BREAKING TABOOS, EXPANDING HORIZONS:

A Study of Twenty-First Century Indian English Children's Literature

Thesis submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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2017

CENTRE FOR ENGLISH STUDIES
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE & CULTURE STUDIES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI-110067, INDIA

Date: **21.07.2017**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis is an outcome of the constant academic support and guidance of many people, without whom this journey would not have been possible. To each one of you, I would like to convey my heartfelt gratitude. I consider myself immensely lucky to have found not just one, but two brilliant supervisors, who held my hand throughout this process. I would first like to thank Prof. GJV Prasad. Sir, thank you for being such an awesome supervisor, for believing in me, for giving the best possible advice at all time, for being blatantly partial towards me, for creating new avenues for me this entire time and for encouraging me not to give up each time I broke down. Next, I would like to thank Dr. Dhananjay Singh - our dear DJ-sir. Sir, thank you for being such a considerate supervisor. I am blessed to have somebody as wonderful as you as my supervisor. You have always been more of a friend than a teacher, patiently listening to all my sob stories and giving me the strength to carry on. I can't thank you enough!

I am blessed to have been a part of the Centre for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, where everybody is made to feel like they are part of one big family. Everyone of you have been my lifeline for the past nine years, especially my teachers - all of you redefine what it means to be one. Saitya Sir, I cannot express in words how thankful I feel to have known somebody as kind as you. Thank you for those timely messages, for those numerous chai-s and meals you treated me to when mess food got unbearable, and for telling me the most wonderful stories when life became mundane. Thank you, just for being there! Bhaduri sir and Simi ma'am, you both have been such inspirations in my life. Sir, without you I would never have been able to do half the things that I have done. You are one extraordinary person! Thank you for letting me partake a little bit of that extraordinariness. And, ma'am, your warm smile has always been such an encouragement and for this I cannot thank you enough! Thank you Brinda ma'am, for your helpful inputs at the initial stage of my PhD. Thank you Udaya sir, for being such a wonderful chairperson. Bhagwati-ji - you rock my life! Without you, I would have been totally lost! Thank you for everything, especially for being so partial towards me. Yatti-ji, Janaki, Naresh-ji, Rawat-ji - all of you have been so helpful all the time. Thank you so much! I would also like to thank the library staff at JNU, especially Dr. Ramesh C. Gaur for being so helpful.

A big thanks to the DAAD Programme "A New Passage to India" which gave me the opportunity to spend two months at the University of Würzburg, Germany, under the mentorship of Prof. Isabel Karremann. This opportunity was given to me at a time when I was struggling to find my secondary resources in India and when I came back, I had accumulated material worth almost sixty books - including two of the most important books that I required for my thesis. For this I will be indebted forever to my university for facilitating this opportunity, Prof. Bhaduri for introducing me to Prof. Karremann, my centre for short-listing my application, the interview board headed by Prof. Chintamani Mahapatra for the final selection, and the staff at the International Collaboration unit - Tekchandani-ji and Nirupa-ji for being encouraging throughout. I am thankful to Dr. Stephan Schröder-Köhne, who guided me through this entire process and made my stay at Würzburg so comfortable. I am thankful to my student tutor Molina for settling me in. I am thankful my fellow DAAD-ians, Anubhav, Akanksha and Rohit, who provided me with a family far away from home. I am thankful to the entire department of English Literary and Cultural Studies for welcoming me like I was one of their own. I would specially like to mention Jenny, Sonja, Laura and Daniel, for sharing my excitement every time I managed to find some new book. I am thankful to Franziska for introducing me to Prof. Junko Yokota's work, for guiding me to the picture-book library at the department and for waiting patiently as I perused through them. I am thankful to my dear friends Sayani and Regina for inviting me to their place at Göttingen and helping me use the library resources at the university there. I am eternally thankful to Tania (whom I accidentally met in a tram at Würzburg) and her family (Umar and Tanvir) for being my support system during my entire stay at Würzburg and cooking me dinner every time I missed home food. Thanks to Rahima apu and Tahamina for adding on to that love. Thanks to

Jenny, Julie, Jane for making the latter half of my stay in Europe so wonderful. And finally, Prof. Karremann, what do I say about you! You have been a guide, a mentor, a friend, a confidante, a well-wisher and so many more things to me. I owe my thesis to you. Thank you for painstakingly going through my work and giving excellent feedback. Thank you for noticing when I looked depressed and cheering me up with your warm self. Thank you for the coffee when I was having trouble staying up to write. I am so blessed to have found you! I love you.

Thank you Priyanka, Shrenya, Aastha for - you know what! You guys have been amazing. I do not know how I would have finished my thesis without you all. Thank you for everything. I count you all as my blessings. Thank you Lakshmi, my wonderful Lokkhi-rani, for being my first critic - love you for going through my work before anyone else and giving me valuable advice. But love you more for the little fun-facts you left me as comments in the draft. Thank you Bulti - without you I would never have been able to go through the initial phase of my research. Thanks for gladly library-hopping with me. Thank you Kamalini-di for keeping up my morale. Thank you Georgina ma'am, Thomas sir and my lovely Siamara for supporting me at a time when I needed it the most. Thank you Soham for bringing me a book from the US, which I was not being able to find it in India. Thanks to my Sabarmati mates and the wonderful hostel staff - especially Kriti, Amrita, Archana, Nabanita, Raleng, Manasi, Baishali, Bhavna, Swatilekha, Lobsang, Bipasha, Lakshmi-di, Ashok-ji - for helping me keep my sanity intact. A special thanks to my lovely single-seater room, Sabarmati-136.

Thanks to Manorama Jafa ma'am, Nita Berry ma'am and Nilima Sinha ma'am for helping me peruse the sources at the AWIC library. I am thankful to the entire AWIC staff, especially the sweet lady and the gentleman, who sit at the front desk. I am thankful to Sahitya Akademi library and the brilliant staff over there, who helped me find the books I wanted. I thank the CBT library for letting me go through the books in their reference section. I am thankful to the Hilltop Xerox-wale bhaiyya for getting me my books at my doorstep. I am immensely thankful to Flipkart and Amazon for all the books that I found through them.

This PhD would not have been possible without Teesta, who introduced me to this field and shared all her contacts with me. I would also like to thank Anukta, who helped me procure books that had gone out of print and never once making me feel guilty for having made such unreasonable demands. Thank you Suchismita for sharing your research work with me. I would like to thank Duckbill Publishing house for being so generous. Thank you Anushka, thank you Sayoni - for the wonderful workshops that you held and invited me to attend. Thank you for not thinking twice before sending me a copy of the book I wanted - at a time when buying it was not possible for me. Thank you for providing me a platform where I could meet other children's literature enthusiasts and have thought provoking discussions. Thank you for introducing me to Tanu Shree Sign, through whom I got introduced to the Reading Racoons group on Facebook - which helped me access first hand information about children's reading preferences and their parents' reaction.

I went through one of the most turbulent phases of my life while writing my PhD. There was a time when I even feared that I might not be able to keep up. It was my Maa, who made sure that nothing like that happens. Maa, you have been my life but I can never thank you enough for what you did for me these past couple of months. Thanks for sitting with me while I cried my heart out and then wrote some. Thank you for holding me tight and assuring me that everything would be alright. Thanks for being my strength and my power house of energy. I would also like to thank my little sister Lahar - not so little anymore - for being the most mature little girl for her age. Thank you Bunu for believing in me, for telling me that I am the best, for making me believe in myself again. And finally, Baba, thank you for being so supportive, for not complaining ever and for encouraging me to get my goals. This PhD is dedicated to you all!

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For

Ma-Baba-Bunu

and

Isabel

INTRODUCTION

In an e-paper article "Ten Controversial Books Indian Children Must Read" (2015) for *dailyO*, Samina Mishra draws up a list of Indian English children's fiction, based on themes of homosexuality, untouchability, depression, inter-class mixing, untimely death, war, disability, communal violence, teen pregnancy, so on and so forth. In the comment section at the bottom of the article, a parent notes:

> We do not need advice from perverts how to bring up our children. We will keep our kids away from these evil prowlers. (Mishra n.p.)

Just two little sentences, but it seems to encompass within itself some glaring truths about children's literature.

1. Children's literature is largely expected to be primarily educational in nature and hence, is till today, seen as a tool that could help adults to "bring up" their children.
2. The child, who is the target audience, has, in fact, very little say in the matters of choosing their own books. They do not have the required finances and hence, very little choice in picking up books by and for themselves without parental intervention of some form or the other.
3. The child is necessarily seen as an innocent subject; the responsibility of the adult being to protect it from "evil prowlers".
4. The matters that make these books included in the above-mentioned list controversial are issues of caste politics, class politics, insanity, communal riots, violence, war, gender issues, homosexuality, and suicide among others - basically issues which the society's gatekeepers believe that "innocent" ones should be kept away from.

However, the intention of the authors in this list was not at all to write text books or corrupt young mind, leave alone advising parents on how to bring up their children. All that they wanted was to write stories for them and make it more representative of those childhoods that exist but hardly find proper representation. They wanted to write about the child who has survived wars, seen the violent world of crimes, have been bullied for being brought up by a single parent or by gay parents, have seen death or have fought with the urge of committing suicide and other such children who do not make it into the comfortable paradise of childhood that is usually created and represented within Indian English children's literature. Let us say we agree that all children's literature should be educational in nature. How is then

branding such matters as controversies and keeping them away from the rest of the children world, aid in their education at all? To understand why all knowledge does not count as education within children's literature, one has to go back to the time when the discourse was born. Back to the time when people starting regarding childhood as something different from adulthood. For, literature that is solely dedicated to children can only evolve after one begins to see the child as a separate category in itself with its own needs and demands. That is when these rules and regulations about the genre began to be laid out - ones that have continued to influence the way children's literature is perceived.

The three names usually associated with this early period are John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Newbery. The first two are credited as being the founding fathers of children's literature for formulating the early discourses of childhood studies. The latter is credited as introducing children's literature as a secure branch of print culture. None of them "discovered" childhood, but all of them had a huge role to play in the way it shaped up. There was no one reason how or why this happened, but a number of interconnected social and cultural factors contributed to the process. However, it reached its high point during the Victorian period in England, especially with the Romantics. Additional boost was provided by the Education Act of 1870 (in England and Wales) and of 1872 (in Scotland) that made elementary education compulsory for children, and created a new group of readers and writers who wrote to supply their needs. All of this contributed in making childhood a subject of serious concern. Childhood suddenly began to be seen as a special state of existence, on which the society's future depended. The child's physical and rational lacks began to be celebrated as innocence, rather than admonished as deficiencies. The child was no longer seen as individuals tainted with Original Sin, but as divine beings who still was in touch with a natural form of existence that adults had lost touch with. This further compelled adults to prolong that state as long as possible, and in the meantime protect the child from 'bad' influences. Given that what is 'good' or what is 'bad' is subject to individual opinion, it was not long before adults started interpreting it according to their own ideologies - the impact of which fell directly on what children were allowed to read and what they were not. As Abhijit Gupta has pointed out in his essay "Frightful Rotters and Little Angels: Writing for Children in Victorian England":

> Few worried about their children's reading habits as obsessively as the Victorians. They wrote articles, conducted surveys, compiled lists, cajoled,

> harangued and berated one another and their children about what they should read. They were even more concerned about what they should *not* read. They were convinced that boys will be boys and girls will be girls and refused to let them come into any kind of contact. They also believed that boys' books and girls' books should be kept chastely apart. (Gupta 57)

These are the discourses that went on to have the most lasting influence in the way children's literature shaped up. It could also be seen as the beginning of segregating children's literature in terms of what is appropriate and what is not.

In India, however, the child was never seen as a separate category. It had no separate literature for children, although the subcontinent's rich oral and folk tradition more than made up for the lack even though they were not shared by children and adults alike. However, these materials too (for instance the *Jatakas*, *Hitopadesha*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Bhagavata Purana*, or the epics *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*), had an inherent trait of didacticism, trying to moralise about what is right and what is wrong. This was especially true for the case of *Panchatantra* - believed to be "the world's first collection of stories for children in Sanskrit" (Jafa 33) - which was set against the backdrop of teaching *niti* (polity) to three ignorant princes. It was finally from the west that the concept of children's literature as a separate discipline first entered India as part of its colonial legacy (Jafa 34). The first books exclusively meant for children were written with the arrival of the British missionaries. Till independence the market was dominated by books imported from the west, apart from some regional magazines for children. Thus, India inherited the concept of childhood just as it had been conceptualised in the west. This, combined with its own tradition of didacticism, gave rise to a branch of literature that was primarily didactic in nature - a feature that continued, even after the country attained its freedom.

In the post-independence era, the child with its malleable and impressionable mind became an apt vehicle for disseminating nationalistic sentiments and building up a future generation of proud Indian citizens. This gave rise to the writing of biographies of national figures. There was also the fear of losing the country's rich oral tradition owing to rapid urbanisation, which resulted in large scale reproductions of folk tales. These themes dominated the market leaving little scope for original experimentations. Fictional works, if any, were highly stereotypical rather than realistic, catering more

towards creating an idealistic image of the society to inculcate national pride. However, the concept of protecting the child from the harsh realities of life, continued. Issues of rampant illiteracy, rising crime rate, looming poverty and other structures of social injustice including caste, gender and religious divides, which were as much a part of the Indian reality, were barely considered suitable material for a child reader. Just like in the west, India too evolved its own ideas of what was appropriate and what was not, within the domain of children's literature.

