Postmodernity refers to the condition that Western society finds itself in, following the undermining of many of the ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly the eighteenth-century belief in progress and reason that brought about damaging shocks in the twentieth century. Jean-Francois Lyotard describes postmodernity as an attitude—an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (509). He regards metanarratives as “violent and tyrannical in their imposition of a ‘totalising’ pattern and a false universality on actions, events and things” (Woods 20–21). Instead, all one can do, he avers, is “utilise local narratives” to explain things. Hence “knowledge can only be partial, fragmented and incomplete” (21). Whereas the term postmodernity emphasises the social, the term postmodernism refers to the cultural and intellectual phenomena that arose in the 1960s as a response to this condition. Lyotard affirms that postmodernism as an aesthetic practice actively searches out “heterogeneity”, “pluralism” and “constant innovation” (23).

The dialogue between internationalism and local concerns has produced a glocal version of postmodernism, which may be termed a postmodern hybridisation. John Stephens makes a distinction between texts that are postmodern and postmodernist—the former standing for texts that express postmodernism both ideologically and stylistically, and the latter for those that exhibit stylistic traits which have spread from postmodern
texts to more traditional texts like picturebooks (90); this is similar to what David Lewis claims in his book *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks* in which he states that writers and illustrators of picturebooks have been exposed to postmodernising influences and are not consciously making a point about the instability of the postmodern world (99). Contemporary picturebooks, Stephens avows, remain focused on ethical responsibilities and social issues unlike typical postmodern texts, and co-opt postmodernist stylistic traits for those ends, recruiting the reader to a textual game (89, 90).

Children’s literature is a hybrid or border country occupied by the adult who creates texts for the “constructed” child, and the “constructive” child who actually reads the texts (Rudd, “Theorising” 22). The constructive child-reader responds to adult language from her/his own social and physical location, often with intentional revision and intertextuality. The texts then turn out to be products co-authored by the adult and the constructive child (25–26). Today's picturebook authors and artists invite readers into the play of visual elements and unexpected textual avenues. They call for co-authors who play “out of bounds,” who seek layers of meaning, not a single already-told tale (Wolfenbarger and Sipe 280). Karen Coats speaks of such books as “transmodern” as they have not lost faith in the idea of the authentic self. These books nurture an authentic self through encouraging thoughtful and critical responsiveness to “our histories, our social stories, and our bodies” (“Postmodern Picturebooks” 85).

The 21st century is often referred to as ‘new times’. The age of the Internet, smartphones, television and films now demands not just literacy but multiliteracy—to read and interpret multiple modes and technologies. The postmodern picturebook
incorporates new literacies in its subversion of hegemonic modes of presenting text, theme, illustration and design.

Just as new times and new literacies challenge us with change at a number of levels, so does the postmodern picture book. Author and illustrator consciously employ a range of devices that are designed to interrupt reader expectation and produce multiple meanings and readings of the book. These books also challenge the traditional audience of picture books. Traditionally the picture book has been seen as the province of the young, inexperienced reader. However, the postmodern picture book appeals to a much wider age span, level of sophistication, and range of reading abilities. (Anstey, “It’s Not All” 447)

According to David Lewis, the key features of postmodernity, the experience of living in a postmodern world, are indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonisation, irony, hybridisation, performance and participation (88, 89, 90, 91). This chapter focuses on aspects of Indian picturebooks that make it postmodernist/transmodern. Apart from discussing aspects like hybridisation, indeterminacy, metafictive devices, metalepsis, modal disruption and parody, it also studies the blurring of boundaries—cross-cultural influences in picturebooks published in a globalised world. Picturebooks that have moved away from the totalising influences of history into the more locally entrenched historiography are also discussed. The re-visioning of dominant social constructs, and the challenges to literary and aesthetic conventions including the introduction of taboo topics are also analysed.
2.1 Metafictive Devices in Contemporary Picturebooks

Metafiction is a stylistic device used by the author/illustrator influenced by postmodernism to destroy the illusion of a “reality” behind a text and instead emphasise its fictionality. Nikolajeva and Scott point out that metafictional elements in a text “deliberately draw attention to its status as a literary construction and therefore raise questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (220). Metafictive elements like the presence of an unreliable narrator, direct address to the reader, intervisuality, intravisuality, intraiconic texts, certain types of framing and indeterminacy, intertextuality and intratextuality giving rise to irony/parody/pastiche, have become prominent in contemporary literature and art since the early 1970s (221). Picturebooks exhibiting such metafictional traits that engage the active reader are looked at in detail in this section.

The protagonist of the picturebook *When Ali Became Bajrangbali* (Tulika 2011), a monkey, exploits the weakness of man in this satirical parody set in an urban landscape. Written by Devashish Makhija and illustrated by Priya Kuriyan, this social satire revolves around a monkey who decides to exploit man’s religious beliefs and innate fear of god by impersonating one of the gods. The illustration of the tree in the book, as the blurb states, is a stylised version of the ‘kalpavriksh’, the tree of life in Hindu mythology, a wish-fulfilling divine tree that is believed to have sprung up during the churning of the ocean of milk. Significantly, the tree is located in Bargad ‘chawl’, a crowded area of a city laid out with residential apartment blocks where a majority of the residents belong to the working class. The name Bargad itself in Hindi stands for the Banyan tree. The animals
who reside in the huge tree in the chawl are worse off than the human residents there. They do not know how to communicate with the beings who are out to destroy their habitat using “mechanical monsters”, until Ali, the monkey, decides to play the part of Bajrangbali or Hanuman, the monkey god, an important character in the Indian epic, *The Ramayana*.

The experienced reader sees the picturebook as a subversion of *The Ramayana*, depicting the monkey god Hanuman or Bajrangbali and the villain Ravana. It is to be noted that Ravana is never once mentioned by name in the narrative; he is simply spoken of and portrayed as “a man with ten heads”. Parody, an offshoot of decanonisation, where nothing is considered sacred anymore including the canons, is “inherently metafictive as it involves a refusal to accept as natural and given that which is culturally determined and conventional”. It usually pokes fun at “the conventions, manners and affectations of a particular genre” (Lewis 97). Parody as a literary device is frequently associated with satire and ridicule. Devashish parodies the great epic in his portrayal of Ali, a monkey who does not belong to the assembly of Hindu gods, outwitting a mercenary man, Mr. Moochhvaala, a modern-day villain much like Ravana, who steps into the narrative as a benign actor robbed of his crown and mace while asleep. In *The Ramayana*, Hanuman is reputed to have outwitted the ten-headed Ravana and set fire to Lanka. In the picturebook, Hanuman enters the dream of Mr. Moochhvaala and reminds him of the Lanka episode while threatening to set fire to his moustache. Overt forms of parodic intertextuality can have three main effects: they can “foreground the ways in which narrative fictions are constructed out of other texts and discourses”; they can “indicate possible interpretative positions for readers”; and they can “enable the representation of a
plurality of voices, discourses, and meanings” (McCallum, “Very” 142). Rewriting the myth from a parodic point of view, Devashish and Kuriyan attack the senseless ways in which Man the villain, equated to Ravana, tries to exploit natural resources in the name of ‘progress’ while seeking greater wealth from the gods.

In Bargad chawl, advertisements vie for space with pictures of gods on temple walls behind which Man prays for prosperity while cutting down the source of it all—the trees—that metaphorically stand for the environment. Ali jumps across buildings in the city pasted with all sorts of advertisements regarding lotteries, the circus, the elections, tutorials, spoken English and printer cartridge refilling. The name board of a hotel and a tea shop and “cool bar”, an idiomatic term for shops selling soft drinks, can also be sighted in the distance. The texts and illustrations of the book “have an ironic relationship to each other: the words tell us what the pictures do not show, and the pictures show us what the words do not tell” (Nodelman, Words 222). Nodelman affirms that two specific sorts of irony inevitably develop when words and pictures come together in narratives due to inherent differences between verbal narration and pictorial depiction: “The first is the distance between the relative objectivity of pictures and the relative subjectivity of words; the second is the distance between the temporal movement of stories and the fixed timelessness usual in pictures” (228–29). Priya Kuriyan’s illustrations and intraiconic texts set off the satire present in the written text. Her illustrations, especially the one of the painting of Lord Siva and the wish-fulfilling divine cow Kamadenu, on the temple wall, below which is painted an ad for “Friend’s Tutorials” ironically reveals in graphic terms the secular interests of man overpowering his spiritual leanings. The fact that Mr. Moochvaala can sit in a temple and pray devoutly to Bajrangbali while killing trees every
day to build new roads, makes for even greater irony. In a further twist, Ali, the monkey with the typically Muslim name, prays to Bajrangbali, the Hindu god, to help him tackle Mr. Moochvaala. The irony rises to a crescendo when Ali, in a subversion of the Lanka incident from the Ramayana, manages to steal a crown and a mace from a gentle Ravana fast asleep. Again, the manner in which a religious character, albeit an actor, is juxtaposed in the visual narrative with advertisements from the film world and men’s undergarments on the one hand and a sticker of god’s feet next to two swastikas stating “Good Luck” in Hindi, reinforces the ironic subtext running through the entire narrative. It is to be noted that the posters of gods or divine feet serve a very utilitarian function when pasted on walls bordering the roads—that of discouraging urination in public places—a sight common in India even today.

Kuriyan heightens the parodic nature of the picturebook with a subtle change in the depiction of the character of Ravana at the end of the tale. He is now shown to be in an angry mood, searching for his crown and mace. The picture shows his only uncrowned head having an uncanny resemblance to that of Mr. Moochhvaala. The haphazard manner in which Mr. Moochvaala has arranged photographs of Hanuman and other Hindu gods in his office along with a black and white picture of himself and his wife, some paintings and a calendar also speaks of the internal conflict between Mr. Moochvaala’s material and spiritual desires. As Nodelman avers:

In a sense, the words of picturebooks are like a voice-over narration in a film that tells us what to see in the pictures, how to interpret them. But since the pictures themselves tend to the objectivity of the theatre, there is an ironic distance
between the subjective focus of words and the objective wholeness of pictures; unlike film or theatre, picturebooks can be both objective and subjective at the same time. (Words 232)

Pictures can also offer extra information or convey different attitudes contradicting the narrow focus of the words. In this picturebook, advertisements of all kinds strewn across the cityscape serve as intertexts that reinforce the materialistic culture of the times, prevalent in the main narrative. The display of lottery advertisements, posters of election candidates and spoken English classes promoting the shortcut to success and man’s unending greed for quick money add many more layers intertextually and intervisually to this parodic commentary on “contemporary commodity culture” (Woods 86). The poster announcing the arrival of a ‘yogima’ or female sage reminds the experienced reader of godmen and godwomen, many of whom are exposed as mere impersonators who take people for a ride and fleece them of their wealth. In the main narrative, Ali reflects this fake side of religion in India in his decision to impersonate a god. The sly ways in which Man taps another’s electricity or water is also hinted at in the poster advising people to select their own electronic meters. The billboard announcing the arrival of Jumbo Circus, an arena of man’s brutality to animals, is a deft touch by Kuriyan, as is the mention by Makhija of Ali’s father being a “madaari’s bandar”, a performing monkey. A ‘madaari’ is a man who makes monkeys perform in shows and street plays. Ironically, the monkey’s “master” too was threatened by Man’s desire to destroy, when his hut was about to be demolished by “monsters”.
What the picturebook *When Ali Became Bajrangbali* turns out to be, is a caustic satire on the actions of men, especially those living in big cities, who commit crimes against nature and their own kind on the one hand and then ask for god’s blessings on the other. The Tree of Life in the book is a symbol of the interdependence of all living beings on the earth. Exhibiting the nonlinearity of postmodern fiction, the picturebook invites readers to co-construct the narrative intertextually and intervisually, using the multimodal, polyphonic form of a picturebook filled with words, pictures, posters, photographs and advertisements—a mixture of “elite” and “popular” culture (Szeman and Kaposy 10).

*The Ramayana* again finds place in the picturebook *Junior Kumbhakarna* (Tulika 2013) which “mixes and blurs different fictional realities” in its story-within-a-story structure (McCallum, “Would” 189). Written by Arundhati Venkatesh, it is a narrative within which a father retells an episode from *The Ramayana* to his son Kukku. But the retold tale slips from the real world into the dream world of Kukku midway through the book. Such disruptions between the world of the “story” and that of “reality” is an instance of metalepsis, a disruption of the diegetic level of narration. A characteristic postmodern feature, metalepsis is mentioned by Robyn McCallum as one among four postmodern strategies which draw attention to the fictional nature of a picturebook, the others being overt intertextuality; inversion of the narrative voice; and modal contrasts and disruptions within the pictorial discourse (“Would” 181).

The title of this overtly intertextual book points to a character, Junior Kumbhakarna, who is not mentioned in the diegetic narrative at all, although the front
cover has a picture of tiny Kukku on the bottom right corner contrasted with a towering Kumbhakarna on the left. It is up to the active reader to go back and forth in the process of reading the picturebook to interpret the text independently. In the frame story, Kukku asks his father at bed-time to tell him the story of Kumbhakarna, for the umpteenth time. The next page opening does not show the father and son at all in the visual narrative; instead, the reader sees a gigantic Kumbhakarna gobbling up food. The verbal narrative also challenges the expectations of the reader; there are no quotes or speech bubbles. It simply begins with the statement: “Kumbhakarna was HUGE”, leaving the reader to decipher the context. In Indian narratology, a tale conventionally begins by locating it in space rather than time, whereas in European fairy tales the story is located in undefined time and space. The fact that the tale has been retold by the father many times probably explains the abruptness of the beginning, but leaves it ambiguous for the reader. The “indeterminacy of the iconotext, playing with objective and subjective perception, and at length interrogating the possibility of depicting a coherent universe, is in perfect correspondence with postmodern views of the world” (Nikolajeva, “Play” 72, 73).

Kumbhakarna, Ravana’s brother in *The Ramayana*, is known for his great love of sleep and voracious appetite. It is said that Goddess Saraswathi was asked to tie his tongue up while he asked for a boon from Lord Brahma. So Kumbhakarna ended up asking for sleep (‘Nidravatvam’) instead of the annihilation of the Devas (‘Nirdevatvam’). He subsequently sleeps for six months and eats ravenously for the next six months. The written text states how Kumbhakarna ate as much food as 100 men. The picture accompanying the text depicts Kumbhakarna looking as huge as Gulliver, gobbling up food from a plate while across the page tiny human figures are occupied eating food from
plates bigger than them or glasses as tall as them. There is metafictive play with typography in the text; key words such as “BURPED”, “S..T..R..E..T..C..H..E..D” and “YAWNED” attempt to reflect their meanings through their very shapes and layout.

The next doublespread emphasises the gigantic size of Kumbhakarna as he begins to snore. The page opening that follows it gives a visual clue to the reader about a change in realities from fictional to fantastic within the book. There is an unusual visual perspective as the sleeping Kumbhakarna who, until then, had been positioned centrally at eye level, is now viewed from a low angle, placed very high on the outer limits of the page. On the lower left-hand corner of the page Kukku is seen on his bed equally deep in sleep, suggesting his “relative disempowerment within the confines” of an epic narrative, or simply that “he does not have a place within the world” of the epic (McCallum, “Would” 189).

The title of the book, on the other hand, implies that Kukku’s dream of Kumbhakarna is a kind of wish-fulfillment, revealing his own desires to eat and sleep like him. Strategies such as “unusual visual perspectives and innovative narrative techniques,” in this case a shifting, third-person point of view, “can disrupt and blur distinctions between the represented worlds of reality and fantasy, encouraging readers to adopt more active interpretative positions” (McCallum, “Would” 181–82). The picturebook offers a second level of narrative, the dream world of Kukku, that disrupts the original narrative or ‘diegesis’, a term used to describe the initial storyworld, the world created by the author-illustrator in which the story events take place. This disruption or metalepsis calls readers’ attention to the boundaries of the real world readers inhabit, the storyworld of the frame narrative, and storyworld of the inset narrative the fictional narrator inhabits.
This “breaking of narrative boundaries requires readers to navigate between the various levels” of the complex text “to enjoy the humour in the story and understand what is happening” (Serafini and Tompkins 344, 345).

