

An Indian Perspective on International Children's Literature

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Anto Thomas Chakramakkil, a citizen of India and a scholar in children's literature whose attention has centered on issues of moral enlightenment within pleasurable literature, spent two years securing a Fulbright grant and the visa necessary to allow him to study children's literature at San Diego State University while working on his Ph.D. dissertation. He attended the Children's Literature Association conference in Winnipeg, Canada during his Fulbright year. As Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at St. Thomas College, Trichur, Kerala, India, Anto organized the first international conference on children's literature held in India, March 26-28, 2007, at Kerala. Anto is the founder and secretary of CLAI (Children's Literature Association of India). Currently he is the editor of CLAI's *Journal of Children's Literature*, a biannual journal of children's literature that focuses on studies in Asian children's literature.

The literary color of international children's literature is grey and oppressive unless members of other cultures are viewed as storytellers with authentic voices and perspectives. When we consider the possibilities of international children's literature written in India, however, we must address the problem of language for the whole of the country. The multilingual and multicultural situations in India are complex. There are more than one hundred regional languages and double the number of dialectal variations in the country. Can we ever really have the possibility of a single children's literature that represents India in an international context?

There are fifteen major languages in India; most have Sanskrit as their base. The majority of the people know Hindi. Those who cannot follow Hindi, especially people of Northeast India and the Southern States, mainly use English as their lingua franca. Cultural diversity is tied to linguistics.

There are possibilities. A Pan-Indian oral tradition has created a foundation of stories shared by almost all Indian children. Panchatantra, Jataka, and Hitopedesa are stories widely known. Myths from the Puranas, Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata help form the cultural consciousness of Indian children, irrespective of their caste and creed. Kathasaritasagara, a collection of Indian folk tales compiled by Kashmiri writer Somadeva (1035 A.D.), contains tales with magic, demons, vampires, and high adventure. The Vikram-Vetal stories in Kathasaritasagara center on a brave king and clever vampire. These are familiar tales for every educated Indian child. Everyone has heard stories of Birbal, the court jester of the Mugal emperor Akbar, and similar tales of Tenali Raman, the jester at the court of King Krishnadevaraya in the Vijayapuram Empire of South India.

When Western culture brought the printing press to India, the concept of a separate literature for children evolved. Christian missionaries published translations of Aesop's Fables, *Arabian Nights*, and Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales. Later, Western children's literature

classics, like *Alice in Wonderland*, were introduced, making literature for Indian children essentially international in scope. In post-independence India, federal and state government entities like the Children's Book Trust and the State Institutes of Children's Literature have promoted original works in respective Indian languages and supplied Indian children with original works, translations of multicultural stories within the country, or international literature. Today, acclaimed works such as the *Harry Potter* series are immediately available to affluent Indian children.

Some Indian children prefer to read in English and avail themselves of contemporary international literature, but the vast majority of Indian parents do not encourage reading fiction or supernatural stories. They may fear that imaginative literature will draw young readers away from vocational aspirations in the sciences. Indian children who do not know English may read the Indian mythologies and folklore available in their particular language, but they are seldom encouraged to read the contemporary stories of others. Similarly, Indian adults refrain from reading stories from diverse Indian cultures, perhaps because literature advocates in India have not created reading lists that highlight multicultural literature created within Indian cultures or republished from other countries. In Indian children's literature, publishers need to offer literary materials that reflect the cultural greatness of Pakistani children's literature as well as Indian children's literature in a way that contributes less to misunderstanding and possible bigotry.

One can find positive steps of internationalization in children's literature in India. Educated Indian children and adults who read children's literature prefer works in English. Vernacular languages can be seen to benefit from western influences. In "Through the Looking Glass: Translations of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Malayalam Children's Literature," I argued that the progress of children's literature in any Indian language can be measured in its translations of classical children's literature. Translations can pinpoint the changing notions of children's literature within a particular culture and become "a magical mirror through which we can see the past and the present state of affairs of [. . .] the target language and foresee its future as well." As I examined the various translations of *Alice in Wonderland* in Malayalam (a Dravidian language spoken in the State of Kerala), I observed that the early translations met what Zohar Shavit calls "systemic constraints" in adapting literature to a new language. However, later translations have broken these constraints, creating writing that can be appreciated by adults and children as well. There are shifts in the evaluation of writers of children's literature who adopted or adapted western literary techniques in their works. For me, this reflects a meaningful shift in international children's literature that is not aimed solely at transmission of culture.

Books that allow children to see themselves in positive roles give them opportunities to affirm their identities. Children and young adults also need books that depict people from diverse cultures who encounter and solve conflicts. Ideally, international children's literature can help students understand the dynamics of discrimination, bias, prejudice, and can help eliminate their acceptance of stereotypic representations of other cultures. Books can build stronger ties among communities by conveying authentic cultural values. However, these efforts seldom highlight the literary values of such culturally diverse works, neglecting aesthetic apprecia-

tion of another group's literature. Rather than introduce people and indigenous cultures as the Other—something to be gazed at by the dominant group—I contend that internationalism and cultural stories can supply cultural aesthetics that will repaint the landscape of literature with a new and colorful vitality.

Works Cited

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