Chapter IV

Conclusion

Publishing houses in India today are waking up to the fact that social media can be a vital force in conflict-ridden states. The media can do much to mobilise funds and reach out to the child who, due to geographical, economic or political reasons, cannot have access to books. Through crowdsourcing on social media, Karvaan: A Roving Book Project, initiated by Furkan Latif Khan, collected and distributed around 1000 books in schools all across the Kashmir valley, where curfews are routine and libraries in schools are locked up most of the time. Incidentally, they are the winners of the Digital Empowerment Foundation’s Social Media for Empowerment award for 2017. Down south, in Bangalore, the not-for-profit publishing house, Pratham Books, is involved in crowdfunding for their Donate-a-Book platform. They offer at least 20,000 titles in 67 languages, both Indian and foreign, and have received 26 crores from Google.org to enable them to achieve their target of putting “a book in every child’s hand” (O’Yeah 1). They have also been nominated for the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award worth 3.6 crores.

Publishing houses understand that the world of books, fantastic and otherwise, can bring a glimmer of peace in the battle-weary lives of children (Oberoi 4). Geeta Doctor points out in her article on the Harry Potter phenomenon that the idea of banning painful topics from children’s books does not help the child who is experiencing it or
viewing it in reality. With “children being the casual victims of what we see around us—whether in attacks on civilian targets in the name of religion, whether as forced child soldiers in wars or as victims of horrible crimes of paedophilia”—she wonders if we can insulate them from hatred and evil “merely by airbrushing the truth” (1). The picturebooks selected for study in this dissertation range from those that function as healing/coping narratives dealing with harsh reality to those which help children get a sense of identity, make children celebrate differences—cultural, corporeal, economic, linguistic, political, social—and speak up for the voiceless. They hone multiple literacies and also enhance the child’s innate sense of imagination. The “authentic self” that Karen Coats speaks about, can evolve from the perusal of such “transmodern” picturebooks, postmodern and experimental in outlook and design but committed to presenting a constructed coherence of the self and the world around, especially the culture in which the self is located (85). These picturebooks encourage readers to become “co-authors”, inviting them, as Wolfenbarger, Driggs and Sipe have pointed out, “into the play of visual elements and unexpected textual avenues” (280). At the same time, they remain focused on ethical responsibilities and social issues, as John Stephens affirms, in his observation of contemporary picturebooks (89–90).

Findings of the Study

Kimberley Reynolds in the Introduction to her book *Children’s Literature in the 1890s and 1990s* states that a good deal of children’s literature which is generally “dismissed as literature written by those who can’t write any better for those who can’t read any better” is “good literature which can withstand any kind of critical scrutiny”
Emphasising the need and the relevance of research in the field of children’s literature she states:

No literature is neutral, but children’s literature is more concerned with shaping its readers’ attitudes than most. Therefore, if we are interested in understanding how our society works—where young people get their attitudes about issues such as sex, gender, violence, government, and war—it behoves us to look at what is being read. (ix)

Children’s literature published in India in the 20th century attempted to give the child what s/he needed rather than what the child wanted. It was overtly didactic or nostalgic in approach and ironically succeeded in encouraging readers to pick up books from other countries that were enjoyable, although the characters in them lived exotic lives in exotic places. Publishing houses in India today have consciously introduced books that do not live to teach a tale but instead bring a smile to the reader’s lips while tugging at their heart strings. That which was overt earlier is now covertly conveyed, the principle of pleasure having taken over the reins of reading in a country which had earlier promoted the “textbook culture” in literature. That is not to deny the fact that “all stories have a moral compass within them” (Rajendran, “Re: Questionnaire”).

The findings of the research undertaken in this dissertation on the nature of picturebooks published in India in the 21st century reflects this in more ways than one. The second chapter titled “Postmodernist Picturebooks and the Active Reader” is a study on contemporary picturebooks that are, in an age of postmodernity, the forerunners in breaking barriers of all kinds—they challenge literary conventions and design; they mix
genres, cultures and modalities; they break taboos, stereotypes and dominant ideologies; they develop empathy and are therapeutic; they break the illusion of reality through metafictive devices; they abound in humour; they highlight the power of the imagination; they encourage play and performance, they interrogate metanarratives; and they sow the seeds of critical thinking in the reader who co-constructs the tale along with the author and the adult co-reader. These picturebooks develop literacies of many kinds—visual, verbal, affective, cognitive and aesthetic. More importantly, the reader develops the skills required to interpret any text presented in the display mode in today’s digital world.