Publishing for children in India was not altogether an easy task. Battling with multilinguality, widespread illiteracy, financial constraints, along with tough competition from foreign books, very few publishers wanted to invest in this field. It was much easier to publish low-cost retellings or biographies rather than invest in an original voice. Being poorly paid, writers too were not easily attracted to this genre and even if they were, they were rarely experimental. The level of education and literacy itself was so low, that few cared about luxury-reading over reading for acquiring educational merit. In addition to that, female literacy level was even lower, especially in the rural areas. This had its ramifications on the texts that were produced, which were mainly centred on a male protagonist. The poor financial resources of the reading public in India, in general, further aggravated the problem. Due to the lack of public libraries, there were limited options for people from such lower economic background to exercise their reading interests, even if they were literate. The books for children, with illustrations and attractive print, were costlier to produce. Added to that, there was no concept of employing attractive marketing strategies to boost up sales. Even the means of distribution were inadequate - leaving very few people passionate enough to invest in the genre. There was also a problem of multilinguality which made it impossible for a book in any one language to get wide circulation. English was increasingly becoming the link language, but despite that, texts written in English too, had very limited readership. The market was thus, always fighting against limited readership with low purchasing power right from its very inception, deterring writers or publishers to invest much in this genre. The few that were there, never had the means to experiment and fell back on the tried-and-tested themes that either evoked national sentiments or primarily depended on re-workings of classical tales or folktales or mainly focused on a middle-class protagonist, for a very long time. Marginal voices rarely found the space to express, leading to the creation of homogenised narratorial figures that dominated most

of these early literatures catering to the few privileged children who had the education and the money to be able to buy and read such books.

Organisations like the Children's Book Trust did try to foster original writing through multiple writing competitions, but the above mentioned issues rarely found prominent space within its narratives. Most issues that were considered taboos within children's writing, especially the themes of sex, death and violence (which had, surprisingly, been well accepted within the domain of folk tales), were still marginally touched upon. The girl child remained an insignificant presence. These conditions inevitably drew up boundaries for the genre itself. The world within most of these narratives thus became represented as an idealised space which was a "narrow hegemonic version of the Indian nation...essentialised and stereotyped" (Superle 4), rather than being truly representative of the nation's diversity.

However, in the last two decades, there has been a radical change in the attitude towards literature for children. There has been a new turn within Indian English children's literature to move beyond a didactic moralistic setup within a homogenised space to that of a more plural zone where marginal voices find representations in sensitive portrayals without being sensationalised. It is similar to the new-realist turn in western children's literature that developed in America during the 1960-70s and caught up in Britain around the 1980s. This literature looks upon the child as an individual who needs to be initiated into reality in a protected yet sensitive ambience which is not overtly dictatorial. In this new trend, one can notice an attempt to move beyond the restrictive limits that existed even within the so-called multicultural books. From an obsession with what is the correct thing to be taught to children through literature, one is coming to recognise children as individuals who are also responsible readers and have their own way of looking at narratives. There is an understanding that with proper workshops, even subjects hitherto considered taboos within children's literature can be presented in a sensitive fashion and can educate the child much more than what the conventional books do. From taking accounts of children themselves and incorporating their opinions while designing books, to including issues of what all has long been considered taboos - whether it be marginal sexualities, issues of caste, political violence and gender - all are finding space within this new articulation. This does not mean that these texts are not potentially problematic in their own way, but that rather for the first

time we have an emphasis on the voice of the child and the plural childhoods that exist in a multicultural nation like India. We find a privileging, not of the adult viewpoint, but that of the young child coming to terms with the complexities of life in general.

My work will try to explore this shift within Indian English children's literature which aims at opening up spaces and giving representation to the multiple voices of multicultural India with its problems of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, child labour, crime, communal tensions, and gender, class and caste divides. I will look at how this brings about a change in the overarching central tendencies within children's literature, with its partiality towards creating binary oppositions, maintaining a simplicity within the narrative, and using a general tone of hopefulness and optimism, to lead to a happy endings. The focus will be on portrayals of marginal voices that have till now evaded the narratorial space. For the purpose of this work, I will be looking at major works being done in this direction by the new publishing houses like Duckbill, Young Zubaan, Tulika, Scholastic India, Puffin, Pratham, Mango and Roli Books, to see how they are bringing about a revolution in the way the child reader has been imagined within Indian spaces.

As part of my thesis, I have taken up thirty-four Indian English children's texts, centred on themes that have so far been considered as taboo-subjects, and characters that have so far remained at the margins of society. All of these texts are primarily from the twenty-first century, published between the years 1999 and 2017. I have taken a conscious decision to exclude translations, poetry, folk/fairy-tales, picture books and short stories, in order to concentrate solely on chapter-books and novels. I have divided them into two groups - texts targeted towards middle readers and texts targeted towards young adults. I have included fiction for both children as well as young adults under the label of children's literature - the reason for which I explain in my third chapter. For each group, I have taken up to seventeen texts that are representatives of such changing attitudes within Indian English children's literature. I have further sub-divided the texts into categories dealing prominently with a particular taboo-subject. As for these taboo-subjects, I have categorised them into groups entitled "Caste, Class and Communalism", "Gender and Sexuality", "Disease, Death and Disability", "Broken Families", and an extra one for the young adult texts, namely "War, Crime and Violence".

My aim has been to show how these texts have attempted to deal with issues that have so far been considered taboos within children's literature. As the broad topics into which the taboo areas have been divided shows, unsuitability of a topic in children's literature seems to have close associations with anything that does not fit into the dominant discourse of childhood. Pointing towards this link between taboos and marginal voices, my study has tried to show how the presence of taboos within this branch of literature has so far ensured that marginal voices are kept away from its domain. In the last two decades, there has been a change in that mindset, and the aim of my thesis has been to explore how these new texts have managed to challenge the existing status quo by breaking these taboos. There has been an attempt to subvert the myth of the existence of one essential childhood (which by default refers to the upper/middle class urban heteronormative childhood), by being representative of those different childhoods that exist at the margins of society. While many of these texts have managed to move beyond such homogenised boundaries to more diversified spaces, there have also been times when they have also been unable to do so and fallen back on the same stereotypes again. My work has also tried to pick out both instances as available within these texts and closely analysed them.

Thus, the intent of my thesis has been not only to read these texts as setting a new trend in a society that is becoming increasingly aware of its multicultural identity, but also to see how they sometimes fall back into newer forms of stereotyping themselves. At the same time, the aim has not been to simply weigh the pros and cons of such deviations from conventional story-telling for children. Rather, it has been an attempt to see how this movement away from tradition has at least encouraged writers and publishing houses to dare and experiment with topics and characters that would otherwise have never been part of mainstream children's literature. Lists have been drawn up, with parents deeming such books as scandalous and controversial, and anxiously pledging to keep away their children from them. However, at the same time, questions have been raised as to what is it that makes these books scandalous. It is such questions that allow us to see how scandals are most often a battle between the mainstream dominant voice and the minority concerns, and more often than not, the former wins. It proves how the concept of childhood as a privileged state of existence is nothing but a myth, available to only a select few and cautiously guarded for them alone, through the exclusion of any other voice that might disrupt that space. These

inclusions or exclusions are windows into the world of adult insecurities and show how power struggles operate through manipulation within the field of children's literature where a particular group tries to assert a specific cultural norm. It also shows, how in this entire process, children are nothing but silent observers who suffer the most.

With that understanding, the main questions that this thesis seeks to address are to see what are the new shifts that have been observed within Indian English children's literature over the last two decades? Have these shifts opened up spaces and broken taboos that have been previously held sacred within this genre? Have they been able to incorporate multiple other voices that have hitherto been excluded or marginalised? If yes, then have they been able to provide alternatives to the mainly upper middle-class character types that have dominated the genre so far or merely created new normative models which are as prescriptive as the older ones? How have the characters evolved to accommodate these diverse concerns? How have female characters assumed central space in the narrative challenging accepted gender roles? How have all the characters been situated in different classes, castes and religions - other than belonging to the upper middle class, thus challenging hegemonic value systems, stereotypes, homegenisation and/or essentialisation within this genre? How have these shifts forced writers, illustrators, publishers and parents to re-imagine the child as not merely an innocent being who needs to be protected, but as an individual who has the right to make his/her own choices as a reader? What does this say about how childhood had been perceived/conceived/imagined in India till now, and how and why has it changed or is on the way of change? My work will try to see how in opening up spaces and breaking taboos, the twenty-first century Indian English children's literature has given space to marginal segments of the population that have till now not found adequate representation within this genre. By bringing in concerns ranging from gender, caste, communalism and sexualities into the ambit of children's reading for the first time, it has furthered a new understanding of childhood that recognises in the child reader a greater agency of interpretation and reasoning.

I have attempted to address these concerns by analysing the texts trough the process of close-reading, mainly under the lenses of postcolonial, multicultural and gender theories. I have paid close attention to language and how it has been used in conveying complex subjects, suited to the vocabulary of child readers. I have tried to

take into account the rhetorical, structural and cultural elements used in the texts. Much importance has been paid to the narrative structure of the texts, in order to form a comprehensive idea about the pattern of correspondence, the underlying tensions, the missing gaps, and the inherent contradictions within the texts. How have the narratives been arranged? Linearly or elliptically? What does the author's writing style convey? Is it descriptive or more conversational? I have tried to analyse the choice of imagery and symbols, and the various literary devices that have been used by the author. I have further figure out how much agency has been given to the child within the text. If the child is a representative of the marginal section of the society, has he/she been portrayed as having the agency to fight oppression or as being dependent on the dominant 'other' to rescue him/her from his position? My attempt has been to show how most of the taboo-subjects have been integrally tied up to these marginal positions.

My thesis is divided into three main chapters, followed by a conclusion. My first chapter, entitled "Children's Literature: A Broad Overview", attempts to trace the evolution of childhood studies and children's literature as it grew up in the west as well as India. I divide the chapter into two parts, the first section looks at the growth of children's literature as a discipline in the west and the second section looks at how it developed in India. I first look at the western construct of childhood, before moving on to the Indian context, because it was from the west that India had inherited the concept of children's literature as a separate category. Through this chapter, I try to bring together all the concerns that are central to the discourse of children's literature, in order to develop a comprehensive understanding about the genre. I begin with some important theoretical questions that have plagued the discourse for long. It includes the debate regarding whether children's literature can be considered as a genre or not and if the term "children's literature" is adequate enough to represent it? Next, I move on to deciphering the construct of the "child". The intent is to show how the idea of children's literature is integrally tied up to the idea of the child, which is dependent on the socio-cultural factors of an age and place. The idea of children's literature could not have developed before the concept of child as a separate category had been formulated. As my chapter will show, this formulation began sometime in the medieval ages, before which children were regarded simply as miniature adults who dresses like them and shared their reading materials. The concept underwent various transformational phases, before assuming the shape by which we recognise childhood today. It is mainly socio-

culturally determined and has nothing to do with the biological lacks that differentiate children from adults. Therefore, it is a construct that is highly fluid and is in constant transition across time and space. Nevertheless, some of the primary tenets of what it is means to be a child have remained constant, mainly the fact that they are vulnerable innocent beings in need of adult protection. It is because of this approach and the fact that children are hardly in a position to intervene in this process, that children's literature has been so dictatorial in terms of determining what is appropriate and what is not for children. My chapter tries to address these questions and to show how this has been responsible in the formation of taboo areas within children's literature. Some of these taboos are culture specific and some of them are universally shared, but in both cases they try to function by prohibiting certain things in favour of others. Whatever reason might be used to justify such exclusions, it is always tied up to a majoritarian position of the group prohibiting it, leaving the rest as minorities. It is thus evident that the practice of taboos are strictly tied up to a position of power, with respect to both the minority voices as well as the child, and this is what my chapter tries to show. To understand it better, I try to trace the evolutionary trajectory of the concept of the child to see how it has been moulded by the dominant forces of each age, retaining some taboos while losing many others in the process. I look at how it has changed our ideas with regard to the child and how that idea has influenced the literature of its age. I also introduce the dominant theoretical positions that have been used to study the evolving nature of the child and its impact on children's literature. Finally, I show how children's literature has been driven by an Anglophonic bias. Despite the latest drive towards multiculturalism, there has been very little work to understand the concept of childhood as it has evolved in other countries without comparing it with the western ideal. This is especially true in the case of previously colonised countries like India and Africa, whose childhood histories before the coming of the colonial powers have been largely erased under the pretext of their cultural deviation from the norm. Finally, I move on to the next section of the chapter which deals with the case of Indian (English) children's literature. I divide the section into three parts, where I look at the idea of childhood as it existed in India in the pre-colonial period, how it evolved during the colonial period, and finally what shape it took after independence. In conclusion, I show, how publishing for children has undergone a drastic change over the last two decades in terms of breaching taboos and expanding horizons, forcing people to re-evaluate the

politics of unsuitability as has been practiced within children's literature in the Indian context so far.

