Chapter III

Decolonising Contexts and the Indian Reader

When Edward Said spoke up against the ideas projected by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*, he stressed on the polemic nature of Huntington’s views—an assumption that civilisations are monolithic and homogenous. Said declared that Huntington assumes, like many others, “the unchanging character of the duality between us and them”. In that sense, Huntington remains a “partisan advocate” of one civilisation over all the others and is far from being an arbiter between civilisations.

Shashi Tharoor, in his TED talk on *Why Nations Should Pursue Soft Power* points out another such instance in which the American publishers of his book *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone*, patronisingly added a gratuitous subtitle: “India: The Next 21st Century Power.” But, he also observes, the assumption of the “unchanging character of the duality between us and them” that Said mentions, is gradually being erased. Stereotypes are changing. Tharoor observes: “We've gone from the image of India as land of fakirs lying on beds of nails, and snake charmers with the Indian rope trick, to the image of India as a land of mathematical geniuses, computer wizards, software gurus”. Tharoor emphasises that whether India is a super power or not, it is definitely a “soft power”—which is essentially the ability of a country to attract others because of its culture, its political values, its foreign policies. He mentions Bollywood as an example of
India as a soft power: Bollywood is now taking a certain aspect of Indian-ness and Indian culture around the globe, not just in the Indian diaspora in the U.S. and the U.K., but to the screens of Arabs and Africans, of Senegalese and Syrians. So too has Indian music, dance, art, yoga, Ayurveda and Indian cuisine. In many ways, picturebooks published in India in the new millennium seem to be doing the same.

Postcolonial Studies involves the reconsideration of the 500-year-long history of colonialism, that included, among other atrocities, the destruction of cultures and the superimposition of other cultures, from the perspectives of those who suffered its effects. As Robert J. C. Young states:

If colonial history, particularly in the nineteenth century, was the history of the imperial appropriation of the world, the history of the twentieth century has witnessed the peoples of the world taking power and control back for themselves: postcolonial theory is itself a product of that dialectical process. (Young 4)

But postcolonial theorists don’t assume that all writing from countries with a history of colonialism “is primarily concerned with colonial history, colonial discourses and ‘decolonising the mind’” (McLeod 28). When decolonising countries appropriate cultural discourse, they can either appropriate the whole of its universalist ideology and become, for instance, ‘more English than the English’, or appropriate it in a way that confirms all intellectual and artistic discourse as aspects of the way of life, strands of the cultural texture, intimately and inextricably connected in the textual fabric of society (Ashcroft 15, 19). Even after permitting political independence, colonial powers continue to practice economic and cultural control on the colonised nations directly and indirectly;
this is seen in “the continuing influence of Eurocentric cultural models” that privilege the imported over the indigenous: colonial languages over local languages; writing over orality, and linguistic culture over what is termed ‘folk culture’. Against all these “occlusions and overwritings of pre-colonial practices” are the appropriations and reconstructions of writers who restructure attitudes to the local and the indigenous cultures thereby transforming cultural discourse (Ashcroft et al. 57). That being said, it is understood that pre-colonial cultural practices cannot remain untouched by dominant practices, especially visible in the use of ex-colonial languages, notably English, and forms employed such as the novel, prose fiction, drama, picturebook, comics, magazines and television soap-opera.

Children’s literature “is a product of culture as well as evidence of power relations; it is a social transcript of the power relations of class, race, and gender” (Botelho and Rudman 71). The picturebooks published in India function as powerful tools in the hands of the writers and illustrators, verbally and visually communicating stories about the many different cultures this rich, plural civilisation contains within it. The term “culture”, problematised by postcolonial cultural critics, “can be the name for a whole way of life, or can describe those specific arts and practices typically connected to social meaning-making,” the latter (for instance, writing, music, painting, and so on) often playing a key role in defining the former (Szeman and Kaposy 7). The first section of this chapter titled “The Picturebook as Cultural Artefact” looks at the ways in which picturebooks give attention to the many different cultures that exist side by side in India, those previously neglected by or invisible to the ‘central’ Anglo-American colonising culture. It looks at culture as a whole way of life that includes specific cultural practices
such as Indian art, craft, cuisine, films, languages, music, narratology, religion and sport, all of which reflect the values and worldviews of many cultures. The next section titled “The Picturebook as Postcolonial Counter-Discourse” discusses picturebooks that write back to the empire, appropriating the coloniser’s language and discourse in order to counter it.

Just as there are many cultures in this sub-continent, there are many Indias as well, the marginalised, poorer sections of society residing in a majority of them. Tharoor points out in his speech that India cannot become a “super power” until it stops being “super poor”:

We have to overcome our poverty. We have to deal with the hardware of development, the ports, the roads, the airports, all the infrastructural things we need to do, and the software of development, the human capital, the need for the ordinary person in India to be able to have a couple of square meals a day, to be able to send his or her children to a decent school, and to aspire to work a job that will give them opportunities in their lives that can transform themselves.

The Indian child’s reality includes family and community tensions; class, caste and gender disparities; insecurity; divorce; drugs; handicaps; problems related to adolescence; indiscipline and corruption along with issues like lack of civic sense and hygiene, squalor and disease; depletion of natural resources and degradation of the earth’s environment” (Berry, “Social Change” Book Review 13). Picturebooks that don’t shy away from these issues and emerge as narratives that counter hegemony are also discussed in the section on Indian realities titled “Voicing the Unvoiced”.

3.1 The Picturebook as Cultural Artefact

3.1.1 Many Communities, Many Languages

*The Runaway Peppercorn* (Tulika 2009) is a picturebook written by Suchitra Ramadurai, a radio jockey in Chennai. Illustrated by Ashok Rajagopalan, this picturebook is one in the series of Wordbird Books published by Tulika. This series features traditional and contemporary stories emphasising the similarities and differences existing in the world. *The Runaway Peppercorn* was chosen for an award in the 2003–2004 Commonwealth Short Story Competition from among 3700 entries. Set in a little village in Kerala, this picturebook narrates the story of an anthropomorphised peppercorn who runs away from the clutches of an old lady, with an alliterative name, Amminikutty Amma, who lives in a typical red-tiled Kerala house with a running parapet on the verandah and the ubiquitous dog and cat lounging outside. On a fine, sunny morning, Amminikutty Amma wishes to eat ‘dosa’ with ‘ulli chammandi’.

Wordbird Books explain unfamiliar words and ideas through ‘wordbirds’, speech bubbles in the shape of birds, that streak across the page, giving readers access to a multicultural, multilingual vocabulary. Interestingly, “dosa”, a favourite comfort food in South India, which incidentally plays a role in many Tulika picturebooks, is not glossed. But “ulli chammandi”, a local dish, is explained as a spicy onion chutney delicious when eaten with dosa.

After peeling a few small round onions, Amminikutty Amma takes out from her spice box salt, red chillies and the one remaining peppercorn, all common ingredients
used in Indian cuisine. But as she turns around to pick up the heavy stone pestle, the little peppercorn, Kurumolagu, glossed on the back cover of the book as the generic name for pepper in Malayalam, rolls off the grinding slab and bounces away. The rest of the story, narrated using the sports commentary register, especially that related to motor car racing, turns out to be a ‘running and catching’ game, universally popular with children, played unwittingly by Amminikutty Amma in her unsuccessful sprint to catch the runaway peppercorn. The child reader will most likely empathise with the tiny peppercorn who runs away from the gigantic hands of the adult trying to catch it.

Along the way, stingy Parvati Chechi who makes “parippu vada”, and sour-faced Nettan Pappu try their luck at catching Kurumolagu. The words “chechi”, “nettan” and “parippu vada” are also glossed in the book for readers unfamiliar with the Malayalam language. As Amminikutty Amma draws closer and closer, Kurumolagu gets a “supersensational idea”. He does a dramatic u-turn, revs up and rolls forward with all his might towards Amminikutty Amma who freezes in her tracks. He then screeches to a halt, clicks his little, black heels and, in the manner of a skilled Olympian gymnast, hops, skips, jumps and “supersomersaults” clean into a big sack of peppercorns. Here Ramadurai abrogates ‘standard’ English and appropriates the English language, coining words that make meaning in the given context (Ashcroft et al. 3–4).

While the physiognomy of men and women in a Kerala village is illustrated skillfully by Ashok Rajagopalan, the hilarious scene where Amminikutty Amma hitches up her ‘mundu’ and runs on her spindly legs with her long hair knotted at the end “swinging like a wild cobra”, is both visually and verbally narrated. Parvati Chechi with
her curly hair and Nettan Pappu and vegetable vendor Chacko Chettan with their folded mundus are also caricatures that add humour to the narration.

The chaotic scene at the crowded ‘chanda’, the local market, glossed in the book within a wordbird, is typical of a marketplace anywhere in India with its various shops selling clothes, shoes, fish, vegetables and toys, kept in total disarray. The people mill around “laughing, talking, shouting, selling”. The informality, boisterousness and flamboyance of Indians generally and Malayalis in particular, come through in both the visual and the verbal narratives.

In a country where many people are trilingual—equally proficient in English, Hindi and their mother tongue—*The Runaway Peppercorn* blends in the Malayalam language with the predominantly English narration, especially with regard to the names of characters, expressions like “Ende Devi” and sounds like “Ppha”, “Ennhhen” and “Henh”. The prefix ‘super’ that appears frequently in the book is in fact a popular term used by radio jockeys who speak the regional language interspersed with English to their listeners who are generally adept at both. Language, Bakhtin avers, is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour (35). Bakhtin posits that an author welcomes all heteroglot languages into the text. Ramadurai layers her texts with multiple significances with her skillful “expropriation” of “languages of heteroglossia” each of which expresses a specific world view (36, 34). The sports
commentary discourse, the radio jockey register and Malayalam all find their way into
the narrative, making the text heteroglossiacal.

What this picturebook brings forth to the dual audience, child and adult, is the
culture of a community—the predominantly traditional way of living in a village in
Kerala, as reflected in the names, physiognomy, clothes, architecture, cuisine,
occupations and the use of colourful expressions by the characters. But this story is also
given a contemporary touch through the multiple voices borrowed from popular culture.
Set in a highly competitive era, the sports commentary speech-genre as well as the radio
jockey register reflects the current world-view. In a digital, emoji-laden age, the child
reader, exposed to such polyphonic texts, experiences the seamless blending of the
traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban, the local and the universal along with
a fairytale happy ending of the victory of the under-dog.

On the other hand, Where’s That Cat? (Tulika 2009), a picturebook recommended
by CBSE and NCERT, and written and illustrated by Manjula Padmanabhan, is set in an
urban locale somewhere in Tamil Nadu. Little Minnie can’t find her pet cat, Pooni.
Incidentally, the generic name in Tamil for cat is ‘poonai’. As Minnie goes all over town
searching for her cat, the Parrot Lady, Mrs. Umbrella, Teacher Ma’am and a whole lot of
other people, young and old, join her in her search. A sense of communal camaraderie,
prevalent among Indians especially in smaller towns and villages, makes the characters in
this book drop whatever they are doing to help a little girl search for her cat.

In the process of reading the picturebook, the intraiconic text in the form of name
boards of shops like ‘Hi Fone’, ‘Electroneek Bootique’ and ‘Happihair’, become a source
of hilarity for the adult, along with ones like ‘Lord & Tailors: fine garments for the wholesome fambly’, which seem to mock at the still prevalent colonial hangover present among Indians to market their products using English. Other name boards like ‘Fresh Paneer’ highlight the frequent fusing of regional language words with those in English, the way Indians typically communicate in cities and towns.

The street scenes, in particular, present the chaos typical in any city/town in India, with tiny shops fighting for space with bigger ones, people walking on pavements and off it, vendors selling products near it and the jasmine-bedecked fortune-teller occupying quite a bit of the space on the pavement with her parrot and prediction cards. Vehicles of all shapes and sizes emit black clouds of smoke while an autorickshaw driver cleans the windshield of his vehicle and a woman in a nightgown and flip flops bargains with a fruit-seller. Mrs Umbrella, a name that Minnie seems to have baptised a woman with, is clad in a red and white printed sari and holds a similarly printed umbrella which is later held, probably in a show of solidarity, by the old man Minnie approaches for help. The entire entourage including adults and children of all classes and animals weave their way back to Minnie’s house and rejoice at the reunion of Minnie with Pooni.

Apart from the main narrative, this picturebook has a couple of ‘running stories’—“visual narratives introducing minor characters not mentioned in the verbal text” (Nikolajeva and Scott, 168). One of them involves a cow slowly chewing up posters. After munching through part of a SALE poster it makes its way slowly but surely through a VOTE FOR poster with the picture of a politician on it. A few pages later, the cow reappears again still chewing on the poster, but by now the politician is completely
eaten up. This running story about an animal which is a familiar sight on Indian roads, posters stuck on every nook and corner announcing constant discount sales and elections, and the power-hungry politician brings in intertextual layers that allow the reader a peep into consumerism in India, the misuse of public spaces by advertisers and caricatured politicians.

*Malli*, a bilingual picturebook written by Jeeva Raghunath and illustrated by Nancy Raj, highlights the mutual dependence among people in a tiny village in Tamil Nadu. Malli, a young girl dressed in a traditional ‘paavada chattai’, worries over the gifts she can’t afford to buy for her uncle and his family who are visiting from the city. Her condition reflects the acute poverty of agrarian India today. As she walks to the market with a one-rupee coin, accompanied by her pet goat, many people she has helped in myriad ways give her egg, fruit, flower and milk until Malli’s initially empty basket is full. This picture of throwing a shoulder with others in the community and eventually enjoying nature’s bounty together, especially through the communal celebration of harvest festivals, is visible in every village in India.

The front cover of Annie Besant’s *Mala’s Silver Anklets* depicts a chubby brown-skinned girl wearing a white petticoat. Her hands and feet are dotted with henna, popular in India both for its aesthetic and its therapeutic properties. Mala’s long black hair is plaited and doubled up and tied with colourful ribbons, a practice fast losing its appeal in the cityscape but still visible in rural India. She wears thick silver anklets, like many toddlers in India. Her eyes are lined with kohl, another Indian practice for enhancing beauty as well as health. The illustrator, Nancy Raj, brings to life the story of a naughty
little girl who loves scaring people, through her visuals of Mala and her family. Unlike the many books in India that depict beauty through fair-skinned maidens with blue eyes, picturebooks like these depict a true picture of Indian beauty. The clothes worn by the family—Mala’s petticoat, her grandmother’s nightgown, her father’s shorts and vest and her brother’s trousers reveal the informal attire of people in any Indian home. The sari worn by the mother when going out is a typical South Indian one—a vibrant red with a yellow border.

Vibrant colours associated with all things Indian are also seen in *Ranganna* (Tulika 2013) written by Arthi Anand Navaneeth and illustrated by Kavita Singh Kale, in which an elephant, Ranganna, ‘anna’ being the Dravidian word for elder brother, is attracted to bright colours. He loves colours—of the clothes spread out to dry at the ‘dhobi ghat’ in the village, of the saris worn by women at the temple, of the flowers bought to pay obeisance to the Gods, of the rainbow and of the nail polish his two friends paint their toe-nails with.