The tale of Kumbhakarna within Kukku’s mind continues to play out, running parallel to the narrative in the epic. Ravana decides that the time has come to wake up Kumbhakarna and make him fight Rama’s animal army. Although drums are beaten and trumpets and conches blown, Kumbhakarna does not wake up. Even the enticing aroma of “mountains of laddoos” fails to wake him up. The picture on the page changes the metaphorical description of the laddoos in the written text into a literal depiction of “Mt Laddu ht – 4500” one of the metafictional methods used in picturebooks to express narratives in counterpoint (Nikolajeva and Scott 25). Even though soldiers try to force his eyes open and elephants walk over him, and Lilliputian men push him, tickle his nose, pull his moustache and drench him with water, Kumbhakarna simply yawns, stretches and turns on to his side. Soldiers roll down, elephants slide off, and drummers and donkeys take flight. The final page has Kukku’s father trying to wake him up to get ready for school. Kukku looks around with half-open eyes and asks him where the laddus are. Waking up early in the morning to go to school is for Kukku, as it is for other children, a tedium to be borne every day. The story of Kumbhakarna who could sleep all he wanted and eat all he wanted is indeed a favourite with Kukku, probably for that very reason. The title, in fact, reflects this wish of Kukku’s to be a Junior Kumbhakarna.

According to McCallum, the “problematising of the relations between the fictional and the real can also be played out through pictorial strategies that mix the visual
modality, or truth value, of images. Insofar as the level of modality corresponds to a level of ‘realism’, modal shifts and contrasts can be used in overtly metafictive texts to reflect metaleptic disruptions between levels of narration and between fictional and fantastic realities” (“Would” 188). Neel, the resourceful school boy, in Anushka Ravishankar’s picture book *Excuses Excuses* (Tara 2011), written in nonsense verse, has ingenious “excuses” to all the questions adults usually ask. He is late for school but what can he do if his clock begins to tick in an anti-clockwise way and he wakes up at noon “of yesterday”? If Neel has no socks on, it’s only because he helped a poor elephant regain sanity on a noisy congested road by stuffing its ears with his socks. If he ends up bringing a dog home instead of bread, why, the dog must have hypnotised him and then brought *him* home. And why was his homework not done? He *had* done it but his disobedient homework had then hopped away across the road and into a pond, sniffing a granny’s wig on the way. Could he now be blamed for submitting a “wet and soggy thing”? Neel’s imagination helps him fantasise a solution to the mundane problems he accosts at school and at home. The blurring of fictional and fantastic realities within the picturebook and in the peritexts disrupts the verbal discourse and even more so the visual discourse in this overtly metafictive picturebook.

Modal-mixing and contrasts are more overt in the visual discourse of *Excuses Excuses* where Gabrielle Manglou uses the technique of collage and a combination of photographs and drawings to play with relations between the represented “fictional reality” and Neel’s “fantastic reality”. The child reader is accosted with illustrations from all corners of the page in unfamiliar combinations wherein photographs fight for attention with Indian rangoli patterns, light flows from lampshades and eyebrows nonchalantly
float across the pages. Realistic black-and-white photographs of Neel and white Ambassador cars are juxtaposed with surreal silhouettes of flying trees, mountains, dogs, cows and people. Manglou uses black and white photographs to give a certain documentary quality but the brush-strokes of colour surrounding the photographs which are themselves morphed at times, blur the distinctions between the real and the represented in its mixing of high and low modalities.

Equally surreal illustrations of Neel’s bedroom filling up with water that flows from lamps, drawers and paintings of boats, intervisually incorporates Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s story “Light is like Water” which also, significantly, mixes fictional and fantastic realities in a narrative about children who drown in boats within a pool of flowing light. Another photograph of penalised Neel with one foot slowly morphing into a wolf’s paw and a tree growing out of the chair he is sitting on, again mixes modalities and intervisually evokes Max, the protagonist, in Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, who fantasises himself as “King of the Wild Things” when his mother sends him to his room without dinner. In addition, black and white photographs of sheets of an English-Tamil calendar on the endpages highlight the weekly routine of Neel’s noble intentions, broken promises and eventual punishment.

In the picturebook What Did You See? (Tulika 2009) by Nandini Nayar, little Meera’s answer to her mother’s question “So what did you see at the zoo?” sets off a hilarious role-play by her mother. The counterpoint of word and image “presupposes playfulness, since images can show something that not merely adds a dimension to the narrative, but offers a possibility to interpret the story differently from what is expressed
by the words only” (Nikolajeva, “Play” 56). Soumya Menon’s illustrations, especially the comic gestures and the expressions of the mother, alongside Meera’s thought bubbles of the animals themselves whose faces have an uncanny resemblance to that of Meera’s mother (lipstick et al!) extends the hilarity in the story. Sipe maintains that the peritexts of picturebooks have ample potential for metafictional play and subversion as does the materiality of the book itself (234). The front cover of *What Did You See?* displays an elephant, a monkey, a giraffe and a crocodile gathered around a sign board displaying the title of the book, a metafictional touch given by Menon. So, too, the back cover depicts a peacock, two flamingos and a parakeet gazing at a board which exhibits the blurb. Whereas the title page reveals only the tails of some animals hanging from the top of the page, the final page shows the animals portrayed on the front cover looking at Meera as she takes a walk presumably around the zoo. Contemporary picturebooks allow for greater performativity on the part of the active reader. This picturebook that abounds in slapstick comedy, permits the child to imitate the antics of the ebullient mother and enjoy the process of storytelling in a more involved fashion.

Materiality is one of the most self-evident features of any picturebook, yet it is not until the postmodern phase that picturebook creators started paying special attention to and utilised this possibility. Peritexts such as the cover, endpapers, title page, and doublespread layout “can contribute substantially to the overall meaning of the narrative,” as can the size and format of the book, and other purely external qualities (Nikolajeva “Play” 57–59). In the picturebook *A Silly Story of Bondapalli* (Tulika 2010), peritexts play an integral part in augmenting the humour within the narrative. The front cover has a huge bonda, within which the title and credits are displayed, looming over the
faces of some of the characters in the book. The intertexts from the film world on the endpapers, that of plump “James Bonda” ready to bounce off on the verso and an equally plump “Bondaman” flying off into the sunset in the final recto, are entertaining to the reader familiar with Hollywood action films starring James Bond and Superman. These verbal and visual puns on the endpapers suggest what is to come within the text and also extend the humour within the main narrative. Ashok Rajagopalan’s play with typography is equally entertaining; embedding the written text in semicircles within huge bondas on the one hand and contrasting the round font depicting the plump people of Bondapalli with the lean font depicting the skinny soldiers from the neighbouring kingdom on the other.

Contemporary picturebooks like *Stories on the Sand* (Tulika 2014) are metafictional predominantly in their self-reflexiveness; the story in the book is about the creation of stories itself. Just as Indian folktales are believed to be versions of those in the collection titled *Kathasaritsagara*, the ocean of stories, this picturebook too metaphorically speaks of all stories as a process of retelling from the ocean of stories. This notion is reflected in Nikola-Lisa’s poem on postmodernism titled “Play, Panache, Pastiche”:

. . . we write and rewrite/repeat history;
we have to, there are no other words but the ones we've uttered,
no other thoughts but the ones we've thought,
no other texts but the ones already written/
The timelessness and interconnectedness of stories, a postmodern concept, is visualised by the author, Sandhya Rao, in the picturebook *Stories on the Sand*. The first few pages speak of children from various parts of the world writing stories on the sea shore: Irfan writes it on soft white sand, Shaan on gleaming black sand, Thanh on fine yellow sand, Suzanne on grainy red sand, Wang on sand like pebbles and Sumana on sticky black clay. What they write is depicted in the pictures on each page filled with characters from myths, legends and folktales. The waves come and carry away these stories to a secret garden at the bottom of the sea. One day, a curious clown fish nibbles at something peeping out of a shell. A story slips out in a burst of bubbles. The clown fish, tickled, flaps and splashes so much that other tiny fishes come rushing to see what had happened. With their whirling movement, the sea swirls and turns and shakes all the stories out of their hiding places and pushes them towards the sun. The waves take them to distant lands on different shores. When children play on the shore, stories whisper in their ears and waves carry their stories back into the sea.

This picturebook imaginatively narrates the process of writing a story as a retelling of stories that have already been written. The writer can only dip into ideas already expressed by minds elsewhere and in other times. By foregrounding the process of writing stories, this picturebook emphasises the text as an artistic construction and projects itself as an artefact. The illustrator, Srividya Natarajan, appropriately uses watercolour illustrations to depict hypotexts (the texts alluded to) such as the myth of
Sindbad the Sailor, the travels of Gulliver, the historical tale of Rani Lakshmi Bai, the story of Buddha, a Vietnamese legend and the myth of the Chinese dragon arising from the swirling waters. Intertextuality “presupposes the reader’s active participation in the decoding process,” (Nikolajeva and Scott 228) in making intertextual connections. In this picturebook, the intertextuality is the kind that Nikolajeva and Scott label as “contamination” (228). That is, the story contains elements from many other tales without naming them overtly. The allusions only make sense if the reader is familiar with the hypotexts. Picture books requiring this more active level of participation are reminiscent of Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly texts; writerly texts, like the complex picture books described here, “engage the reader as co-author and active participant in the reading process” (Serafini and Tompkins 345). The intertextual allusions in *Stories on the Sand* allow the active reader to perceive the main narrative in a vivid manner. It also allows them to see the interconnectedness of not just stories but of human beings and of sands, no matter what colour they are. The child in the wheelchair who writes his story is just like the other children who write theirs—they all weave similar stories of wish fulfillment. The involvement of the reader increases twicefold in the interpretation of wordless picturebooks, such as those discussed in the next section.

### 2.2 Indeterminacy in Wordless Picturebooks

Bran Nicol postulates that postmodern writing challenges us because “it requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer” (Preface xiv). The increasingly ambiguous works or “uncertain iconotexts”, as Nikolajeva and Scott prefer to call them, draw readers into decoding aspects of the picturebooks that
continue to remain ambivalent despite their attention (260). Picturebooks that are wordless are considered even more challenging by the adult co-reader. But as Perry Nodelman points out, the perceived “inadequacies of wordless books are actually their strength; that in leaving some things vague they allow their young viewers to be creative” (Words 190).

The illustrator, Deepa Balsavar, and designer, Aditi Babel, of the picturebook series titled *Round and Round* Books (Tulika 2013)—a set of three wordless picturebooks—believe that the young reader likes to pick up a book and start where it opens. The three picturebooks have no beginning, end, first page or last page, and of course, no written text. Each three-page book has pictures that can be read in any sequence. In wordless picturebooks, the reader’s response is usually guided only by a title (Gibson 102). The small, square-sized set of three books comes in a case with the title of the series printed in front and the titles of the books mentioned at the back. The child gets a clue about the narrative from these titles—*The Egg*, *The Bath* and *The Rainbow*—each accompanied by one of the pictures in the books. But the pictures do not necessarily indicate the beginning of the narrative. They are simply there for the child to tell many stories. In fact, the stories in them can be told by different children in different ways.

Nodelman affirms that wordless picturebooks “can easily depict actions, not so easily communicate feelings or meanings” (Words 190). But the pleasure in wordless picturebooks, he asserts, lies in “the realisation by the reader that they *are* stories and that one has discovered them to be stories—not the events themselves or the people they are happening to” (188). Children tend to express their enjoyment of wordless books by
telling, in words, the stories the pictures suggest to them, turning purely visual experiences into verbal ones (186). All three books in this collection tell stories of a cyclical kind. *The Egg* depicts pictures of the clichéd egg-chicken story leaving the reader to decide which comes first, the egg or the chicken. But the child unfamiliar with this stereotypical life-cycle narrative is free to create her/his own story, incorporating the butterflies, the flowers and the sun depicted in the pictures. Nodelman avers that “finding a story in a sequence of pictures with no help but our eyes is something like doing a puzzle,” (187) requiring close attention. Searching for clues and putting together disparate bits of information, the readers must provide meanings to complete the pictures out of their own storehouse of information. The illustrators of wordless books, in fact, “depend on the ability of pictures to suggest information they do not actually offer” (187).

The book titled *The Rainbow* similarly proffers a narrative which depicts the changes in weather—sunny at one point, rainy the next, as well as the emergence of the rainbow. But the pictures also give significant visual weight to the two dogs who enjoy the heat of the sun and the frogs who jump out of the water when it rains. All the creatures seem to admire and appreciate the beauty of the rainbow equally. The child’s constructed narrative need not take off in the direction that has been mentioned by the researcher. That the same child may look at the book differently at every reading is also a possibility. Postmodern narrative, as Nicol maintains, involves us in “a process of conjecture” (47). The third book *The Bath* gives prominence to the activities of a child, although the title seems to give more importance to the consequence of the child’s antics in the garden—the bath in the tub. The pictures show the mother permitting the child to
play outside with the cat, the child returning with muddied clothes and hair, the mother
giving her a bath in the tub and then combing her hair while she plays with the cat.

As these books can be placed in an upright position with all three hardbound
pages kept open, the reader has the freedom to decide the structure of the narrative—the
beginning, the middle and the end. Also, the reader retains the freedom to interweave the
narratives in all three books and create more stories. Michele Anstey observes that the
postmodern picture book, like many of the texts available today, “looks different and is
meant to be read differently” (“It’s Not” 447). The picturebook series *Round and Round
Books* is innovative in design, wordless in format, and asks for an active reader who is
“playful and accepting of open-ended interpretation” (Nicol 47). It displays a tendency
“to draw the reader’s attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the
text” (Nicol xvi). The next section looks at another postmodern trait exhibited in Indian
picturebooks—the blurring of boundaries.

### 2.3 Blurring Boundaries – Hybridisation

One of the outcomes of postmodernity is hybridisation, the dissolution of
boundaries especially with respect to literary genres and high and low culture (Lewis 90).
Contemporary picturebooks blend various genres and consider nothing sacred, leading to
the creation of a host of hybrid genres. Manjula Padmanabhan’s picturebook *The World
Tour Mystery* (Tulika 2011) blends travel writing in the form of diary entries with puzzles
for the reader to solve through visual clues. Anushka Ravishankar’s *Wish You Were Here*
(Tara 2003) brings in a tongue-in-cheek narrative on the fad for world tours, written in
nonsense verse accompanied by stereotypical pictures of popular tourist destinations on
postcards, with seals included, painted by commercial poster artists. The picturebook *My Gandhi Scrapbook* (Tulika 2007) is in the form of a multimodal scrapbook filled with drawings, cut and pasted black and white photographs, stamps, interesting anecdotes, witty captions and random thoughts along with blank pages for the reader to fill. This picturebook is similar in its multimodality to the picturebook by Eljay Yildirim titled *Aunty Dot’s Atlas* and published in the UK, which includes letters that can be removed from envelopes, maps, illustrated borders in the colours of various flags, flaps that reveal more text/pictures, stereotypical photographs of places, newspaper clippings and little notes on bag tags.