The second chapter, entitled "Breaking Taboos in the Texts Aimed at Younger Children", takes up seventeen Indian English children's texts aimed at middle readers - approximately belonging to the age-group of six to twelve. The extreme power imbalance, that is an inherent nature of children's literature, becomes even more acute in the case of child readers of this age group. They are children who are just beginning to read and hence not experienced enough to navigate through the text's underlying ideological trappings with the dexterity that adult readers possess. The middle readers are, thus, more prone to internalising the biases and prejudices of the texts without questioning. Therefore, it is even more crucial to study how taboos operate within these texts as compared to the texts aimed at older children. I divide the texts into four overarching sections, depending on the kind of taboo that they primarily deal with. Although, I group a particular text under a particular category, I explain how it does not mean that the text does not touch upon any other issues at all. However, I try to locate the major issue that becomes a driving force for the novel and classify it accordingly. I closely examine how the text represents the major issues and then go on to touch upon the minor issues as well. I try to show how each taboo lies interspersed with other taboos, showing how prejudices have a way of existing in groups. Through this chapter, I try to explore how these taboos unconsciously coexist in the minds of people as an entangled mass and limit the text's scope of transgression - where the author tries to challenge a particular taboo but end up subscribing to another one. One example of this kind would be in relation to the woman question. Although most of the texts try to portray empowered girl characters in terms of the agency that they have, it fails in the department of characterisation by ascribing to conventional ideas of physical beauty and mental capacity as far as girls are concerned. Under the category of "Caste, Class and Communalism" I examine six texts - *Trash! On Ragpicker Children and Recycling* by Gita Wolf, Anushka Ravishankar and Orijit Sen (Tara, 1999), *Ju's Story* by Paul Zacharia (Tulika, 2009), *Flat-Track Bullies* by Balaji Venkataramanan (Duckbill, 2013), *Jungu, The Baiga Princess* by Vithal Rajan (Young Zubaan, 2014), *Dear Mrs. Naidu* by Mathangi Subramanian (Young Zubaan, 2015) and *Mukund and Riaz* by Nina Sabnani (Tulika, 2007). For the category of "Gender and Sexuality", I take up four texts - Ranjit Lal's *Faces in the Water* (Puffin Books, 2010), Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran's *Mayil will not be Quiet!* (Tulika,

2011) and *Mostly Madly Mayil* (Tulika, 2013), and Ranjit Lal's *Smitten* (Young Zubaan, 2012). I study six texts under the category of "Disease, Death and Disability" which includes Jayasree Kalathil's *The Sackclothman* (Mango, 2008), Sujatha Padmanabhan's *Chuskit Goes to School* (Pratham Books, 2011), Zai Whitaker's *Kanna Panna* (Tulika, 2015), Arti Sonthalia's *Big Bully and M-Me* (Duckbill, 2015), Ranjit Lal's *The Dugong and the Barracudas* (Young Zubaan, 2015) and Zainab Sulaiman's *Simply Nanju* (Duckbill, 2016). Finally, under the category of "Broken Families", I examine *Timmi in Tangles* by Shals Mahajan (Duckbill, 2013). Through a careful examination of these texts, I try to show how taboos are broken or rebuild within these twenty-first century Indian English texts for children.

My third chapter, entitled "Breaking Taboos in the Texts Aimed at Young Adults", follows a similar pattern as that of the previous chapter, analysing seventeen Indian English texts aimed at young adults or individuals belonging to the age-group of thirteen to eighteen. However, before moving into the close examination of the primary texts in this category, I try to attain a comprehensive idea about the category of young adults and explain my choice of including them in a study pertaining to children's literature. As the chapter shows, the term and category of young adult is a fairly recent addition to the discourse of childhood. It was only from around the 1930-40s that this category started gathering momentum. The reader group consists of individuals who are not mature enough to be considered as adults, but also not as immature as children younger to them. However, in terms of the basic rights they enjoy as individuals, their situation is far more similar to the latter. This is the reason why I have chosen to include this category in my thesis. The purpose is to see how taboos operate in texts for young adults, individuals who have already started developing their individual perspectives about the issues around the world. The chapter will also try see if there are any differences in the way the same issues are dealt with in these texts as compared to the ones meant for younger children. In order to achieve this, I divide the chapter into similar categories as that of the previous chapter, with the addition of one new category. Under the category of "Caste, Class and Communalism", I examine two texts - Ranjit Lal's *The Battle for No. 19* (Puffin Books, 2007) and Rahul Srivastava's *What Happened to Regina that Night* (Scholastic India, 2012). As part of the category "Gender and Sexuality", I take up three texts including Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (Duckbill, 2014), Payal Dhar's *Slightly Burnt* (Bloomsbury, 2014), and Swati Sengupta's *Half the Field is Mine*

(Scholastic India, 2015). I study six texts under the category of "Disease, Death and Disability" - Leele Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest* (Puffin Books, 2010) Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Ice* (Duckbill, 2014), and Nadhika Nambi's *Unbroken* (Duckbill, 2017). Before moving on to the category of "Broken Families", however, I look at a new category - that of "War, Crime and Violence" - as part of this chapter. Within that category, I analyse four novels, comprising Paro Anand's *No Guns at my Sons Funeral* (Roli Books, 2005) and *Weed* (Roli Books, 2008), Siddhartha Sarma's *The Grasshopper's Run* (Scholastic India, 2009), and Swati Sengupta's *Guns on my Red Earth* (Rupa India, 2013). In the final category of "Broken Families", I take up five texts - Rupa Gulab's *Daddy Come Lately* (Duckbill, 2013), Revathi Suresh's *Jobless Clueless Reckless* (Duckbill, 2013), Sampurna Chattarji's *Ela: The Girl Who Entered the Unknown* (Scholastic India, 2013), Andaleeb Wajid's *When She Went Away* (Duckbill, 2015), and Rupa Gulab's *Hot Chocolate is Thicker than Blood* (Duckbill, 2016).

These chapters are followed by a "Conclusion", where I make a summary of all the chapters and make the necessary connections between them. I try to enumerate the various changes that have crept into the genre in the last couple of years, and how have they impacted the scope of writing for children within the Indian subcontinent. By studying this impact in close detail, I try to find answers to the questions that my thesis seeks to raise. I try to show how the domain of children's literature is dominated by an Anglophonic bias, both in the way it is conceptualised and the way it is studied. I try to point out the problems of such conceptualisations, especially in a country like India whose material conditions are so different from that of the west. In fact, the idea is to show that the idea of childhood as one universal state, is a myth. No two childhoods are similar. There are different childhoods and the practice of trying to flatten them out to fit them into one mainstream idea of childhood (as dictated upon by the western modes) is essentially problematic. Given the history of the growth Indian English children's within the subcontinent, it is understandable why such homogenisation happened in the initial phase through the employment of certain taboos; but the time has come to move beyond this structure and represent Indian English children's literature in all its heterogeneity. I try to show how the move has already been initiated in the past two decades, where publishers are more interested in experimenting with newer voices. However, I also try to show how such representations are not without their own problems. Thereby, I try to question, if at all the genre has been able to expand its boundaries by breaking these taboos, that have so far operated by silencing one group of people in favour of

another and becoming mouthpieces for the dominant groups in society. I show how such a movement is proof to the fact that Indian English children's literature has come of age and is no longer seen as a tool for disseminating nationalistic concerns - as had been its main agenda in the initial years of its growth. As a new born nation, in its early years of independence, the country's main aim had been to portray itself as a homogenised whole - the repercussions of which had been felt more strongly in its literature for children. This is what had promoted a flattening of the underlying heterogeneity - that is so integral to India - leading to the creation of an essentialised version of Indian childhood. With the present trend of breaking out of such homogenisation by challenging previously held taboos, it seems that a change has definitely come over in the way children's literature had been used in the country so far. It seems to point out towards the fact that India is no longer insecure about its identity as a nation and is more open to exploring its underlying fragmentary nature. Although, there is still a long way to go, at least the process has already begun.

CHAPTER I

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A BROAD OVERVIEW

I. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

Introduction

Simple straightforward texts, short on detail, with a focus on action and precedence to illustrations (especially in case of early readers) - those would be some of the crucial defining qualities that would lead one to identify texts of children's literature, as pointed out by Perry Nodelman in *The Hidden Adult* (Nodelman 76-77). In a world, where defining the category of children's literature opens up a veritable Pandora's box, the above description is perhaps one of the few things that the body of critics working on children's literature would unanimously agree upon, although often with some degree of suspicion.

> Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. (Rose 1)
>
> Traditionally, defining books as children's books has focused on...questions of simplicity, both of style - of vocabulary, syntax, sentence length - and of content, with concentration on action and brevity. (Wall 3)
>
> Children's literature seems...to be a simple idea... (Hunt *An Introduction* 4)
>
> In children's fiction, the assumption is that writers can represent the experience of child characters more easily than they can represent adult characters, which has gained children's fiction the reputation of being simple... (Nikolajeva x)

Indeed, the first thing that strikes the eye when one picks up a text intended for an audience of children is "the simplicity of its diction and the straightforward nature of its style" (Nodelman 8). The problem of to how to determine whether a text qualifies as children's literature brings up a whole host of questions that require answering - is children's literature 'by', 'about' or 'for' children; but the one thing that remains constant is that there are 'children' in the equation. This is also perhaps the main reason why simplicity becomes of foremost concern in children's literature as we are trained to see children as biologically inferior - nothing more than individuals in the early stages of human development with limited capabilities. Roderick McGillis points out aptly in his essay '"Criticism is the Theory of

Literature': Theory is the Criticism of Literature" how "many books for the young are disarming in their ostensible simplicity" (McGillis 14). But he is also very quick to point out how the rise of literary theory has taught us that what looks simple only looks like that because we have not looked at it closely enough. With the recent developments in the field of children's literature in the academic circuit, we now know how true his statement is, be it in understanding this apparent "simplicity" that shrouds the texts of children's literature or the figure of the child that prompts the use of simplicity. The legacy of critical work on children's literature that precedes and informs my work will bear testimony to this fact by revealing the complex web of meanings that lie hidden behind the simple diction of these texts - which Nodelman calls "shadow texts" (Nodelman 8), and the complex web of meanings that go into the social construction of its so-called consumers, children.

Can We Refer to Children's Literature as a Genre?

What makes the study of children's literature seem naturally so simple but theoretically so complex at the same time? This is because of the inherent inability of this genre to conform to the traditional tenets of categorisation that have been used so far to compartmentalise life to make it simpler. Every observation made about this genre, inevitably calls out loud for another look, each time challenging the conclusions arrived at. For instance, even the reference to this field as a genre is open to contestation. Can we really call this a genre? In the definitive sense, children's literature lacks "generic 'purity'..." (Hunt *Children's Literature* 3), being comprised of a huge spectrum of texts - diverse in both form and content, all clubbed together to cater to a readership that constitutes of individuals of various age-groups and different receptive capabilities. Children's literature, which had never really been limited to just literary texts, has increasingly and more prominently moved on to include texts from other media with the progress of digital technology. At the same time, it has a readership which is equally limitless, extending to "a wide demographic of readers from preschool to young adulthood (adults too are often drawn to children's literature for various reasons)" (Mallan and Bradford 7-8). As Clare Beghtol notes: "The word *genre* means 'kind of' or 'sort of' and comes from the same Latin root as the word *genus*" (17). To determine a genre is to divide the whole into a kind or type of the whole. By this definition, if we see literature as the 'whole' and children's literature as a 'type' of it, how far does the 'type' "conform to the accepted desiderata of mutual exclusivity and joint exhaustivity" (Beghtol 18) from the 'whole'. Further expanding on her position, Beghtol explains that by "mutual exclusivity and joint exhaustivity" she means that the genre categories should not overlap

with each other, and all possible instances should be accounted for and accommodated in the groupings" (18). If that be the case, where does children's literature stand in all this? As we will see, children's literature with its ambivalence and overlaps defies being tagged as a genre. Its diversity makes it difficult to strictly identify it as one category. As Mike Cadden notes: "[c]hildren's literature is a bit unusual as a genre" (xiii).