The picturebooks under study in Chapter II appear to be postmodernist more than postmodern. Although they borrow postmodern strategies and metafictive devices that challenge literary and aesthetic conventions such as blurring of boundaries, metalepsis, modal disruption, indeterminacy, parody, fragmentation, hybridisation, play and performance, they do not leave the reader with a sense of angst or pessimism. The reader can bring in multiple meanings and fabricate many stories, collaborating with the author in the production of constructed coherence. These picturebooks remain anchored in the world of ethics and social issues; the attempt to project hope into a world broken up into fragments still prevalent, the desire of the adult to see the child as a being full of promise and the saviour of the future still visible. They engage critically with cultural practices, break gender stereotypes, interrogate social constructs and write ‘other’ histories. They focalise on the mentally and physically challenged and become therapeutic in their evocation of empathy to traumatic experiences and human frailties. Such picturebooks then are more “transmodern” than postmodern. They are picturebooks that Tamara Ellis Smith would term “vibrant triangle” picturebooks. (66) The ability of these picturebooks
to transform ways of thinking in the child through new ways of reading is immense. (Kress 149, 152)

The third chapter titled “Decolonising Contexts and the Indian Reader” analyses the many ways, both overt and covert, in which picturebooks remain entrenched in Indian milieus, including those dealing with narratives about the “other”—the child, the marginalised sex, the marginalised classes and castes, the migrant and the war-ravaged, the birds, the beasts and the trees. It looks at culture as a whole way of life that includes art, craft, cuisine, films, languages, literature, music, narratology, religion and sport, all of which reflect the values and worldviews of heterogeneous, polyglot India. It looks at Indian narratives and narratology in the rewriting and improvisations of folktales and animal fables. It reads picturebooks as postcolonial counter-discourse, in which the language of the coloniser is appropriated by the pens of the colonised. It includes the realities of children belonging to many Indias as well—the poverty-stricken, the abused, the discriminated and the exploited. The destruction of the ecological balance in India and the pollution that abounds as reflected in picturebooks is also discussed in this chapter. The author, Sowmya Rajendran, speaks proudly of the Indianness in her writing:

My writing is very Indian—my characters, where I set my story, the humour . . . all of it is Indian. Is it postcolonial? I’m writing in the postcolonial period and I use the English that would appear natural for my characters, not the Queen’s English. RK Narayan is one of my favourite writers. I love how he wrote in English with a purely Indian soul. That’s the kind of writing I enjoy doing. And I
do bring in issues to do with differences, hierarchies, and identity in my writing.

(“Re: Questionnaire”)

Insights into Indian identity can be “therapeutic” according to Sudhir Kakar, as they can

. . . clarify and engage the deeply Indian parts of myself, thereby strengthening a sense of personal and historical continuity. This is an important consideration, since rapid historical change or ‘modernization’ and the attendant psychological confrontation with other, seemingly more assertive and ‘successful’ world-images, have provoked in many Indians anxious feelings of having come unmoored, of being adrift. (13)

The independent children’s publishing world in India, opines Sowmya Rajendran, has a woman majority, be it as publishers, editors, authors or illustrators. This could also be because there is not much money in it when compared to other professions (sadly, that is a factor) but this has also meant that the books they are producing take into consideration a wide range of issues that a mass producer of books would not (“Re: Questionnaire”). Special mention must be made of the many ways in which gender equality is portrayed in Indian picturebooks. In a woman-centric world of picturebook publishing, the themes and illustrations within narratives, as well as the challenges meted out to patriarchal stereotypes and constructs, exhibit feminist leanings of the transformative kind.
Oral tales narrated and illustrated by women artisans and story-tellers in rural India as well as the tales written and illustrated by other women authors and artists in these picturebooks speak of women-centric issues and values dear to them in the Indian context. History too is retold as her/story. Rajendran maintains that gender is a big influence on her writing. She interprets the world around her based on the experiences she has had and she consciously tries to include more girl characters in her books. She tries to make these characters independent and give them roles that are not secondary which was not the case with many children’s books written earlier. Niveditha Subramaniam, author and illustrator, maintains that she crafts girls she didn’t see in books she read while growing up; “characters who have minds of their own” (“Re: Questionnaire”). As the author Anushka Ravishankar, who consciously chooses a girl over a boy in certain cases, firmly states: “If I can subvert stereotypes to promote a new world view, why not?” (Personal Interview). Vidhya Venkat, an author of children’s books, avers:

Women have been breaking stereotypes in all walks of life in the last decade. Having broken in and taken over as successful producers of content for children, they are now beginning to look beyond slice of life stories—stories that are meaningful and can make a difference and be accessible to children all over India. (“Re: Questionnaire”)

Menon points out that working on books in the nine languages they publish in gave them a more nuanced and definite sense of the Indian ‘storytelling voice’ in picture books which was quite distinct from the western one. Good Indian books in English, she affirms, have a dynamic cultural identity that is changing and evolving constantly. At the
same time they are books with a “strong universal resonance” (“Re: Questionnaire”). The local context enables the Indian child to gain a sense of self and view the world familiar to her/him while at the same time opening the portals to a host of other cultures both within and outside the country. Niveditha Subramaniam succinctly states:

I enjoy work that is culturally rooted and my own work is Indian. Having said that, I find it odd that Indians ask other Indians this question because we shouldn’t have to signal or authenticate one’s identity at this point at all. We are creating for our audience and a compulsion to locate or designate “Indianness” tends to reduce a dimensionality and richness that exists in a very natural way.