The postmodernist picturebook *Excuse Me, Is this India?* (Tara 1999) written in nonsense verse by Anushka Ravishankar and illustrated by Anita Leutwiler, a Swiss textile artist specialising in the patchwork technique, interweaves memory, dream, travel writing and parody to emerge as a postcolonial counter-narrative. The illustrations, put together by the artist from fabric collected in India, echoes old quilting forms which, as the blurb states, have traditionally held women’s memories, art and labour. The first verso of the main narrative which displays the panels on the quilt actually displays the entire narrative in sequence. The title page displays the scenes too, but they are fragments of the pictures seen on the following page, arranged to resemble the film reels of yesteryears. Incidentally, each page of written text is accompanied with four such fragmented pictures in sequence. *Excuse Me, Is this India?* can be read by a dual audience drawing multiple meanings from a hybrid genre which amalgamates memory, dream, travel writing and nonsense verse into a picturebook illustrated using the
patchwork technique. It will be looked at again in the following chapter as an example of postcolonial counter-discourse.

### 2.4 Blurring Boundaries - Transcultural Picturebooks

Some picturebooks like *Ismat’s Eid* (Tulika 2007) and *High in the Sky* (Tulika 2008) are syncretic artefacts influenced by many cultures that waft in and out of the verbal and visual narratives. Whereas the former is a retelling of a Turkish tale by Fawzia Gilani-Williams, an international educational consultant who worked in Britain and the USA and is now based in the UAE, the latter is a Korean folk tale retold by Cathy Spagnoli, a professional storyteller with a special interest in Asian tales, who lives both in India and the USA. The illustrator of *Ismat’s Eid* is Proiti Roy, based in India, while the illustrator of *High in the Sky* is Jo Hye-Mi, a Korean who has learnt the kamishibai style of drawing, which itself is influenced by the story cards of Japanese paper theatre. Living in an age of “increasing interconnectedness, where political borders and cultural edges tend to blur and growing numbers of people throughout all layers of society are ‘on the move’ across the planet, such authors/illustrators experience the effects of dislocation, deterritorialisation and cross-cultural acculturation” (Dagnino 1).

Whether fleeing political oppression, or religious oppression, or dictatorial regimes, or in search of a better life, “an increasing number of people find themselves in a transcultural position” (Rønning 2). But while moving physically across the globe and across different cultures, they “find themselves less and less trapped in the traditional migrant/exile syndrome and become more apt instead to embrace the opportunities and the freedom that diversity and mobility bestow upon them” (Dagnino 1). Culturally
mobile writers, whom Arianna Dagnino calls ‘transcultural writers,’ have consequently emerged:

. . . imaginative writers who, by choice or by life circumstances, experience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual/plurilingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities. (1–2)

Their writing transcends the borders of a single culture and promotes a wider global perspective. Anne Holden Rønning also points out that “the globalisation of culture and texts, through increased linguistic skills among peoples, and not least the power of the media, whether film, text or electronic means, results in no one being able to avoid the influence of other cultures” (2).

The kamishibai style influences the layout of the picturebook High in the Sky. Whereas the front cover is split vertically into two, with the title on the right and part of the face of the tiger on the left, the title page is split diagonally. While the written text of the first half of the narrative remains on the recto, split horizontally or vertically with a band of colour, it shifts to the verso at a significant point in the narrative. The narrative begins typically with the atemporal phrase “Once in Korea”, but continues with another phrase, “when tigers smoked long pipes” which the reader outside Korea would probably be unfamiliar with. The image evoked, though, might paint the tiger in a bad light. In a “lovely” village, a mother worked hard to feed her family of two children. Every day she crossed forests and mountains to sell “deok”, that is, rice cakes. Tulika’s Wordbird Books
give readers access to a “multicultural, multilingual vocabulary” through Wordbirds that explain unfamiliar words such as these. The mother warns the children to open the door only when they hear her voice, as there were many “fierce tigers” around. As she walks up the mountain, “du-bug, du-bug”, a huge tiger jumps out with a great growl: “AU-HEUNG!” It is significant that Wordbirds are required to gloss Korean sounds as well, since they are so culture-specific that readers from elsewhere cannot make sense of them. The mother gives all her rice cakes to the hungry tiger, but eventually, the still hungry tiger gobbles her up too. He then makes his way to her house in the village, with the hope of eating her children too.

The tiger reminds the reader of the wolf in the fairy tale Red Riding Hood when he tries to change his voice and trick the children into opening the door. Unlike the wolf, he doesn’t succeed. In a comic twist, the tiger goes back to his cave and does voice exercises: “Um, um, um, ma, ma, ma”. The children open the door for him this time. On seeing him, the children cry out for their mother: “Umma, Umma!” As the tiger chases them, a strong rope comes down from the sky, up which they quickly climb: “yeu-tcha, euyeu-tcha”. The tiger too asks for a rope and climbs up. But the rope breaks as he is too heavy: “AI-KOO”. The Wordbird describes the two sounds as those associated with climbing and falling respectively. The children reach the safety of the sky and turn into the sun and the moon, “looking after all of us here below” even today. This origin myth depicts the tiger’s face in all its ferocity while the human figures appear faceless. The use of Korean words and sounds in a Korean tale written in English by a diasporic author; the values that Koreans hold dear such as obedience, respect for parents and hard work; the universal need of primitive man to weave myths about the unexplainable in nature; and
the use of Japanese art and craft by a Korean illustrator—all these elements make this picturebook a transcultural artefact in an era of globalisation. The next section looks at picturebooks that interrogate the traditional form of the picturebook and involve the reader in the process of book-building.

2.5 Experimenting with Design: Interrupting Reader Expectations

Contemporary picturebooks and their readers exist in a world of many narrative options. Forms of text like those on the internet, billboards, television and video games involve moving and interactive images. On the other hand, it is relatively easy to link the picturebook with the static image. Some picturebooks, however, “interrupt and interrogate the static qualities of the picturebook; they demand and help to create a plasticity of mind that is honed by many textual forms” (Mackey, “Postmodern” 115). New and unusual designs and layout, which challenge the reader’s perception of how to read a book, makes these postmodern texts, meant to be read differently, also look different (Anstey, “It’s Not” 447). Knock! Knock! (Tara 2015), Home (Tulika 2009) and Round and Round Books are picturebooks that “visually, and conceptually draw attention to the salient fact that THIS is a BOOK and ask whether or how its qualities of being a book affect how it should be read” (Mackey 106–07).

Knock! Knock! by Kaori Takahashi is “book architecture at its inspired best” as the blurb states; the book has to be constructed by the reader manually, page by page, from the box-shaped artefact enclosed within a case. Consciously interactive and participatory, Knock! Knock! can be considered a ‘movable’, a hybrid, merging “two otherwise incompatible artefacts: the toy and the picturebook” (Lewis 98). Unlike the
conventional linearity of pages turned from right to left, the pages in this text first open left to right, then upwards, then towards the right, upward again and so on till an entire building is created storey by storey up to the terrace, as the story unfolds. The last few pages unfold vertically downwards revealing a staircase which leads back to the first storey. Every page has pictures alternatively in black and white and in colour. The written text is initially present in both but later remain absent in the coloured ones, which reveal the interiors of each apartment, some of them surreal in depiction. The architectonics of a well-made text is challenged and re-defined by such radical departures in the narrative structure.

The narrative begins on the first page with the written text stating: “Knock! Knock! I’m Home!” The back of a little girl wearing a yellow cap is visible, knocking on a door. The page turn depicts the interior of the apartment in which her mother stands looking concerned as the girl, with her hand on her head, searches for her bear, whose face she has drawn and hung up on the wall. The page on the left in black and white shows the girl peeping out of a window and asking the cat if the bear is out there. When the artefact is moved up, the girl is seen rummaging inside her toy box, while the bear, unseen, floats up strung to a balloon outside. The black and white page above depicts the girl knocking at the door of Flat 201, on the floor above, accompanied by the cat. As the girl makes her way up the floors to the terrace, she is accompanied by quite an entourage of animate and inanimate beings: the cat, the rooster, the clock, the mongoose, a pair of clogs, the snowman, a crab, a plant and two butterflies. The lost bear is now in sight being carried back to the girl by a bird. The artefact now has to be unfolded further to the left and then vertically downwards as the girl happily runs downstairs with her bear. The
rest of those that make up the procession pause, two by two, on the floors they belong to. But, unexpectedly, the last page has them all looking in at the window as the girl goes to bed wishing “Good night” to the bear sleeping alongside her.

The reader of *Knock! Knock!* in the process of unfolding the physical artefact, unfolds not just a narrative, but also unpacks notions of the architectonics of a picturebook. It literally constructs an unconventional “book”—a book that resembles a six-storied red brick building within which the action takes place. The reader constructs the book and the story at her or his own pace, having the freedom to stop or pause at any given point in the narrative. The book is structured in such a manner that a knock on a specific door is followed by a view into that specific apartment. Equally precise is the way in which the various objects and animals accompanying the girl stop their course on the stairway only on the floor they belong to. Frank Serafini and Felicia Tompkins have written about the various ways the picturebook can be used—as an object of construction, as a character, and as a portal to other narrative levels. Using the book as an object of construction, they affirm, “breaks the traditional boundaries between fictional and real worlds” by requiring the reader “to actively participate in the construction of the narrative” (345). In this book, the surreal illustrations further break the traditional boundaries between real and fantastic worlds, effecting modal disruption of a different sort. The residents of the same building seem to be experiencing summer and winter. Some apartments hold oceans, forests and gardens. While some accommodate humans as residents, others only seem to have animals or fish. The inanimate also seem to have a life of their own, accompanying the girl in her search for the bear. The characteristic
poststructuralist impulse to break binaries is foregrounded here in the eroding of the boundary between the animate and the non-animate.

Mixed modality within the pictorial discourse and innovative narrative techniques “can disrupt and blur distinctions between the represented worlds of reality and fantasy, encouraging readers to adopt more active interpretative positions” (McCallum, “Would” 182). Picturebooks like *Knock! Knock!* develop both

. . . tacit and explicit awareness of books as systems of conventions and expectations. Young readers who grow up with such literary awareness are better equipped to understand how books work and to understand that they may be critiqued and challenged. Far from undermining book literacy, such radical understanding makes it possible to register books as dynamic forms of text. In an era when other dynamic texts are so seductively available, knowing that books can also play lively and entertaining postmodern games is a lesson that cannot be learned too young (Mackey 115).

The picturebooks examined in the sections above have the potential to foster an early critical literacy insofar as they all position their readers in actively interrogative and participatory positions. Metaleptic and modal disruptions, in particular, create spaces within texts for readers to actively “engage” with stories. This kind of engagement may “potentially expand an audience’s knowledge of what stories are like, how they work, and how they might be played with, changed, and retold, and potentially how new stories might be written” (McCallum 191). The following section analyses picturebooks that expand the potential for imagination in the child through fantasy and nonsense verse.
2.6 Imagination, Play and Performance

Adults today fear that the stress, the pace and the commercialism of modern life are “undermining childhood as a time for play, for developing the imagination, and for direct engagement with the natural world” (Hall 130). Some of the sub-genres of children’s literature, especially fantasy and nonsense verse, go a long way in nurturing creative development. Madeleine L’Engle posits that “a child denied imaginative literature is likely to have more difficulty understanding cellular biology or post-Newtonian physics than the child whose imagination has been stretched by fantasy and science fiction” (105). This section analyses picturebooks which take play and imagination as their theme but suggest subtly different definitions of the two terms.

Like myths, legends, and fairy tales, “nonsense is a mode of writing that has come to be associated with children’s literature” (Reynolds, Radical 45). Traditional tales are conservative in their attempt to transmit long-held values and ideologies. Nonsense, by contrast, “sets out to question received wisdom” and in the process “stimulates new ways of thinking”. This makes it a “highly effective mode both for writers who want to comment on and so affect society, and those who propose new ways of representing culture” (45). Nonsense is capable of poking fun at religion, politics, education and topical issues, as well as at the adults and organisations that control them (55). Anushka Ravishankar, often referred to as the Dr. Suess of India, has written many picturebooks in nonsense verse, one of which is Today is My Day (Tara 2003), a parody of adult behaviour vis-à-vis that of children.
The protagonist, Tala, is a girl who, like her counterpart Neel in *Excuses Excuses*, another picturebook written by the same author, is harassed and nagged by the adult right through the day, every day. But unlike Neel whose imaginative explanations do not amuse the adult, Tala overpowers the adult through magical transformations. Literary nonsense “tends to be highly intertextual, frequently, though not invariably, through parodic relationships. . .” (Reynolds, *Radical* 51). This picturebook, in fact, is “intratextual” (Nikolajeva and Scott 232) in the way it extends Neel’s story but gives it a twist through the use of fantasy as weapon. The word ‘tala’, incidentally, means ‘head’ in Malayalam, a metaphor that seems to suggest the power of imagination here rather than its stereotypical association with reason.

The reader remains unsure if the events narrated are real or only the work of Tala’s imagination. The title “Today is My Day” emphasises Tala’s transition from a powerless child to an empowered one. Karen Coats suggests that engaging in fantasy play helps children set “the elements of their environment” in an order “over which they exercise some control” (“Fantasy” 76–77). The endpapers further extend this idea by depicting a picture of Tala on the recto, arms akimbo, as all around her, two-dimensional and three-dimensional versions of the word “MY” lie scattered. Significantly, the official title page with the name of the adult author and adult illustrator is moved two page turns away. Instead, the first “title page” only portrays Tala pointing at the picture of the sun on a calendar from which dates seem to be falling off, a metafictional device often used by picturebook makers like Anthony Browne whereby metaphors are represented literally in pictures (Nikolajeva and Scott 25). The surreal front cover incidentally depicts the same sun within which is embedded the title of the book with a smiling Tala swinging from a
couple of rays. The narrative proper begins on the next spread with Tala mentioning her willingness to be “good” on all days other than this one, reminding us once again of Neel’s intentions to be good. On the verso, Piet Grobler, the illustrator, portrays a girl with her back turned against a host of speech bubbles with incomplete phrases or just exclamation marks within them: fragments of phrases like “EAT YOUR SPINACH”, “BE GOOD” and “CLEAN YOUR FEET” that the child reader hears the adult spout every day. Tala keeps one eye closed, suggestive of the yearning to block them out from her view also. The presence of a cat which mimics her actions and, in turn, is harassed by a little bird, makes for an entertaining “running story” (Nikolajeva and Scott 168) which parallels the main narrative. The verso on the next page warns the adult in the book and also makes a direct address to the reader:

        Today strange things can happen
        You’d better stay away
        Today’s the day to let me be
        For today is my day.

        The recto now depicts another title page with Tala dressed in armour attacking speech bubbles, pointed fingers, eyes that glare and mouths that shout; a surreal representation of the child’s perpetual battle with the adult, and an intimation of what is to come—a fantasy or a dream or a magical transformation that is played out in real time, the disruption in modality leaving the reader in postmodern indeterminacy (McCallum, “Would” 191; Anstey 150).
Tala’s day starts in typical fashion with her father asking her to “Rise and shine!” The illustration shows the sleeping girl holding a pillow to her head while the cat lying next to her feet covers its ears with its paws. Tala wishes that her father would leave her alone and go away to “Bangkok / Or Tokyo or Rangoon” but he continues to “twitter and “coo” and “flap” his hands like wings. Tala thinks that if he starts to flap too much, he will surely start to fly. She looks up with a giggle to see that her wish has come true: “Daddy is up in the sky!” Her father has been transformed into a huge bird in pyjamas with the cat and the little bird in hot pursuit. Tala’s sister, Vella, now appears on the scene, sitting on the toilet seat and pontificating about the importance of brushing teeth and the best way to do it. Ravishankar’s nonsense verse is at its comic best as Vella instructs:

Firstly, soak them
For an hour
In some lemon
That is sour
Then go outside,
And facing South
Stand for an hour
With an open mouth.