Children's literature with its vast spectrum of materials - "from fiction to textbooks, from Shakespeare to the scriptures, from verse to adverts, from picturebooks to computer games" (Grenby *Children's Literature* 2), can hardly qualify as one separate genre. A simple generic categorisation of this kind is complicated by the fact of its containing all the genres and subgenres used to classify writing. As Perry Nodelman notes in *The Hidden Adult*:

> ...if children's literature is a genre, then how can it contain other genres? How can a text belong to the genre of mystery or science fiction and to the genre of children's literature at the same time? ... If one text clearly represents the characteristics typical of mystery and another those typical of science fiction, how can they both represent the characteristics of a third, notably different, genre at the same time? (Nodelman 127-128)

Likewise, we cannot really define its generic characteristics by virtue of the period it was written in or the movement which gave birth to it. For unlike say medieval literature or Romantic literature, children's literature has existed since times immemorial, even if such texts had not been identified as a separate category at that time. We cannot even classify on the basis of place, for children's literature was produced in all parts of the world. The same goes for determining its generic nomenclature in terms of a specific approach, like feminist or postcolonial texts for example, because the scope of children's literature is really too broad. Further, does the 'children' in children's literature refer to books written by children making it a genre named after its writers say like say women's literature? That is also not possible as despite being called children's literature, it has almost zero involvement of actual children as writers, producers or disseminators of this category of literature - all these roles being mostly occupied by adults. Even when actual children do get involved in the process, they hardly function independently without adult guidance (Hunt *An Intro* 3). In that sense it is more like a literature 'for' children, rather than about or by them.

To quote from Saunak Samajdar's doctoral thesis "Fairy Tales, Comic-Strips and Illustrated Texts: The Poetics and Politics In/Of Children's Literature":

> The mode of literary praxes, including the writing, reading, *misreading* [emphasis in the original], circulation, reception, promotion, censor, mediation, canon-formation and criticism, that focuses upon texts, inter-texts and peri-texts that pass through hypothetical, targeted, and/or actual child-readers is broadly identified as the domain of children's literature. As such, it is *definitely* [emphasis in the original] not a generic category but a *receptional* [emphasis in the original] category, with its taxonomic limits ranging from picture books and primers to science fictions and fantasies, fairy tales to ghost stories, marionettes to animation films and nonsense rhymes to computer games. The reception is sociologically defined with respect to the biological and cultural age of the reader/consumer, and psychologically in terms of the expected emotional responses to the anticipated/approved semantic base of the text; but these closures cannot be said to operate within same rigid and assured limits, as the scriptibility of a mode based on the fantastic and the imaginary [which forms the internal logic of the category] is too radical to be fastened into a restrictive and disciplined set of norms, suitabilities and closed meanings [which form the external rules of the category]. (Samajdar 1)

Children's literature is then, as Samajdar has pointed out, a "receptional" category. Noting this aspect, Nodelman posits that the texts in this category are included "by virtue of what the category implies, not so much about the text itself as about its intended audience" (Nodelman 3). He equates this nature of children's literature with that of "popular literature" - intended to be popularly read and thus defining itself through "an audience rather than a time or place or a specific type of writing" (ibid.). However, this equation is misleading since in popular literature the relationship between the producer and the purchaser is quite direct and does not have to pass through a mediating agency who chooses and buys the books for the readers, which is not the same in the case of children's literature. In the latter, the creators hope to produce texts that appeal to their audience, but before it reaches the audience it has to go through another layer of an adult filter, adults being the actual purchasers of these books. So the audience that the producers have in mind are not actually or not only children, but their adult purchasers who think that they know what will appeal to children. So, in short, it is a category of literature made by adults but named after its intended audience, the model for which is based on adult assumptions of what they think these intended audiences are and what they think they should like.

In the face of this rather twisted dynamic resulting in a convoluted understanding of how children's literature can be seen as a genre, one realises that the one thing that one thought could be known for sure about this category, that is the category of 'children', does not even exist in reality. For as much as one may want to believe that children, the intended audience of children's literature, are actual 'real' children, it is far from the truth. This is because children cannot be regarded "in the essentialist mode as trans-historically and trans-culturally consistent beings, shaped primarily in a deterministic way by biology and brain-development" (Lesnik-Oberstein *Children in Culture* 2). Additionally, the intended audience of this 'receptional' category, which gives name to this genre, is not a fixed real referent but a floating idea conceived of by its relative "other", the adult. Furthermore, this idea changes not just from century to century, place to place, but also in terms of the implied audience's age and gender. As Samajdar points out: "...even when the authorial intention is to mimic the child's perspective, the actual operation is much more complex - first the author has to exercise his adult point of view *about the point of view of the child* [emphasis in the original], and then channel the narrative or depictive act through the...filter constructed thereof" (Samajdar 2). These adult assumptions about the intended audience of children's literature which informs this category are, in turn, dependent on a whole discourse of childhood that has developed over a long period of time having been shaped by various forces. Therefore, the intended audience is an illusion, based on a set of assumptions that make it look like real, when in reality it is a construct fashioned out of several socio-cultural forces. Thus again, this category moves further away from the scope of the real intended audience as the "texts circulated as children's literature are themselves produced, circulated and received in a certain historical contingency whose parameters are neither child-centric nor delimited by the historic instantiation of the-then "child"" (Samajdar 2). In a receptional category, the most important component is the recipient. However, as can be seen, in this case, the recipient is neither real nor stable. When the main component is based on such loose grounds, how can the category even exist and recognised as one whole? But children's literature does exist; in the sense that despite being so diverse in form and content, it still has an uncanny quality by which one can almost immediately recognise a text as intended for young readers. How is that possible?

In order to interrogate that question, I will refer back to Nodelman's observations *The Hidden Adult*. He mentions that despite the diversity that separates one children's text from another, there must be something that make them appear similar to each other. In order to

find answers, Nodelman closely reads six texts spread across two different countries and spanning almost two centuries but unanimously recognised as 'good' children's literature, to come up with forty-five qualities that they share with each other which ultimately lead critics like Nodelman to recognise them as children's literature or literature that is intended for young readers. He comes to the conclusion:

> ...children's literature might be something more than just an indiscriminate body of quite different sorts of texts grouped together by adults for convenience merely because of their intended audiences. It might, in fact, be a specific genre of fiction whose defining characteristics seem to transcend specifics of time and place, cut across other generic categories such as fantasy or realism, and even remain consistent despite variations in the ages of intended audiences. (Nodelman 81)

Therefore, even though in a "strange and elusive" form which is "hard to define" (Susan R. Gannon 59), critics like Nodelman would choose to classify children's literature as "a genre, a special kind of literature with its own distinguishing characteristics" (Nodelman "*Beyond Genre"* 22), as he himself states in his review of Paul Hernadi's *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (1972). This makes children's literature a strange type of receptional category which is intrinsically bound to certain recurrent features necessary because of the nature of its recipient. While the idea of the recipient keeps changing according to the socio-cultural factors of the period, what does not change is the recipient's limited linguistic capability owing to its biological constraints. This makes authors across time and space unanimously assume a 'simple' style of narration while writing for children, which mainly includes maintaining a straightforward stance of narration, not too dense in its description and focalised through a child or 'childlike' character - features that emerge as regulars in children's fiction. For example, the recipient was once constructed as an individual born with the Original Sin, while later on he/she became the symbol of innocence. The content of their fiction changed accordingly. However, most of the dominant feautures of the texts remained unchanged, making it easier for us to classify these texts as children's literature. These recurrent features, as pointed out by Nodelman, could be seen as one of the primary modes by which children's texts can be distinguished from adult ones, thus contributing to its understanding as a separate genre.

These features point to the fact that despite being based on a fluid construct of what adults think the child is, writers of this genre share a system of existing "knowledge of codes,

conventions, and grammatical relationships" (Nodelman 109). But why do we need to define this genre? This is because, as Nodelman says, genre is the most "basic and unavoidable habit of human minds in making sense of the world they perceive" (107) and by doing so one might be in a better position to answer how taboos are made or broken within children's literature. However, though generic qualities help differentiate one category from another, one could say that "[t]here is no such thing as a "genre" in exactly the same sense" (Nodelman 107). Even within a particular genre, two texts might not be completely similar. Despite all that, objects within one category would still have more similarities with each other than with objects in other categories, and definitely much more than its differences with each other within the set category. In this way, generic qualities can be used to put objects into a pre-established system in order to understand how they are similar or different from these systems. This can be especially helpful in the case of children's literature; a genre, which as Nodelman's study shows, can be distinguished as a category based mainly on certain qualities that are unique to it. Of course there are various inclusions and exclusions to the system of the genre across time, based on both individual percetions as well as communal ones. This is because there are two ways that a person approaches a text. At first when he/she is given a text, the person forms an initial individual response to the text based on his/her interaction with it. Secondly, he/she is also socially influenced about a text, based on his/her exchanges about the text with other people or in the way the text is marketed to him/her. Through such private and public intersections of ideas, the genre emerges and manages to establish itself as a system of law - and this is an understanding Nodelman borrows from Derrida. He writes, "In Derrida's terms, genres establish what the law is and impose it on readers" (Nodelman 113), and "*actually shape how writers produce, and readers respond, to literary works* [emphasis in the original]" (Fishelov 10) and form a historical continuum. In adult literature, the readers are more experienced and slightly more perceptive of this system of generic law. However, in the case of children's literature, the real readers are just beginning to read and are not as informed about other genres as their adult counterparts. So for them, the generic system of law does not apply in the same way as that of the adults. Therefore one might conclude that the purpose of understading children's literature as a genre is solely for the benefit of the adults than its real readers. Generification of children's literature has no special purpose for its child readers. Rather it is for its adult reviewers, who use this system in order to establish some sort of boundaries against which one may study the underlying structures of children's literature and exclude everything else that does not conform. By now, one thing must have become clear. In this entire category of literature, real

children have no role to play. Even the generic categorisation of children's literature is for the benefit of the adults. In that case, what is the need to determine whether we can see children's literature as a genre or not? Because, it is adults who create children's literature, it is they who disseminate children's literature, and finally it is they who decide which texts to pick up for children. So it is ultimately they who determine what shape this genre will take in the future. Categorising children's literature as a genre is important because it will not only provide them the opportunity of exploring the underlying structures of children's literature, it will further help understand what are those that are excluded from this structure and why. In thus deconstructing these structures that make it qualify as a genre one will have a clear understanding as to why certain topics are disapproved as taboos within this genre and what does it say about the adult group disapproving it.

The Problems with the Term "Children's Literature"

After having looked at whether we can consider children's literature as a separate genre or not, we come to the next problem of this genre - the one to do with its nomenclature. First there is the problem with the term "children", then there is the problem with the term "literature" and finally the problem with the possessive which links 'children' with 'literature', suggesting that this literature "either *belongs* to children, or *partakes* of their nature" (Morag, Bearne, and Watson 15) - none of which we now know is true. The problem with the term "children" arises with the realisation that the 'child(ren)' in children's literature does not exist within the genre in any capacity except as an adult construct of the genre's intended audience, making the term 'children's literature' appear misleading. Notable critics of children's literature would agree that it is more of a literature 'for' children rather than by or about them. However, even if it is called 'children's' referring to the for-ness of the literature, can we really unify children of all ages and genders and from across the world under a singular label? As Nodelman remarks in *The Hidden Adult*, "The uniformity implied by the shared label is, apparently illusory" (Nodelman 6). And M.O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds point out:

> Unsurprisingly, the needs, abilities and experiences of this group vary tremendously on age grounds alone, but also because it incorporates children of both sexes, children from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, children who are physically and educationally challenged or intellectually gifted, children who are prepubescent and those who are not only well into adolescence but also sexually active, children who live in the countries where they were born in

> traditional nuclear families and children - some separated from their families - who have migrated to new countries for a variety of reasons and who are having to negotiate both a new culture and a new language. This list is by no means exhaustive. (Grenby and Reynolds 4-5)

In addition to the insight that the intended audience as conceived of by the adult creators or purchasers is based on a construct which is shaped by socio-cultural forces and changing conventions, questions about how long childhood lasts, how various factors like that of caste, class, race, place and wealth affect notions of childhood, and how the very notion of the purpose of children's literature has never stayed constant further complicate the apparent simplicity of the 'illusory' shared label. These factors further influence what is thought of as suitable within children's literature and what are seen as taboos. For instance, at one point of time 'death' was not considered unsuitable within this genre especially during the period when children's literature was dominated by evangelical writers; it was only with the popularisation of the Romantic notion of the innocent child that death started to be considered as a taboo subject within this genre.

Moving on to "literature" in children's literature, another loaded term, we realise that this is a question that has plagued theorists of children's literature for a very long time. Deborah Stevenson writes in "History of Children's and Young Adult Literature": "Defining 'literature' is even more complicated. Does the term mean only finely written material, or can texts better known for their popularity than their writing quality count as well? Can literature be nonfiction, informational, even institutionally educational, or must it be a pure and pleasurable continuous narrative?" (Stevenson 180). For Peter Hunt, "the values and qualities which constitute 'literariness' naturally (that is, have come to mean culturally) cannot be sustained either by books designed for an audience of limited experience, knowledge, skill and sophistication, or by the readers" (Hunt *Children's Literature* 2). The so-called simplicity which is considered as the most important marker for children's texts, spreads the general feeling that writing for children is inferior to writing for adults, further denigrating its status as a serious branch of 'literature'. The question of the literariness of children's literature is vast, inconclusive and beyond the scope of this thesis. However, what is relevant to my argument is the fact that because of such prejudices associated with the idea of what 'literature' stands for, it has been "popular neither with enthusiasts for, or with antagonists of children's books. For both camps, and for totally opposing reasons, the idea is irrelevant" (Hunt *An Introduction* 5-6). For the traditionalists, children's literature as a category of

literature has been relegated to the margins or associated with popular culture. This does not sit well with theorists of children's literature, who consider the categorisation as literature in the traditional sense undesirable because of the term's apparent qualities of exclusivity and intellectualism that inevitably imply an association with the dominant cultural system. In the ladder of literary hierarchies, children's literature has always assumed the lowest rung (since children can come only after men and women) till almost the 1970s.