Food experiences “form part of the daily texture of every child’s life from birth onwards. . . thus it is hardly surprising that food is a constantly recurring motif in literature written for children” (Keeling and Pollard 10). The section below studies picturebooks that refer to the cuisine of people belonging to various regions and communities of India.
3.1.2 Many Cuisines, Many Flavours

Many of the picturebooks under study feature food which is savoured in various parts of India. Ann Alston asserts that although the consumption of food is a “biological necessity” it is also a “cultural practice” as the “type of food, the method by which it is prepared, and the people with whom it is shared suggest an adherence to specific ideologies, families, and even nations. . .” (106). In eating traditional food, the children demonstrate “a double loyalty: first, to their family as they allow the food prepared within the home to penetrate their bodies, and second, to the country/community as they in effect consume their national/local culture” (119). These picturebooks, in effect, portray this loyalty towards indigenous cuisine and in that sense endorse the many different cultures that exist in India.

While Bulbuli in the picturebook Bulbuli’s Bamboo (Tulika 2012) drinks bamboo soup, a favourite among the people of Assam, Moyna in The Why-Why Girl relishes snake curry, eaten by the Shabar tribe in North-eastern India. So too in The Runaway Peppercorn, the old lady chases a peppercorn, an essential ingredient of ulli chammandi, made in Kerala as an accompaniment to dosa. Special mention should be made of the dosa—the comfort food of people in South India—also featured in other picturebooks like Dosa and Mala’s Silver Anklet. Another favourite North Indian accompaniment to the main course, ‘chappati,’ is rolled into the shapes of various animals by an imaginative Neeraj in What Shall I Make? The choice of what is acceptable to eat, as seen in these picturebooks, plays a major role in defining the culture—whether of a nation, a tribe, a class, or a family (106). As Carolyn Daniel points out in her book Voracious Children,
“cultural food rules and attitudes toward food and the eating body are transmitted via the subtexts of children’s fiction and of their everyday lives” (15).

Other picturebooks like *A Silly Story of Bondapalli* and *Jalebi Curls* (Tulika 2008) focus on food as the main theme. It has been observed that young children in India, who sleep at night along with or in the same room as their parents, do not need bed-time stories for comfort as much as children in the West do. Interestingly, many folktales in India are food-centred as they are narrated at meal times, when the child absorbed in the story-telling in which food figures, finishes the hand-fed meal while listening raptly to the story. In Shamim Padamsee’s *A Silly Story of Bondapalli* the ‘bonda’, a savoury snack made of lentils, saves the day for the petrified cook at the royal palace. The prince, who fusses and spats out food all the time, an experience which the child reader would probably relate to, inadvertently names the accidentally-created savoury when he is heard exclaiming “Bondaful” while eating them. Soon, everywhere in Bondapalli, shops sold bondas, people ate bondas and then slowly grew as round as bondas. Everybody is round and happy till the lean, skinny neighbouring king, like “lean and hungry” Cassius in Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* (1.2.194–95) grows jealous and decides to capture Bondapalli. The prince unknowingly starts off the battle of bouncing bonda-shaped soldiers by falling down the steps and bouncing across the battlefield. Victory is near for Bondapalli when all of a sudden the prince stops the fight declaring that he’s hungry. All of them including the enemy soldiers and the neighbouring king sit down to a feast of bondas. Everyone cheers: “Long live bondas! / Long live Bondapalli!” This story resonates in the hearts of readers in South India as the bonda is a favourite snack eaten there. It also expresses the universal notion that those who eat well are far happier than
those who don’t. The name, Bondapalli, is stereotypical; many towns in the South are tagged with the suffix ‘palli’, meaning ‘village’.

While bondas are accidentally discovered by the royal cook in *A Silly Story* and effectively stop a battle from raging on, the raja in *Jalebi Curls* dreams of ‘jalebis’ everywhere; ‘jalebi’ being a crisp, orange, spiral-shaped, succulent Indian sweet. A ‘jalebi’ moon dances, the rani sings in a garden full of jalebis wearing jalebi earrings, and the raja sports a jalebi moustache. The dream turns into a nightmare when his daughter runs towards him looking for a jalebi to bite into, after his mother and the rani have eaten up the jalebis on his moustache. The raja wakes up, checks his moustache in the mirror and then turns around to look with relief at the last jalebi on the plate: “There is STILL one left. Orange. Hot. Crisp.” This story, written by Niveditha Subramaniam, is pictorially depicted by Kavita Singh Kale using many shades of only two colours—blue and black—with the jalebis prominently displayed in orange. Perry Nodelman maintains that the conventional meanings of colours can be culture-specific or can relate to specific emotions universally. Colours and their emotional connotations can influence the mood of the picturebooks—blue being associated with melancholy and serenity, yellow with happiness, and red and orange with warmth—derived from our basic perceptions of water, sunlight and fire (*Words* 60, 61). In *Jalebi Curls* the orange colour of the traditional sweet sets a warm tone to the story which revolves around a king’s desire for the sweet dish.

Like the jalebi, the momo is the inspiration behind the book *Tsomo and the Momo* (Tulika 2013), also written and illustrated by Niveditha Subramaniam. Tsomo’s mother
makes her a big momo. But Tsomo wants her to make another one as big as the moon. Her mother convinces Tsomo to eat the one made first. Tsomo promises to eat it fast. But later the mother wonders what has become of Tsomo, as she can only see a big momo in front of her. When she sings out if the “moon-moon Momo” is Tsomo, the reader notices that the alphabet ‘m’ is now capitalised as in a proper noun. The narrative ends with the line “‘Yes!’ said Tsomo the momo.” What Daniel states about food in children’s books incorporating information about who eats whom (12), is subverted in this picturebook with a fantastic ending in which the eater, Tsomo, becomes the eaten.

The desire for food is often not just a tickling of the tastebuds but an amalgamation of a vision, an aroma, an aural and a tactile experience. Tsomo’s experience especially when she eats the momo and pictures herself flying on a tube of chilli sauce with a mushroom crown and cabbage-leaf wings is fused with the reader’s sensory experience, just as the momo is eventually fused with Tsomo. Food descriptions in fiction, like menus in restaurants and television cookery programs, produce “visceral pleasure, a pleasure which notably involves both intellect and material body working in synaesthetic communion” (Daniel 2).

All these picturebooks feature Indian food eaten in various regions of India or by specific communities. Food signifies a sense of belonging and the need to belong is intrinsic to children’s literature. As mentioned earlier, belonging can entail loyalty to both family and nation and it is noticeable that children’s literature is often very conservative about the type of food which it promotes. Even in texts of the late twentieth century, while there exists an attempt to represent a multicultural society, there “remains a certain
unease about exotic, foreign food. Similarly, processed food is often scorned as, not being home-cooked, it implies a bad family” (Alston 119).

In *Honey Biscuits*, a picturebook by Meredith Cooper tracing the source of the ingredients that go into the making of honey biscuits, a traditional snack eaten in England, the same conservatism in the depiction of food and thereby English culture can be seen. In John Burningham’s picturebook, *Mr. Gumpy’s Outing*, the story ends with Mr. Gumpy, the children and all the animals sitting down for tea, a typical British ritual.

African food and American food is eaten by the African American family in *Big Mama and Grandma Ghana* by Angela Shelf Medearis in which the two grandmothers, one from Ghana and the other settled in America exchange an African basket and peanut butter cookies. Food and rituals associated with it, are “strong signifiers of the conservative nature of children’s literature” and it, like the family, “remains largely unaltered, constantly promoting a specific ideal” (119).

Carolyn Daniel remarks that many people in the West don’t have to worry about where their next meal is coming from (1). In India, on the other hand, where economic poverty goes hand in hand with illiteracy, political disempowerment and absence of health care, the reality is different. Amartya Sen postulates that class, gender, caste, region and community all function as “divisive influences” that contribute to inequity (205). Moyna in *The Why-Why Girl* refuses to eat the leftovers that the ‘babus’, the landlords in her village, give the poorer Shabar tribe. The old lady in *The Runaway Peppercorn* runs behind the peppercorn because it is the only one left in her spice box and she probably cannot afford to buy this expensive ingredient frequently. Ranga in *A
*Kite called Korika* (Tulika 2012) wishes for a full meal from Korika, the wish-fulfilling kite. Nainamma in *Under the Neem Tree* (Tulika 2012) generously gives the children of the village a simple meal of rice and ‘pappucharu’, a dish prepared with yellow lentils, probably because she knows that not every child would be getting three meals a day. Malli in *Malli* has only one rupee to buy gifts for her uncle’s family; fortunately she gets eggs, fruits, flowers and milk from her kind neighbours whom she has been constantly helping. All these instances reflect the reality in India. Sen points out that the percentage of undernourished children in India is a gigantic 40 to 60 percent, much more than that in sub-Saharan Africa (212). The publishers of these books, in that sense, attempt to sensitise their middle-class child readers about the disparity that exists in the lives of children in India.

The picturebooks mentioned in this section project food as cultural signifier affirming Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard’s postulations regarding food:

If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination, because food is fundamental to culture. . . Cultures and civilizations will not leave it alone. Cultures and civilizations elaborate it. . . —not simply by transforming food from the raw to the cooked—but through its inclusion in cultural rituals, its purpose as cultural signifier, its central position in the creation of culture. (5–6)

These picturebooks project food as a cultural signifier, accepting its central position in the creation of multicultural India. The next section highlights indigenous art and craft
portrayed in picturebooks, especially those by rural women, that not only empower them but also let them tell their own story.

### 3.1.3 Indigenous Art and Craft in Picturebooks

Two of the most powerful ways to introduce the cultural experiences and achievements of others to the child living in a multicultural world are art and storytelling (Grigg 131). Works of art, like favourite books, “offer the viewer entry into alternative states of being that change our perceptions of self and the wider world” (135). Indigenous art and craft have been promoted and adapted in a big way by both the picturebook publishers under study. V. Geetha, the editorial director of Tara, on being questioned in an interview on the evolution of values and the philosophy behind Tara, stated the importance of portraying indigenous art in their picturebooks:

. . . we have also developed a publishing outlook that is concerned with celebrating the book as a cultural object, through pushing its boundaries—with our experiments in printing, production, design, and pushing the boundaries of illustration. Today we value what we are a part of—the global culture of the picture book, to which we have contributed in a fundamental way, with our books that feature art by indigenous—folk and tribal—artists, the handmade book and the book that recalls older forms of the written word, such as a scroll. . .

A popular Indonesian trickster tale retold by Nathan Kumar Scott is illustrated by Radhashyam Raut using the Patachitra style of temple mural painting in *The Sacred Banana Leaf* (Tara 2008). A note at the end of the book on the art of Patachitra informs
the reader that it is a style that originated in Orissa where ‘pata’ means cloth and ‘chitra’ means painting. Found first on the walls of the ancient temple in Puri that were filled with painted images and stories of local gods, this style of painting took on a different form when artists started creating scrolls and cards for visitors to take back with them as keepsakes. These became the first patachitras. Belonging to the same community, these artists began making other products like toys and games using the same style; details of a card game, Ganjifa, using patachitra cards, is also given at the end of the book. Mention is also made of the process, for which artists initially used only naturally produced colours—white, yellow, red, black and blue. The picturebook, however, uses illustrations painted in other colours like green also. Apart from giving a different form to patachitra as a picturebook, Tara also showcases the artist illustrating the book. Radhashyam Raut’s picture is prominently displayed above the write-up on the style of painting. In doing so, this picturebook exhibits Indian culture not just to people across the world but more so to people across India still unfamiliar with the art and craft of many communities strewn across “a pluralist India that tolerates, protects and celebrates diversity” (Sen 348).

Children, especially, have “a need to see their country’s culture(s) portrayed in picturebooks if they are to have a sense of their own distinctiveness and their country’s identity” (Jobe 79).

There is also an introduction to the trickster tales of Indonesia placed alongside a picture of the narrator, Nathan Kumar Scott. The trickster tale tradition prevalent in Indonesia and Malaysia is similar to the trickster tale tradition in India. The Sacred Banana Leaf is one among the Kanchil series of folktales which celebrate the victory of brains over brawn. Significantly, in the Kanchil tales, artists who practise art that relates
to Indonesia in one way or another have been chosen; patachitra is a form of painting that emerged from Orissa on the east coast which was involved in South-east Asian textile trade.

Kanchil is a tiny deer who lives in the rainforest. The tale, reminiscent of the story *Henny Penny*, is about the trick Kanchil plays on the snake, the boar and the tiger whom he lures into a pit he has fallen into accidentally. They believe Kanchil’s story about the sacred banana leaf on which is purportedly written that the sky is going to fall and the world is going to end. Kanchil declares that all those in the pit would be safe. The only condition Kanchil lays down is that if they sneeze when inside they would have to be thrown out. The story ends with Kanchil getting himself thrown out of the pit and enjoying his routine life again after he deliberately sneezes loudly.

The illustrations done in the patachitra style are aesthetically pleasing and colourful. The depiction of the pit is a variation of the Ganjifa cards with the animals encircled within a border filled with traditional motifs. At times, the picture of an animal is framed within a border depicting in miniature the animal in focus in the picture and the written text on the page. Books which take an objective, unemotional view of the events they describe often have frames around all their pictures: “The focus here is less on what is happening or whom it is happening to than on how pretty it all looks, how sumptuously ornamental; we are to indulge our senses rather than care for the characters (Nodelman, *Words* 51).

The skill of the artist is visible in the intricate portrayal of trees, leaves and motifs dotting the pages. But the child-reader looking for a visual narrative that conveys the
actions in the verbal may be in for a disappointment as the static picture of the pit with
the animals in it is repeated on many pages in similar fashion. As Nodelman posits, the
technique of framing keeps the reader distanced from the narrative. This picturebook, in
that sense may be an instance of art given precedence over story to the detriment of the
enjoyment of the tale in lieu of a picturebook in which art complements the written text
and fills the gaps. A true picturebook, avows Nikolajeva, “will allow the pictures to carry
the major load of action, without repeating the information by words” (44).

_Gobble You Up!_ (Tara 2013) is another picturebook illustrated using the
traditional art of Mandna. An ancient art form practised only by women and passed on
from mother to daughter in Datasooti village in Rajasthan, Mandna is the art of painting
on mud walls and floors of village homes using a piece of cloth soaked in chalk and lime
paste, squeezed through the artist’s fingers in a fluid line. The book provides a profile of
the artist, Sunita, who is ready to step out of the confines of the village and experiment
with her art. It is Sunita’s recollection of her grandfather’s orally-narrated tale that finds
its way into the picturebook. One of the most striking themes among Meena artists is the
pregnant animal depicted with a baby inside its stomach. In an interview to Saffron Tree,
V. Geetha mentions that an animal within an animal is also the subject of many
traditional tales from the region. Retold in cumulative rhyme, the tale revolves around a
wily jackal who gobbles up animals one by one till his stomach bursts. The various
animals eaten by the jackal are visible to the reader, painted within the gradually bloating
stomach of the jackal in the typical Mandna style. In this picturebook, the verbal narrative
has been chosen to suit the style of painting which traditionally favours single static
images. These handmade books of brown paper portray the wolf illustrated in black and
the other animals contrasted in white. Whereas the verbal narrative sets the pace of the
tale, the artwork reflects the cumulative structure of the written text in its repetition of the
jackal with an animal added within his stomach on every page turn.