The little bird, meanwhile, has caught hold of the cat’s tail in the same way Tala has been cornered by her sister in the bathroom. As Tala compares Vella’s open mouth to that of a crocodile, she is terrified to see that Vella’s nose has turned into a slimy snout. The page turn finds Tala addressing the reader and the adults in her life again: “LEAVE
ME ALONE”—the font in capitals reflect her loud voice warning the world. Tala’s grandmother comes rushing with a mug of milk just as she heads off to school. Her grandmother’s story about drinking five cans of milk every day that eventually built up her muscles makes Tala wonder how she had managed to consume an amount only cows could drink. The next minute she smiles as she sees her grandmother turn into one.

Imagination in *Today is My Day* is a faculty for problem-solving, for creating analogies and metaphors which reframe the object or issue. The ‘trick’ in firing the imagination is “first of all a verbal one, an analogy and renaming from which a setting, experiences, and encounters can be developed” (Hall 135). The reader, on the other hand, with the page turn, is launched rather abruptly into a world where fantasy and reality coexist.

According to Reynolds:

. . . literary nonsense has its own conventions and logic: as well as obeying the rules of grammar, it employs inversion and wordplay, mixes unrelated or contradictory items (usually suggesting an affinity between them through rhyme or parallelism), and tends to present things in terms of extremes. (*Radical* 51)

Ravishankar plays with words in lines such as the ones spoken by Grandma, coining nonsensical nouns like “crib” and “fussle” that add to the humour and rhyme within the text:

I’ve followed it for sixty years

Without a crib or fussle

So now you know the secret of

My strong and solid muscle.
The verso on the next page has Tala standing in the corner with a dunce cap on her head, in much the same way Neel was put in a corner by his mother. The verse begins abruptly with the lines:

‘I want you to find
What the answer would be
If you multiply eight ninety five
By a three.’

The teacher admonishes Tala in much the same way Neel’s teacher does but Tala’s thoughts interrupt the teacher’s words; she suddenly realises that when her teacher is “cross” “she’s a multiply sign”. The teacher is transformed into a cross sign with her grotesque face positioned in the centre. The dance teacher whose instructions seem contradictory and vague is also changed into a statue, frozen mid-pose. Tala’s mother who tries to move her away from the television set and into bed is suddenly on TV just as Tala wishes it so. The child reader is bound to agree with Tala’s patient explanations to her mother about watching TV late at night:

‘Mommy, Mommy,’ I quietly explain
‘They’re about to jump from a burning train
Such moments are few
Such moments are rare
Such moments keep one glued to the chair.
Such moments are not for going to bed’
The narrative concludes with Tala reminding the adult that the disturbing practices of child-rearing and disciplining—flaring, glaring, growling and scowling—can continue on all other days, but not “today”. The final page reveals Tala in deep sleep with a gentle smile tugging the corners of her lips. The absence of the verbal text leaves the reader no choice but to construct the ending independently. The narrative gives no explanation for the series of magical transformations narrated in a matter-of-fact manner; it is up to the reader to take it as real or as a figment of Tala’s imagination. The picture of Tala deep in sleep is probably a hint to the reader to interpret the narrative as a dream, just like Alice’s dream in Lewis Carrol’s *Alice in Wonderland*. The other alternative could be that Tala indulges in fantasy before going off to sleep just as Max does in Maurice Sendak’s picturebook *Where the Wild Things Are*. Both endings allow the protagonist and the child reader to experience catharsis by giving the usually powerless child agency within the narrative and turning the hierarchy existing in the real world on its head. Rules, hierarchies and social proprieties “get upended for a time, but when control and order are ultimately restored” the children “function more smoothly as a result of the release of tension and negative emotions. . .” (Coats, “Fantasy” 83).

On the other hand, if the reader accepts the narrative as real, that Tala has managed to transform the adults and prove that “today” is indeed her day, the picturebook employs another nonsense convention, that of “blending the ordinary and the extraordinary” (Reynolds, *Radical* 61). Looked at from this perspective, *Today is My Day* celebrates the fact that imagination “makes magicians of us all”, as Margaret Mahy states in her Young Adult magic(al) realist novel, *The Changeover* (34). Nonsense verse’s requirement, akin to magic(al) realism’s prerequisite, “that readers accept the
improbable—even what is held to be impossible—also mirrors the constant mental adjustments the young make as they undergo new experiences and encounter new ideas” (Reynolds, Radical 20). Like magic(al) realism, nonsense verse expands the capacity for intellectual openness stimulating new ways of thinking through the stretching of the imagination.

In the picturebook What Shall I Make? (Tulika 2006) written by Nandini Nayar, illustrated by Proiti Roy and recommended by CBSE for schools, imagination is layered into the fabric of the everyday. A little boy, Neeraj, helps his mother make chapatis. The endpapers depict the stages of making chapatis from rolling the dough after squeezing, pinching and patting it, to making a “hot, light, puffy” chapati on the tawa. Reading the book becomes a synaesthestic experience for the child who sees and interprets pictures and words on the page—vicariously touching, smelling and tasting a chapati in the process.

When Neeraj shapes the ball of dough into various shapes which then seem to take on a life of its own, there is potential for slippage from reality into fantasy. His mother, whose face is not revealed, encourages the enacting of the narratives visualised by Neeraj after rolling the dough into various animal shapes: a snake, a mouse and a cat who suddenly grows into a lion. This is imagination as action, triggered not through words as in Today is My Day but through deep commitment to an object—in this case, the ball of dough. The child “acts as the creator of texts in ways that parallel the author/illustrator’s creation of the book...” (Hall 138–39). The child reader, on the other hand, plays a guessing game before each page turn, looking at the changing shape of
dough and wondering what it will turn out to be. Neeraj appears scared of the snake that is going to bite him and the mouse that will run all over the house, but his mother quickly dissolves the threat by asking him to roll up the dough quickly. However, the cat who is going to drink up all the milk does not seem to be held in check like the others and changes into a lion even as his mother asks him to roll it up. As in the picturebook *Wolves* by Emily Gravett, where the rabbit, the reader of the book on wolves, is eaten up by the wolf which is a creation of his imagination, here too there is a sense that “the imagination is not entirely controllable or beyond the realms of disruption by the real” (Hall 140). In *What Shall I Make?* it is the mother who guides Neeraj back into reality as he visualises a terrifying lion opening its mouth and revealing big teeth. Children who fear the dark are also similarly terrified of the monsters they themselves create who then seem to inhabit the real world.

The book engages the reader in much the same way the picturebooks *Ari* (Tulika 2014) and *What Did You See?* do; it allows the child reader to indulge in role play. Margaret Mackey affirms that “the semiotic doubleness of the picturebook format and the actual doubleness of the paired readers make room for a performance of reading that is considerably more visible and tangible than normal silent reading. . .” (“The Most” 112). She asserts that “hands, bodies, voices, wits—all play a role in making the text come alive” (113). While reading aloud, the “combined modes of written word, image, sound and gesture give texture, colour and substance to meaning” (Bearne xvii). This picturebook makes both the child within the text and the child without co-creators of the story, engaging them in performance and role-play through the use of imagination.
On the other hand, the picturebook *Why Paploo Was Perplexed* (Tulika 2011) delineates the role played by imagination in nurturing intelligent minds. Paploo, the protagonist, has many troubling questions to ask, questions that hover in many children’s minds. Paploo wonders about the laws of nature, science and society as well as the rules made at home. His countless questions remain unanswered by the adult: “Does NIGHT come first and then the DAY? . . . Why am I woken up when I’m STILL SLEEPY, And when I’m NOT SLEEPY, sent to bed? . . . Why do only MAMAS carry babies? Why can’t PAPAS carry them too?” He tries in vain to tell the sun to come out at night and the earth to become sky.

The story ends with Paploo’s dream which makes him realise that he can change any law or rule, by imagining it the way he wants it to be. The author concludes with the statement: “The world could do with boys like him who add ONE and ONE to make FOUR!” Paploo’s perplexity, curiosity, defiance, rebelliousness and creativity are probably experiences the child reader relates to, more so in a world where the adult decides the needs of the child and only offers logic and reasoning from the world of science as they know it. There is no encouragement for curious minds in an education system which believes in intellectual development through memorising facts rather than through lateral thinking. The pages in *Why Paploo Was Perplexed* illustrated by Tiya James are full of swirling images with Paploo caught in the centre of it. The cover page shows Paploo being sucked into the vortex of a whirling circle of words which include the title and the names of the author and illustrator. The linearity of the stairway on which he is standing could represent the static world of logic and rationality, in contrast to the swirling vortex representing the dynamic world of the imagination.
The children in these picturebooks engage in fantasy play that help them set the elements of their environment into an order over which they exercise some control. In their playful testing of boundaries, their mixing of genres and the centrality given to imagination, these picturebooks find their natural place in literary postmodernism. The next section analyses picturebooks that fracture the metanarrative of history and rewrite the narrative of the partition of India as shared historiography.

2.7 Partition Memory as Shared Historiography

Children’s literature in India has been satiated with didactic stories from history, religion, myth and folklore in comic book series like *Amar Chitra Katha* and periodicals like *Target* and *Tinkle*, published from the 1970s onwards. The picturebook, a fairly recent sub-genre in India, does not primarily focus on history and religion. A notable one that does is *Mukand and Riaz* (Tulika 2007) published by Tulika. It is the author-illustrator Nina Sabnani’s interpretation of the partition of India as gleaned from her memory of the story told by her father focusing on his personal experiences:

*Mukand and Riaz* is a real story about my father Mukand and his memory of his best friend Riaz Ahmad who helped him and his family escape from Karachi during the partition. My father missed his friend whom he never met since 1947. He used to say that most people complained about leaving behind property and wealth. His wealth was his best friend. I hoped that I could bring them together through this story. (Interview *Saffron Tree*)
Narrative, as Peter Brooks has said, is always “a perspective on a story rather than a record of every single event” (qtd. in Nicol 27). What follows is an examination of memory as history in Mukand and Riaz; more specifically, of the representation of history as biography seen through the spectacles of memory—of history as an oral account of ‘his/story’ documented and interpreted as “herstory” (Carby 216) by the author in a picturebook for the child reader. In the process, the author’s perspective of history and the importance that she, as a woman, places on certain issues is also discussed.

Rather than accepting grand narratives as the given, postmodern theorists now look for micronarratives, the little narratives which do not seek to homogenise the story of Everyman but represent every wo/man’s story as one among many incomplete stories. Postmodernists no longer view History as a totalising discourse, a single ‘History’, but as a limitless number of incommensurable ‘histories’. The ‘new historicism’ is distinguished from the old by a lack of faith in the objectivity of historical study and is replaced by an emphasis on the way the past is constructed or invented in the present (Watkins 53).

Louis Montrose, in his elucidation of the textuality of history, suggests that we can have . . . no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival may be a complex, subtle process of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the ‘documents’ upon which historians ground their own texts, called “histories” (781).
It is historiography’s “explanatory and narrative emplotments of past events” that construct what we consider historical facts (Hutcheon 92). As Hayden White succinctly states:

What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity—a historiography which, in cutting itself off from the resources of poiesis (invention) and artistic writing, also severed its ties to what was most creative in the real sciences it sought halfheartedly to emulate. (152)

The partition of India as narrative has undergone a process of “sedimentation” (Ahmad 229) subsequent to numerous accounts of it from the British perspective as well as from the Indian and the Pakistani perspectives. As Ranajit Guha states:

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively (37).

The common man has been represented as agency, through personal memory as history in novels like Raghu Karnad’s Farthest Field. Anne Holden Rønning points out that “the boundaries between history and anecdotal memory are often blurred and fluid in fiction” (9). Karnad’s novel is an Indian story of World War II as experienced by his own
grandfather and two granduncles—Ganny, Manek and Bobby—the outcome of which affected his great grandparents, his grandmother and his grandaunts. The final fragmented picture is a fresh perspective of history as we know it, of the extraordinary role of India/ns in the War as the largest volunteer army in history and its repercussions, both public and private. The story of a single family—a family history—garnered from memories, letters, memorabilia, photographs, maps and sundry documents—turns into one of the multiple histories of the nation, a part of the past constructed in the present.

In the picturebook, *Mukand and Riaz*, the memory of Sabnani’s father’s narration metamorphoses the history of an individual into the history of two friends, of a family and subsequently, of two nations during a horrifying period in time. The common man’s uncommon story, here too, becomes one of the multiple histories of the nation. Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani novelist, has written an account of the Partition as witnessed by a young Parsi girl, Lenny, in her novel, *Ice-Candy Man*. This was later made into a film produced in India titled *1947, Earth*. On the other hand, the picturebook, *Mukand and Riaz*, was created as a sequel to an animation film of the same name made by Sabnani for the Big Small People Project, Israel, which incidentally won a certificate of merit from the Tokyo Broadcasting System, Japan.

The title of the picturebook on the cover page yokes together two names identified with two predominant religions in the region—Hinduism and Islam. The illustration of the tree on the title page with its branches of varying lengths attached to the trunk seems to signify the underlying unity among people of various communities. The partition of 1947 threw people practising these two religions and living together for
centuries into two hastily-formed geographical spaces—India and Pakistan. But, unlike many written records on either side of the border, this picturebook does not pit the story of one nation against the other. As the blurb states, Mukand and Riaz is a story of shared histories through the shared memories of a daughter and a father. It is the shared history of two young boys, later identified as Indian and Pakistani, whose friendship was broken up forever, for no fault of theirs. It is the shared history of the uprooting of families who considered the land they were born in their home, until then. The shared memories of Mukand’s family interweave with the untraced memories of other families to become representations of the shared histories of a divided nation, woven, significantly, in this picturebook through a shared craft—applique work—created by women on both sides of the border, Sindh in Pakistan and Gujarat in India.

What happened to Sabnani’s father, Mukand, echoes what happened to the two nations. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had lived mostly in peace and harmony until then, not conscious of their religions having become identity markers on the political stage, were evicted, uprooted, raped or killed overnight. The protagonists, Mukand and Riaz, in the picturebook, are the best of friends. They do not let religion come in the way of friendship. When the country is split into two, blood on the streets does not shake Riaz’s love for his friend. It only makes him bolder and more courageous, ready to sacrifice his life for his friend and his family. This is what probably makes Mukand finally part with his cherished cricket cap. It does not matter if he does not play cricket in future, as long as the cap lets his best friend live his dreams.
Riaz asks Mukand’s family to dress up in the clothes worn by people of his community. He becomes aware of how clothes and caps had turned into identity markers. Lenny, in Sidhwa’s Ice-Candy Man, similarly notices the sudden change in the way people are identified. Overnight, her Ayah is no longer just Ayah but a Hindu, and is hunted down by the same companions she used to spend her time with, now labelled Muslims.

What the professional historians see as an event, fixed and frozen at a specific point of time in the past, is seen by New Historicists as ‘texts’ that interpret the past through multiple narratives. Emphasising the same, Linda Hutcheon, states:

The shift from validation to signification, to the way systems of discourse make sense of the past, is one that implies a pluralist (and perhaps troubling) view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality—or rather, of the textualised remains (documents, archival evidence, witnesses’ testimony) of that past. (96)

In Mukand and Riaz Sabnani highlights those aspects of history important to her as a woman. Although she focuses on her father’s oral narration, the issues foregrounded by her are very different from those that would be foregrounded by a male writer. In the picturebook, the fundamental rights of human beings, as declared by the United Nations, are subtly emphasised. In any war-torn nation, human rights take a back seat, especially those of women and children. In this picturebook, the riven country deprives two children of the right to friendship. It takes away the right of a family to live on the land they consider theirs. It takes away their right to a home and a neighbourhood and a homeland
and throws them into a new geographical space among new people, no matter if they belong to the same religion or speak the same tongue. Saadat Hasan Manto brings forth the frenzy that Partition created in the minds of the people in his short story “Toba Tek Singh”. The insane protagonist, Toba Tek Singh, plants his feet firmly in No Man’s Land refusing to cross the border in spite of being pushed by soldiers who now say his home lies on the other side. The confusion, anxiety and the horrifying helplessness undergone by the common people is highlighted in this story where even the insane seem to sense the chaotic mood of the nation.