The Early Beginnings of Childhood Studies

Childhood, as an area of serious study, emerged only during the 1970s in the west - "a time of strong interest in Freudian psychoanalysis and Jean Piaget's studies of child development" as well as a time which "gave rise to the study of the so-called 'forgotten people,' which included the subaltern classes, women, and children" (Ferrarro 61). However, the biggest stir in the area was provided by French historian Philippe Ariès with his seminal study *Centuries of Childhood* (1960, English translation 1962) whereby he became the very first person to raise awareness about the socio-historical nature of the concept of childhood. Focusing mainly on medieval and early modern Europe and providing a mine of information as obtained from memoirs and paintings spanning a period of four centuries, his work analyses portraits of children, the various games they played, the idea of sexuality with respect to the child subject, the roles assumed by parents and the roles assigned to the child within the family setup, following it up with the groundbreaking claim that "[i]n medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (Ariès 128) but was instead 'discovered' towards the latter part of the seventeenth century. Although his work, with sweeping historical generalisations, has seen much criticism and revisions since then, he still remains undeniably the first one to have revolutionised the way of seeing a subject matter previously assumed as natural and hence taken for granted, forcing people to question as to the when, why, where and how of the birth of modern childhood.

Even though Ariès' postulation had its own problems, it is important in having dispelled the kind of sentimentality that is attached to the study of childhood. As Seth Lerer points out in his "Introduction" to *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008): "For Ariès, childhood was not some essential eternal quality in human life but was instead a category of existence shaped by social mores and historical experience" (Lerer 2). Of course, in the physical sense of the word children have always existed, but only in the sense of "miniature men and women" (Townsend 3) and not as a separate category with

its own needs and requirements. Till they were thus recognised, there was also no scope of developing a separate literature for them, a fact that is proven by the observations that before the development of children's literature as a separate category, children and adults had the same reading materials. With the reform in the notion of childhood, the kind that was pointed out by Ariès and his followers, evolved the idea of a new addressee and with it evolved a new kind of literature. No wonder John Rowe Townsend's highly pertinent remark that "[b]efore there could be children's books, there had to be children" (3) has remained the starting point of most discussions on children's literature even today.

Since the 1970s, various theoretical approaches have been taken to read childhood and children's literature. The interdisciplinary nature of childhood studies has made it possible to study it from the vantage point of various disciplines, but departments of education, librarianship, and literature and cultural studies have been the forerunners in this matter. Again in this case, the field is occupied by adults, who analyse, review and refer texts for children instead of referring to the reactions of actual real readers - if there be any. The question remains whether we can at all use any criteria used to study adult literature and apply them to study children's texts. Does adult evaluation of a book match that of the real child reader? Before answering this one must first ask if children's literature is at all different from adult literature.

As mentioned above, prior to the recognition of childhood as a separate category, children and adults would share the same texts. Even after a conscious separation of the two categories, there were still adults who read children's books or children who read adults' books. There are huge overlaps between the two and history bears evidence to this fact. For instance, many books that were intended for adults like *Gulliver's Travels* (1736) and *The Water Babies* (1863) have been incorporated within the canon of children's literature. At the same time, many books originally meant for children have their own adult editions, like the Harry Potter series (1997-2007) which was later republished with separate covers. "Children's fiction remains a fuzzy-edged category for the further reason that children read books intended for adults and adults may enthusiastically read books written for children" (Sunderland 3). As David Rudd aptly notes: "As with other texts, those 'for children' are fashioned out of the same materials: from a language that we share, using a way of structuring narratives and using a set of characters that carry the traditional markers of gender, class, ethnicity, colour and (dis)ability" (Rudd Editor's xiv). Therefore, since "children's literature is not hermetically sealed from either other literature or from the field of

cultural production generally" (McGillis 14) it does not make any difference if one uses the same literary tools developed to read adult literature to read children's literature, albeit with an added focus on "the theoretical implications of a literature that describes and, therefore, constructs children, and ultimately seeks an audience of children" (McGillis 16). Hunt proposes an alternative to analysing children's literature in his proposal of "childist criticism" - a term that suggests adults to read children's text like a child would do by temporarily shedding off the vast shared knowledge of previous readings, diverse in nature and accumulated in his lifetime. However, Nodelman is quick to point out the follies of this method. He writes:

> Hunt assumes it is possible not to know what one knows - that one can somehow imagine oneself to be less experienced and less sophisticated than one is. I don't believe I can or that, excepting amnesia, any adult can. As a result, I cannot accept another assumption Hunt makes - that it is possible for adults to know how children read. I simply don't know - can't know - how children might read, enjoy, and understand texts...Childist criticism assumes that it is possible to generalize about children's abilities, tastes, and interests. (Nodelman 84)

Instead he suggests that the best way to read a text of children's literature is as an adult self as since that is the only way that one can truly judge children's literature - a genre that is, after all, entirely at the behest of the adults. In fact, by reading as an adult using adult literary techniques, one might never lose track of the truth that children's literature "is centrally and almost exclusively an activity of adults" (Nodelman 85), that even children read these texts through an adult lens as forced upon them by the adult creators, producers and purchasers of children's literature and that this might eventually lead one to be in a better position to analyse the constructed nature of the child that supposedly lies at the heart of this genre.

The next segment of the chapter will cite the work of some of the most important critics in this field. These critics have used various strands of literary criticism in order to arrive at a better understanding of children's literature. In this fashion, they have contributed to decoding - albeit partially - the apparent simplicity that characterises the genre, thus facilitating its shift from being a marginal subject to that of a major one. In order to understand this shift, it is necessary to study the development of the critical and theoretical moorings of the genre right from its very beginning up till today and to see which ones have remained the most influential.

The Early Critics

Ever since the 19th century, critical responses to children's literature began to appear quite regularly in the west. *The Guardian of Education* founded by writer, critic and educationalist Sarah Trimmer in 1802 was the first journal which carried serious reviews of books written for children. It was very popular in those days. She was, therefore, responsible for the way the genre shaped up in the early period with her views on children's writing. Her major focus was on education and her target audience were the parents. Stressing the importance of choosing the 'right' reading material for children, Trimmer went on to establish a set standard of things that would benefit the child and others that would not. Early commentaries on children's literature following in the line started by Trimmer, further propagated these ideas and contributed to the early debates about what is suitable for the child. The suitability in these cases was further determined by the class and sex of the intended reader, who was generally assumed to belong to a middle-class background (Reynolds 39) - something that holds true to a large extent even to this day. Thus, the history of didacticism that has continued to impact children's literature seems to have begun quite early under the influence of Trimmer and her followers, along with the assumption of an audience that primarily belongs to the middle-class (ibid.).

In 1932, F.J. Harvey Darton published *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, a study that broke with this didactic model and celebrated imagination as the mainstay of children's literature instead. He charts out this agenda in the very first line of the book:

> By "children's books" I mean printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach the, nor sorely to make them good, nor to keep them *profitably* [emphasis in the original] quiet. (Darton 1)

In his study, Darton attempts a bibliographical-historical categorisation of children's literature, seeing children's literature as coming truly into being with the publication of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* championing "liberty of thought" (Darton 268). With this move from instruction to delight, he started a new trend of defining the birth of children's books. Although Rudd would point here to the fact that such 'delight(ful)' material with its celebration of bawdiness had always existed, the kind of 'delight' that Darton and eventually his followers referred to was more of an elitist kind - one that fit into middle-class sensibilities. Darton went on to influence many studies of children's literature based on the

move from instruction to delight, traced through the bibliographic developments of the genre. In doing so, as Reynolds mentions in *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (2011), Darton "pioneered a book-centred way of approaching the study of children's literature" (41) and also shifted "the focus of criticism from parents to those with a scholarly interest in publishing for children" (40).

The other critic who is known for his socio-historical approach to study children's literature is Townsend (one whom I have already mentioned in this chapter before) with his work *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature* (1965) who pre-empted many future studies by foregrounding the role played by the construct of the child in the development of this genre. It was also he who coined the terms "book people" and "child people" in 1968, to distinguish between educators and writers in this field of childhood studies, a concept that he further refined in an essay written in 1971, entitled "Standards of Criticism for Children's Literature". It was in the work of Paul Hazard, Professor of Comparative Literature at the College de France, especially in his work *Books, Children and Men* (1932, English translation 1944), that Reynolds notices a shift to a more "child-centred approach" (41) from the above mentioned approach of focusing on the point of view of the critics/theorists/writers of children's literature. Hazard is also said to have introduced the idea of studying children's literature within the domain of comparative literature, although as Emer O'Sullivan notes, the professor himself would not have agreed to this viewpoint (*Comparative* 6). His notion of childhood was a rather idealistic romantic one, seeing it as a life-changing force that could foster internationalism in recognising its potential as a "universal republic of childhood" (Reynolds 41) and thereby transcending all political and linguistic obstructions. Many key organisations like the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) have continued to propagate his vision up to the present (ibid.).

Most Influential Critical Approaches Used in Understanding Children's Literature

Among the various theories, **psychoanalytical and psychological approaches** have perhaps been the most influential in the domain of children's literature. The reason behind this might be accorded, as Reynolds points out, to the fact that children's literature has always been used by adults to make children understand themselves and those around them (42) before the clinical vocabulary for scientific understanding of the psyche had developed. The early children's writers drew heavily from both psychoanalysis as well as child psychology in the way they set up their plotlines (Reynolds 42). In some cases, as Reynolds points out, the

writers were also practising psychologists themselves, like Catherine Storr, the author of *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf* (1955) (43). From the 1980s and 1990s, there was a rise in psychoanalytical work on children's fiction. Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1978) is such an influential, albeit controversial, study in this field that uses Freudian principles in studying a child's psychosexual development through the study of well-known fairy tales. Bettelheim champions the idea that tales written for children must provide them a vent for their inner fears, a claim which has influenced many theorists after him. Nicholas Tucker, an educational psychologist, also contributed to this field of study. In fact, he developed it further by merging it with Jean Piaget's theories of child development in his work *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (1981). Carl Jung's idea of the child archetype is another influential theory that has dominated the field of children's literature and criticism. According to his theory, human psyche is divided into both the conscious and the unconscious, where the latter is further split up into the personal unconscious as well as the collective unconscious. This collective unconscious is made up of universal symbols that a person inherits by virtue of his birth into the world of humans - symbols that he calls archetypes - which is complemented by inborn complex patterns of behaviour in an individual known as instinct. The figure of the child is such a symbol, rather than a real being, that is born out of the imagining of the collective unconscious. As Reynolds mentions, many writers, especially those writing juvenile fantasy, have drawn from this Jungian "system of archetype" (44). Among the recent critical works that uses Jungian psychology to read children's literature is Susan Hancock's *The Child That Haunts Us Symbols and Images in Fairytale and Miniature Literature* (2009), whose primary focus is on children's fantastical/fairy tales.

The radical turn in this field was provided by Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan; or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984). Her work is considered to be a seminal contribution to the area of psychoanalytic studies of children's literature. Rose uses the Freudian theory as interpreted by Jacques Lacan to argue against the very possibility of children's literature. She writes: "Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility" (Rose 1), an observation which stems from the fact that it is adults who write, publish, criticise and choose books for children. Focusing on this inherent power imbalance that exists between the adult author and the child reader in this genre, Rose argues her case using the example of

J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. She takes up the case of simplicity that is often seen as the chief marker of children's literature and notes that it is a result of the Rousseauian and Lockean theories that see the child as a zero state of innocence. This propels adults to reduce the language within children's literature to the basic state in order to enable the child to develop an easy understanding of the material world outside. Rose writes:

> Language is imperfect (Locke) or degenerate (Rousseau), which implies the possibility of some perfect, or original and uncontaminated for of expression. For Rousseau, this is quite explicit. Language has gradually progressed into a set of abstractions, and has lost touch with the object, or sentiment, which it was originally intended to express. Its degradation exactly matches the decay which accompanies social advance. In *Emile*, therefore, the child is being asked not only to retrieve a lost state of nature, but also to take language back to its pure and uncontaminated source in the objects of the immediate world. (Rose 47)

Rose, thus demonstrates how the philosophical writings of Locke and Rousseau have had the biggest impact on the idea of childhood and have continued to influence the conception of the child right up to the contemporary age. She further argues how that influence has encouraged us to see the child as "a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state" (Rose 8). Therefore, by upholding the purity of the concept of the child, adults have tried to find access to a world which is not yet threatened by the complications of language (since children have a much simpler vocabulary as compared to adults) or sexuality (as adults choose to see children as essentially non-sexual beings). Childhood is thus merely a projection of adult fears and desires than what the child really is. It is the prime way that adults manipulate the realities of childhood and try to shape the figure of the child in a way that is not threatening to their idea of what childhood should be like. Thus, even though texts of children's literature may seem simple and innocent they hide underneath an interior that is "intrusive, controlling, and often downright sinister" (Hunt "Instruction and Delight" 14).