*Drawing from the City* (Tara 2012), an autobiographical picturebook, also
foregrounds Rajasthani folk art and the artist; it will be discussed in detail in the section
on migrants. *A Bhil Story* (Tulika 2015), also discussed in another section, portrays
Pithora, a style of painting practised by the Bhil people of Madhya Pradesh. A
picturebook that is directly influenced by Indian craft, in particular, the Kaavad, an
instrument of storytelling used in Rajasthan, is Nina Sabnani’s innovatively designed
*Home*. Similar in structure to the portable wooden shrine, *Home* is described as a
storytelling house, each panel of which opens out to the reader, who like the Kaavadiya
Bhat, the Rajasthani storyteller, can build stories and discussions around the words and
pictures on each of them. Revolving around ideas about home, family, identity and
belonging, it breaks stereotypes and exhibits inclusiveness. The panel depicting kinds of
families includes a joint family, a nuclear family with father, mother and children, a gay
couple with a child, a single parent and a couple with an adopted child; another panel
focusing on various stories shared by families depicts a girl sitting in her wheelchair
conversing with her parents. Bird, beast, child, insect, man and woman all belong to the
same world although their stories may be different, their homes may be different and
their families and houses may be of different sizes. The poor, the rich, the homeless, the
nomad; the creatures who live in water, on land, and on both land and water; alone or in
groups, all live on the same earth. This picturebook attempts to send out a strong message
about the earth being home to all creatures; the importance of the life cycle; the need to
preserve the earth and the right to a dignified life for all living beings harbouring in it. As Sabnani, in an interview to Saffron Tree, clarifies: “I wanted each child to be able to find its own family in the book and have a sense of belonging. Similarly, with the house/home a child does not feel unrepresented. All kinds of homes are possible. They may learn to be tolerant of differences.”

If the art and craft of India depicted in picturebooks gives the child a sense of the creative energies of the many cultures in India, the section on Indian narratology which includes both folk tales and animal tales helps re-present myths and fables to the discerning reader of the new millennium, giving them a new twist, at times through translation and other times through subversion. In their merging of oral creativity with literacy, they draw on Indian narratology and transform picturebook texts into postcolonial counter-narratives.

3.1.4 Indian Narratology and Counter-Discursive Folktales

The noted Indian academician on tribal communities and languages, G. N. Devy, points out in his essay “Orality and Literacy” that the literary tradition in India is about 3,500 years old, while the medium of print is barely 200 years old. The “principal mode of literary transmission prior to the nineteenth century was oral” (34). Although scripts had been used in India for recording literary as well as discursive texts from at least the fifth century BC, the oral tradition was never replaced by the tradition of written literature. Today, the literature of about two-thirds of the ‘major’ languages in the Indian subcontinent continues to exist in oral traditions. According to the census, there are about ninety living languages in India today with more than ten thousand speakers each. But
print technology has not reached more than a third of these people. Nearly a third of
India’s population is officially listed as ‘illiterate’; but it would be a gross mistake, Devy
maintains, to label these people as non-literary, as numerous traditions of poetry and
knowledge that can range from preserving the local history and clan memory to
theological observations and knowledge related to medicine, ecology, agriculture,
biology, animal life or political strategy, continue to survive through India’s ‘illiterate’
(33, 38). K. Ayyappa Paniker, a Malayalam poet and literary critic on ancient Indian
aesthetics and literary traditions, affirms this: “Uncodified, uncollected, unpublished yet,
the folk/tribal narrative in India is perhaps the richest, yet untapped, resource of the
Indian narrative imagination” (120).

As repositories of knowledge, oral traditions need to be incorporated into the
curriculum and pedagogy to make what is taught relevant to life as it is lived in the
villages. This will prevent the numerous and rich traditions of oral literature from being
relegated to the status of old wives’ tales. More importantly, “it will help bring about a
renewed and vital reciprocity between the oral and textual traditions in the areas of
imaginative expression as well as discursive knowledge” (Devy 33, 34). The oral and
written traditions of literary productions in pre-colonial India constantly returned to each
other and drew upon each other for sustenance. The synergy between the two traditions
brought the narrative techniques and world views entrenched in both into texts now
considered classics of the Indian canon of literature. The picturebooks under discussion
are current examples of this synergy which continues to exist between the two in post-
colonial India, and can be read as postcolonial counter-discourse (30, 38). Whereas folk
tales from the North-east of India and other states have been transliterated in some
picturebooks, some old folk tales have been embedded within newly-created tales in others, while yet others are predominantly metafictional.

In his Introduction to the book *Fantastic Worlds*, Eric Rabkin speculates on the origin of myths, folktales and fairy tales:

Certain questions seem universally to have occupied people’s minds since prehistoric times. Where did the world come from? How can one explain the feelings of awakened sexuality? Why must there be death? Is there an afterlife? Fantastic worlds dramatize answers to these real questions for the ease of the questioners. In their oldest forms, these answers are the myths that cultures live by; in somewhat more modern forms, these answers become the folktales by which cultures entertain themselves; and in yet more modern forms, these answers become the fairy tales through which cultures amuse—and thereby educate—their young. (5)

India has been a crucible for thousands of stories spanning several centuries. Many tales come from South India, “where video buses speed past fine old temples and Indian satellites fly over calm fields of sugarcane. . . These tales are told today, as before, to teach history and morals, to look at current events, to entertain, and to offer devotion” (Spagnoli and Samanna xv). A. K. Ramanujan, the noted Indian folklorist, poet and translator, avers that “Indian folktales, narrated within the house generally by women, usually have animals, men, women, and couples as central characters” (“A Flowering” 412). Though other secondary characters like supernatural beings, both divine and demonic, may be present, they are not the focus of domestic oral tales. *Kathasaritsagara,*
the Ocean of Stories, an ancient collection of tales linked together, remains the main source of folk tales in many parts of India. In fact, Salman Rushdie has adopted the translated version of the title for his allegorical novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* written for a dual audience.

The picturebook *Under the Neem Tree* is originally written in Telugu by a Dalit school teacher, P. Anuradha, and translated by N. Manohar Reddy. The Dalits in India belong to a traditionally marginalised caste in India but are treated as untouchables even today. Ostracised in many ways, they are pushed into menial labour and live in poor economic and hygienic conditions. There is not a day that goes by without atrocities being committed on them; they are often beaten up brutally and at times killed. Education of Dalit children and the empowerment of Dalit women by various NGOs is bringing about a gradual change in this centuries-old situation. When the editor-in-chief of MuslimGirl.com, Al-Khatahtbeh, was asked at the White House’s United State of Women Summit, “How do we empower the people we call the voiceless?” she replied: “Pass the mike” (Susan 13). The publisher of this picturebook does just that; she passes the mike to someone traditionally labelled voiceless—a Dalit woman writer.

Set in rural Andhra Pradesh, this is a story in which a well-known folktale is narrated by Nainamma to Kala and her friends under a neem tree, the setting for many a story and many a sage’s meditation. Incidentally, Telugu (spoken in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and the newly created Telangana) was an oral language that borrowed its neighbouring state Karnataka’s Kannada script when it wanted to move to print. Ramanujan observes that non-professional tellers of tales in India, as in many parts of the
world, are predominantly women (“Towards” 429, 430). The inset tale narrated by Nainamma is that of Ookamma and Ookaiah, an old couple, whose lives mirror that of Nainamma and her husband. The Indian tribal narrative is both local and universal at the same time. As Paniker states:

    In its basic features it is deeply rooted in the regional experience: landscape, weather, flora and fauna, local dialect and proverbs, and social relationships. But since this narrative is the fictionalisation of the grassroots experience of everyday reality, it shares many features with the tribal narratives of other regions. (121)

In *Under the Neem Tree*, the present world in which the story is narrated is very similar to the world within the inset tale; universal issues of work and food are constant concerns in both.

Ookamma, like Nainamma, works in the village after finishing her work at home. Ookaiah, like Nainamma’s husband who is called Thatha, meaning grandfather, by the children, is a construction worker. In a way, this narrated folktale speaks of a way of life lived over the ages. The neem tree functions as a chronotope; on the front cover, a bride and bridegroom stand below the neem tree, whereas the neem tree within the narrative is the space under which stories are told. The illustration of the tree on the cover by Ilango seems to suggest that the cycle of life that starts afresh with marriage and childbirth revolves around or takes place “under” (the only word capitalised in the title) the neem tree, a physical space which is a necessity in many ways to the rural community. In one scene, early on in the book, the children sit listening keenly to the story that Nainamma narrates to them under the neem tree. The open space, the attentiveness of the children
and the interested story-teller all seem to suggest the compelling nature of and abiding interest in oral story-telling, which has not died in India with the advent of the written word. This is also subtly shown in the choice of yellow for the front and back cover, the same shade of yellow used for the background in the illustrations for the orally narrated inset tale. Seen together, the endpapers depict a long string of garlands, a traditional decoration at weddings and other auspicious occasions. The garlands seem to welcome the reader into a different way of life, that of rural Andhra Pradesh and Telengana along with its unfamiliar terms and names, many of which are not glossed.

Every day after work, Ookamma makes five ‘rottis’—flat, round bread—three of which she gives the old man while eating the rest herself. One day, feeling very hungry, she decides to eat three rottis and give her husband only two. Ookaiah shouts at his wife, “You thief, how can you eat three? I am a man. I work more. You are a woman. How can you give me less and you eat more?” Amartya Sen, identifies five different ‘faces’ of gender inequality in India, each of which influence the other: survival inequality; natality inequality; unequal facilities; ownership inequality; unequal sharing of household benefits and chores; and domestic violence and physical victimisation. In the story, Ookaiah abuses his wife verbally. He believes that his being born a man makes him superior to a woman who does not or cannot work as much. As a man he can accuse her of theft but she, as a woman, cannot eat more than him or give him less to eat. The frame story narrates how it is Nainamma who works both at home and in the village, while her husband comes home drunk after work. Sen observes that it is quite common in many societies to take for granted that men will work naturally outside the home but is
acceptable for women to do so “if and only if they could engage in such work in addition to their inescapable—and unequally shared—household duties” (236).

Ookamma, not being a typical submissive woman, angrily retorts that she should be eating all the rottis since she too works and she is the one who makes them every day. The old man takes a bet with her: whoever talks first would get to eat three rottis forever. This is where Nainamma takes up the story again after she asks Kala to recount it, who does so, earning the praise of the old woman. But before she can pick up the thread of the narration, Thatha arrives smelling of toddy as usual and demands food while cursing Nainamma and her stories. Although Nainamma shouts back, she gets up to give him food. As in Jane Austen’s novels the women in both the tales appear to revolt from within the system. Kala, who had quickly gobbled up her food and slipped away from home is, like fiery Moyna in The Why-Why Girl, furious with Thatha. She slyly kicks away his fallen cigarette packet and matchbox behind the grindstone. But she too ends up quietly obeying her mother.

In school the next day, Kala hopes and prays that the tale would end with Nainamma winning the bet. That evening Nainamma continues her tale: Ookaiah and Ookamma leave the rottis untouched and go to bed without talking. They both pretend to sleep the next morning also and do not get up even when the neighbours gather around. Taking them for dead, the neighbours make arrangements for the funeral rites. Thatha tries to interrupt the storytelling at this point but Kala insists that she should finish the story and Nainamma agrees. Ookamma worries about the hot water bath they would give her as part of the rituals but she still does not speak. While being carried to the funeral
ground, the old man hopes that Ookamma would speak. Five people lift them up on to the firewood and then light the pyre. The old man feels the heat faster as he is only wearing a ‘dhoti’, a garment tied around the waist. He jumps up screaming: “Abbah! I am dead!” Hearing this the old woman too jumps up screaming: Two for you, three for me. . .” The five neighbours think that the old couple want to eat them up and run away screaming. Kala and the other children laugh a lot along with Nainamma, happy at the way the story has ended. Nainamma’s worldview, subtly present in many folktales, is expressed in the homilies she attaches to her tales. When Kala eagerly asks Nainamma if Ookamma got three rottis after she wins the bet with her husband, she replies: “Look, hunger is the same for all, but whoever works more, will eat more.” Here, Nainamma tempers Kala’s exuberance in the victory over the opposite sex by gently pointing out that more food must be eaten by the one who works more, be it a man or a woman.

The lives of the people in Kala’s village, the food they eat, the rituals associated with their weddings and funerals, the work that women do inside and outside the house, the behaviour and habits of the men and certain words, terms and names in the Telugu language are all mentioned in the verbal text and expanded further in the visual text, painting a vivid picture of life lived in a village in Andhra Pradesh. At the same time the portrayal of gender inequality prevalent in patriarchal societies, the poverty and hard work of the villagers, the communal camaraderie and kinship, the magnetism of oral story-telling, the empowerment of the girl child and woman as agency make this multi-layered book universal in its tapestry of themes. Written, significantly, by a Dalit writer, this book exhibits a typical feature of Indian narratology which Paniker terms Interiorisation:
A text is often a multiplicity of layer upon layer of signification, and it may even be that the simpler a text looks the chances of the inner text being contradictory to it are much greater. This kind of sophistication may be found even in so-called children’s fiction, which takes a reader with preconceived notions about children’s literature for a ride. Surface simplicity is often a clever device to interiorize a deeper and more complex end. Folk tales are a good example of successful interiorisation of a deeper intent: some readers may not take pains to reach the core. (5)

Nainamma’s story exhibits feminist leanings and promotes gender equality. Her role as agency is immense in the way her stories influence the children in the village, in her refusal to fit into the stereotypical mould of the submissive woman, in her voluntary work for the well-being of the community, in her discourses expressing her worldview and her direct influence in the empowerment of intelligent Kala. Sen emphasises the extraordinary importance of women as “active agents of change,” who can “transform their own lives and the lives of other women, and indeed the lives of everyone in society—women, men and children”. He sees women as “harbingers of major social change, in making the world a more liveable place for all” (223). Nainamma, in this sense, is an active promoter and facilitator of social transformation.

Ramanujan avers that women’s tales counter various constructs and stereotypes (held by both men and women), such as the passive female victim, conceptions of karma, or even chastity. There are also tales that speak of a woman’s creativity, her agency, and the way it is bound up with her capacity for speech. (“Towards” 447). This folktale is a
Dalit woman’s narrative about a persuasive woman’s oral tale about another woman; a woman’s tale which moves towards a “counter-system”, an alternative set of values and attitudes, to gain wish-fulfillment unavailable outside the world of stories (446, 447).

One of the four major Dravidian languages of South India, Kannada is spoken by about 35 million speakers, most of whom live in the state of Karnataka. Although less well-known than its classical neighbor, Tamil, Kannada has a rich written literature, dating from the ninth century of mythology, epics (especially Jaina texts), religious poetry, and, more recently, sophisticated novels and plays. Folktales in Kannada, “curiously, have been collected and studied more extensively than tales in any other Indian language. . .” (Blackburn and Dundes). The picturebook *The Neverending Story* (Tulika 2006), originally written in Kannada, with its local flavour, use of repetition and eventual fusing of two stories exhibits many features typical in Indian folk tales.