While the macrocosmic world has always dominated the pages of history books and historical fiction with its grand narratives of great wars, great kings and great kingdoms, a woman writing history is more likely to focus on other histories—the little narratives of the common wo/man. She is more likely to focus on themes closer to her heart—the rights of children, friendship among people of different religions, the courage of children and their sacrifices, the point of view of the child. Nina Sabnani goes further in that she also uses a craft usually associated with women to illustrate her work; applique work is the art of stitching together pieces of fabric on a base layer of cloth to form a richly textured, colourful tapestry, symbolic of Sabnani’s act of sewing together the histories of two nations using patches of memory—her father’s and her own. History then becomes herstory through memory and biography; a weaving of history through a woman’s memory of her father’s narration of partition.

In the field of children’s literature, newer histories for children emphasise the story in history, while fiction, specifically historical fiction for children, paradoxically
continues to offer certainty (Watkins 56–57). The only change in historical fiction has been the embrace of the notion of relativism, the idea that someone else is going to see a different part of the past, whereas history begins to suggest “the possibility of complete subjectivity—that no one is seeing the past quite right and that the stories will not match up” (Stevenson 127–28).

While historians now re-negotiate the problems of history as a construct, writers of children’s historical fiction delve into various texts through which the past can be constructed in the present, bringing forth different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality. In doing so, they succeed in representing many voices muted before. The strands of memory, biography and oral narration are all woven, though not seamlessly, into multi-coloured, multi-layered works of multiple histories. In this picturebook, illustration and text go hand in hand in weaving a historical story, a story from the past constructed through the author’s memories in the present. In doing so, a family history gets transformed into the shared histories of two nations—a new perception of an old catastrophe; a new insight into current misfortunes.
It was Ari’s mother. She entered the room, crouching on all fours, pretending to be a mouse.

Ari

High in the Sky
Excuses Excuses

Mukand and Riaz
When Ali Became Bajrangbali

“But everybody will laugh at you, and make you cry,” Lola said.

“I won’t cry!” Appu shouted. “You don’t know anything about clowns!”

“I know that you’re making them all up!” Lola shouted back.

When I Grow Up
The strangest thought suddenly
Comes to my mind
When my Maths teacher's cross,
She's a multiply sign

Today is my Day

Why are you afraid?

Why are You Afraid to Hold My Hand?
The following section studies dominant ideology and stereotypes and discusses the ways in which they have been challenged in picturebooks.

2.8 Interrogating Prevailing Ideologies and Social Constructs

Books published and authorised by adults, bought by parents and read by children consciously or unconsciously mirror adult ideals and social constructs. To study children’s literature is to analyse an adult ideal (Hunt, Understanding 5). Joseph Zornado, in his book *Inventing the Child*, maintains that “there remains a master narrative to the story of childhood that continues to play out in and through the dominant culture, through the stories the culture tells about itself to itself and through the lived relations that result between the adult and the child” (xiv). Rosemary Ross Johnston also affirms that children’s books, like all texts, are “culturally coded—consciously and unconsciously, implicitly and explicitly” (153). Picturebook publishers in India have sought to challenge the master narrative of the story of childhood played out in and through the dominant culture in many ways. They have attempted to interrogate the prevailing ideologies and social constructs woven around childhood with respect to family, gender roles, power equations and parenting.

2.8.1 Revisioning the Family

Kimberley Reynolds states that “the family has been a constant presence in stories written for children, but the way in which it is represented has changed considerably over time in line with shifts in cultural needs and expectations about both the family and children” (“Changing Families” 193). The picturebooks chosen for examination in this
section are representative of the endorsement or subversion of dominant ideologies in India regarding a ‘normal’ family.

2.8.1.1 The Traditional Family

Set in a middle-class apartment, Where is Amma? (Tulika 2010) is a picturebook which has the absent mother playing a pivotal role in the title as well as in the content of the book. The child, Kiran, becomes anxious when he doesn’t see his mother. He starts his search in the drawing room. The framed photograph of a heterosexual couple with a single child, generally held to be the ideal nuclear family, is strategically placed on a book shelf at the other end of the room. The parents in When I Grow Up (Tulika 2013), though not present physically, are mentioned in the verbal narrative of the picturebook and are portrayed in the thought balloons of the protagonists; Appu’s mother is an architect and his father is a comic book illustrator. The picturebook Catch that Cat (Tulika 2013) ends happily with the illustration of the family walking back home after Dip Dip rescues her friend’s cat from up a tree—her father and mother are shown pushing her wheel-chair while her brother prances on up ahead. Kanna Panna (Tulika 2015), a story about a visually challenged boy coming into his own, depicts a father who constantly asks Kanna to “Look up! Head up!” and a mother who orders him to straighten his clothes. Fakru, the worrier, in Fakruddin’s Fridge (Tulika 2014) has a father who tells him that they can live without a fridge and a mother who encourages him to solve his problems rather than panic.

Representations of families are always “discursively shaped by class, culture, and historical moment” (Bradford 130). To the conservative middle-class Indian living in the
21st century, the ideal family is still the heteronormative nuclear family. Not surprisingly then, all the picturebooks mentioned above portray existing stereotypes of the traditional family and pave the way for an internalisation of dominant ideology. Ann Alston comments on the conservative portrayal of the family in children’s literature:

The family as a living reality has altered; divorce rates have soared; blended families are commonplace; often both parents work outside the home; children have become more central to family life as is often evident in parental battles for custody; there has been a decline in religious faith: the list of changes, it seems, is endless. Yet, in spite of this oft-quoted revolution, the depiction of the family in children’s literature is, at heart, deeply conservative. (1)

This unchanging portrayal may be due to the family being constantly presented as the first social unit encountered in childhood and therefore the “foundation for understanding and accepting the broader hierarchies of state and religion: the good family produces the good citizen” (Pearson 91).

2.8.1.2 Changing Families

While the concept of the nuclear family remains strong, there is, in reality, “an increasing acceptance of alternative families,” and also a return to “the growing importance of the extended family” (Alston 25). Some picturebooks from Tulika mirror this reality in their narratives.

Mala’s Silver Anklets, written for the pre-schooler and recommended by the Central Board of Secondary Education for schools, is set in a rural locale and portrays a
joint family with the grandmother making ‘dosa’, the father cleaning his scooter, the baby brother playing with his toy car, the mother going shopping and Mala, the chubby daughter in doubled-up plaits, jumping up from nowhere and frightening them all. Mala’s game goes awry when her mother gifts her a pair of anklets which announces her arrival everywhere. She thinks for a while and then hits upon a simple solution—“She took off her silver anklets!”

In pre-colonial times, especially in agrarian India, the joint family had been the norm rather than the exception. Sudhir Kakar observes that most Indians grow up in an extended family, although, in recent times, “migration to cities and towns in search of economic opportunity has contributed to the dissolution of extended families”. In spite of this “a social ‘jointness’ continues to operate” (115). Annie Besant portrays an ideal joint family in Mala’s Silver Anklets (Tulika 2011), in which a support system not available to nuclear families is seen to be in place. The grandmother in the book is seen extending a helping hand to the mother who is otherwise stereotypically portrayed in the kitchen. Here, the mother, seen to have more time on her hands, goes shopping. The father, too, has time to clean his vehicle, while the children play around him. Both the children are seen enjoying an idyllic childhood with ample food, love and security provided by the extended family.

On the other hand, Lauren Child, an English picturebook maker, in her award-winning picturebook, Clarice Bean: That’s Me, portrays a little girl’s dilemma in not being able to find “peace and quiet” in a house overflowing with people. The extended family includes Grandad, his canary, cousin Yolla, cousin Noah, Uncle Ted, Cement the
dog, sundry strangers as well as her parents, two brothers and an older sister. Having to share a room with her younger brother makes Clarice Bean yearn for a space of her own, which she eventually gets for “3 whole hours” when sent to her room in disgrace. This portrayal of a joint family deals more with the lack of space for a child who, in an environment essentially controlled by adults, occupies “a liminal and powerless position on the borders of the family” (Alston 89).

*Malli* (Tulika 2005), a bilingual picturebook, highlights the mutual dependence among people in a tiny village in Tamil Nadu; Victor Turner refers to this generalised social bond as ‘communitas’—an unstructured communion/community made up of equal individuals (360). Here the entire community functions as an extended family nurturing, supporting and caring for each other. This too can be looked upon as an alternative family where kinship stronger than blood ties brings people together.

The bilingual picturebook *No!* portrays a single parent family. The father is shown patiently trying to wake up his daughter, Annika, sleeping alongside the cat. Annika’s answer to his every request is “No!” He gets her new dress and shoes ready, irons his shirt and gives her “puri-potato” which he has cooked earlier. When Annika hears that she is going to her “Dadi’s” house, she jumps out of bed and quickly dresses up to get on the bus with her father. The mother is not mentioned at all in this book, but unlike Kiran in *Where is Amma?* Annika does not seem to ask for her mother or look for her in any way in the verbal or the visual narrative. Ann Alston’s picture of a happy home focalises on an ideal good mother; mother and home, like mother and family, are constantly linked, and as a result the motherless home is something of a contradiction in
children’s literature. Generally, when the mother is absent from the home, the family suffers (78). In this picturebook, however, although the mother is absent, the family remains a happy one and the home a neat and cosy one, challenging the dominant construct of a ‘good’ family and a ‘happy’ home.

In *The Lonely King and Queen* (Tulika 2011) picturebook maker Deepa Balsavar sensitively broaches the topic of adoption. As Radhika Menon affirms, there is no topic which is taboo in children’s literature provided it is dealt with sensitively and with compassion: “Children’s books have always reflected the larger society and context. I don’t believe in any taboos. It’s about how the story is written. A really good writer and illustrator can communicate even the most sensitive issue in a child-friendly and accessible manner” (Joseph).

The couple in the picturebook *The Lonely King and Queen*, described as “a handsome king and a beautiful queen,” are visually depicted on the title page, in ordinary Indian attire but for the crowns on their heads. Here, the expectations of the reader fattened on fairy tales is challenged. They feel lonely in spite of being happy together, having many friends and relatives and being successful in their respective careers. One day, they hear a distant voice calling out to them. They search high and low until it leads them to a big yellow building. They finally trace the voice to that of a little baby, one among many others in the orphanage, and then hear clearly what the baby says—“Papa, Mamma”. The entry of the baby into their home is portrayed as a call from the child to its parents, presenting adoption to be as joyful and natural a process as the biological one. In reality, if a couple opts for adoption, the extended family has many questions to ask
which usually includes doubts on the couple’s efficacy. They also discourage them from going in for adoption citing various reasons. In this scenario, a picturebook like *The Lonely King and Queen*, sensitising children to adoption, can do much to challenge the stigma attached to such ‘dysfunctional’ families opting for adoption. The King, Queen and the Princess/Prince are shown to live happily ever after in a 21st century fairy-tale ending to a story in which a middle-class couple enact a noble deed and are equated to royalty.

The picturebook, *Home*, written and illustrated by Nina Sabnani, breaks many barriers, especially in design and theme and social constructs. Structured in the shape of a ‘Kaavad’, a portable wooden shrine used by traditional storytellers in Rajasthan, its panels display a variety of houses and families alongside birds, animals, insects and humans, the final panel with an opening mentioning “Look out of the window. We all belong to the same world.” on one side and “Look out of the window. We all live on the same earth.” on the other. There are “large” families, “small” families and “different” families portrayed in the book. The large ones feature a joint family—a heterosexual couple, their parents and children—and a single parent family—a mother, with four children. The small family features a single parent again—a mother with two children—whereas the different family features a same-sex couple holding a baby. In a country steeped in patriarchal norms and traditions, the homosexual couple with a child, like the single-parent family and the couple that adopts, is still not looked upon as a ‘normal’ family. This picturebook allows the child reader to grow up freed of the stereotypical notions promulgated by Indian society.
The next section looks at the ways in which stereotypes regarding the Indian mother and motherhood are portrayed in the picturebooks chosen for study.

2.8.2 Mother and Child Portrayal: An Ideological Critique

The picturebooks in this section endorse or contest dominant ideology regarding the mother’s role in the life of the child as well as child-rearing practices prevalent in India. John Bowlby’s postulations regarding child-parent attachment, Zornado’s views on detachment-style parenting and Michel Foucault’s standpoint on disciplinary power enriches the ideological deconstruction of these picturebooks. The study of the “story” of mother-child relationships is also a study of “herstory” (Carby 216) as the authors, illustrators and publishers of the books under study are, significantly, all women.

2.8.2.1 The Absent Mother and the Anxious Child

*Where is Amma?*, set in a middle-class apartment, is a picturebook which has the absent mother playing a pivotal role in the title and the content of the book. The child, Kiran, becomes anxious on seeing the house devoid of the person who is constantly there for him. Kiran starts his search, newspaper telescope in hand, pet cat echoing his actions, in the drawing room. The room appears cosy in its set of domestic signifiers—a sofa set, a book-shelf with a framed photograph of the boy and his parents, a centre-table with a bowl of fruits and newspapers strewn around and a red toy boat lying alongside a yellow rubber duck. But the rather untidy room also bespeaks an absent mother and may be the reason for the boy’s rising anxiety. Ann Alston points out that “the home encapsulates
pre-conceived ideas of mothers and families. . .” Essentially, “the mother is always presented as the key symbol of the home, and therefore, the family” (78).

The first room Kiran runs into is the stereotypical female domain – the kitchen. While we might expect the home to bring individuals within a family together, the different rooms and spaces within a house also serve to separate those individuals: stereotypically the father in his study, the mother in the kitchen and the child in his/her bedroom (89). The child then goes into the bedroom, wondering if the mother has suddenly decided to curl up in bed with a book, or is hiding under the bed. When he notices her “dupatta” draped on a chair, he swirls it around himself, his anxiety mounting by the minute, exhibiting, in Bowlby’s terminology, a mode of Attachment behaviour.

Attachment behavior, the behavioural component of Bowlby’s Attachment Theory, is defined by Jeremy Holmes as any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual:

Attachment behaviour is triggered by separation or threatened separation from the attachment figure. It is terminated or assuaged by proximity, which, depending on the nature of the threat, may vary from being in sight, to physical closeness and soothing words without touching, to being tightly held and cuddled. (68)

Sudhir Kakar observes that in India, “the anxiety that may fester around the theme of separation stems at least partly from that moment in later infancy when the mother may suddenly withdraw her attention and her presence from her child”. Retrospective
accounts of adults and “anthropological observations of child-rearing practices suggest that this is a widely used method of disciplining young children in India” (88).

The mother’s slippers placed in front of the fridge give Kiran little relief, for he pictures her sitting within the fridge doing all the things he may have done in the same situation—drinking up all the milk, eating up all the “barfi” and finishing off the jam. Wondering why she does not reply to his loud remonstrations, he turns around on the stool placed in front of the fridge and slowly breaks into a wide, toothy grin as his mother approaches him with a pile of ironed clothes. The cat, on the other hand, looks on disapprovingly. The mother smiles when Kiran declares it must have been very cold in the fridge without a sweater. The story ends on a metafictional note with the mother laughing and hugging Kiran while the cat on the stool sticks up a poster on the fridge that states “THE END”.