For example, the *Mayil* books that Sowmya and I worked on together are local; the language, the humour, the everyday situations—all of it is influenced by our own middle class upbringing and reality. We very consciously challenged stereotypes and misinterpretations in the book but *Mayil* also deals with uncomfortable situations and there are unresolved conflicts. We believe that the books have resonated with a wide audience because we wrote about the world we knew intimately with honesty. (“Re: Questionnaire”)

The blending of the local with the global make picturebooks written in English in India glocal, encouraging readers from across the world to pick up these books and engage with them. The translations published in other Indian languages by Tulika and Tara also allow children in remote corners of India to read and enjoy them. These picturebooks encourage the continued syncretism of oral and written literature, through translations, transliterations and subversions. They bring in literary forms like nonsense
verse and art forms like surrealism from the west and use them to counter metanarratives disseminating dominant ideologies and dominant discourse. They also invite the researcher to bring in tools of research and literary theories from the west in order to comprehend the ways in which children’s literature in India appropriates western norms and the ways in which they resist it. Bill Ashcroft maintains that the global term 'culture' only becomes comprehensible as a conceptualisation of local 'cultures' (*Post-Colonial Futures* 16). These picturebooks then truly belong to the 21st century, the beginning of a millenium which celebrates differences and heterogeneity, no longer viewing the world as a melting pot of many cultures but as a vibrant vessel which holds distinctive local cultures together.

**Scope for Further Research**

At a panel discussion on children’s literature at the Hindu Lit Fest held in Chennai in 2015 which this researcher attended, the lack of research and criticism in the area was emphasised as one of the reasons for the poor quality of books being published in India. The academic world, they said, had still not woken up to the fact that children’s literature was as relevant a field of study as feminism, postmodernism, postcolonial studies or cultural studies. In fact, the study of children’s literature draws upon all these areas and includes other disciplines like history, psychology, anthropology and art. One of the few academic institutions that have included children’s literature as a course, both for graduates and postgraduates, is Stella Maris College, where this researcher has taught the subject. It must be mentioned that the programmes run by the Department of English are inclusive, offering courses on many marginalised literatures.
The students who took the course felt that the subject demanded an alternate way of thinking and perceiving: “It demanded our thinking abilities to work at dual levels—by making us think both in terms of adult and child readers” (Chaithanya). The paradoxical nature of children’s literature was also considered thought-provoking: “As an adult reading literature I had first read years ago, it is always interesting to go back and look at the different ways in which the relationship between the writer and the reader, and the text’s context and subtext can be understood” (Jose). Students claimed to have gained a deeper understanding of the mind of the child in relation to the adult: “The paper offers an insight into the child-adult relationship and reveals much about the rich, complex mind of the child” (Sreenivasan). The researcher’s experience in teaching the course and the subsequent interactions with students also led to greater insights into the area of children’s literature in general and the field of picturebooks in particular, which influenced the direction of the research undertaken. This, in turn, enhanced classroom teaching and framing of the syllabus on children’s literature.

The book as a physical object and its continued existence has been a topic of debate among publishers and students alike. When asked if she considered the hand-held book a continuing reality in a virtual-world scenario, Menon states emphatically:

I do. Sales of our books which have gone up steadily is a clear indicator. We have partners who have come out with digital versions but haven’t really got very far with the sales. Even in markets in other countries where they have, physical books continue to have steady sales. (‘Re: Questionnaire’)

While there is ongoing research on literature written by adults for children, very few attempts have been made to expand it to literature written by children themselves or those written by them in collaboration with adults. Similarly, more research needs to centre on systematic ways of gauging the responses of children to books written for them, although this can be challenging and riddled with uncertainties. The need to incorporate the opinions of adults who read books to children at a young age—parents, teachers, older siblings—also cannot be overlooked.

Children’s literature and the way in which it is studied also changes with the perspective of the times the researcher lives in. Didacticism does not seem to have a place in the world of children today but there still remains the yearning on the part of the adult for positive influences in books meant for children. That search for books that transform young minds is an eternal quest the world over. Indian publishers today are one step closer to that pot of gold; those at Tulika and Tara have found the key to unlock that cherished treasure trove.