The author, Ashwini Bhat, portrays a grandmother—the source of many an oral tale in all parts of the world—as narrator, telling a chain story to her grand-daughter, who wants to listen to a story that doesn’t end. The tale starts off with a short line—“The old man from Madikeri came to Bengaluru”—and gradually includes his wife, his daughter, her doll, the doll’s dog, the dog’s tail, the hair on the tail, the louse on the hair and finally the wife of the louse. Quite nonsensical, it merges fantasy with realism, a trait quite common in Indian tales. Paniker identifies fantasisation as one among ten distinctive features of Indian narratology, the others being interiorisation, serialisation, cyclicalisation, allegorisation, anonymisation, elasticisation of time, spatialisation, stylisation and improvisation:
The Indian mind from the beginning of history has continued to question the nature of reality: it has often found delight in transforming apparent reality into invisible or intangible legend or myth. . . Fantasisation is thus a privileged enterprise in the Indian narrative: the Vedas, the Puranas, the epics, the fairy tale and folk tale: all these are primarily perceptions of the imagination and only secondarily those of the rational mind. (8, 9)

The seamless linking of two stories in the picturebook also draws inspiration from the structure of the typical Indian narrative which prefers “an apparently neverending series of episodes to a unified, single-strand, streamlined course of events” (6) reminiscent of the Indian temple or palace architecture. When the grand-daughter wonders if there is really a story without end, the grandmother remarks that it may end if “the old woman gets her needle back from the well”. This leads to another story about an old woman whose needle fell into the well behind the house while she was about to mend a big hole in her one and only sari. But this time the grandmother makes her grand-daughter interact in the narration with the condition that she will narrate only if the girl says “hoonh” at the end of every sentence. Unknown to the girl, this influences the conclusion of the story. The grandmother reaches the part in the story when the needle falls into the well; the girl dutifully chants “hoonh”. But now the grandmother retorts tongue-in-cheek: “If you say ‘hoonh’ will the needle come out of the well? . . . If you say ‘Stop it, Ajji!’ will the needle come out of the well?” The story ends with the declaration that the needle did not come out of the well and so the louse’s wife’s story did not end. This interactive method of story-telling is prevalent all over India especially in Burra Katha, a style of storytelling which originated in Andhra Pradesh where the story-teller
asks questions and makes comments about the story from time to time (Spagnoli and Samanna 36).

_The Neverending Story_ narrates a tale within which are embedded two stories linked together, similar to the embedding of stories prevalent in folk tales and Indian epics like _The Ramayana_ and _The Mahabharatha_. The use of the frame story, the grandmother’s narration in this instance, embeds the two other tales within it. Currently associated with postmodern fiction, this device has been in use in India for centuries. Regarding the elasticity of time, Paniker states that narrators leave the supposed time of the supposed happenings in an undefined area of time, thereby shifting the emphasis from a definite dateline to indefinite infinity. The temporal frame of “Once upon a time” which is how the second story in the book begins, aims at a certain ahistoricity where clock time or calendar time is less important than psychological time. Indian narratives, like fairy tales around the globe, give greater importance to space and end up telescoping time (15). That being said, there are instances in which space is left as undefined as time, especially in tales from South India.

Oral literature, unlike written literature, is not an exclusively verbal art. It is inevitably intermixed with song, music, dance, ritual and craft. The objects one identifies as craft are not produced in a given community for aesthetic pleasure alone. They “form an integral part of the community’s daily life. Often, such objects carry with them an imprint of the supernatural as conceived in the imagination and myths of the specific community” (Devy 31). The ‘kaavads’ used by traditional nomadic storytellers in Rajasthan, the ‘kaavadiya bhaats’, is one such example. These portable wooden
storytelling boxes made by ‘suthaars’, carpenter-artists, have colourfully painted panels of scenes from myths and folktales behind multiple hinged doors which the storytellers open one by one as they retell ancient tales, pointing at each picture with a long peacock feather. The picturebook *It’s All the Same* (Tulika 2012), is part of the Tulika series of books titled ‘Our Myths’ which aims to carry forward the spirit of oral storytelling and shows how myths change and still endure, gently questioning stereotypes and rigid notions.

Narrated in the typical flat manner used by the storytellers, the story, retold twice, depicts the lives of the Hindu gods and their involvement in worldly matters. Many stories told in India “encourage a closer relationship between human and divine beings” (Spagnoli and Samanna 51). Stories revolving around Siva are popular, while Vishnu appears in stories especially in two of his incarnations as Krishna and Rama. Kali, Ganesha, and Subramanyam are “also found often in tales, along with the goddess Lakshmi, who gives wealth, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning” (51). Both storytellers in the book begin their version of the story by introducing themselves and state that they are going to narrate a tale about why Lord Ganesha is always worshipped first, before all other gods and goddesses. Pappuram, the first kaavadiya bhaat, speaks of how Shiva sends his children, Ganesha and Kartikeya, away from their home on Mount Kailash, as they were disturbing him and his wife, Parvati. He asks them to go around the whole universe seven times with a reward for the one who wins. Though Karthikeya flies off on his peacock, he reaches only after Ganesha whose vehicle is the mouse. Shiva is pleased with the fact that Ganesha had decided to go around his parents seven times declaring that they were his universe. Shiva blesses his son stating that people will pray
to Ganesha first, before any other god. It is interesting to note that in Tamil Nadu, this is not how the story ends. Karthikeya—Murugan in Tamil—goes away to a hill-top in a huff accusing his parents of favouritism and is brought back only after several intercessions.

Kojaram, the second kaavadiya bhaat, begins his tale in similar fashion but veers off to narrate how Shiva, feeling tired, sends his son, Ganesha, to attend Rama’s wedding to Sita in Mithila. Unhappy with only Ganesha’s presence, a boy with an elephant’s head, the people in Rama’s house refuse to take him in the procession going to Sita’s house. Saddened and upset, Ganesha asks his mouse along with other mice to dig up potholes all along the way, so much so that the procession can move no further. Now the people plead with Ganesha to ask his mouse to repair the damage, promising him two wives and two children. Ganesha remains unmoved. They then promise to pray to him first, before any other god. Ganesha is happy. Both stories end with a picture of Ganesha along with his two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi, and his mouse. But the picturebook doesn’t end there. The last double-page spread depicts the two storytellers facing each other stating “It’s the same thing!” echoing the title on the front cover.

Paniker posits that “the very grammar of communication in India” as seen in literature, painting, music, dance and drama “is heavily weighted in favour of fancy and fantasy. All things impossible in the everyday rational world of so-called reality are made possible: elephant god, monkey god, water god, etc., are important players in all Indian narratives” (9–10). This picturebook narrates an imaginary story of the gods in a matter-
of-fact manner, spatially locating the narrative on Mount Kailash rather than temporally fixing it.

Indian narrators, centuries back, understood that all fiction is a mental construct just as reality is, a predominant trait now in postmodern writing from the West. They believed that all tales are recycled (10). Paniker identifies cyclicalisation as a regular feature of many Indian narratives. The very title of the picturebook It’s All the Same! highlights this aspect. The two stories in the book are variations of the same theme, an explanation as to why Ganesha is always the first god to be worshipped. Nina Sabnani, the picturebook maker, captures the essence of all myths—that there is no one story about anything—through the stories recounted by the two kaavadiya bhaats. In fact, in an interview given to Saffron Tree, Sabnani spoke about considering each tale not as a version but as an original story:

From the storytellers of the Kaavad tradition I learnt that a story is born afresh each time someone narrates it; that there is never an original story with versions, rather all stories are original or all are versions. This invokes the notion of inclusiveness, accepting multiple voices, the need to embrace diversity. This is important in today’s context where the world is getting too homogenized and there is a tendency to be conforming.

To invest inanimate objects as well as non-human creatures with the capacity to feel, think and speak, Paniker conjectures, “probably stems from the animistic or atavistic beliefs of early times” (12). To effectively present moral ideas through such tales is not just an Indian trait but a universal one. Allegorisation is present in both the tales in the
picturebook. Whereas the first one underscores the need of the adult to teach the child to look upon the parents as equivalent to the entire universe, the second tale speaks of refraining from judging a person by her/his appearance. The family, in the first tale, is depicted as a microcosm of the macrocosmic world—the world contained within the family on the one hand and the entire world being one family on the other—an instance of simultaneous expansion and contraction that is a fundamental Hindu way of looking at the cosmos. The second tale shows how the gods in India are often portrayed as fallible beings, a definite source of comfort to the human listener of the oral tale.

The metafictional nature of the book brings to light the very nature of storytelling, that there is only one story which can be retold many times by many people, changing its shape in every telling but retaining its essence and freshness, like the waves of the sea. One of the tales in A. K. Ramanujan’s collection *The Flowering Tree* is “The Story and the Song”, a story about why stories should be retold (5–6). As Ramanujan himself expounds:

Stories must be told because they are crying out to be told. For without transmission they suffocate, they die. Untold stories, equated to objects, transform themselves and take revenge. They fester, create an atmosphere of rancour and suspicion, as they did between the husband and wife of this story. (“Towards” 439)

The first narrative in *It’s All the Same* subverts the notion of the hero who must travel in order to achieve his goal. The quest of the hero that Vladimir Propp and later Joseph Campbell postulate in *Morphology of the Folktale* and *The Hero’s Journey*
respectively as being an integral part of the pattern of folktales and myths is turned on its head in Indian folktales, especially in women-centred tales (Ramanujan “Towards” 429). Ganesha in the tale succeeds in his quest without travelling far. The hero who doesn’t journey trounces the one who does; an Indian value embedded here is the belief that one can achieve success while remaining in the same place. Echoing John Milton’s “They also serve who only stand and wait”, it emphasises the notion that coming first in the rat race may not get one the prize after all, a perception much required in the current scenario of mechanised frenetic activity.

Fantasisation is linked with an irreverent but humane portrayal of the Creator in the picturebook *And Land was Born* (Tulika 1998), a creation myth of the Bhilala tribe of Madhya Pradesh in central India. Paniker postulates that the folk/tribal tale is not an institutionalised affair with fixed techniques or formalities imposed by tradition or by critical enterprise. The storyteller, through his improvisations and asides, can make it current and relevant to the times, however ancient the story may be. The narrator’s innate sense of humour and irony can also find its way into the tale (125). The book begins with a commentary on the narrator of the tale, Guna Baba, a respected old man of the Bhilala tribe. The walls of his hut are painted in rich reds, blues, yellows, whites and blacks depicting the story of how land was born; this has inspired the illustrator, Uma Krishnaswamy, to improvise the same in framed pictures throughout the book. The author, Sandhya Rao, declares within this introductory piece: “There are hundreds of stories in India of the creation of land.”
Guna Baba narrates a tale which begins with echoes of the Christian creation myth: “In the beginning . . . there was no land.” When the animals, birds and humans get fed up of being wet, they go to the four ‘jugni matas’, the mothers of the universe. The jugni matas decide to take the help of god. But all their shrieking and imploring fail to wake up god; the “poor fellow” continues to sleep, says Guna Baba, tired after having worked so hard. One of the jugni matas changes herself into a baby and tries to wake god up with her wails, but god simply sticks his little finger in her mouth and goes back to sleep. Since he is god, milk begins to flow from his finger. The baby, sucking on it, grows fatter while god becomes thinner and thinner. God wakes up worried and runs to find the astrologer bobbing on the water. He wants to know why he has become so thin and feels so ill. The astrologer tells him that the baby is one of the four jugni matas who want him to find land. God now wants the astrologer to study his horoscope and tell him what the future holds. The astrologer states that he will not find land. God returns to the palace and tears up the baby into four; each piece turning, to his consternation, into a jugni mata, now totalling seven in all. He manages to outwit them and escape on his magic cart. The jugni matas now create seven bumble bees from the drops of their sweat and send them off in search of god. They manage to catch hold of him after many years but god tells them that only the astrologer can help them. The astrologer, when asked, tells them to approach Kali Kachchu, the tortoise. The tortoise promises to try, and returns after several years with an egg on its back. The egg hatches and thus “land was born. As wind and rain touched it, the land grew.”

Ramanujan postulates that the comic folktales in India invert and parody the values of the serious ones: “In them, kings, tigers, demons, and even gods and goddesses could be figures of fun and act like morons, as they do not in the serious tales. King and
clown change places” (“Towards” 412). The myth narrated in And Land Was Born is a parody of the puranic tales in which the ‘devas’, when troubled by the ‘asuras’, typically run to Lord Vishnu sleeping blissfully on his serpent bed on the milky ocean. Though stereotypically male, the Maker in the tale, filled with human fallacies, resembles a rather lazy Rip Van Winkle who can be violent when threatened and who has limited powers with no control over his own destiny. Astrologers and horoscopes help him sort out his problems and ill health. The astrologer bobbing on the water reminds one of Brahma on a lotus emerging from Vishnu’s navel while he is lying on his serpent bed in the water. It is said that when Vishnu thought about creation, Brahma was created from a lotus that came from his navel. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva form part of the divine Hindu triad associated with creation, preservation and destruction of the universe. This lotus as well as Vishnu’s serpent bed are usually on the waters of the deluge which marks the end of one ‘yuga’, an epoch within a four-age-cycle of the cosmos, and the start of the next ‘yuga’. The tortoise which carries land on its back is also reminiscent of the Hindu depiction of the earth resting on the back of a tortoise; in fact, one of the incarnations of Vishnu was that of a tortoise.

The story does not end with god as the hero. At the same time, this fantasy places god on the same plane as an ordinary mortal and probably gives the readers a sense of comfort and ease, instead of the awe and reverence usually expected from them. In the context of discussing Indian traditions and the Western imagination, Sen points out that the mainstream Western image of India focuses on religion or spirituality but it would not be erroneous to say that India is a country of fun and games too (160). This tale brings in irreverent humour and an element of fun into one of the many creation myths in India.
The north-east of India, a neglected region, politically and otherwise, is brought into prominence in Tulika picturebooks, documenting orally narrated folk tales set amongst the beautiful flora and fauna of the region and showcasing indigenous craftsmanship along with the deep love they exhibit for nature and harmonious living. Two picturebooks on the North-East revolve around rivers; *Hambreelmai’s Loom* (Tulika 2014) focuses on the art of weaving beautiful textiles by the Mishmi people living in northeastern Arunachal Pradesh, and *Race of the Rivers* (Tulika 2014) is a Khasi myth about two rivers running through Meghalaya. *Hambreelmai’s Loom* has the distinction of being the first book ever to be published in the Mishmi language. *Race of the Rivers*, originally written in Khasi, is the first picturebook for children in that language. The National Book Trust, that functions under the aegis of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, is also getting the presses ready to publish books in undocumented languages and dialects of India to promote their use and preserve them (Pathak 15). Paniker avers that “the essence of the tribal narrative,” closely linked to everyday life, is not wholly contained in the literary form it is given as “it eliminates the visual effects and the body language” (120). But the picturebook, as an iconotext, especially when read out and performed, does better justice to the oral tale than most other genres. In fact, it has been considered a “sister art form” to oral storytelling (Smith 66). As Rachna Dhir, in her review in Saffron Tree, affirms: “Local authors and illustrators have the special gift of sharing cultural nuances that outsiders or tourists could easily overlook.” In Dhir’s view, children’s literature in India goes a long way in promoting national integration, introducing microcultures that exist within the macroculture.
3.1.5 Indian Narratology and Utopian Animal Tales

Indian literature abounds in tales of birds and beasts that metaphorically stand for ideas and human beings. *Panchatantra* is one of the most popular Indian collections of such animal fables known worldwide in which moral lessons are sugar-coated for grandmothers to teach good behaviour to children. The *Jatakas*, parables based on the Buddha’s former births, and *Hitopadesha*, many stories of which are sourced from *Panchatantra*, also portray animal characters exhibiting human traits to emphasize the importance of values like humility, trust and loyalty and give lessons in wisdom and common sense. Unlike the ‘Purasas’ the Indian sagas glorifying divinity, the animal tales are more secular. Unlike the ‘Itihasas’ or the Indian epics, they speak more about probabilities—of what might happen at any time—rather than of what has already happened (Paniker 72, 77). In picturebooks published in the 21st century in India we see a continuation of this legacy of animal tales, but with a difference; they are not always allegorical and do not necessarily have morals incorporated in them. The pleasure principle holds the reins in many of these picturebooks, similar to the entertaining tales found in the *Kathasaritsagara*.