Highly innovative for its times, Rose's work went on to find new followers as well as generate a lot of controversy. Among the various criticisms hurled at Rose's study, one was to do with her choice of *Peter Pan* (1904) as her primary text, which was itself adapted from an adult novel *The Little White Bird* (1902). So, her argument that children's fiction is impossible because it rests on the concept of a childhood which does not exist in reality but is rather an adult projection of their desires, based on a text that was originally an adult text,

becomes dubious (McCulloch 142). Secondly, critics like Nodelman have found her views quite limiting in the way she ignores the ambiguity in children's literature, lying under the garb of simplicity. Rose chooses to see children's literature as a straightforward saga of purity when that is far from the case (Nodelman "The Case" 99). Furthermore, critics like Reynolds have pointed out their concern over Rose's way of seeing the child in children's literature as a champion of conservatism rather than having the potential of change as a "distruptive and creative force" like "Lyotard's monster-child" (Reynolds *Radical* 3). However, this did not stop critics like Karin Lesnik-Oberstein and Karen Coats from following in her footsteps and taking the use of psychoanalysis in children's literature studies to a new level. Rudd sees in it "a widening interest in what is now known as 'Childhood Studies', and especially in the theoretical shift towards poststructuralist analyses" (8).

Another tool that is quite popular in the study of this genre is the use of **linguistic, narratological and stylistic approaches**. I began this chapter with Nodelman's assertion of how simplicity of diction becomes one of the prime ways of distinguishing children's fiction from others, showing how integral this approach is in the understanding of children's literature. One could perhaps claim that this method would be the best way to garner an immediate understanding of what children's literature stands for. One of the first steps in this direction was probably taken by Zohar Shavit with her work *The Poetics of Children's Literature* (1986). Her main aim lies in uncovering "the universal structural traits and patterns common to all children's literature" in order to show how "children's literature is part of the literary polysystem...a stratified system in which the position of each member is determined by socioliterary constraints" (Eastman 144). According to her, several cultural systems make an impact on children's literature through its ideals and prejudices, making the genre fall back on well-established literary models rather than finding new ones. This also makes the genre continue to address a double audience of both adults and children, who are contradictory in their approaches. Her field of study traverses a diverse range of texts starting from the tales by the Brothers Grimm to Carroll's *Alice* to the Nancy Drew novels for children. However, Reynolds finds a problem with Shavit's choice of taking canonical texts from across the history of children's literature, as many of those texts were not originally meant for children (Reynolds *Children's* 45). Despite that, Shavit's method of rooting children's literature within a literary polysystem remained unique in the way it developed a new approach towards the genre through the use of the method of cultural semiotics.

Another theorist who uses stylistic and narratological criteria to develop an understanding of the narratorial stance in children's literature is Barbara Wall. With her work *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (1991) she proposes a system that makes it relatively easier to distinguish children's texts from adult ones - a problem that has always riddled debates about this genre. She points out recurring stylistic patterns in books written for children under the age of twelve throughout the history of children's writing and identifies three narratorial strategies frequently used in this genre. The first is the mode of single address where the narrators in the texts will "address child narratees, overt or covert, straightforwardly, showing no consciousness that adults too might read the work" (Wall 35-36). This mode, though very idealistic and practically very hard to achieve, can be increasingly seen in the writings from the 20th century onwards to the present age. The second mode is that of the double address, where the narrators "address child narratees overtly and self-consciously, and...also address adults, either overtly, as the implied author's attention shifts away from the implied child reader to a different older audience, or covertly, as the narrator deliberately exploits the ignorance of the implied child reader by making jokes that are funny primarily because children will not understand them" (Wall 35-36). This mode dominates early writing for children, where sometimes one can also find portions directly addressing the adults. Finally, there is the mode of dual address, "either using the same 'tone of seriousness' which would be used to address adult narratees, or confidentially sharing the story in a way that allows adult narrator and child narratee a conjunction of interests" (ibid.). Wall also notes that this kind of address "is rare and difficult, presupposing as it does that a child narratee is addressed and an adult reader simultaneously satisfied" (Wall 36). This mode is more visible in picture books or crossover fiction (books that appeal to children and adults alike). Through her observations, Wall makes it clear that it would have been impossible for adults to fashion out children's literature as a separate genre before figuring out a distinct mode of address suited specially for children. This in turn would not have been possible without developing an exhaustive conceptual understanding of the child as a categorical other.

Another major work that applies stylistic methodology to study the existing power structures within children's literature is John Stephen's *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992). Stephens argues that all discourses are loaded with ideology and the same is true for the narrative discourses in children's fiction. The ideology, according to him, lies imbued in the narrative fiction, both in the form of the actual story and in its significance (the

theme of the story, characterisation etc.). Ideological connotations can be overtly gleaned from the latter option, while it is implicit in the way the audience derives the story from the text exactly in a way that they believe it to exist in the actual world. This is how children end up internalising various stereotypes, believes Stephens. Thus, children's fiction, with its implicit and explicit presence of ideology, contributes towards indoctrinating the child with societal beliefs and values that help in its socio-cultural development. His study tries to combine critical linguistics with literary theory and practice in order to expose these implicitly lying ideological biases in narrative fiction for children. Explaining why his study centres around works of fiction, he notes: "Because ideology is...present as an implicit secondary meaning...fiction must be regarded as a special site for ideological effect, with a potentially powerful capacity for shaping audience attitudes" (Stephens 3). Moving further, he criticises reader-centred approaches to text based on Iser's formulations of the theory. His criticism is on the ground that the approach places so much importance on the text that it results in the subjectivity of the reader taking a backseat. This is evident in the way most children's fiction tries to mould audience opinion by encouraging the readers to identify with the character through which the narrative of the plot is focalise, leaving very little agency for them to exercise their own subjectivity. This becomes, according to Stephens, one of the main reasons why child readers become highly susceptible to the ideologies of the text, especially the ones that are not easily discernible. He tries to suggest ways in which readers can be made to resist identifying singularly with a focaliser, thus preventing them from being intellectually manipulated by the ideology underlying the text. His study is unique in the way it gives precedence to the subjectivity of the readers instead of the text. It tries to explore the interconnectedness of the ideologies of texts and the subjectivity of readers by using both critical linguistics and narrative theory. The study of language emerges as central to his methodology as he believes that: "it is through language that the subject and the world are represented in literature, and through language that literature seeks to define relationships between child and culture" (Stephens 5).

The one major palpable difference between adult's and children's texts is the presence and absence of graphic sexual content respectively. If at all present, the content has generally been prominently heteronormative. At the same time, children's literature has been known to perpetuate conventional gender stereotypes through its conscious segregation between "books for girls" and "books for boys". With the growth of gender studies, questions of **sex and gender** have become more and more productive in decoding children's literature. Special

attention started to be paid to how masculinity was celebrated in its active display of boys' outdoor pursuits while femininity remained confined within the domestic space. The first major study to represent this phenomenon was an edited collection by John Stephens, entitled *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinity in Children's Literature and Film* (2002). However, as Reynolds mentions, despite considerable advancements in diminishing instances of sexism within children's literature, there has been a revival of the traditional mores in the 21st century. Pink-washing of books targeted at girls, showing them inhabiting a world where appearances are of foremost importance, has resurfaced in the market. As for boys, they are being targetted through a display of machismo and strength over emotions. Renowned children's publishing houses like Buster Books, Usborne Children's Books, Igloo Books etc. are the ones involved in employing such gendered marketing strategies. Pointing out the dangers of such gendered representation as evoked by titles like *The Brilliant Boys' Colouring Book* (2011) and *The Beautiful Girls' Colouring Book* (2012) - published by Buster Books and conveniently colour-coded in blue and pink respectively - a campaign entitled "Let Books Be Books" was started by a group of parents on World Book Day 2014. The petition (drafted on Change.org) was directed towards "Usborne, Bustor, Igloo & other children's publishers" (Let Toys Be Toys n.p.). Since then, many publishing houses like Usborne and Parragon has come forward and agreed to stop producing such gender-specific titles. But at the same time, publishing houses like Buster, did not budge from their positions. Michael O'Mara, whose company owns Buster Books, went ahead and issued an official statement explaining their position by mentioning how such gender-coded books are easier to sell (Morrison n.p.). As of 2016, the latest update states how Igloo Books, Hodder Children's Books, Top That Publishers and Alligator Books, among others, continue to ignore the petition by bringing out such gender stereotypical titles (Tessa n.p.). Despite incessant work by critics like Kerry Mallan or Maria Nikolajeva in spreading awareness regarding the underlying sexism in such children's fiction, such instances as mentioned above clearly prove that this genre seems to have taken a regressive turn to its sexist past. The one good thing, however, is the fact that representation of sexuality has undergone a drastic change. Instances of alternative sexualities is becoming more and more common within children's literature. Although in many cases they have been portrayed in a rather clichéd manner, such attempts at moving beyond heteronormative constructs of sexuality have at least opened up the scope for further debates and discussions.

With the growth of **postcolonial studies**, children's literature - popularly seen as an Anglophone tradition gifted to the rest of the world - has undergone yet another revision. The history of the children's literature, especially from the west, shows how during Britain's colonial heyday, the market was flooded with adventure tales that propagated the myth of imperialism by glorifying Britain's racial supremacy. Many theorists have since used postcolonial theory to unearth underlying imperialist structures of these texts. Nodelman's essay "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature" (1992) took this approach to a different level altogether. He used Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to study the relationship between the adult and the child as depicted in children's literature to propose that this genre is primarily colonialist at heart whereby the adults assume the supremacy and authority of a coloniser in order to dominate children, thus reducing them to the colonised. The other way in which this method has been used to study children's literature has been in analysing how the cultural 'other' is portrayed within children's fiction. Revisionary readings of some of the canonical texts which were produced during the colonial period, to justify the colonising mission, are now being undertaken to search for images that present the colonised groups in a negative light. Bob Dixon's *Catching Them Young*[1] *Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction* (1977) has an entire chapter on "Racism: All Things White and Beautiful" which talks about how "[a] particularly strong aspect of the indoctrination carried on in children's literature is that of racism" (Dixon 94) where the black-ness of an object or person is generally associated with a negative connotation. Martin Green's *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (1979) analyses some classic children's adventure tales to show how the concept of adventure was used to perpetuate the myth of empire building for the sake of development of the uncivilised inferior races. Green's main contention is to show how these texts intended to indoctrinate the young with the logic of imperialism in order to encourage them to contribute to the project of empire building in the future, thus, preserving the legacy of Britain's superemacy. Kathryn Castle's *Britannia's Children: Reading Colonialism Through Children's Books and Magazines* (1996) looks at how Indians, Africans and Chinese were racially stereotyped in the way they were portrayed in British history textbooks and periodicals. Writers like Rudyard Kipling or R.M. Ballyntyne are undoubtedly recognised as colonialist writers today. At the same time, as Roderick McGillis mentions in the "Introduction" to *Voices of the Other: Children's Literature and the Postcolonial Context* (2000), there is a further recognition that colonialist attitude continues to manifest itself in contemporary texts like the Babar Books or the Curious George series that apparently seem innocent (McGillis Intro xxiii). Another recent work that puts on the postcolonialist lens to

study children's literature is Clare Bradford's *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (2007). She attempts a comparative study of children's fiction originating from former settler-colonies of New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States, in order to draw the conclusion that "non-Indigenous texts are much more likely than Indigenous texts to recycle the unquestioned assumptions of domiant cultures and their ingrained beliefs and convictions about Indigenous peoples and cultures...non-Indigenous texts are often oblivious to the historical and symbolic processes that have privileged whiteness as a normative mode of being" (Bradford 226).

Since the entire genre of children's literature derives its definition from its intended readership, many theorists have tried to apply **reader response and reception theories** in order to understand the genre better, even though it is clear that the intended readership is mostly a socio-cultural construct rather than a reality. As Reynolds notes, this method is prominently practiced among educationalists, for whom it is an essential prerequisite. It further helps their case that real children are participants in their empirical studies, and they try to make much of their position to record their responses for a better understanding of the genre from the vantage point of its intended readership. This methodology opens up new avenues of understanding the genre as child readers with their limited literary or world experiences react very differently to texts compared to adults. It gives the theorists the opportunity of studying how responses to the narrative may develop in a child from its infancy to adolescence and will help in differentiating them from the adult readers better. Aidan Chambers' essay "The Reader in the Book?" (1977) uses Wolfgang Iser's ideas of reader response theory to show how children's books employ the image of a "friendly adult storyteller". It is this storyteller's job to construct the implied readers who would be entertained by him/her but on his/her terms. If the storyteller thinks that there are certain situations in the story that would be too complex (or what they consider inappropriate) for the child reader to deal with, the storyteller will not hesitate in editing out those parts without even asking the implied readers for their opinion (Reynolds 52). This happens more in the case of children's literature, where there is an unequal power distribution between those who compose the stories and those for whom the story is composed. As Reynolds points out, Chambers' work in "many ways...anticipates that of Shavit and Wall, for his analysis indicates that the nature of the narrator-narratee relationship depends on the prevailing understanding of childhood when a text was written" (52), noting further that a special

literature for children would not have developed before the development of a unique way to address its child readers.