The stereotypical nuclear family with the devoted mother and the silent role she plays in turning the house into a cosy, neat home are projected within the book—a reflection of the ideologies promoted by the patriarchal society without:

These are no innocent things, these children’s stories; rather, their innocence is an ideological projection by which we ignore their implications, their meanings, and the larger story they tell, for adults write the children’s books. The child is always already faced with an adult reification of the world presented as “neutral” and “obvious”. Children’s stories speak directly to the nature of the human relationship that produced them. If we want to understand the way in which a
culture envisions itself, we might look no further than the stories adults tell and
retell to their children. (Zornado 3)

In 21st century India, the urban, middle-class woman generally plays a dual role—
that of a career woman and a home-maker. This picturebook, published, written and
illustrated by women in 2010, continues to represent a stereotypical Indian woman. The
ideal of the nuclear family and the mother at home still remain “part of cultural
ideology”, in both reality and literature; mothers are often “criticised for returning to
work when their children still need daytime care”—the ideology demands “that they
invest all their time and emotion in their families” (Alston 23).

This myth of the ideal mother remains part of a metanarrative promoted by both
Western and Eastern societies. In a study on parental role portrayals conducted by Amy
L. DeWitt, Cynthia M. Cready and Rudy Ray Seward, the researchers were left with a
troubling question: “. . . why in Westernised society that values gender equality are not
more people demanding egalitarian portrayals?” They point out that “employed mothers
in children’s literature with occupations that depict greater independence and diversity
would be stronger role models for young readers” (100). An intelligent picturebook
influenced by postmodernity and feminism must seek to contest dominant socio-cultural
discourse with regard to class, community, gender, race or region and to voice what
Lyotard terms the “petit recits” (509), the little narratives. It must allow mothers to depart
from ideal stereotypes and “work to liberate them from unrealistic expectations”
(Fieldberg 11). Where is Amma?, on the contrary, reinforces existing stereotypes about
the ‘good’ mother and paves the way for an internalisation of dominant ideology. On the
other hand, the strong attachment the child seems to have for the mother is a welcome traditional practice endorsed by the text, also prevalent in the next picturebook under study.

2.8.2.2 The Nurturing Mother and the Attached Child

In the picturebook *My Mother’s Sari* (Tulika 2006) the mother is the protagonist whereas the child remains the narrator through whom the events are focalised. In other words, the reader views the action through the eyes of the child. The adoration and love for the mother is expressed through the possessive pronoun “My” in the title. Bowlby’s Attachment Theory mentions the strong attachment a child develops with the parent, especially the mother. Elucidating Bowlby’s theory, Jeremy Holmes writes:

Attachment Theory is in essence a spatial theory: when I am close to my loved one I feel good, when I am far away I am anxious, sad or lonely. . . Attachment is mediated by looking, hearing and holding: the sight of my loved one lifts my soul, the sound of her approach awakes pleasant anticipation. To be held and to feel her skin against mine makes me feel warm, safe and comforted, with perhaps a tingling anticipation of shared pleasure. . . Attachment Theory accepts the customary primacy of the mother as the main care-giver, but there is nothing in the theory to suggest that fathers are not equally likely to become principal attachment figures if they happen to provide most of the child care. (67–69)

An Indian child tends to experience her/his mother almost totally as a ‘good mother’. The father, on the other hand, remains in the periphery (Kakar 83). But *My*
Mother’s Sari is similar in many ways to Anthony Browne’s portrayal of the mother in his picturebook, My Mum. The clothes worn by the mother function in both picturebooks as a metaphoric substitute for the mother and her role in the child’s life. In My Mother’s Sari, the mother’s sari wraps itself around the child. Acrylic pictures of many children swaddled in traditional Indian saris take up the space with just one picture of a mother’s back bleeding out of the verso towards the middle of the book. In this picturebook, the narrator describes synaesthetic experiences of a mother’s love represented by and through the sari—at times visual in the vibrant variety of colours; at times tactile, especially when enveloped in it or when used to wipe a runny nose; at times soothing when swung to sleep in it (a typical Indian practice) and at times corporeal as when climbing up a twisted sari or sailing down a river-blue ‘pallav’.

My Mother’s Sari, which was selected as an Outstanding International Book for 2007 in the U.S., is open to multiple readings. What the child reader comprehends literally, gains significance in the eyes of the adult reader as a “shadow text” (Nodelman, The Hidden Adult 8). The verbal narrative states: “I sail down a river and climb up a rope. I hide with my friends. I even wipe my nose. . . . I love my mother’s sari. I love the way it makes me dream.” The mother is seen by the experienced adult reader as the anchor the child needs in times of joy or sorrow, sickness or health, in fearful circumstances or depressing ones and especially at bed-time. The double-page spread where the child is shown blissfully dreaming is depicted with the sleeping child cocooned in a sari within a tiny circular frame, resonant of the mother’s womb, surrounded by the muted motifs of the sari scattered across the rest of the spread. It is said that the adult fantasy of the return to the womb, as seen in this instance, underlies much of children’s literature (Alston 88).
In *My Mum*, the mother’s duster-coat, the floral pattern of which fills the endpapers too, takes on a life of its own, especially when the child-narrator, who is absent otherwise, says “My mum’s a magic gardener. She can make ANYTHING grow”. The flowers on the coat spring out of their designated places revealing shoots and leaves below. Behind the mother are displayed pots with plants on which buttons, fruits, fish and coffee mugs are ‘flowering’.

*My Mum* depicts a more realistic mother who “can sing like an angel” but also “roar like a lion”. But, as the unseen child narrator stresses immediately after, “She’s really, REALLY nice, my mum”. The child narrator in *My Mother’s Sari* seems equally secure in the knowledge that the mother, who, in India, remains the primary care-giver, will wrap herself around the child and take her through the ups and downs of life. However, there are also picturebooks that portray children who do not share that perspective. A more nuanced understanding of motherhood is reflected in such books, one of them being the picturebook under study in the following section.

### 2.8.2.3 The Strict Mother and the Disciplined Child

Ann Alston asserts that the ideal of the family is not simply an innocent idealistic fantasy but an ideological system in which issues of power and control are embedded. This, she states, is evident in Michel Foucault’s work on the study of power:

Disciplinary power functions through ideology: concepts, values, rules, morals, all the mechanisms which permit the peaceful co-existence of masses of
individuals, come to seem ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ because the individual internalises the ideology which produces them. (10)

Alston contends that the family can also be read as “a site of discipline; it is a site of surveillance”. Within the family, children are constantly under the observation of parents and are “therefore under constant parental guidance and control. Family is where the child is first immersed in ideology”. She affirms that “the family unit is a disciplinary institution. It follows socially promulgated ideologies that dictate patterns of behaviour which insist on conforming to culturally constructed conventions of family” (10). As Zornado reminds us, the child remains “at the bottom of the hierarchical totem pole as the adult’s God-given property” (13). Mocking parental control and disciplining, reinforcing what Foucault asserts and using dominant discourse in order to subvert it, the picturebook *Excuses, Excuses* (Tara 2011) written in nonsense verse by Anushka Ravishankar makes a caustic statement on detachment-style parenting in India.

Joseph Zornado disapproves of detachment-style parenting as one which causes the child emotional trauma:

From the infant’s first days, ideology interrupts his ability to meet basic biological needs: namely, in the first months of life, attachment to the mother remains a biological necessity, until the infant signals a readiness to separate from the mother. Ideology interrupts and structures the relationship of the adult and the child in the form of technology, medical science, and the belief in the salvific force that technology and science supposedly embody. Yet for the infant, technology augers something other than salvation. Technology in the form of
baby formula, rubber nipples, cribs, intercoms, and even strollers goes hand in hand with premature detachment from the mother and the resultant emotional and physical deprivation. Ideology goes hand in hand with detachment and abandonment. (5)

Neel, the child protagonist, is constantly accused by the adult of making excuses. The child reader, familiar with this phrase uttered repeatedly by the powerful adult in this universally hierarchical relationship, would instantly empathise with Neel in his efforts to become a ‘good’ boy. The excuses cooked up by Neel are hilarious and imaginative. The question Neel asks himself—“What did I do wrong?”—is often asked by the child who tries but fails every time in keeping the adult happy.

Neel’s intentions are always noble but what is he to do if he’s late to school because his clock begins to tick in an anti-clockwise way and he wakes up at noon “of yesterday”? The teacher presumes Neel will come up with an excuse even as she asks him the reason for being late. “Late again! What is it now? / Chased by a lion? Kicked by a cow?” Neel’s heightened sense of imagination and the angst he experiences while completing his homework is ignored by the adult who simply expects the child to do her/his bidding without questioning. On another occasion, a guest who finds Neel’s questions rude leaves the house. She does not understand that it is curiosity, an eagerness to know, prevalent in the child as yet unconditioned to frame his thoughts in polite expressions that has probably made him ask her where her eyebrows had gone – “Did they slip away silently? / Or did they let you know?”
Neel’s mother always wants him to keep his room clean but she doesn’t seem to be too impressed with his innovative method of sloshing it with water and turning it into a swimming pool. All Neel gets for his effort is a day in the corner. The mother is at a loss when it comes to understanding why her child “misbehaves”. Rather than reading a child’s behaviour as a way of reading and supporting his emotional needs, the mother instead reads the child’s behavior as ‘misbehavior’, as a sign of the child’s willfulness or inappropriateness. The child “learns early and often from the lived relation with the adult that the rules and regulations of adult culture will not tolerate this or that in the child, though the rules are inconsistently applied,” which thereby always cause confusion in the child’s unconscious mind (Zornado 8). Ann Alston observes that the child “being sent to her/his bedroom, or ‘grounded’ like a prisoner is a common childhood punishment” (89). But, in this picturebook, the adult’s belief in the power of punishment is not upheld by the child – Neel stuns his mother, who thinks he has spent his confinement in repentance, by drawing pictures on the wall.

A photograph of Neel with one foot slowly morphing into a wolf’s paw while a tree grows out of the chair he sits on, evokes Max, the protagonist, in Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, who fantasises himself as “King of the Wild Things” when his mother sends him to his room without dinner. Withholding food is another common strategy adopted by the mother, the nurturer, to bring the disobedient child back in line. Underlying the cultural institution of the family meal are “rituals concerned with power and control, for to feed someone is to exercise power, to penetrate metaphorically the body of another and to gratify desire” (Alston 105).
Challenging stereotypes influences young minds to think differently and bring a positive change in a world that is in urgent need of it. In her essay on “Changing Families in Children’s Fiction” Kimberley Reynolds speaks of the ways in which children’s literature today is engaging in interrogations of the family to suit new conditions:

. . . with new world orders taking shape and a new series of threats to the future, from global warming through terrorist activities to a revival of the nuclear arms race, the times are changing again, and children’s literature is playing its part in opening up thinking and offering young people opportunities to revision relationships, culture and power structures. (207)

It is imperative that children’s publishing houses realise the need to consciously engage in countering patriarchal stereotypes and dominant ideologies which idealise the mother or encourage unhealthy child-rearing practices. They must also be aware of the need to challenge and revision the normative construct of family thereby giving the child reader a picture of the real world in which families can be of many kinds, not to be viewed through tinted spectacles but accepted and welcomed with compassion, embracing differences the humane way. As Christopher Myers in his CSK Illustrator Award acceptance speech stated, a story-teller’s narratives can “rewrite reality” (33). The potential to revise lies in the ink of the storyteller; it lies in the hands of publishing houses like Tara and Tulika.
2.8.3 Challenging Socio-Cultural Constructs

As discussed above, many picturebooks published in India today consciously counter stereotypical socio-cultural notions prevalent in the country. The creators of these contemporary picturebooks are aware of the texts functioning as “powerful vehicles of ideology”, as Michelle Superle describes children’s literature, affecting children of all ages, more so the toddler yet to find her/his identity and position in the world.

Annie Besant’s picturebook *When I Grow Up* (Tulika 2013) begins with Lola declaring that she will be a “cricket batter” when she grows up. She then asks her friend, Appu, what he wants to be when he grows up. Appu concocts wildly imaginative careers Lola has never heard of. He wishes to be a “pironaut”, a combination of pirate and astronaut. When Lola declares that nobody can live on the moon, Appu says that he will then become a “singerina”, a singer-cum-ballerina. Lola states firmly that he can’t be one as he would have to dance around in a pink, frilly frock otherwise. Appu now decides to be a “clownter”, a clown and a painter. Lola states flatly that he is “making them all up”, an allegation which Appu stoutly denies. They fight till they are black and blue. Later, an apologetic Appu makes up with Lola confessing that all he wants to be is her friend. Lola grins and admits that all she wants to do is draw. She shows him a picture she has drawn in the course of their conversation. It is Appu’s picture.

This picturebook, through both the verbal and the visual texts, influences the reader’s perspective of the socio-cultural connotations attached to the terms ‘childhood’, ‘gender’ and ‘success’, especially in the Indian context. Annie Besant consciously depicts Lola as a dominating, strong-willed and aggressive girl exhibiting qualities not typically
considered ‘feminine’. At the same time, Lola believes in adult notions of ‘success’ and ‘career’. The upper middle-class girl, in this sense, also stands for the ideologically-ingrained adult stuck with stereotypical notions of growing up and having a successful career. On the other hand, Appu, is portrayed as a highly imaginative boy who does not want to succumb to the pressures of thinking about a ‘respectable career’ and ‘success’ in life. Appu’s outlook has probably been influenced by his unconventional parents. His father is a comic-strip illustrator and his mother is an architect. Lola’s father, not surprisingly, is a doctor, one of the two professions still considered the ‘ticket to success’ in a country like India. Her mother is not mentioned at all.

While Lola echoes the rational, unimaginative adult’s speech in her discouragement of Appu’s creative choice of careers, she is continuously shown drawing a picture all through the conversation. It is only after a physical fight with Appu that Lola realises the pleasure of creativity, the joys of childhood and the value of friendship which makes her a happy ‘child’ once again. The cover page, illustrated by Anushree Bhat, reveals an adult’s preoccupations concerning children and growing up. It shows Lola sticking her tongue out as she concentrates on measuring Appu’s height on a scale shaped like a giraffe. The title page, on the other hand, has a baby giraffe looking up at its taller parent with awe, much the same way a child who wants to grow up in double-quick time looks up at an adult.

The picturebook *Neelu’s Big Box* (Tulika 2015), written by Nandini Nayar and illustrated by Shreya Sen for the 3+ age group, also breaks gender stereotypes. Bespectacled Neelu, wearing polka-dotted shorts and t-shirt, and sporting a bindi, finds a
big box which she then proceeds to use as a fort. She plonks a fruit basket on her head as helmet, wields her grandparents’ walking sticks as swords and turns into a soldier about to attack a fort. When Neelu trips on her mother’s red dupatta which functions temporarily as a red carpet, the box gets flattened but Neelu nonchalantly turns it into a big boat with herself, the sailor, at its helm, donning her “captain’s hat”. Neelu’s choice of ‘careers’ are not typically associated with girls/women, especially in the Indian context.

The bilingual picturebook, *Work* (Tulika 2011), on the other hand, portrays pictures of only men engaged in many occupations—teaching, pottery, driving, shopkeeping, gardening, dancing, etc. This interactive non-narrative picture book for children seems to suggest that women today don’t work in an India where double-income families are not a rarity. Again, in the bilingual picturebook, *Dosa* (Tulika 2008), written by Sandhya Rao and illustrated by Ashok Rajagopalan, Bapa typically reads the newspaper while Amma makes dosas in the kitchen. On the other hand, in *The Lonely King and Queen*, analysed earlier, the lonely couple is shown sharing the housework and pursuing individual careers. All these texts then become disparate examples of the way “a culture envisions itself” (Zornado 3). Radhika Menon speaks of the need to see beyond the “black and white issues”. Gender sensitivity is not just about “strong girls, girls doing ‘boy’ things or ‘ungirl’ things”. It has to be presented in a far more nuanced manner. Stories “questioning the stereotypical notion of heroism, asking about the true nature of courage, of equality and friendship, loyalty and fear” are at the heart of gender sensitivity (Re: Questionnaire). Picturebooks like *Under the Neem Tree* (Tulika 2012), *Catch that Cat*, *Best Friends* (Tulika 2007) and *The Why-Why Girl* (Tulika 2003) portray women,
the challenged girl and the girl child as possessing agency. They will be analysed in detail in the following chapter.