Many picturebooks feature animals, especially domestic pets, a favourite being the cat as seen already in *Where’s that Cat?*, *Catch that Cat, Mala’s Silver Anklets*, *A Silly Story of Bondapalli*, *Where is Amma?* and *Tsomo and the Momo*. Although the cats in the latter three books seem to imitate humans and at times dress up like humans, they still maintain their identity as animals. On the other hand, in picturebooks like *Snoring Shanmugam* (Tulika 2006), *Storm in the Garden* (Tulika 2001), *Aana and Chena*,
"Ranganna, Purple Jojo" (Tulika 2011) and "Colour-Colour Kamini," the animals speak and act like human beings although they are not clothed in human attire, as animals seem to be in picturebooks like A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* and Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit.* Some of these picturebooks have already been discussed elsewhere in the dissertation. Hence not all of them will be dealt with in this section.

Much thought has been given to the reason behind depicting animals in anthropomorphic ways in children’s stories. The child has always been associated with animals probably because those at the top of the human ladder, since centuries, have wished to distance themselves from animals and have therefore placed lesser beings like children, women, slaves, peasants, the working class, the mad, ethnic minorities and migrants—in other words, anyone seen as the ‘other’—closer to nature (Rudd, “Animal” 242). It is then not surprising that many animal fables have been written by women for children. Rudd points out that it was the women in England who were particularly active in pushing for the more humane treatment of animals. It is pertinent to mention that all the Indian picturebooks listed above have been written by women, as is the case with a majority of the picturebooks published by Tara and Tulika.

Rudd also points out that “despite the fact that we are included in this term [animals], we tend to forget it” (250). The term we should be using is ‘nonhuman animals’. He claims that most books about animals do not feature humans. This is not strictly true with regard to the Indian picturebooks under study, some of which feature humans also. The terrified tiger in *Tiger on a Tree* (Tara 1997) has a soul-mate in the sleepy lion in Radhika Chadha’s *Snoring Shanmugam.* Mannu the monkey has a good
time getting a joyride on his stomach as Shanmugam the lion snores loudly
“Khorhrhrh…..phsheew…….” but the rest of the animals in the jungle are unhappy,
especially Hutoxi the horse. Amma the elephant tries to console Hutoxi by reminding her
that a gentle lion is better than a cruel king. As Shanmugam continues to eat, sleep and
snore, Amma the elephant keeps turning him on to his side so that he stops snoring and
the rest of the animals can continue their work. One day, Kamalnayan the camel, reports
to the animals about the nasty lion he has seen lurking at the edge of the forest. It is
Gabbar Singh with the curly-haired mane. Gabbar Singh smells food—rabbit, horse,
piglets, monkey, baby elephant and camel—and realises that there are no lion pug marks
around to threaten him. The animals wonder what will happen if Gabbar Singh realises
that they have a very gentle king of the jungle. It is then that Baby Bahadur the baby
elephant has an idea. Amma the elephant puts it into action. She turns sleeping
Shanmugam on to his back. Gabbar Singh hears the loud scary sounds and thinks that the
lion in that jungle must be a big and strong one. He leaves the jungle and is never seen of
again. The animals cheer and congratulate Baby Bahadur. Woken up by the noise,
Shanmugam asks the other animals if his snores had disturbed them. They reply happily
in unison: “Snore away, Shanmugam!”

Nodelman avers that children in their natural state are like animals as they have
not yet learnt to behave in the way adults expect them to. In fact, he affirms, a central
dilemma of childhood is “whether one should act naturally in accordance with one’s
basic animal instincts or whether one should do as one’s parents wish and learn to act in
obedience to their more civilised codes of behavior” (Words 116). So children’s literature
portrays children most authentically when they are depicted as anthropomorphised
animals like the animals in this picturebook or zoomorphised humans, having a human face and an animal’s body, as seen in the character of Max in his wolf suit in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Whereas Shanmugam the lion exhibits benignity and inefficiency, Hutoxi the horse is associated with impatience and Baby Bahadur with childlike ingenuity. Gabbar Singh, on the other hand, is an effective intertext—the name of the most popular villain in Bollywood featured in the film *Sholay*. The name brings to mind the villainous nature of the character in the film and the accompanying visual depicts a lion with an unusually curly mane, similar to that of the curly-haired villain.

The reader infers that it is better to have an ineffective but gentle ruler than an aggressive one who would kill them all. Nodelman speaks of characteristic animal attributes that are identified with human behaviour—lions are depicted as arrogant, foxes as crafty, peacocks as proud and mice as timid (114). But this picturebook suggests that a lion need not exhibit stereotypical traits to be accepted and loved just as human beings need not play the stereotypical roles laid down by society. Shanmugam is not arrogant but gentle; he may be ineffective but it is better than being nasty. On another level, Gabbar Singh’s quick exit demonstrates that it is rash to act on hearsay alone, without being witness to it yourself.

India has always been labelled the land of elephants and snake-charmers. In reality, elephants in India are captured frequently and put to work carrying logs of wood or adorned for stately temple processions. On the other hand, the picturebook *Ranganna* is a tale of an elephant who has human beings as friends, loves colours and wants to paint his nails. Ashok Rajagopalan’s *Gajapati Kulapati* (Tulika 2010) too portrays an elephant who enjoys his freedom while living with his human friends in a village.
A Silly Story of Bondapalli

So what did Mala do?

Mala’s Silver Anklets
Where’s that Cat?

“She has an orange tail, pointy ears and is very naughty.”

Tiger on a Tree
Kurumolagu grinned and rolled on at top speed. But Amminikutty Amma was right behind, huffing and puffing, her long hair with a knot at the end swinging like a wild cobra.

He swerved neatly around the corner and paused, panting, to catch his breath.

The Runaway Peppercorn

Out of the Way! Out of the Way!
I am Papparam. I am going to tell you a story about why Lord Ganesha is always worshipped first, before all other gods and goddesses.

It's All the Same

"Why do I have to graze the Babus' goats? Their boys can do it."

The Why-Why Girl
Gajapati Kulapati, “gajam” being the generic name for elephant in Malayalam, has got wet in the rain and has caught a big cold. As he has a big nose, it is natural that he should have a big sneeze. But he does not expect it to disturb his friends. When he sneezes, he sets off a domino effect—the banana-seller’s bananas go flying out of his hands, one of the bananas falls on the postman’s head and the postman himself falls on a frightened cow. When the elephant opens his mouth to say sorry, another sneeze comes out instead making all three victims run away. Feeling sad, Gajapati Kulapati hides behind the wall of a temple. The elephant’s cold now becomes the talk of the town. The banana-seller tells the milkman who tells the tailor who tells the flower-seller who tells the postman who shouts out that he already knows about it. That night, they hear a very loud noise which makes them wonder if it was a lion, or thunder, or the sky falling down. But it was only Gajapati Kulapati giving his biggest sneeze yet. Fortunately, with that mighty sneeze, his cold disappears. Next morning, a wise, old grandmother decides to get a house built for him so that he doesn’t get wet in the rain in future. The banana-seller, the postman and all the others in the village gather together to build the house, making him the happiest elephant in the world. From that day on, many different decibels of “Aaachooo . . . . .”s were heard in the village but never that big a one as Gajapati Kulapati’s.

The name of the elephant starts off a narrative which abounds in repetitive sounds and colloquial sounds like “pachaak” and “damaaaal”, onomatopoeically echoing the splash of the banana and the postman’s fall. The temple wall, the kind typically seen in Tamil Nadu, sets the story in a small village where people work selling milk or flowers, stitching clothes or delivering letters. Rajagopal gives a tongue-in-cheek representation of
the way people gossip but he also places emphasis on the camaraderie that exists among people in a little village as seen already in the picturebook *Malli*. The spirit of kinship dissipates as people migrate from the rural to the urban landscape along with the dissolution of joint families and communal gatherings.

There are also more realistic picturebooks in which animals are focalised but are not depicted as morphed humans or given the power of speech as seen in Anushka Ravishankar’s *Elephants Never Forget!* (Tara 2007) and Mahasweta Devi’s *Our Incredible Cow* (Tulika 2015). Similar to Ravishankar’s other picturebooks revolving around animals like *Tiger on a Tree* and *Catch that Crocodile!* (Tara 1999), the book *Elephants never Forget!* is also written in verse and is illustrated using only two predominant colours—blue and black. The colour blue is typically associated with calmness and serenity (Nodelman 60); in fact, the buffaloes in the narrative are considered “calm” and “serene” by the baby elephant. In this nature-versus-nurture tale, a baby elephant finds himself orphaned after a heavy storm one night. The monkeys around are not of much help. In fact “they threw and they flung” fruits down. The elephant decides to leave when a coconut hits his head. He runs away and reaches a stream for some water. The herd of buffaloes wallowing in the water look hospitable. He plays with a baby buffalo and becomes his friend. All of a sudden the herd runs away. The elephant wonders if he is too smelly or bad but realises with a fright that the reason for their sudden departure is the presence of a tiger. The buffaloes shepherd the baby elephant to safety. He grows up with them becoming big and strong, clearing their path, giving them a shower bath and plucking leaves for them when the grass is dry. But most importantly,
he protects them from the tiger. Like the elephant in *Aana and Chena*, the elephant in this tale is not happy with his appearance:

- His ears were too large
- His nose was too long
- His shape was quite odd
- And his colour all wrong

Although the elephant could only trumpet and not bellow like the other buffaloes, he liked being a buffalo. The elephant continues to think that he is one of them until the day he sees a herd of elephants. The elephants call out to him. But so do the buffaloes. Torn between making a choice, he thinks for a while and then runs towards the herd of buffaloes: “A buffalo he would always remain!” The ending and the title reinforces a trait that elephants are well-known for – their capacity to remember. The book emphasises the way in which the elephant forges his identity, by choosing to live with those who look after him, rather than those who appear to look similar to him.

Rudd hypothesises that most animal tales divide animals into certain categories: ‘pets’, ‘vermin’ and ‘food’ (“Animal” 250). The picturebooks above do not seem to categorise them as such. Instead, the lion and the elephant seem to exist in a free world. Though some of them exhibit human traits and are given voice, the implied reader sees them in a setting where nonhuman animals and human animals co-exist harmoniously in a utopian world. Bradford et al. have developed the idea of “transformative utopianism” as “fictional imaginings of transformed world orders” that can “propose new social and political arrangements” (2–3) with the capacity to “imagine a better world than the one
that readers/audiences currently know” (4). In that sense, such picturebooks express an optimistic view of the future, visualising young readers as agents of transformation in a less hierarchical world order.

Although the picturebooks under study in this section are not overtly didactic, they do try to communicate to the child reader the benefits of oneness within a community and the peaceful co-existence of tradition and modernity, individual and society, regional languages and English. The Indian flavour in these multicultural picturebooks, like the Indian curry, can be enjoyed by children, not just in India, but all over the world. What they take back from it is a multiplicity of meanings relevant to their lives and experiences. Such picturebooks make the child reader open-minded to celebrating differences—cultural or otherwise.

3.2 The Picturebook as Postcolonial Counter-Discourse

Indian picturebooks published in English appropriate the coloniser’s language, as has been seen in the discussions on picturebooks such as Where’s That Cat? and The Runaway Peppercorn. By “appropriating the imperial language, its discursive forms and its modes of representation” postcolonial societies are able “to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers” (Ashcroft et al. 16).

The 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, can be read as a postcolonial counter-narrative
not just in its travesty of colonial discourse but also as a parody of the Eurocentric
disciplines of cartography and travel writing. The picturebook revolves around the dream
of a child who has turned into a “bright blue mouse”, the same mouse that features in her
aunt, Anna’s, quilt. Surprisingly, we never get to see the child or hear her name. Even the
gender remains a little mysterious, though we presume the protagonist is a girl, since the
mouse seems interested in trying on a ‘dupatta’ at a textile shop. Aunt Anna has sewed a
patchwork quilt for her, highlighting those moments from the trip that she had recounted
to her niece after her recent visit to India. The entire narrative is from an outsider’s point of view, in first person, though ironically, the mouse is associated with Lord Ganesha in
Indian mythology. Incidentally, the book evolved from the illustrations by Leutwiler who
had worked on the patchwork panels after a visit to India, the blue mouse in it representing herself.

The front cover displays a “three-wheeled car” from which a blue mouse looks
out curiously; an instance of stereotypical labelling of unfamiliar objects by travellers in
an unknown land. The resident Indian would probably use the term ‘autorickshaw’. Read
from a postcolonial perspective, the mouse in the dream seems to replicate Edward Said’s
“orientalist” gaze (873). Western nations like France and Britain, Said argues, spent an
immense amount of time producing knowledge about the locations they dominated. He
points out that rarely did Western travellers in these regions ever try to learn much about,
or from, the native peoples they encountered. Instead, they recorded their observations
based upon commonly-held assumptions about ‘the Orient’ as a mythic place of
exoticism, moral laxity, sexual degeneracy and so forth. These observations were
presented as scientific truths that, in their turn, functioned to justify the very propriety of colonial domination.

Ravishankar’s narrative in nonsense verse materialises as a counter-discourse in many ways. Aunt Anna’s memories, embroidered on the quilt, spring to life in the child’s dream. In the mouse’s constant questions regarding the names of places she travels to, and the nonsensical answers given by the various animals and human beings she accosts along the way, Ravishankar appears to parody the Eurocentric imperialist attitude and discourse which, especially during the Enlightenment period, evinced a keen desire to map the world and label it according to its own terms. While sitting in the plane, the mouse asks her neighbour where the plane is going. The answer that comes back is a piece of advice: “follow your own nose.” Significantly, the mouse follows her nose to the sea, the travel route frequently taken by the coloniser to reach foreign lands. When the cow is asked which country they are in, it answers: “It’s East of this and North of that / And South-west of the other.” In Renaissance learning, geography or cosmography, acted as an “encyclopaedic synthesis for the description of the world” (Rubies 242). The frenetic mapping that the colonisers engaged in, quartering the world into longitudes and latitudes and geographically locating places is satirised in this humorous answer. Cartography has “not only been a tool of conquest but, arguably, a weapon employed with vigour and purpose” (Howard 144). An integral part of Orientalism is the relationship of power between the Occident and the Orient, in which the balance is weighted heavily in favour of the former. Such power is “connected intimately with the construction of knowledge about the Orient” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 61). The various kinds of power include political power, intellectual power, cultural power and moral power (Said,
“Orientalism” 874, 880). Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia succinctly state Said’s postulations that were influenced by Foucault’s writings on power and knowledge:

The knowledge of the Orient created by and embodied within the discourse of Orientalism serves to construct an image of the Orient and the Orientals as subservient and subject to domination by the Occident. . . The creation of the Orient as the ‘other’ is necessary so that the Occident can define itself and strengthen its own identity by invoking such a juxtaposition. (61–62)

Incidentally, the girl that the mouse meets on the next spread draws “a map without a place”. The South Indian reader would refer to it as a ‘kolam’, a traditional form of drawing around a grid of dots using rice paste, typically seen at the entrances of houses. The girl explains that the location of the mouse depends on whether the mouse is standing on her head, or whether she is standing on her feet. If on the head, then she is standing on her hair. If not, she “could be anywhere”. These lines seem to suggest that the outlook one has of the place travelled to changes according to the traveller’s chosen gaze. The superior ‘order’, ‘rationality’ and ‘symmetry’ of Europe, and the inferior ‘disorder’, ‘irrationality’ and ‘primitivism’ of non-Europe were “the self-confirming parameters in which the various Orientalist disciplines circulated” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 49). The logic embedded within the nonsensical responses to the mouse’s questions turns these very parameters on their head. Unlike the travel books brought out in colonial times, travel writing today is influenced by a Lyotardian awareness of the fictionality of ‘facts’, an awareness of the dependence on erstwhile sacrosanct texts and the need to include all kinds of texts to describe a more authentic, if still fragmented,
view of the world. A “text that generically proffered itself as ‘true’, as a representation of unaltered ‘reality’”, now tries to highlight “the fundamental fictionality of all representation” (Campbell 263).