Yet another approach that is often used to study children's fiction is something that Reynolds would call the **"child-oriented" theory** (53). Hunts proposal for a 'childist criticism' which I already referred to before would be one of its prime examples. The need to generate a criticism unique to children's literature grew from the concern that children's literature studies lacks an original critical methodology, and hence has to use theories from other disciplines. While this is true enough, the failure of this approach - more of a "position than a methodology" (Reynolds 54) - stems from its ignoring the fact that adult intervention is an inevitable part of this literature even though it decreases as the child grows. Reynolds mentions that it was in fact Chambers who had first popularised the idea of finding ways to critically engage the child in reading its literature. His methodology included reading sessions and having children share their responses to material intended for them. Peter Holllindale's *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997) is another work that bears resemblance with such childist criticism claiming that both adults and children have access to a certain 'childness' or 'the quality of being a child' (Reynolds 55). For U.C. Knoepflmacher, Mitzi Myers and Maria Tatar, adults always have a mechanism to resort to a child-oriented approach by accessing memories of their childhood past. How much of one's adult self can be shed off to assume that childist position is a matter of eternal debate but that has not stopped theorists from trying to find the common ground which adults share with children and to figure out a method of reading children's literature with the real child in mind rather than a constructed image.

Finally we come to a theoretical approach used in the study of children's literature that has inspired an extensive proportion of research in this field. Starting with Darton, one of the earliest critics of this genre, the **historicist method** has become very popular within this field. The data subjected to evaluation has been of various kinds - "books, manuscripts, or other printed materials from the past as physical objects produced at a particular historical moment, or analysing competing discourses of power in fiction from the past, or contemplating how writers from earlier times have constructed images of, say, childhood or parenting or gender or war, or studying how the books were produced, sold, or received" (Reynolds 48). The major difference between a reader response approach (discussed above) and historicist readings of this genre lies in the fact that while the former believes that the construct of the implied reader is formed from pre-existing ideas, the latter argues that since texts have the

power to construct readers it is ultimately the text that affects the socio-cultural impulses that lead to the construction of the implied child reader (Reynolds 53). This method, however, has its own problems, including agreeing on what is children's literature, recognising that the construct of the child is ever changing and battling with this eternally fluid zone of literature where something that was considered children's literature once might not be even considered such anymore and vice versa.

Nonetheless, a study of children's literature is incomplete without tracing the historical development of the genre. Although this is a history that is primarily based on the development of the genre in the western tradition, it is important because it was in the west that the concept of children's literature was first recognised as a separate category. Eventually, it was this very western idea of childhood that went on to infiltrate other cultural spaces like that of India through the colonial contact, influencing the shape that it would take in those countries. Moreover, as has already been pointed out, children's literature shares a dialectical relationship with the concept of childhood, which in turn is dependent on ever-changing socio-historical forces. Being a receptional category, it is important to understand the nature of the intended audience first before one can analyse the nature of the literature written for them, because it is the former that goes on to impact the latter. One way to access this developing idea of childhood that went on to impact children's literature would be to trace the chronological development of this genre and note the nature of the intended audience that these texts address. This is where the historicist study of children's literature comes in. As Lerer put it:

> The history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and told back. (Lerer 1)

So, to sum up, there would have been no separate category of children's literature had there been no separate concept of childhood. However, this concept of childhood is not a stable construct but one that changes and evolves according to the socio-historical condition of its time. Thus, one way of accessing how the category of childhood evolved could be by tracing the chronology of the literature for children, because the idea of childhood as prevalent in a particular age is what determines the fiction that was written during that age. Eventually, one generation of texts leaves its imprint on the next generation through confluences or disjunctions, helping maintain a continuum in an odd way. Tracing the historical

development of children's literature will give us a glimpse into how there have always been children (but not in the sense that we recognise them now), how the modern idea of childhood was born, how it changed with the changing ideologies of time, and how those changes went on to impact the literature written for children during that time. It will also help us trace those qualities of children's literature that have stayed constant despite the changing dimensions of childhood and in turn defined its literature and ultimately the genre.

There is another purpose that such an historical arrangement of children's literature can serve. It can help analyse if there is an underlying universal structure in the way children's literature develops across cultures, but with the understanding that most of written history is selective in nature. It is shaped by the dominant ideologies of an age, privileging a certain 'arrangement' of data and is hence never fully complete, by virtue of leaving out the alternative narratives of those that occupy the margins. In an attempt to discover this structure in the case of children's literature, Shavit finds that:

> *...a similar historical model is common to all children's literatures both in their inception and later on in their development* [emphasis in the original]. The same stages of development and the same historical patterns recur time and again in all children's literatures, transcending national boundaries and even temporal ones. Regardless of when and where a system of children's literature began to develop, whether its emergence took place a hundred or even two hundred years later, *all systems of children's literature known to us, without exception, pass through the same stages of development. Moreover, the same cultural factors and institutions are involved in their creation* [emphasis in the original]. (Shavit 27-28)

Agreeing to her stance and further elaborating on it, Maria Nikolajeva writes:

> Children's literature has more or less gone through similar stages in all countries and language areas. First, existing adult literature, as well as folklore (folktales, myths, fables), adapted to what is believed to be the needs and interests of children, according to accepted and dominating views on child upbringing. Next, didactic, educational stories written directly for children appeared. Most often these two periods overlap. Children's literature system began to detach itself from the adult system, sometimes even isolating itself in a kind of ghetto. Usually, books from this period are mentioned only briefly in histories of children's literature. (Nikolajeva x)

It would be interesting to study the development of the western tradition of children's literature in the light of these observations and then eventually determine how much truth it holds when we finally move on to the study of Indian English children's literature.

Tracing the Historical Development of Children's Literature in the West

Although Ariès had professed that childhood did not exist in the medieval period - a view that remained influential for a very long time and inspired its own brand of followers - historians today "have recognized not only children but also the outlines of a childhood in that long period between ancient and modern times" (Fass 3). It was definitely different from the modern understanding and much shorter than it is today, but as Fass points out it was not as radically different as Ariès had suggested. The assumptions he made led one to believe that with the birth of the idea of childhood as a separate category, childhood became a privileged site of existence overnight, when it has been now pointed out by historians that privileges of childhood were differentially available to a select few then - "a status to which some children have historically had much more acess than others " (Fass 2) - as it is even now, a state "deeply affected by circumstances such as status, class, wealth, and poverty" (Fass 2). Similarly, many others like Keith Bradley and Margaret King have also proved through examining various sources that "childhood was hardly an invention of the last four hundred years as Ariès argued. Rather, even two thousand years ago children were regarded as critical to both the future and the present; then, as now, they were objects of care and observation" (Fass 5), if only for a privileged few. Cunningham would also go on to argue that the child had been a focus of philosophical debate in the medieval period, too, and that there is plenty of evidence to prove the extent to which pre-modern society involved itself in the child-rearing practices (McCulloch 4). The only way probably that it has changed considerably is that the boundaries of privilege have gradually increased to include a larger section of people as the state of childhood was increasingly advertised and accepted by nations and its people as a state of universal aspiration.

Lerer's *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* tries to show that the tradition of children as readers can be traced back as far as the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines or the Anglo-Saxons. He mentions how the Greek and the Roman children had access to passages from *Aesop's Fables*, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. These passages were selected to teach them the art of citizenship, heroic qualities, moral lessons as well as to assume gender accepted roles. The way these materials were made accessible to

children, could be seen as precursors to various other genres that have continued to feature in writing for children, as Lerer argues. Thus, even though more work needs to be done in this area to see how such traditions have had enduring effects on the modern conceptualisation of the genre, it would be unwise to deny any such impact and assume children's literature to have suddenly sprung into being in the modern period. However, despite such an understanding, it would also be significant to point out that even though children had reading material available for them, these were shared by the adult audience too, notwithstanding the fact that these "would have been excerpted into manageable sections" (Lerer 19), accompanied by illustrations (in most cases) and presented in a way that along with simple reading it would also facilitate oral recitation (Lerer 21). Moreover, whatever might have been the presentational techniques, they were always meant for educational purposes. The few other materials that existed, like jokes, anecdotes or even folktales, which often were extremely frivolous and bawdy in nature, were also shared by adults and children alike and as Rudd points out, were more "frequently transmitted orally" (Rudd 4) than otherwise.

How and when did child readers begin to have literature written primarily for them instead of having them share materials with the adult readers? The history of its print culture can be traced back to the 17th century, if one leaves out the case of *Aesop's Fables* that was translated and printed by Caxton as early as 1484. Before that, the children's market was dominated by materials that they shared with adults or produced by hand for private purposes. Initially, there were very few items printed, the reason which accounts for the long shelf life of most of these materials. One such work was *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1685) produced by John Amos Comenius, a Czech educational reformer, initially written in German but made available in its English translation within the span of a year. It began with the alphabet and went on to teach children about everything in the world starting, from creatures and plants to abstract concepts, through a combined use of words and pictures. At this time, the period of childhood was much shorter, occupying the very early period of an individual's growth. So the literature of this period was mostly involved with the purpose of teaching children how to read, after which they would shift to reading materials like the chapbooks which would be shared by the adults, given that both would have had reached almost similar reading capabilities by that stage.

The first major change in the perception of childhood must have developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as Britain moved from Catholicism to Protestantism. Children were seen as instruments that would aid in this transition by influencing the new

generation away from the previous religious beliefs. The biggest difference was in the way sin came to be associated with children. Baptism was no longer considered enough for washing away the traces of the original sin. Under the Puritan system, it became the responsibility of the parents to control their children and cleanse them of their sins. Within the family unit, the parents - especially the father - became the source of authority to which the powerless child submitted. Since child mortality rate was quite high around that time, the pressure was to achieve that sinless state as soon as possible, before the child was lost, and so parents had to begin early. Around this time, appeared James Janeway's *A Token for Children, being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths, of several young children* (1671-72), one of the most influential books for children. Despite its focus on death, which as McCulloch says Janeway had a firsthand experience of, having carried out pastoral work during the last Great Plague of 1665 (McCulloch 31), this book was described as "the most entertaining book that can be" (McCulloch 31). This also proves that death had not always been a taboo area within children's literature, and the extent to which the dominant ideological structures of an age had an influence on this outlook. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) and *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686) were other such examples.

The next big change was brought about by John Locke, whose *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) changed the way one looked upon a child. From being seen as a vessel full of sin, the child started to be regarded as a blank slate or the tabula rasa, whose potentiality knew no bounds. Therefore, the right education was of prime importance as the child could be moulded by the correct ways of child-rearing. This view was championed by others like Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and Robert Owen, as a result of which adults became more particular about maintaining the right surrounding environment in order to raise a 'good' child. Locke's recommendation of books like *Aesop's Fables* and *Reynard the Fox* was treated with utmost seriousness, and despite concerns about the evil effects of reading fables for not telling children the truth, these books continued to remain popular for a long time (McCulloch 10). McCulloch mentions how the influence of Locke's philosophy spread into the seventeenth century and gave rise to an increase in the number of publication of children's books, starting around 1740, because Locke believed that children should have more books written for them (9). With the decrease in the child mortality rate and the increasing influence of Locke's philosophy, the period saw a cultural turn with regard to childhood (ibid.). From being seen as young adults, children now began to be seen as unique

individuals with their own needs and wants. Corporal punishment began to be viewed upon as brutal and parents began to be more protective towards their children and assuming a "kindlier attitude" towards them (Stone 439). McCulloch mentions how this attitude also increased the level of surveillance on children's reading materials and toys (9). The Enlightenment, which arose as a major cultural influence around this time with its emphasis on reason and logic, followed in the Lockean paradigm and had a huge impact on the concept of childhood. From being born into a sinful state that needed to be redeemed, childhood began to be seen more and more in a positive light (ibid.).

The other theorist who also had a great impact on the Enlightenment and children's literature was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, his theory about childhood was a little different from that of Locke's. He saw the child as inherently innocent, like a "young plant" (Richardson 122) that was untainted by the corrupt adult world and therefore should be allowed to stay like that as long as possible. His work entitled *Emile: Or on Education* (1762, English translation in 1763) propagated most of these views. He was suspicious of imaginative literature and considered *Robinson Crusoe* as the only worthwhile text because of its "plain realism" (McCulloch 10). Childhood was celebrated as an ideal state that adults could only access through memories, creating a desire to return to that state of bliss. The Romantics were highly influenced by these ideas and many of them went on to incorporate them in their writings. The Romantic idea of childhood innocence, is believed by many critics, to have left the most lasting impression on children's literature.