A critical study of embedded ideology and counter-discourse in picturebooks helps to posit the transforming power inherent in picturebooks. Breaking stereotypes influence young minds to think differently and bring positive change in a world that is in urgent need of it. Seen in this light, the “transformative energy” of children’s literature that Kimberley Reynolds talks about in “promoting new world views, values and social models” is immense (Radical 2).

Contemporary picturebooks reflect, in their methodologies, the way life has changed in the last century: “we have shifted from absolutes to relativities, from understood rules of behaviour to personal preference, from shared values to situational ethics, from community to anomie” (Nikolajeva and Scott 260). The following section looks at picturebooks that enable the child reader living in a postmodern world of bleakness and isolation to cope with trauma and disability. It also encourages the readers untouched by such experiences to empathise with those facing difficulties, thereby honing their affective skills.

2.9 Evoking Empathy in an Era of Postmodernity

2.9.1 Healing Stories

Describing the process of reading a “vibrant triangle picture book” Tamara Ellis Smith posits that the experience that unfolds between the picturebook, the child listener and the adult reader is one in which the reader and listener are removed from their
everyday lives, giving them a break from their immediate problems or pleasures (66). However, their everyday experiences are unconsciously incorporated into the read-aloud experience as these still remain with the child and adult. The result, according to Smith, is deeply satisfying, as it is both “self-contained and connected” to their lives. In fact, Smith affirms, “the intersection of imaginary elements and real sensory experiences offers the child a safe and full way to participate in crises and celebrations, dilemmas and resolutions. It expands a child’s capacity for empathy and understanding” (67).

On the other hand, a child who is in emotional distress can find comfort and healing through bibliotherapy—through reading books which metaphorically, rather than literally, reflect her/his experiences. First, the reading of narratives “that literally or symbolically parallel one’s own condition can provide a language in which a child or adult may begin to talk about what has previously been inchoate”. Second, the reading of books can “provide the comfort of knowing that one is not alone. . .”. Third, reading can provide “vicarious insight into one’s problems, and even a measure of integration of previously disowned feelings”. Fourth, reading can provide “suggestions, akin to hypnotic suggestions, of ways to resolve the reader’s problems—suggestions which may bypass conscious resistance, on the sufferer’s part” (Crago 187). This is similar to what Sipe and Wolfenbarger term “engaged or kinetic resistance” (278). When we read a story that is obviously very similar in its characters and events to our own life experience, we may read it with enjoyment and appreciation, consciously appreciating the parallels; but if our life experience is painful, then we may reject such a story altogether: it will take us back to something we might prefer to forget (Crago 185).
The picturebook *My Friend, the Sea* (Tulika 2005) is a healing narrative for the child who has experienced loss and grief after a calamity, while the child who is fortunate not to have undergone the trauma, vicariously lives it through the intersection of imaginary elements and real sensory experiences. As the blurb states, this narrative about a boy in the aftermath of the tsunami is also the story of any child anywhere whose life is closely linked with nature. The book has been translated into German by the Kreuzberger Kinderstiftung who awarded it the Ambitious Children’s Book Project Prize. More importantly, the Hindi, Tamil and Kannada translations have been extensively used by groups working with children all over India. Written by Sandhya Rao, the story, though located in a fishing village in Tamil Nadu, transcends borders and appeals to an international audience through a universal experience, making the picturebook glocal; texts that are glocal are typical of those published in the era of postmodernity.

Interspersed with photographs clicked by Karuna Sesh and Pervez Bhagat, this picturebook yokes real-life photographs with a semi-fictional narrative. The boy’s story is based on the actual experiences of many like him who lost their families and friends overnight to the sea when the tsunami swallowed their villages on December 26, 2004. He too, like his father and grandfather before him, had considered the sea as his friend. He spent most of his spare time either leaping over the waves or trying to steer and stay afloat on the “kattumaram”, a boat made of logs tied together very tightly, used by fishermen for over 3000 years. His father and grandfather did not sense the arrival of the tsunami as “kadalamma”, Ocean Mother, had not shown any signs of impending squalls that day. They had returned from fishing and were laying the untied logs of the kattumaram to dry when “the sea crashed into them”. His grandfather, who always told
him to listen to the sea, didn’t hear the tsunami coming that day; “even he didn’t know
the soft and giving sea could be hard like a mountain.” Although his grandfather was
washed ashore clinging to a log, his father was never seen again. Overnight, the boy finds
himself in a shelter made by people from the cities for them. His grandfather has
suddenly grown very old. His mother hardly ever smiles. The boy tries to stop his tears
for his mother’s sake. Some of his friends too have been taken by the sea when they ran
towards it to look at the fish lying on the rapidly widening shore. Mothers and sisters who
ran behind their disappearing children too shared the same fate. When the boy hears that
his school will reopen soon, he is happy. He will find some of his dispersed friends
finally. He wants to ride the waves again with his friends. His brother has promised to
make him a new kattumaram.

The strong attachment of the boy to the sea is echoed in the many pictures of boys
playing in the sea or running on the shore. The last picture, which has been shot by
Raghavendra Rathore, the noted photographer to whom the book is dedicated, shows a
silhouette of a boy running joyously to the sea, capturing the indomitable spirit of the boy
and his unchanging love for the sea which can be the source of loss and grief at times but
is otherwise the mother who nurtures and sustains them. Some of the photographs in the
picturebook have frames around them either of white space or of lines drawn using
crayons. Other pages have simple crayon drawings of the sun, the waves and the
dolphins, which along with the tortoises, are never caught by the fishermen who regard
them as their lucky mascots. This picturebook pays homage to crayon marks that
‘decorate’ many copies of children’s books:
Generally read by adults and librarians as a sign that children have ‘ruined’ their own books, these marks function here as supernatural manifestations (children are the unseen gods of the colouring-book and picturebook worlds), as signs of reception visible inside the text itself, and as children’s attempts to collaborate in the picture-making process, infusing creative colour into often lifeless narratives.

(Trumpener 73)

This innovative touch builds a bridge between the child reader and the protagonist and deepens the reader’s understanding of the other’s experiences.

This picturebook, in the hands of a child who has undergone similar experiences, could lead to a healing of sorts, when the child is consoled by the fact that s/he is not the only one who has undergone such experiences and may adopt the coping strategies of the child protagonist in real life. It must be pointed out that, unlike other picturebooks, all the photographs in this book are not of the same boy; there is no one boy protagonist that the child can empathise with. This strategy does not permit the child to be lost in the original storyworld. But, at the same time, the breaking of the illusion of reality allows the reader to estimate the trauma undergone by several children like the boy in the verbal narrative. The local, in a rather different manner, becomes glocal, in this conscious absence of focalising on the narrator in the visual narrative.

The picturebook Alone in the Forest (Tara 2012), written by Gita Wolf and Andrea Anastasio, on the other hand, is the narrative of a boy who experiences fear, an emotion that is universally experienced, especially among children. Fear of the dark is an unexpressed, deeply felt fear in children who perceive the world of darkness as one full
of monsters and evil creatures. Not surprisingly, darkness has been archetypally associated with evil and ignorance the world over across time. Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger and Lawrence R. Sipe point out that young readers “make intertextual and real-life connections during interactive read-alouds” (277). For the child listener/reader who experiences the same fear, the picturebook extends a cathartic insight into the games played by the mind and the coloured vision extended by the eyes. The image of the perceiving eye becomes a leitmotif in a narrative in which a young boy, Musa, from a village offers to go collect firewood from the forest when his mother is sick. The first experience of the forest seen through the eyes of the boy is literally visualised by a picture of two big eyes across a double-page spread crowded with green trees and red birds. The written text is within yellow circular discs which stand for pupils. Alarmed by a loud noise, Musa dashes into the hollow of a tree which envelopes him in sudden darkness. The illustrations by the Gond tribal artist, Bajju Shyam, influences the mood of the narrative with double-page spreads that shift from green, blue and brown to a combination of dark brown, red and black. Perry Nodelman attaches significance to the use of colours which have culture specific meanings or emotional associations, either universal or private. Green and brown are usually associated with growth and fertility, blue with serenity and red and black with anger, defiance and hostility (Words 61, 63). Julia Kristeva suggests that colour in visual art speaks not only of conventional meanings but also to “the unconscious, that aspect of being which resides outside of the boundaries of the world we can name with language and thus think about. . .” (qtd. in Nodelman 59).

The double-page spread where the boy’s head is seen on the lower section with a wild boar foregrounded between his eyes is particularly significant in its use of colour.
and what Lewis terms “positional codes” (113). Citing William Moebius, Lewis affirms that figures positioned low on a page, as in this case, suggests low social status or low spirits in contrast to figures positioned higher up which suggests high social status or a positive self-image (Lewis 112). While the boy’s face is dark brown and his black hair standing up in shock resembles the rays of the sun, the background is a dark shade of red with a semi-circular brown section at the top embedded with the written text in capitals: “WILD BOAR! IT WAS A WILD BOAR!!” The boy’s experience of fear is associated with the time a wild boar had pursued him. The fear of the dark makes the boy imagine that the forest is full of wild boars waiting to pounce on him: “Now wild boars began to chase each other, round and round in his head.” This line and the accompanying illustration in significant colours may alert the reader to the location and source of the protagonist’s fear—the mind. The next page opening is again a picture of a huge eye trapped behind a network of twigs, metaphorically representing a petrified Musa. His heart beats loudly as he waits and waits, another page opening showing multiple images of Musa sitting patiently around the hands of an invisible clock depicting temporality and complementing the written text. David Lewis and Nodelman point out the ways in which pictures which set the story spatially can at times take over the function of the written text which locates it temporally (Lewis 107; Nodelman 159). A tiny squirrel that looks at him enquiringly and then heads out into the sunshine makes him follow its path. Musa is happy to see sunshine and a cow ambling along, which tells him he is very close to the village. Reflecting his mood, the pages turn bright blue, typically associated with serenity and security (Nodelman 64). Musa returns to his village without any firewood but with a story to tell—a story he is very proud of. A note on the Gonds follows the conclusion of
the narrative. It speaks of the community of tribal artists as highly visual people, traditionally forest dwellers, who, like many other tribes in India, brought forth their creativity through decorative patterns painted on the mud floors and walls of their houses; but now their art, as seen in the book, has developed into a highly evolved aesthetic capable of telling complex tales.

Wolfenbarger and Sipe postulate that three principal impulses appear to guide children's responses to literature:

1) the hermeneutic impulse or the desire to know; 2) the personal impulse or the need to connect stories to one's own life; and 3) the aesthetic impulse, in which readers either experience the secondary world of the story as if they were there or use the story as the springboard for their own creative performances. . . The aesthetic impulse pushes readers' creative potential to shape the story and make it their own. (277)

The picturebook Ari displays the impulses of the child within the book and elicits similar responses in the child outside. Ari, the protagonist, responds to the tale of the fierce lion being performed by the class, guided by the personal impulse and the aesthetic impulse. During the ritual of reading aloud, in itself performative in many ways, the child reader/listener witnesses a performance by the child and mother within the narrative. Similar impulses then guide the child reader’s/listener’s response to the picturebook. As Wolfenbarger and Sipe remind us, “facilitating children's performative responses and enabling them to manipulate the text in imaginative ways allows the children to become active agents in the story rather than merely passive spectators of someone else’s telling” (277).
Ari is the story of a boy who is shy but is misunderstood and labelled a coward. Ari tries to hide his face when someone calls out to him or pretends to look elsewhere when someone looks at him. Many child readers would see Ari as a mirror of their own lives; and, if not, as a window to the lives of others. As Radhika Menon and Sandhya Rao state in their article published in Wasafiri:

[picture books] . . . offer young readers their first big window on the world.

Besides, as picture books cater especially to an age group that can either be read aloud to or take its first steps in reading alone, they provide the perfect space for textual and visual narratives in which readers can find themselves and discover ‘the other’. (16)

When Ari’s teacher asks students to volunteer for play-acting, Ari’s hand goes up too, but slowly. As he doesn’t jump or shout like the other children, his soft voice remains unheard in the clamour. Although the name Ari means ‘lion’ in Tamil and Hebrew, and he loves to dress up and perform, especially like his namesake, the lion, he is not one of the children chosen by the teacher for the play. Later, Ari quietly watches the chosen ones practising in the school auditorium. He feels that the students enacting the roles of the lion and the mouse are not doing justice to them. Once home, Ari looks at himself closely in the mirror, then gets to work, cutting a big hole in a yellow paper bag, putting it over his head and drawing whiskers over his lips. He then bares his teeth, waves his hands, one of which is covered with a grey sock, and growls and roars loudly. Looking at the grey sock on his hand, he shouts out the line he had heard in school, “You teeny-weeny, so very little mouse! How dare you walk all over the king of the jungle?”
To his surprise, he hears a squeaky voice saying: “I’m sorry, O king of the jungle! You were lying so still, I thought you were a rock. Please don’t eat me up”. Ari’s mother now enters the room, on all fours, pretending to be a mouse. Ari quickly gives her the grey sock and they play the parts of the lion and mouse with gusto. When Ari pretends to hide behind his mother’s ‘pallu’, she pretends to nibble at the hunter’s net to rescue him. The lion now dances along with his new friend, the mouse, and growls “I am frrrrreeee!” The actors bow to an imaginary audience. They then proceed to clap and laugh and hug each other.

This picturebook, dedicated to the Aris of the world, helps the child either find herself/himself in the story or empathise with the shy boy. This picturebook effectively does what Maria Nikolajeva, in the article “Picturebooks and Emotional Literacy” affirms—picturebooks help foster empathy, an essential social skill, through images as well as words:

Young children have limited life experience of emotions, whereas picturebooks offer vicarious emotional experience that children can partake of. Fiction, as cognitive criticism claims, creates situations in which emotions are simulated. Reading picturebooks prepares children for dealing with empathy and mind-reading in real life. (250)

The pre-schooler, involved in the ritual of reading books with the adult, enjoys the corporeal experience of enacting the story, imitating the characters and shouting out the lines. Role playing enables the child to be what he/she is not, fosters empathy and also leads to catharsis. Ari’s yearning to be as loud and fierce as the lion is snuffed out in
school by his louder, more confident classmates. If it were not for his mother, who understands the desire and the talent of her child, Ari would have remained a bud that never blossomed. Significantly, the endpapers of this book depict two plants, one without any flowers on it and another sprouting a big red flower.

The play enacted within the main narrative is also equally significant. The strong, fierce lion needs the help of a tiny mouse. As Joseph Zornado reminds us, in the real world, the child remains at “the bottom of the hierarchical totem pole as the adult’s God-given property” (13). But, as seen in many other picturebooks and children’s stories, the power equation in this one too is shown to be tilted in favour of the child—the small mouse has abilities that the huge lion does not. The shy child equated to the tiny mouse, has abilities that the confident child equated to the large lion, does not have. The common motif in children’s literature of the victory of the underdog is reflected in the play within the picturebook text as well as in the main narrative itself. The book also reveals that the shy child has the potential to become a lion too, as Ari, true to his name, with a little bit of help from his mother, discovers. Ari’s theatrical skills and his ability to dress the part is superior to that of the ‘confident’ children in school. What he lacks in terms of confidence simply needs nurturing for Ari to rise as the king of the jungle, as seen on the front cover where Ari is depicted looking into the mirror in which his reflection appears dressed up as the lion.