The answer given by the bandicoots continues to mock at the inane mapping activities of the Western world:

We might be at the Equator,
Or even the North Pole.
It doesn’t matter much to us,
We live inside a hole.

Outside a temple gate, the mouse meets an elephant whose speech register echoes that of the Queen of Hearts in the nonsensical novel Alice in Wonderland: “‘Off with your shoes! / Off with your shoes!’” The elephant’s answer to the mouse’s questions on directions for travel are equally nonsensical, rubbing the seriousness given to cartography by the colonisers: “‘First left then right then up then down / Then back then forth then here then there / Then to then fro . . .’” The driver of the autorickshaw speaks in the same vein when, instead of asking the mouse to specify where she wants to go, he is happy to simply take her “there”, suddenly stopping to announce: “At last we’re getting near.” In the next spread, a woman at a textile shop gives a seemingly logical answer to the mouse: “You’re as far as you can run. / But if you learn to fly, then you / Could catch up with the sun.” This spread showcases the picturebook as a counter-narrative in which the imperialist lust for travel, conquest, mapping, and travel writing is parodied. The adult co-reader of the picturebook may further comprehend this through
intertextual references to Leo Tolstoy’s short story “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” which suggests that a man’s greed for land will only result in his own death and ruin. The myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun and witnessed the same fate also reflects the same thought. The adult/sophisticated reader who perceives the satirical subtext and the child reader who enjoys the nonsense in the verse might laugh at different things, but, as Martin Salisbury points out, there is no requirement on the part of child and adult to laugh at the same places in a picturebook (30).

On the next spread, the bearded gentleman at Chennai airport consoles the mouse who suddenly realises that she cannot read. The reader who has seen the picture on the recto first before reading the written text, the characteristic order in which a picturebook is read (Nodelman Words about Pictures 243), finds this ironic. The picture shows a patchwork panel with the mouse and her suitcase at the centre, and “CHENNAI AIRPORT” written vertically down on her right. The fact that the mouse can no longer read English seems to hint at appropriation, a term used to describe the ways in which postcolonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture—language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis—that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities (Ashcroft et al. 15). The discipline of ‘English’ was invented as a vehicle of the civilising mission, a repository of European, and particularly British, cultural values that could be effortlessly inculcated into colonial students. A subject that was invented to convey the cultural weight of empire has been transformed by those very societies to which it was disseminated into a forceful medium of self-expression. (Ashcroft Introduction On Post-Colonial Futures 2–3).
The “silly tune” that the mouse sings for the plane to continue flying as per the pilot’s request might be the metanarratives of reason and progress (Lyotard 509) the Western world sings out to the colonised world, a nonsensical excuse to indulge in pillage and plunder. The phrase “excuse me” in the title seems to reflect the same idea, passing off as a limp apology. The last spread has the mouse admitting to the reader that it was only a dream and that she will get on “a real aeroplane” one day and fly off to India. The reality is different from the narratives constructed by the colonisers about the colonised. It is time to attempt a portrayal, fragmented like the patchwork illustrations, but a collage more authentic than an essentialist fictional account of a land that doesn’t exist. The last illustration depicts the mouse staring at the framed picture of a cat, who seems to gaze into space. The fate of the coloniser seems to be insinuated in the portrayal of the arch enemy and victimiser of the mouse breathing down on her, albeit within a framed picture. The iconic leader of the Red Indians, Chief Seattle, in his speech, similarly prophesied the destruction of the white man’s race in the imminent future.

Sumanyu Satpathy, in her study of Edward Lear’s nonsense verse after his visit to India, comments on his Orientalist caricatures of India and his racist journal entries (75). On the other hand, this picturebook works as a counter-narrative that parodies and subverts the metanarratives and dominant discourse of the imperialists in a manner which leads to self-empowerment.

The section below discusses picturebooks that open the child’s eyes to darker Indias—poverty-stricken India that is classified by the world as “super poor”; marginalised India that remains the “other” in “independent” India; patriarchal India that does not rejoice at the birth of a girl child; and “Mother India” that is brutally raped of
her natural resources. The picturebooks under study are involved in counter-narratives of a different kind—that which challenge the hegemony of the dominant classes and represent the voiceless.

3.3 Voicing the Voiceless – Picturebooks on ‘Other’ Lives

3.3.1 The Outclassed

Mahasweta Devi, the noted writer-activist from Bengal, in her first picturebook, *The Why-Why Girl* (Tulika 2003), represents the life of Moyna, a young girl, who belongs to the tribal community of the Shabars who live, landless, on the hills of North-east India. Devi’s sensitivity to local problems, realities, beliefs and notions makes her story a counterdiscourse—one which contests the existing configurations of class and gender. Through her writing, Devi attempts to raise awareness against social injustice and poverty, especially against the 25 million tribal people in India, who belong to approximately 150 different tribes. Her pioneering work with the Sabars/Shabhars, a tribal community in the north-east of India, has earned her the name “The Mother of the Sabars”. During the British Raj, the Shabars were classified as a ‘criminal tribe’ under Criminal Tribes Act 1871, because of which they still suffer from social stigma and ostracism. The traditionally forest-dwelling tribe lacks experience in agriculture and relies on the forests for its livelihood. The Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, mentioned in the picture book, has been working with the Shabars for about 30 years. The results of the Samiti's efforts are noticeable among the Shabars.
In independent India, the Shabars continue to remain under the thumb of the internal imperialists—the rich and powerful landlords, the Babus, who enjoy lives of luxury and idleness. In the picturebook, Moyna’s father has gone to Jamshedpur in search of better prospects. Her brother, Goro, has to go every day to the forest to collect firewood for the family. Her mother, Khiri, cannot work due to a bad leg. And so, in a community which does not usually let its girls work, Moyna becomes shepherd to the Babu’s goats.

Nobody in the community complains; except Moyna, that is. Moyna asks many questions and her questions go on endlessly. So much so that the postmaster who cycles to the village calls her the “Why-Why Girl”! Incidentally, the story begins with a question by Moyna “But why?” and ends with another “Why?” The name Moyna brings to mind the Mynah bird as does the Bengali translation “kyon-kyon” of the compound word “why-why”, a colloquial appropriation of the semantic structure found in the regional languages in India.

Gregory Castle cites Albert Memmi, a leading postcolonial theorist, who has written about the three major ideological components of colonial racism—“... one, the gulf between the culture of the coloniser and the colonized; two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the coloniser; three, the use of these supposed differences as standards of absolute fact” (245). Mahasweta Devi questions and challenges the internal colonisers’ age-old exploitative practices and beliefs through the questions thrown at the rich landlords by Moyna. Her narrative attempts to represent the life of a girl who is triply marginalised—as a Shabar, as a girl and as a child.
Moyna defiantly questions gender bias, inequality in class and caste, and neglect of educational facilities for children: “Why do I have to graze the Babu’s goats? Their boys can do it. . . Why should I eat their leftovers? . . . Why do I have to walk so far to the river to fetch water? . . . Why should we live in a leaf hut? . . . Why shouldn’t I study too?” In a marginalised community like the Shabars, it is a member of the marginalised sex, and a 10-year-old child at that, who has the courage to question the autocratic ways of the internal imperialists. Incidentally, this book has been written, illustrated and published by women.

Mahasweta Devi comments on the back cover of the book, “All over India there are children, tribal and non-tribal, who always ask the question ‘Why?’” She highlights the close relationship tribal children share with nature and how easy it is to explain things scientifically to them. Moyna is satisfied with the answers she gets to her endless stream of questions on nature: “Why can’t fish speak? . . . Why do stars look so small if many of them are bigger than the sun? . . . Why shouldn’t I catch a cobra?” When Moyna declares that she is moving in with Mahasweta Devi, who has come to work at the Samiti, her mother disapproves of it. Out pop the questions again: “Why not? It’s a big hut. How much space does one old woman need?”

The culture and landscape of the Shabars seeps through both the visual and the verbal text. Moyna walks with a pet mongoose on her shoulder. She loves to eat snake curry and crabs. She wears a white dress with a broad red and black border typical to the tribe, while her mother and her teacher wear saris. Moyna plaits her long hair and tucks a frangipani flower behind her ear. Her brown skin and her facial features, especially her
sparkling, black eyes, are characteristic of people of the North-east. Illustrations of bamboo shoots, grass, roosters, mountain goats, snakes, mongooses and crabs bring to life the flora and fauna of the hills of the North-east. The wicker-basket lying on the road, the leaf huts they live in, the basket that Khiri weaves, Moyna’s dress and a striped rug on which Moyna and her siblings sit, highlight the skilled craftsmanship of the tribe. So too does the charpoy on which the long-moustached Babu sits, resting on his cushions and smoking his hookah.

In keeping with the theme of the book, the illustrator, Kanyika Kini has allowed Moyna’s questions to rise and fall across the pages like the rolling waves of an unquenchable sea. Devi writes the story of the ‘other’, the poor, female, tribal child but makes her speak boldly, at least within the text. She acquires agency within the text as the education she receives empowers her. Devi, through Moyna, challenges the hegemonic structures, norms, practices and beliefs of a class-conscious, gender-biased India within the story. This story, incidentally, has been translated into six regional languages by the publishers.

In a picturebook, the verbal narrative is diegetic, that is, it tells the story in time. The visual narrative on the other hand, is mimetic, that is, it shows the space which can only be described in the verbal narrative. In *The Why-Why Girl*, the verbal narrative tells us the story of 10-year-old Moyna who meets the author/narrator, Mahasweta Devi, at the Samiti set up to help the Shabars. Moyna’s rebellious questions actually reveal the life of every Shabar, more so the girl child. She complains about walking miles to fetch water from the river, of looking after the Babu’s goats while his own sons sit idle, of having to
tend goats during the time classes are taken for children at the Samiti, of living in a leaf hut, and of not being able to eat rice twice a day. She also has to bring the goats home, collect firewood and lay traps for the birds. Moyna refuses to thank the Babu for sending them rice, as her mother wishes her to. “Why should I?” Moyna said. “Don’t I sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him? Does he ever thank me? Why should I?”” It is Moyna’s self-respect which touches the narrator and the reader. The story of Moyna’s father having to migrate to Jamshedpur far away from his home in the hills in search of a job, her mother who can’t work due to a bad leg which reveals much about the lack of medical facilities, her brother who goes into the forest every day just to get firewood and Moyna who can’t attend school because of the many chores she has to finish, is the story of the Shabars. They remain a neglected poor, landless, tribal community in the hills of North-east India, a region which is still undeveloped due to step-motherly treatment by the government of India, insurgency and lack of political will.

The visual narrative is complementary, in that the lives of the Shabars, the difficult but beautiful terrain they live in, the animals they tend to and the ones they eat, the huts they reside in, the clothes they weave and wear, the baskets they weave and use, the food they eat and the pots they cook in and their facial features and nut-brown complexion, are all shown to the reader through double-page spreads of pictures in muted colours. As Nikolajeva and Scott remind us, the visual narrative allows the reader “considerable freedom of interpretation” (62) unlike the verbal narrative which forces the reader to see certain details of the setting while ignoring others.
The path to empowerment and agency, for the voiceless and the powerless, Devi suggests to the adult, is education. The advantages of literacy is highlighted metafictionally towards the ending of the story. “Why do you read books before you go to sleep?” asks Moyna. “Because books have the answers to your whys!” replies the narrator. Moyna then decides, “I will learn to read and find the answers to my questions.” She goes on to become the first girl to be admitted to the village primary school and, at eighteen, becomes a teacher at the Samiti.

As Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” reminds us, “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (285). She goes on to state the role of the female intellectual: “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish” (312).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the noted Nigerian novelist, in her speech on the TED stage, warns us against the danger of the single story presented by the West of the ‘other’. Moyna’s story is an/other story among many, many other stories which have remained unvoiced over the centuries. Until tribes like the Shabars and girls like Moyna are empowered, writers like Mahasweta Devi must continue to represent their stories. They must continue to bring the margin to the centre. The next section looks at caste discrimination and the life-story of a Dalit that emerges as a counter-narrative to the dominant ideologies of the majority.
3.3.2 The Outcaste

History was made in India when Bhimrao Ambedkar became the first Dalit to hold a Ph.D degree. He went on to become the first Law Minister when India attained independence in 1947. Sowmya Rajendran puts together this great political figure’s biography in picturebook form in *The Boy Who Asked Why* (Tulika 2015), the title of which echoes that of *The Why-Why Girl* whose protagonist’s story too is one of challenging the dominant order and questioning it. Whereas Moyna questioned class and gender prejudice, Ambedkar spoke up against caste prejudice. As Sen emphatically states, India has a terrible record in “social asymmetry”, of which the caste system is only one reflection (34). He warns us that “silence is a powerful enemy of social justice”. The demands of justice in India are also demands for “more use of voice in the pursuit of equity” (34, 38–39).

The front cover is filled with a huge question mark, again seeming to bring in intertextually the many question marks figuring in *The Why-Why Girl*. It is also an indication of the many unanswered questions put forth within, an instance of the peritexts in picturebooks contributing to the main narrative in some way. Sitting within its curve is a little boy with no shirt on and a bemused look on his face. The book begins with a mention of Bhim’s hero, cricketer Palwankar Baloo, who became the first great “Untouchable” cricketer in India. Incidentally, the main narrative begins and ends, not with Ambedkar’s story, but with the eternal struggle of all Dalits, then and now. The hierarchical caste structure in India is visualised as a ladder with many rungs, the lowest being Bhim’s own. As a young boy, he wonders why the Mahars were considered low-
caste; about why they could not eat with those above them in the caste ladder or drink from the same well or bathe in the same pond. Most importantly, he wonders why people like him could not even be touched. The word “WHY?” appears on many pages in the text frequently located amidst pictures, so much so that this intraiconic text can be viewed as an image. Recognising his thirst for knowledge, Bhim’s father sends his fourteenth child to school, well aware that he will face these discriminations there too. At school, Bhim wonders why he has to sit with a few others on gunny sacks, and why the peon has to give them water from a pot which should not be touched. But one upper caste teacher takes a liking to him, shares his lunch with him and even changes his surname from Ambavadekar to Ambedkar.

An incident which remains etched in the nine-year-old’s mind is mentioned in the picturebook. Bhim’s father fails to get a letter with details of his children’s arrival at Masur station from where someone was supposed to pick them up. The station master initially mistakes them for upper caste children and shows his aversion to them when told otherwise. The children make their way to Goregaon on a bullock cart, the cart driver walking beside them as he would not sit with them in it. Though very tired and thirsty, nobody gives them water or shelter during the long ride. The double-page spread by Satwik Gade depicting this scene is primarily in smoky blue evoking a mood of melancholia in the reader (Nodelman, Words 60). Incidentally, Gade also depicts the divide between Bhim’s people and the others by placing the boys in clusters flying maroon kites on the verso while across the gutter of the page, on the recto, is a river above the banks of which are visible multi-hued patterned kites, a sign of an upper-caste, richer neighbourhood perhaps. The word “WHY?” looms large on the horizon starkly
printed across the bright yellow sun. Mention is made of how Bhim’s father, after
migrating to Bombay, gets him into one of the best schools and wakes him up at two in
the morning to study by the light of the kerosene lamp, also featured on the title page, in
their otherwise noisy one-room house.

Although still treated as an untouchable, Bhim goes to college and wins a
scholarship to America. Back in India, on his first job, he finds that nobody is ready to
take orders from him, the peons throwing files and papers at him as they didn’t want to
touch him. The illustration, interestingly reveals a disappointed Ambedkar drowning in a
pile of papers many of which many seem blank, in contrast to the illustration of young
Ambedkar a few pages earlier, beaming as he dreams of piles of colourful books,
alphabets and numbers falling on him. The way in which Ambedkar is depicted a second
time in the same doublespread, sitting on a suitcase in front of doors that shut on a Dalit
searching for a place to stay is not much different from the way he had to sit in school on
a gunny sack. But just as the young boy did not give up, the older Ambedkar is not
deterred by these unpleasant experiences. The picture shows him reading a newspaper on
a rather uncomfortable suitcase. The doublespread that shows him in the classroom
exhibits perspectival counterpoint (Nikolajeva and Scott 25). Although the story is
narrated from Bhim’s point of view, the illustration on this doublespread foregrounds the
teacher’s point of view, his head facing the students who are depicted in colour, all other
than the three boys in the back row. They alone remain sketched in black and white,
symbolically representing the manner in which the teacher looks right through them, not
even acknowledging them as human beings. The question “WHY?” curving towards the
three boys serves as a trajectory taking the reader along the path of the teacher’s vision who, ironically, does not perceive the students in the last row.

Later, while teaching in a college, Ambedkar starts a weekly magazine in which he writes about the evils of the caste system. After studying law at London, Bhim, now affectionately called Babasaheb, continues his fight through his speeches and writing. He leads the untouchable people to a public tank and gets them to drink water from it, breaking a rule that had existed for centuries. Respected now as a brilliant lawyer, Babasaheb goes on to complete his Ph.D and become the first Law Minister after independence, framing the Constitution of India which gives an equal chance to everyone in life—“to eat and play, to study and work.”

The last doublespread repeats the question “WHY? with scenes of the lives of Dalits today. The struggle by the Dalits continue in the present. Menial jobs are designated to them. Consequently they remain poor and are still not empowered. The newspapers are filled with news of how they are subjugated to mental and physical torture across the country. The pictures on the final doublespread depict their poverty-stricken condition and the kinds of work they do from picking rags to cleaning sewage drains. The focus of the narrative shifts from the achievements of Ambedkar to the unchanging situation of the Dalits in the present. The narrative ends not on a note of celebration but with a question regarding the continuing injustice that affects them. One man’s tortuous journey which helped frame the constitution of India has not ended at the destination Ambedkar was striving to reach. This is metaphorically represented through the muddy colours of the sun which still does not shine on the Dalits. The damp patches
on the walls of young Ambedkar’s house in the main narrative sprouted branches, symbolising hope, but in the final doublespread, they are pointedly absent. The patches alone remain as the backdrop to the oft-repeated “WHY?” They are also present on the significantly blank placards that the voiceless Dalits hold up. Just below the question “WHY?” is the picture of a broom, symbolically displaying the only avenue open to the Dalits even today in digital India. The counter-narrative in the picturebook text reminds the reader of the need for many more such counter-narratives in 21st century India.

3.3.3 The War-Ravaged

A political issue which remains unsolved as a result of the Partition of India is the conflict regarding Kashmir, one of the most beautiful places in the country and a tourist’s paradise. Although Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession, ceding Kashmir to India on October 26, Indian and Pakistani forces fought their first war over Kashmir in 1947–48. Eventually, they ended up fighting four bloody wars, the last one in Kargil in 1998 being the most intense (“Brief History of the Kashmir Conflict”). Kashmir remains an area of violent skirmishes between the Indian army and the Pakistan army, a vulnerable, easy entry point for terrorists with their own agendas. This never-ending political tussle ending in ceasefires has taken the lives of countless Kashmiris who have undergone horrifying experiences on both sides of the Line of Control. In India, some have managed to migrate to safer states. But those who could not, continue to suffer at the hands of those indulging in acts of violence; schools are shut down frequently and there is not much scope for employment as the number of tourists have dwindled rapidly. The picturebook *Gulla and the Hangul* (Tulika 2008) is overtly the story of a young boy
who saves a little ‘hangul’, a deer. But the manner in which the sound of guns disrupt the quiet lives of the villagers is also subtly woven into the story.

Written by Mariam Karim-Ahlawat and illustrated by Proiti Roy, this picturebook brings to life the beauty of Kashmir and the hopes and beliefs of the Kashmiris, along with the catastrophes they face—earthquakes that destroy them and their livelihood, and guns that hover in the vicinity threateningly. When Gulla, who lives in the village of Tangdhaar, tends to the goats and takes them close to the forest, his mother warns him of the bears, wolves and leopards that roam inside. The superstitious belief in Banbudhiya, the wicked old woman of the forest, who could catch them and eat their hands and feet is also reiterated. Gulla isn’t scared of the old woman whom he is confident of pushing away. But he isn’t as sure about “the men who fired bullets”. The bullets could hit him by mistake. He wonders why these men did not let anyone go to the other side of the wire fence; more so because “the people there looked and dressed the same as the villagers of Tangdhaar” and there are boys called Gulla there too. He settles down on a tree to eat his lunch consisting of “haak”, “batta”, “gaarh” and radish in curd. The unfamiliar words are translated for the reader; “haak” is greens, “batta” is rice and “gaarh” is fish.

As the sun goes down and a cool breeze sets in, Gulla feels lazy and sends home his dog, Rooda, with the goats and sheep. A sudden bark makes him look up to see a hangul being chased by two large stray dogs. Gulla races up the slope, shoos the dogs away and rescues the hangul. Deciding to take it back home with him, Gulla realises suddenly that it has grown dark and fears that he may be attacked by the bears and wolves, or worse still by the Banbudhiya. Wrapping the hangul with his “pheran”, his
loose outer garment, he huddles at the foot of a large pine tree. The next morning, the boy
gently tells the deer whom he calls “myon shoosh”, meaning ‘my sweet little one’, that
they are safe. To his amazement, the hangul changes into a young boy who declares that
he is Sheen, Spirit of the Eternal Snows, and grants him a wish. Gulla wishes that there
will never be earthquakes in Tangdhaar. Back home, when the villagers hear Gulla’s
story they are amazed. The narrative ends with a mention of how, because of this
incident, the hangul is a beloved animal in Kashmir. They believe that one of the hanguls
that roam the valley might be a dazzling Spirit of the Eternal Snows, ready to grant a
wish.

Shashi Tharoor, in his book *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*,
cites Jawaharlal Nehru’s hope of an unchanging India after partition: “The India of
Geography, of history and tradition, the India of our minds and hearts, cannot change”
(169). Tharoor refutes this idyllic notion:

But of course it could change: geography was to be hacked, history misread,
tradition denied, minds and hearts torn apart. . . Over a million people died in the
savagery that bookended the freedom of India and Pakistan; some 17 million were
displaced, and countless properties destroyed and looted. Lines meant lives. What
Nehru had thought of as a temporary secession of certain parts of India hardened
into the creation of two separate and hostile states that would fight four wars with
each other and be embroiled in a nuclear-armed, terrorism-torn standoff decades
later. (169–70)
Tharoor puts the blame squarely on the British for instigating the partition of India, the subject of which is the focal point of the picturebook *Mukand and Riaz* dealt with in the section on historiography in the previous chapter. Kashmir continues to reel from the aftermath of partition. The picturebook *Gulla and the Hangul* ends with a suggestion that the Kashmiris are waiting for their many wishes to be fulfilled: peace instead of war; resolution instead of curfew; friendship instead of enmity; and prosperity instead of poverty. Political games played by the powers-that-be have riven the state and continue to tear it apart, destroying it even more than an earthquake ever could.

Like the battle-weary, another section of society that is rarely represented in children’s literature is the working class. Publishers catering to middle class readers forget to introduce them to the lives of those who labour under the sun. The following section deals with picturebooks that focalise such characters.

### 3.3.4 The Working Class

At the turn of the 21st century Tara launched a new series titled ‘People Around Us’ directed towards a pre-schooler’s curiosity to know more about other people. Similar to a monograph and resembling a family album full of black and white photographs, these unique books give the child a glimpse into the lives of the working class in India, be it that of a waiter, a balloon man or a flower-seller. Although picturebooks generally portray the lives of the middle class, there are many exceptions like *The Why-Why Girl, The Boy Who Asked Why, Malli, Drawing from the City, Sabri’s Colours* (Tulika 2009), *Under the Neem Tree* and *A Kite Called Korika* that portray the lives of the marginalised. In *Ponni the Flower Seller* (Tara 2000), Ponni, the fictional namesake of Navaneetham, is
described as a flower seller who sells garlands made of different kinds of flowers to people. Decking the hair with sweet-smelling flowers is a typical South Indian tradition, especially in the state of Tamil Nadu. Flower-sellers also set up stalls in front of temples as seen in the picturebook *Ranganna*.

The scene at the big flower market where Ponni sources her flowers from, after travelling by bus paying two rupees to the conductor, reveals the beginning of a tiring day for her. The photographs of various flowers used by Ponni are displayed on a double-page spread. Another photograph gives the child reader an idea about the technique involved in making garlands. Trudging the hot streets trying to sell her basket of flowers makes Ponni thirsty. But when she stops to drink some cold milk, a cow starts munching on the flowers. Ponni ends her day after she visits the home of a regular customer who buys what remains of her flowers. The customer, an older woman, immediately tucks some jasmine flowers on top of her bun exclaiming that they smell good. In the last recto, Ponni’s gaze is directed at the reader to whom she waves out, happy that her day is done.

The pre-schooler, eager to know more about the world and all who inhabit it, is given a portrait in miniature of the life led by a hard-working woman who earns her living selling flowers. The black and white photographs of Ponni seem to lend the narrative the authenticity usually associated with a documentary (Nodelman, *Words* 67). Picturebooks like *Ponni* portray the working class with the respect they deserve and influence the young reader experimenting with different kinds of subject positions and encountering different ideas about what the world feels like (Reynolds, *Children’s Literature* ix). The picturebook on migration discussed below also features the hard lives
of villagers in India who have no choice but to leave their homes and travel to cities and towns in search of work.

### 3.3.5 The Migrant

In the picturebook *Drawing from the City* Teju Behan, a singer and self-taught folk artist from Gujarat illustrates and orally narrates her inner and outer journey, translated into English by V. Geetha and Gita Wolf. The cityscape of Ahmedabad and later Bombay is drawn by Teju Behan in this hand-printed unusually tall book in the “portrait format” (Butler and Reynolds 57), the pages of which are filled with her illustrations save for a border of text at the bottom of each page. According to Nodelman, this arrangement is one among two of the most common arrangements of text and picture in picturebooks, the other being the text on the left side of a two-page spread with the picture on the right (55). The pictures and text are both framed by white space. Although Nodelman states that white space around a picture can act as a frame and demand detachment, it can also do just the opposite; it can provide a focus that demands our involvement (53). All the illustrations are drawn in black ink, mainly using the static conventions of folk art, whereas the font colour of the written text changes from red to purple, then again to red and finally blue, portraying the narrator’s mood during each phase. Initially when life in the village is described—the hardships, the poverty, the drought and the continuous work—the font colour is red. Although colours are usually associated with culture-specific meanings or emotional connotations, at times the symbolism associated with them can be of a more private kind, meaningful only to the artist (60, 108). Conventionally, red is associated with warmth, but here the mood of the
artist is somber and sad. Probably the red-hot rays of the sun that scorch the land is the reason for the choice of colour.

Teju Behan’s father leaves the house early in the morning to sing for a living. Her mother, who loves to sing, does not accompany him as women “don’t sing in public”. At times, he also takes the family into the forest in search of food. Later in the day, Teju Behan’s parents work on landowners’ fields. The villagers pray to Goddess Durga, an armed goddess riding a tiger, for rain or to get their sick children well again or for a good harvest, but they continue to stay poor. When trains pass by, the people she sees with their faces at the windows seem luckier to her as they don’t appear to be doing any work other than gazing at the countryside: “They can sit and stare at the world going by.” At times, Teju Behan walks five miles to the closest station and whispers to the train there, “take me to the city.” Her wish does come true when a large group of villagers including her family migrate to the city. They all look worried and pale, especially her mother who used to sacrifice her share of the food for her children.

When Teju Behan enters the city, the font turns purple, perhaps reflecting the excitement and happiness at having her cherished dream come true. She marvels at the pace of the city, the tall buildings and even more the lampposts that turn “night into day” although she realises that there are very few trees around. The illustrations on the doublespread depict the faces of women, some driving while others sit behind gazing out of the window. Soon enough she realises that living in tents at the edge of the city is as difficult as life in the village. Three years later, she is married to “a groom with kind eyes”, Ganeshbhai, who also sings for a living. Her husband encourages her to sing and
together they build up a repertoire of songs on hope, faith, the passing of seasons and on love and surrender. They decide to move to the shores of Mumbai, where their songs reach the ears of people on the beach. Time flies as their family grows.

The font changes to red again as life gets tougher and they move back to the village until her husband meets an artist who finds him a job as a singer in a restaurant. Ganeshbhai coaxes his wife to join him. Later the artist encourages Ganeshbhai to draw. He, in turn, asks Teju Behan to try. Now the font turns blue as she feels the act of drawing is like magic, bringing to life not just objects in real life but those of the imagination too. The doublespread is filled with illustrations of girls on bicycles all going somewhere just as she had seen in real life. On the next doublespread she draws many cars, whose speed attracts her along with the fact that the driver seems to be the one in control. She again draws women who drive and others who sit behind in each car, stating: “I want to be both those women.” The aeroplane too catches her fancy for the same reasons and its windows are also filled with the faces of women passengers and a lady pilot. But she feels that her women are never content with sitting still. So in the next doublespread, the women are depicted gliding down on parachutes. The book ends with Teju Behan unable to decide if her women should continue to fly like birds or float down to the sea. She decides to take a break before she decides.

Michelle Superle points out that diasporic Indian authors of Young Adult fiction imagine optimistic versions of Indian girlhood in their novels for children (3). This picturebook, on the other hand, centres on a real woman’s journey from an Indian village to a city in Gujarat and later on in Mumbai coping with tough terrain, hot weather,
poverty and sickness. She faces many restrictions because of her sex but fortunately with
the help of her encouraging husband she blossoms forth both as a singer and an artist. Her
inner journey reaches a point when she as a successful artist can now afford to take a
break and relax, something she and her community could never afford to do earlier. Her
illustrations revolve around women like her who continuously strive to better their
situation and that of their families in as many ways as possible. The vehicle, be it a car or
an aeroplane, functions as a trope in the book. It transports her from being a victim to a
person in control of her life who eventually acquires agency through her art and the
publication of the picturebook itself. It is pertinent here to point out that empirical
investigations have brought out “the way in which women’s working outside the home
and earning an independent income tends to have a powerful impact on enhancing
women’s standing and voice in decision-making within the household and more broadly
in society” (Sen 238). Although Teju Behan gets herself behind the wheel in control of
her journey through life, she also yearns to be a passenger with the luxury of enjoying life
as it goes by. Teju Behan finally learns the art of doing both, and seems to recommend
the same path to all readers of her sex.