Two other picturebooks, also published by Tulika, project similar stories. The picture-books Colour-Colour Kamini (Tulika 2007) and Aana and Chena (Tulika 2009) portray animals who are not their stereotypical selves. The elephant lacks self-esteem
until he’s given a pep-talk by a yam, and the chameleon is dejected that she’s not good at her work. Again, the child reader who is sensitive about imperfections or is lacking in self-esteem is consoled by the fact that these animals are just like her/him.

In Aana and Chena, a dual language text, the elephant, Aana, has a whole list of complaints: “Look at my nose . . . It is so long. Look at my eyes. They are so small. Look at my tail. It is so thin. Look at my ears. They are so big. Look at my body. It is so fat.” Chena consoles him saying that that is just how an elephant should look. “You are beautiful!” Aana is now very happy. This picturebook allows the child reader to empathise with the elephant in a story which challenges stereotypical notions of beauty and firmly declares that everybody is beautiful as she/he is.

In the picture book, Colour-Colour Kamini, by Radhika Chadha, Kamini, the chameleon, is just not able to perfect colour matching, i.e., matching her skin colour to that of the surroundings, which is what chameleons go to school for. Kapila aunty, her teacher, is not happy and Kamini is worried about being left behind while all her friends move on from Basic Colours to Spots and Stripes. Now steps in Baby Bahadur, the baby elephant, with his simple solution. Kamini can be the look-out for the class when the elephant teenagers stomp into the banana patch and accidentally squash the chameleons; for whenever Kamini gets excited, she starts flashing “colour-colour”—red-brown-green or pink-indigo-silver or orange-black-purple. The chameleons would be alerted and everyone would be safe and happy.

The child reader comprehends that each individual has her/his special place in the world and a potential which need not be compared with that of anybody else. Kamini is
happy that her unique talent is being used productively. Although Baby Bahadur is just a young elephant calf, he solves the problem by tapping the talent Kamini has, again highlighting anthropomorphically, the belief in the inherent wisdom of the child. Instead of growing up with an inferiority complex, Kamini will now be praised for her unique gift and be considered vital for the survival of the community. The child, growing up stifled by an education system which has no place for heterogeneity, empathises with Kamini and is happy at the way things are sorted out for her.

2.9.2 Narratives about the Differently Abled

For years, librarians, teachers, and school counsellors have been using children’s literature to help students deal with stressful issues such as abuse, adoption, death and divorce. Children’s literature has also been used successfully to discuss disability issues with children and adolescents. Bibliotherapy, “the process of using literature in therapeutic ways,” has proven to be a useful strategy for addressing the needs of students with disabilities in addition to helping those without disabilities to understand the lives of children with special needs (Kurtts and Gavigan 23).

The depiction of characters with disabilities in children's books has evolved over time. Stories such as the Grimm brothers’ tales portrayed deformed witches, dwarfs, giants and others with physical differences as metaphors for these characters’ inner qualities usually associated with negative or evil tendencies. Other stories portrayed characters with disabilities as symbolically representing what is good, kind, and loving in the world. But characters with disabilities, portrayed in contemporary children’s literature, as Tina Taylor Dyches and Mary Anne Prater assert, are “expected to be
integrated in society, to experience reciprocal relationships with characters without
disabilities, to make positive contributions, and to have opportunities to make and act on
choices. Metaphorical use of physical or cognitive disabilities,” they declare, “is no
longer acceptable” (202).

The picturebook *Why Are You Afraid to Hold My Hand?* (Tulika 1999) is written
and illustrated by Sheila Dhir who felt compelled to depict the attitudes of society at large
towards the differently abled children after working on her thesis for six months at the
Spastic Society of India in Mumbai. The book has been translated into Tamil, Malayalam
and Korean. The protagonist in the book is a young girl affected by cerebral palsy. The
blurb gives a brief description of the cause of cerebral palsy as damage to that part of the
brain that controls the muscles and movement. It also points out that the child protagonist
could be part of the fifty percent that has average or above average intelligence.

In this picturebook, the young girl engages in a silent dialogue with society.
Whereas society’s doubts and misconceptions are depicted in font that is bold and placed
on the upper part of the page, her response in verse is placed below. A band of orange is
generally seen across the double-page spreads, the only splash of colour in the book.

Dyches and Prater maintain that characterisations of individuals with disabilities in
contemporary children's literature should be both positive and realistic. Affirming Ann
Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank and Leal’s analysis, they state that portrayals were
characterised as positive if they

(a) emphasised strengths rather than weaknesses, (b) represented high
expectations of the character with Developmental Disability, (c) enhanced
positive contributions, (d) showed the character acting on her/his choices, (e) were given full citizenship in the home and community, and (f) enjoyed reciprocal relationships (208).

Realistic portrayals include “physical, behavioral, and language attributes typical of an individual with disability” (202).

The girl’s portrayal in Why Are You Afraid to Hold My Hand? is a positive one, in that it is she who accepts herself as she is, aware of her limitations and aware of the various feelings people experience on seeing her. She does not succumb to self-pity; instead she asks people not for sympathy and help, which they readily dole out, but for friendship and acceptance. She asks them not to be confused in their actions and speech but simply to be themselves in the company of a child like her, and allow her to be who she is. There is no false hope given by her as she stoically states while she drools: “Yes, I have a problem. / No, it will not go away. / Take me for who I am: a child / Who simply wants to play”. But then again, she clarifies that her legs being wobbly doesn’t imply that her mind is wobbly too. Realistically portrayed, at times in a wheelchair and at times using a crutch, she is shown playing football and painting pictures just like other children her age. Dyches and Prater speak of the feeling of guilt experienced by people on seeing such a person who may look so different from them (211). Acknowledging that she feels shy when they look at her like that and that they can be mean at times, she asks them not to feel bad for her and be grateful for what they have instead. As she gently reminds them, this condition could affect any of them too. The only question she has for them that remains unanswered is, “Why are you afraid to hold my hand?” The fear of association,
that is, of being afraid or embarrassed to be associated with people with disability of any kind—be it learning, developmental or physical—is quite common in society. The protagonist is puzzled about this unwarranted fear among people who look upon her as the ‘other’. Literature meant for children that portray protagonists or supporting characters with disability help readers gain an understanding of their world. It allows them to place themselves in another’s shoes and evoke empathy instead of shallow sympathy.

As children’s books have the potential to educate others about individuals with disabilities, it behoves us to look at the portrayal of characters with disabilities in picturebooks, not forgetting that the book is effective only if the literary and artistic qualities of the books match up. As Tina Taylor Dyches, Mary Anne Prater and Jennifer Jenson point out, “a character with a disability housed in a poorly written story or portrayed with inaccurate illustrations has limited potential to impact readers emotionally and intellectually”.

Supported by the Navajbai Ratan Tata Trust Initiative, the picturebook *Kanna Panna*, written by Zai Whitaker and illustrated by Niloufer Wadia, is part of Inclusive Children’s Literature, a project spearheaded by them in collaboration with Tulika. It narrates the transformation of a reticent, visually challenged boy into a confident, articulate student not afraid to speak his mind. Works of literature should, affirm Dyches and Prater, include characters that are “credible, consistent and multidimensional”—characters who continue to grow and develop (202). As the blurb mentions, this book,
“exhibiting postmodern influences” (Lewis 99), inverts the notion of ‘disability’, standing it on its head and thereby throwing fresh light on the social construct.

The umbrella term “visual impairment” delineates people on a continuum from totally blind to partially sighted. A person who is totally blind relies on tactile and auditory methods to gain information about the world. On the other hand, many people who are Braille readers may have some vision; for example, they might be able to see light or large objects. These individuals are considered to be “functionally blind”; that is, even though they have some vision they rely on tactile and auditory means for learning. Individuals who are able to use their vision for learning, for example to read print, have low vision and are considered “partially sighted” (Carroll and Rosenblum 621).

Although the narrative does not make it clear if Kanna is totally blind, it is clear that he uses tactile and auditory methods to guide him. Analysing the portrayal of Kanna, the protagonist using the criteria put forward by Dyches and Prater, it is clear that the author and illustrator portray him in a positive light and as realistically as possible. Kanna’s parents have nothing to say to him other than passing on stern instructions which are directed at making him ‘appear’ a confident, well-dressed boy. The posture of Kanna, with his head down, which his father finds fault with, chiding him with statements like: “Look up! Head up!” actually reveals his state of mind—his low self-esteem, his lack of self-confidence. When his mother asks him to re-do the buttons on his shirt, she is again trying to make him appear as normal as possible. Not surprisingly, Kanna appears to them as a quiet boy who does not like to talk. But unknown to them, Kanna’s head is whirling with words, and rhymes. When his father says “Hold up your head,” his mind
replies “What did you said?” which he knows is grammatically wrong, but nevertheless pleasurable to the ear. The book is a first-person narrative which brings forth the inner life of Kanna to the reader, opening their eyes, ironically, to the world of the visually challenged.

Kanna then narrates the incident which changes his life. When his Chithappa and Chithi, meaning uncle and aunt in Tamil, take him along with his cousins to see the cave temples, the electricity goes off suddenly and they are left in the dark. The insensitivity of the uncle and aunt in taking Kanna to a place whose beauty he cannot appreciate in any way is to be noted, as Kanna comments on the noises of appreciation made by them as they looked at the temple art and architecture. The illustration shows Kanna touching a pillar in his attempt to make sense of his surroundings. But when the caves turn pitch-dark, frightening his cousins to tears and making his uncle and aunt nervous, Kanna takes charge. The lack of light makes no difference to him. He asks them to be calm and rubbishes Chithi’s fatalistic comment “We are finished!” with a retort that till then was only stated in his mind: “Finished finished. Just hold hands and follow me.” As he leads them out, he feels good that others were now dependent on him. He starts talking to them to calm their nerves, and all that had remained in his mind till then flows out incessantly. This transformation is an important aspect of character portrayal, as has been already mentioned, especially with regard to characters with disability. The child who cannot see stops being perceived by the reader as ‘disabled’ in a role reversal when he leads the family who now cannot see and is hence considered ‘disabled’ in the current scenario.
Although his father ends up enrolling him in an inclusive school when he is far older and taller than the other students, Kanna doesn’t lose heart. He cannot stop his voice from saying “Kanna Panna” to the stern-sounding teacher. The yearning to be accepted and enjoy friendships seen in *Why Are You Afraid to Hold My Hand?* is fulfilled for Kanna who trips over a boy who angrily asks: “Can’t you see?”. When Kanna replies that he can’t see, the boy is apologetic, again a common attitude adopted by society to the challenged. Kanna responds in his typical way: “Sorry porry. It doesn’t matter.” And the two become best friends. Although Kanna is shown developing into a confident boy, a portrayal of a dynamic character approved of by Dyches and Prater, it is achieved in a credible manner. The physical problem does not go away, but Kanna realises his worth in spite of it. Realistic portrayals do not show miraculous cures as the solution for the problem. Whitaker sensitively illuminates the world of Kanna to children who otherwise remain in the dark about the lives and strengths of those considered ‘disabled’ by society. Whether it is in emphasising strengths rather than weaknesses, enhancing positive contributions, being shown given full citizenship in the home and community, and enjoying reciprocal relationships, this picturebook manages to accomplish a positive portrayal of the protagonist with ‘disability’. The only time Kanna’s point of view in first person narrative appears unrealistic is when he describes the cave temples and comments on “the large bright tubelights everywhere” and “the beautiful god statues”. As mentioned earlier the “functionally blind” can perceive light and dark objects, but the details mentioned go beyond what the narrative, especially at the visual level, reveals about Kanna.
Rather more unrealistic in terms of portrayal is *Catch that Cat*, written by Tharini Viswanath and illustrated by Nancy Raj. The illustrations, the wheelchair in particular, both on the title page and the pages within, make it clear to the reader that Dip Dip is a young girl who is physically challenged. But as the diegetic narrative makes clear, this fact is seemingly irrelevant to the plot and to the protagonist who is portrayed naughtier than her fellow classmates. The fact that she enjoys the company of children, engaging in inclusionary recreational activities like food fights, in an inclusive school is also portrayed more in the visual narrative. But the illustration which accompanies the third person narrative that comments on how Dip Dip was muddier and messier at the end of the day than all the other children is not altogether credible. Dip Dip is seen lying on the ground looking at a water body across a raised stone platform. Her wheelchair remains at a distance with no one else in sight. To believe that Dip Dip can move without the help of the wheelchair goes against the crux of the narrative. Dyches and Prater, as mentioned earlier, stress on the positive and realistic portrayal of characters with disability, especially in literature intended for children (202).

Dip Dip is described as a helpful child who decides to skip school to help her friend, Meemo, search for her cat, Kaapi. According to Dyches and Prater, characters with disabilities should be shown “making deliberate choices that significantly impact their lives and the lives of others; serving more as protectors, teachers, and caregivers of others; and engaging in inclusionary recreational activities” (215). This adds depth and multidimensionality to the portrayal of characters. Like the protagonists in the other two picturebooks, Dip Dip seems less ‘disabled’ than those considered more able than her. Every morning, she gets ready for school on her own. Her brother wheels her to the bus
stop and leaves her there to wait for the bus alone. It is to be noted that Dip Dip shares strong reciprocal relationships both with her sibling and her schoolmates. Her brother seems aware of the nature of her disability but is not expected to take on the burden of care-giving or extra household duties. Although Dip Dip’s positive contribution is commendable, it comes at times with a dip in credibility. Young Dip Dip is portrayed wheeling herself up and down dug-up roads and little hills. Also, the pace at which a cat generally moves is much faster than what a young child on a wheelchair can probably keep up with, though mention is made about the speed with which she can move around. Later, Dip Dip heaves herself onto the branch of the tree on which the cat sits frightened, until her parents and brother, who had supposedly gone to school, appear from nowhere. The delight in Dip Dip’s rescue of the cat is marred by these discrepancies in the narrative.

The last two picturebooks do not talk about the disability so much as make it an intrinsic part of the plot, which is commendable. The first one, on the other hand, focuses on the disability of society in understanding the needs of those with cerebral palsy. But all three books evoke empathy within the child reader who may slowly realise that all children share similar needs, joys and sorrows, though the challenges they face may be different. In an age of inclusive classrooms with diverse learners including students with disabilities who are receiving special education services, teachers seek innovative ways to assist their students in developing empathy, acceptance, and understanding for individual differences. The use of children’s literature is a way to share powerful examples of how “we all may or may not relate to individual differences” (Kurtts and Gavigan 23).
Nikolajeva affirms the power of the picturebook in shaping humane minds:

Fictional narratives, including picturebooks, are about interpersonal communication, both within and outside the text. Representation of emotions in picturebooks enables communication when simple verbal description is insufficient. If, as cognitive criticism claims, we read fiction because we want to learn more about ourselves and about other people, picturebooks are an excellent first step toward emotional intelligence. (254)

The picturebooks under study, focalising on child protagonists or anthropomorphised animals, serve to broaden the emotional intelligence of the child reader and highlight the transformative power of children’s literature. Postmodern writing “challenges its readers to interrogate the commonsense and commonplace assumptions about literature and life which prevail in our culture” (Nicol xiv). One such assumption is that children should be shielded from harsh reality. The other is that children who are ‘different’ need not be portrayed in books meant for ‘normal’ children. Contemporary picturebooks challenge these notions and nurture readers who grow up aware of adversities in the real world, readers who are also comfortable with their own ‘differences’ and empathise with others considered ‘different’.

The next chapter explores the many ways in which picturebooks succeed in decolonising the mind through postcolonial counter-discourses embedded within an Indian way of life.