The publishers of this picturebook target a dual audience and engage in double
address in a text which on one level is the story of the movement of an artist from an
Indian village to a city, which could then be viewed as travel writing. As Peter Hulme
and Tim Youngs observe, travel writing is best considered as “a broad and ever-shifting
genre, with a complex history which has yet to be properly studied” (10). Just as the ways
and means of travel are constantly changing, so travel writing will “continue to change in
their wake: stories emerging from space travel, from virtual travel, and from the ‘travails’
of the world’s refugees and migrants will doubtless continue to extend the genre in the years to come” (10–11). On another level, the sophisticated reader interprets it as a text portraying gender roles and gender empowerment along with the poor conditions—economic, geographic and infrastructure-wise—in agrarian India that force them to leave their homes and migrate. Read as a metafictional text, it is a commentary on art itself as an expression of both reality and the imagination. The magic involved in the creation of a work of art and the pleasure it gives the artist is also incorporated within the narrative. The book remains, as stated in the write-up on the artist and her husband, a celebration and a tribute to the memory of Ganeshbhai who passed away just as it was being completed. Although the book may not make a young child pick it up again as there is no child protagonist in it and it is not a narrative that touches a chord with them, it is brave on the part of the publishers to introduce the rarely-broached topic of migration and gender roles in the context of life in the villages of India in a picturebook and not constrict the eligibility for reading such a book with any labels targeting age groups, an ongoing practice at Tara.

3.3.6 Birds, Beasts and Trees

One of the gargantuan problems the world faces in the 21st century, as opposed to that lived in by our ancestors, is that of depletion of natural resources and degradation of the earth’s environment (Berry, “Social Change” Book Review 13). Ecocriticism, as an analytical discourse, was identified as a distinctive field in the first half of the 1990s. By then environmental issues—global warming, “habitat protection (and celebration of wilderness), ecosystem conservation, pollution prevention, resource depletion, and
advocacy of harmonic balance between human subjects and natural environments (as opposed to an anthropocentric hierarchy of humans and nature)—had become major social concerns and were widely perceived as the greatest threat to the continued survival of human beings (Bradford et al. 79–80).

Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum affirm that ecofeminism draws from feminism

. . . the understanding that Western patriarchal thinking is based on binarisms, that is, opposed pairs of concepts organised hierarchically: mind over body, spirit over matter, male over female, culture over nature, reason over emotion. The eco element of ecofeminism demands an interrogation of the nature/culture binary as a step towards dismantling the other binarisms and for creating an environmentally aware society in which often discounted values (friendship, nurturance, love, trust) shape human subjectivity. Contemporary ecofeminism has evolved beyond an essentialist notion of oppression to a position which valourises intersubjective relations with others—human others, other creatures, natural environments—as the ground for possible, not yet existing, new world orders.

(85)

This section studies picturebooks that can be viewed as “environment-focused texts” (104) and can be read ecocritically in that sense.
3.3.6.1 The Tiger

*Tiger on a Tree* is a picturebook written by Anushka Ravishankar in nonsense verse on the fate of the tiger, a species soon becoming extinct in India. This book is the recipient of several awards like the American Library Association Notable Book in 2005, the Andersen Award, Italy, in 2004 and the Biennale of Illustrations, Bratislava, in 1999. Read by the child as a humorous story on a tiger who gets scared of a deer and clambers up a tree, it also tells another tale to the adult co-reader—one in which Man is the villain and the cause of most environmental issues. Although ecocriticism has moved on from this blinkered perspective, in the text under study, *Tiger on a Tree*, published in 1997, this anthropocentric hierarchy is satirised.

The cover page of *Tiger on a Tree* shows the tiger swimming in a river. The gap in written text and picture immediately piques the reader’s curiosity. The orange endpapers with pictures of men running around looking frightened, do not give any answers either. The title page alone shows the tiger cowering within the foliage of a tree. Ravishankar holds the toddler by the hand and leads her/him into the story through a series of questions in verse, printed on the back cover of the book: “Tiger, tiger on a tree / Is it true? Can it be? / Did he fly? Did he flee? . . .” The main narrative begins with the tiger wondering whether to cross the river: “Does he want to go across? / Make a dash? / Be bold? Be rash?” Ironically, the tiger in the story is neither bold nor rash.

The deer’s belligerent cry “baaaaaaaa” shocks and frightens the tiger. The positions of the two animals on the doublespread are significant. The deer is seen initially on the bottom left-hand corner of the verso; Nodelman posits that the reader tends to
empathise with the character on the left foreground as she/he looks here first (Words 135). The tiger on the recto occupies the middle space with its tail hitting the top right corner of the page, at a higher and therefore more dominating position. But the page turn shows a changeover; the tiger takes the deer’s position as victim and the deer occupies the top right hand corner of the recto. The deer now seems to be in control of the situation, thematically and visually. The reader is surprised to see a tiger that can be terrified. The bleating of the deer makes the tiger yelp like a frightened puppy and sneak up a tree. The fact that a huge tiger can be frightened by a tiny deer consoles the child who instinctively identifies herself/himself with the deer in an adult-powered world. The entry of Man into the story reveals to the child the surprising fact that the adult can also be as frightened as the tiger: “Get him! Net him! Tie him tight! / Will he bite? He might!”

The tiger surrounded by many villagers, significantly all men, is frightened out of his wits and is easily caught. Dark-skinned Indian villagers dressed in dhothis, some with pot-bellies, use the ‘dholak’, the cymbals and the ‘shehnai’ to trap the tiger into the net. Ironically, the villagers don’t know what to do with him once caught. The hilarious solutions offered by them mock at Man’s senseless actions and his cruelty towards other creatures: “Send him to the zoo? / Stick him up with glue? / Paint him an electric blue?”

The voice of the lone, old, wise man is then heard: “I know, set him free.” Pulak Biswas chooses to decorate the doublespread in which the villagers agree to set the tiger free with a band of celebratory orange running below, a colour also associated with warmth. The narrative ends with the line; “So. Tiger, tiger on the shore” It is to be noted that the last line does not end with a period although, significantly, the word “So” is followed by one. The “happy ending” of the narrative which resounds with Blakean
undertones, in fact, takes the cyclical story back to the beginning. Ravishankar seems to suggest that there is no end to Man’s manic actions.

Nothing puts off a child listening to a story as much as an overdose of moral preaching. Joan Aiken, a Carnegie Medal winner and writer of teenage mystery stories, feels that “... children have a strong natural resistance to phoney morality. They can see through the adult with some moral axe to grind almost before he opens his mouth—the smaller the child, the sharper the instinct” (149). There is no didactic message breathing down the child’s neck at any point in Tiger on a Tree but the adult co-reader could delve deeper into the book to initiate a discussion with the young reader about the state of tigers facing extinction in India and Man’s cruel, meaningless actions that exacerbate it. In the larger context, the child could learn about the natural cycle of life and Man’s destructive role in it, frequently prioritising culture over nature.

Raising awareness about rain and water conservation among the people is an ongoing project in India as it is all over the world, especially since the depleting water resources are rapidly being consumed by an ever-increasing population. The section below discusses picturebooks that do the same.

### 3.3.6.2 Water

The picturebook Let’s Catch the Rain (Tulika 2012) directly focuses on the need for rain water harvesting whereas A Bhil Story addresses the issue through an ancient myth initially recorded in the voices of the Bhils for an animated film by Nina Sabnani and her team. Excessive thirst is the reason why the rooster, a favourite character in
folktales, cannot crow in a drought-ridden land in A Bhil Story, a collaborative work by artist Sher Singh Bhil and Nina Sabnani. The picturebook narrates an oral tale of the Bhil tribe who live in the dry western and central parts of India. Their thirst for water led to the creation of a myth which explains the reason for their abiding interest in the form of painting called Pithora. They paint patterns made up of vibrant dots, each dot representing an ancestor whom they invoke for the well-being of all forms of life. Equated to prayer, painting thus expresses their close interaction with the natural world. Their art is seen on the walls of their houses, interestingly the canvas of many an art form in the villages of India.

The lack of freshwater in the village pond leads to many fights among the villagers and ends up killing the fish. It makes the rooster, thrown aside in the melee, so parched that he cannot crow. As seen in folktales from the North-east, this narrative too shows the close connection which Man used to have with nature, metaphorically through the conversation the rooster has with the villagers. Bhuri Bai, the wisest woman in the village of Jher, decides that it is time the villagers approached a ‘badwa’. Although there is, surprisingly, no explanation given for the term, it is clear from the context that he is akin to an oracle who can go into a trance and communicate with the gods. The rooster knows that he may be the sacrifice that the badwa demands from the people. Sher Singh pacifies him and dresses him in dry leaves so that he cannot be identified as a rooster. They do meet a badwa on the way who twirls around with a stick that hits a man who stumbles back and steps on the rooster. The leaves fall off and the badwa, catching sight of him, asks the villagers to sacrifice a rooster. Fortunately, Bhuri Bai comes to the
rescue and asks the badwa to stand on a pot, a common test to check the authenticity of the badwa. The pot breaks and the badwa is revealed to be a fake.

The next badwa they meet is led to them by Sadi Chidi, the bird whose song is considered a good omen. He is standing on a pot from which water flows constantly but when asked to save their village, he steps down and breaks the pot. The villagers are stunned and offer the rooster to placate him. Now the rooster courageously, though shakily, asks the badwa to eat him up. But the badwa simply smiles and begins to draw on a broken piece of the pot. The rooster realises that he has painted a tree and wishes them also to fill their walls with painted trees. Sadi Chidi starts singing as the villagers look admiringly at the otherwise-ridiculed rooster and turn around to find that the badwa has disappeared. They go back to the village and paint trees on the walls of their houses. That night, clouds gather in the sky and break into a rain storm. The next morning, the happy villagers collecting water in pots realise that the snakes and the turtles collect water differently. They had made holes in the ground. Bhuri Bai tells the villagers that the animals were showing them how to collect water. The people then dig wells and ponds to collect rain water. The dry land soon turns green and “the rooster crowed every day, loud and clear—‘KUKAROOKOO!’”—signalling the happy end to a story which hinges on using art to evoke the rain gods and keep the world teeming with life.

As a repository of knowledge passed down orally from generation to generation, this myth reinforces the connect man must retain with nature and all creatures living on earth for, like the rooster, Sadi Chidi, and the snakes and the turtles in the story, all creatures have things to teach us. If water conservation were a constant practice within
the community along with pithora painting invoking their ancestors to protect all life on
earth, times would not be hard even during the months of famine. Small-scale community
narratives like these can both raise consciousness and offer avenues for practical action
available to children as well as adults. The positive and negative impacts on environment
caused by ways of inhabiting it is very transparent in this picturebook, as also in the
picturebooks addressing the need to conserve trees in the next section. The reader, in
turn, is motivated “to reweave culture and nature by means of sound ecological
decisions” (Bradford et al. 96).

3.3.6.3 The Tree

The preservation of trees is the focus of narratives in the picturebooks *Out of the Way! Out of the Way!* (Tulika 2010) and *Best Friends*. In *Out of the Way! Out of the Way!* Uma Krishnaswami, the author and Uma Krishnaswamy, the illustrator coalesce two opposing elements—development and environment—to show that both can exist side by side. A “civilisation born from a fusion of culture and nature in a small-scale community” is conceived as an “ecotopia” in this picturebook (Bradford et al. 93).

As a little boy in a village grows up, a baby tree that springs up in the middle of a
path shoots up too. Surrounded by the noises of people shouting “Out of the way!” to
each other, the baby tree develops into a sturdy one while the path that now curves
around the tree broadens into a lane, then a road. The tree becomes the haunt of people
who want to rest or chat, its foliage becomes a home to birds and squirrels, deepening
emotional bonds not just between men but between human beings and animals (Bradford
et al. 96–97). Listening to the tree makes the now married man with two children
remember the stories his parents and grandparents had told him of trees long ago, before roads were built. Even today these stories are told and retold, just as the story in the picturebook is, and sometimes the busy drivers on the road “stop and stay awhile . . . and listen.” The book suggests that development can leave space for the conservation of the environment. Today, there may not be as many trees as they used to be but the roads can be made to wind around them instead of destroying them all the time.

The relationship of a child with a tree is again the subject in Nina Sabnani’s picturebook, *Best Friends*. Whereas *Out of the Way!* positions the tree at the bottom of the front cover above which is a busy road full of moving animals, people and vehicles, as is typical in India, the front cover in *Best Friends* focalises a painted tree. The central position in a page emphasises the character’s central role in the story, in this case, the tree (Nikolajeva, “Picturebook Characterisation” 43). Whereas the endpapers in *Out of the Way!* depict the same chaotic scenes, the endpapers in *Best Friends* zoom in on the leaves of the tree in a riot of colours. The girl in the story, Tamanna, appears only at the bottom of the title page. Sabnani has based this story on a real friendship between her niece and a tree. While playing in the garden everyday, Tamanna develops a strong relationship with a tree whom she calls ‘Kuchi’, meaning a stick, in Tamil. She tells Kuchi stories about school and home. Kuchi, in turn, tells her stories of the wind and the rain. It is mentioned that as a baby, Tamanna had pressed her cheek to the tree saying “Kooooooochi!” and the tree had replied “Shhhhhhuunnn! Munnnnnnn!” But as they grew up, in the nature of growing-up children conscious of being ridiculed, Tamanna stops speaking to Kuchi. It is only when she is reading a story to her daughter that she hears a familiar sound and runs out to find a man holding an axe. She prevents Kuchi from being cut down and hugs the
tree crying. The tree replies “Shhhhhhunnnnn! Munnnnnn!” Now Tamanna’s daughter is best friends with Kuchi.

Sabnani, like Wordsworth, points out the natural relationship between children and nature which is suppressed by adults who assume the world to be structured hierarchically with Man on top and every other creature under his control, an androcentric perspective. In this picturebook, symbiosis between a healthy environment and the individual subjective agency is modelled through Tamanna’s growth from a baby to an adult as shaped by her gradual ecological awareness and steadily increasing capacity to change her local environment from dystopia to utopia (Bradford et al 96).

All these picturebooks on animals, trees and water reinforce the importance of ecosystem conservation and habitat protection in a less didactic manner than a school textbook would. As determinedly activist texts, they share a strong desire “to bring about a new world order in which nature and culture are rewoven and the world is made green again” (Bradford et al. 104).

The picturebooks that have been discussed in this chapter come across as postcolonial counter-narratives in that they celebrate the differences in the many unvoiced cultures of India that have been ignored by the imperialists, then and now. They give the Indian child a peep into her/his own culture and reality, as well as those of the ‘other’. Postcolonialism, as Robert Young asserts, “is not an endorsement of the new world system, but rather constitutes a critical response to its conditions” (59). Apart from doing so, these picturebooks encourage the reader, both local and global, to visualise a new world order, wherein binaries are erased and harmony exists. The concluding chapter
weaves in the multiple strands analysed in Chapters II and III to consciously construct the colourful fabric of the glocal picturebooks published in India which break expectations and decolonise contexts to transform the mind of the child reader.