Despite the impact of the Enlightenment, which brought reason and logic to the forefront and generated a sense of religious scepticism, there was an Evangelical revival towards the end of the eighteenth century which had both good and bad effects on childhood. With the purpose of imparting moral and biblical teaching, members of the Evangelical movement set up Sunday schools that played a key role in imparting education to children from a poor background. The Religious Tract Society, for instance, which was responsible for distributing religious stories for cheap, was founded in 1799. Books were written which were overtly moralistic and evangelical. The flipside was that they went back to the Puritanical way of viewing childhood as an essentially sinful state. Their main motive was to regulate children's behaviour and discipline them in order to save their souls. Although they were optimistic enough to believe that everyone could be redeemed, the stress was more on instruction rather than pleasure. Understandably, they saw fictional literature, especially ones with fantastical elements, as immoral and evil.

Around this time, when Enlightenment, Romanticism and Evangelicalism were imposing their cultural influence on children's literature there was this other development that would go on to influence children's literature in a rather prominent way. The period between 1696 and 1704 saw the literary fairy tale (or the written version of the oral art form) gaining prominence in France, although solely as an adult genre at this stage. The most important work to capture this market was by Charles Perrault, which was later translated into English in 1729. These tales were translated and distributed across the continent in the format of chapbooks (McCulloch 33). There were oppositions to these tales too, mainly because of the fantastical elements that these stories used which were seen as spreading the culture of 'lies' but in spite of that these tales remained popular and eventually managed to enter into collections intended specifically for children like Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; or, Little Female Academy*, which was first published in 1749 (McCulloch 34). Eventually, fairy tales began to be adapted specifically for children. Their aim was to impart morals to children in the shape of direct messages (McCulloch 33). These new tales, tailored to suit the needs of the intended child-reader, were didactic, moralistic and - from a modern point of view - sexist in nature, introducing into the genre certain features that have remained till today, like the use of flat characters, simple binary oppositions, conventional gender roles, reversal of fortune and finally happy endings (McCulloch 34).

The eighteenth century, thus, saw a variety of social, political and cultural upheavals - all of which contributed to the shaping up of a distinct cultural identity of childhood which is much closer to the idea of childhood as one understands today. Finally, with John Newberry's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744), the moment came to fruition and an era of print culture began, with books targetted specifically at child readers. The commercial print market for children's literature shot to popularity with their novelty and their technique of mixing entertainment with instruction. These books were not so affordable and hence was only available to a privileged few - the poor had to still satisfy themselves with cheap chapbooks. But the concept of children's literature had finally made its mark in the minds of people as a category separate from that of adult literature (McCulloch 36; Reynolds 11).

In nineteenth century Victorian England, the Industrial revolution had a major impact on the idea of childhood. The horrible working conditions in which children were made to work in the factories, made reformers agitate for changes in the workplace. The idea that children should not be sent to work at an early age but instead be schooled, started to become the norm. This led up to the formulation of the Education Act in 1870 which made education

compulsory. It also secularised the educational space. Though the idea of childhood for someone from a privileged background was still far different from that of a child from a poorer background, childhood increasingly began to be seen as an idealised natural space for all children. Having inherited the Romantic ideal of the innocent child combined with the growing awareness that a child should be removed from the workplace, the Victorians started shaping the idea of childhood as per their own desires as a place of escapism - "a new Eden in a fallen world" (McCulloch 15). Childhood was beginning to grow as an idea and to spread across a larger group of people. It began to be recognised as an ideal state of existence where one could imaginatively access a past where the individual still had access to the divine - since a child was considered to be closer to god (McCulloch 10). Childhood became a place where the adults could escape from the rigours of everyday life and find peace. Special care was also being taken to ensure that children from less privileged backgrounds could also nurture their innocent selves. The care for children's innocent souls lay mainly with their mothers. At a time that saw an increasing polarisation of gender roles, given the changing employment patters and the emergence of separate spheres, "the Romantic and Evangelical reverence of the relationship between mother and child" (McCulloch 16) became ever more prominent. While before fathers had been responsible of the child's education and upbringing, now the responsibility shifted to the mothers within the domains of the home, which began to be seen as a feminised space. Moreover, boys were sent to boarding schools and taught there to cultivate manly behaviour, while girls were expected to stay at home or attend institutions that functioned as finishing schools. At the same time, writing became more child-centric (even within adult literature) and less instructive in nature. The use of strong child protagonists became more frequent, ones who would show adults the pathway - as evident in the works of Charles Dickens (McCulloch 38-39).

Reflecting the changing times, the domain of children's literature was also changing, negotiating the transition between the old world and a new, modern era. There were still many writers who continued to write in keeping with the traditions of the old certainties, depicting a close-knit and loving family unit, clear gender divides, and the authoritarian presence of an adult and the obedient child. The genres that dominated this period were fantasy, adventure, school stories, and the realist domestic tales (McCulloch 38). But the Victorian age also saw the birth of some extraordinary literary texts for children that challenged these old norms and went on to be regarded as classics within this genre. Many books kept up the façade of conventionality, but as Hunt puts it, "[b]eneath their conventional

surfaces, they [were] about empowerment, subversion, growth, liberation, finding a voice, finding *depth*" (Hunt "The Same" 78). This is how children's literature entered into its first golden age, starting from around the 1850s and leading up to the First World War. The stories, characterisation or the endings of texts written during this period followed a conventional pattern, but underneath there was an attempt at challenging the existing norms that gave very little agency to the figure of the child. Children's literature became less preachy. Actions in the narrative started being focalised through the child's perspective instead of a dictatorial adult narrator. Adult figures began to be portrayed as less reliable, while child characters were shown as having a mind of their own, not afraid to rebel and exercise their own will. The most crucial text that managed to assimilate these new changes and changed the face of children's literature forever was Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). To this list, Hunt also adds Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1882) and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). All these texts appeared to be conformist but brought about changes that encouraged children's writers to experiment with ambiguous plotlines, feisty women characters, absence of authority figures - either a missing father or a mother, and a move towards open-ended closures where the status quo is destabilised (Hunt "The Same" 75).

The period in between the two World Wars, from about 1918 till about 1939, saw a bit of a lull in terms of major innovations within children's writing. A group of new writers emerged during this time, who came up with individual series of children's fiction that were set in a rural past. The First World War had left people disillusioned with the world and the literature of this period can be seen to make sense of that feeling. Hugh Lofting came up with the *Dr. Dolittle*-series and A.A. Milne's *Pooh*-books made a grand entry. Both these series tried to hark back to a rural retreat where people still knew what it was to feel safe (McCulloch 41, Hunt "The Same" 78). J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) also tried to resurrect that pastoral world of bliss through fantasy. This "pastoral scene of nostalgic domesticity" was also seen in Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*- and *Secret Seven*-series (McCulloch 41). The prominent features of children's fiction in this age was thus represented by a desire to go back to a safe past, but at the same time there was a realisation that the home was no longer as safe as depicted; rather the home was always seen to be under some threat in these writings. At the same time there were still strong resonances of the writing styles of the previous generation that remained dominant in the market be it the "boys' school stories and

war stories with stiff-upper-lipped heroes; girls' school stories populated by madcaps and anti-soppists and featuring crushes, campfires and hockey sticks" (Hunt "The Same" 78).

Within twenty years from the end of the Second World War, children's literature again picked up pace with new experimentations, thus ushering in the second golden age. The biggest contribution of the second golden age of children's literature was the emergence of a new variety of children's fiction by the 1960s that was referred to as teenage or young adult fiction. There was also a sudden spurt of new writers experimenting with different forms of writing for children, like Judy Blume, who immediately managed to find herself dubbed as the most controversial writer with her neo-realist writing that broke many existing taboos about death, disease and sexuality. This age saw a move towards more open-ended plotlines, unreliable authoritarian adult figures, and a clash between the adult's nostalgic hankering for the past on the one hand, the child's aspirations for the future world on the other, rife as that might have been with threats of corruption and danger (McCulloch 41, Hunt "The Same" 80-81). However, the Romantic notion of childhood innocence was still very much present as writers were seen trying to reconcile old traditions with new ones. This age could be seen as an age when writers were trying to come to terms with a nostalgia for the past and a looking forward to a future that was in the process of change and uncertainty (McCulloch 42). Even though this led to the closures of the texts to become more open-ended and ambiguous, the attempt was still there to make it reassuring, a fact that is brought forward beautifully in Tucker's *Rough Guide to Children's Books 0-5 Years* (2002) where he shows how majority of the texts follow this pattern.

In the late twenty-first century, the appetite for children's literature hit new heights, especially with the recent success of the *Harry Potter*-series making many theorists refer to it as the third golden age (McCulloch 42; Hunt "The Same" 81). The ever increasing demand for children's books has led to mass production and a market increasingly motivated by a profit-oriented commercial logic. This brings with it a more formulaic narration, relying excessively on clichéd plotlines that have been overused within this genre. Publishers are not very interested in trying out innovative storylines for fear of not being able to get their buyers' approval and suffering financial loses. Hunt sees this as a return to a "bland, safe, neo-conservatism" (Hunt "The Same" 81), which McCulloch explains as "a potential return to the didactic moralizing of books reflecting and supporting the dominant social ideologies of contemporary society" (McCulloch 43). However, that does not mean that there have been no new developments within this genre. Even though these texts use some of the familiar

patterns, say of journey from the home to the scary outer world and back to the home again, the endings are now left more unresolved. An example is provided by the *Harry Potter*-books, where the protagonist's return back home to his muggle relatives after each term is more like a return to a dysfunctional unit than the comfortable haven that home stands for in this genre (McCulloch 43; Hunt "The Same" 82). The attraction of fantasy continues, as evident in the number of vampire and werewolf stories, but there is also an attempt at showcasing the fragmentary modern world of urban family life in some authors. The family units are no longer represented as stable, parental figures are no longer shown to be flawless and the child is no longer portrayed as a happy-go-lucky individual but one who is busy battling with growing up anxieties (McCulloch 42). Writers have started using a lot of intertextual references, where allusions are not limited to just children's fiction but also includes adult texts, spread over multiple medias. This explains the popularity of the crossover fiction - one which appeals to both children and adults alike (McCulloch 42), for given the information boom in the digital age, both adults and children are in a position to access a shared knowledge base.

Conclusion

So this is the grand historical narrative of children's literature, as it can be seen from the Anglophonic perspective. In this conventional history, Britain has always been placed at the head, closely followed by America, whose children's literature market was also essentially a product of the British legacy (Hunt *Children's Literature* 10). Given their broadly similar patterns of development from religion to education to reading for pleasure, the two histories have often been conflated together as representative of a universal category of children's literature as it has evolved over the ages. With the world slowly becoming a global family, attempts have been made to open up this history to include other voices too. Ever since the Second World War, there has been a drive towards internationalism, with the purpose of promoting international understanding and a Utopian "universal republic of childhood" (O'Sullivan 1). But as Hunt has pointed out, this has largely been a "one-way traffic from English" (Hunt *Children's Literature* 21). Even with the increasing focus on analysing children's literature through the multicultural and postcolonial lens, the ambit of study has been pretty limited. This is the case of Hunt's collection *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (1995), whose chapter on "Internationalism" (by Peter Hollindale and Zena Sutherland) is only interested in the study of convergence between British and American children's literature, while its chapter on "Colonial and Post-Colonial Children's

Literature" (by Michael Stone, Roderick McGillis and Betty Gilderdale) takes up the cases of Australia, Canada and New Zealand alone.

Anticipating a criticism against such choices, Hunt points out this limitation in the "Editor's Preface" itself. He writes:

> But perhaps the most obvious exclusion is the non-English-speaking world. This book is about English-language children's literature, in its several major dialects; it charts the interchange between Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, colonial and post-colonial. While both Britain and the USA have their own cultural spheres of influence, their impact in terms of children's literature on other cultures, as in India and Africa, and latterly in Europe, is not the business of this volume. For all the obvious differences between the USA and New Zealand, for example, there is a certain cultural cohesion. For example, British girls in the late nineteenth century may have looked enviously at their more independent cousins, the four *Little Women* or the *Seven Little Australians*, but the gap between them was small compared to the gap between European and African narrative forms. (Hunt Editor's Preface xiii)

However, in order to understand the reason behind such choices one could in fact take up Hunt's own concerns regarding such "one-way traffic" of internationalism and wonder "how far is all this an innocent traffic, and how far does it represent invasive colonialism?" (Hunt *Children's Literature* 21). This is a question that is critically discussed in more recent studies of this genre, for instance in O'Sullivan's chapter on "The development, culturespecific status and international exchange of children's literatures", where he states that: "Most descriptive models are based on developments in the industrialized countries of north-west Europe, the birthplace of children's literature, and are often presented as universal rather than culture-specific accounts..." (O'Sullivan 45). Even in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (1996) edited by Peter Hunt and Sheila Ray, although there is a section on world children's literature which features India, the essential theoretical paradigms are entirely based in the western tradition. Similarly, out of the many critical works that I referred to in the course of this chapter, only a handful mention any non-European country let alone India. Even in studies exclusively designed to look at the multicultural or postcolonial aspects of children's literature, the extent to which the critics are willing to venture out is not far beyond Australia, Canada or New Zeland. There is hardly any mention of the colonial 'other'

like that of India or Africa. The convenient excuse given for such exclusion is the fact that Indian or African cultures are not as culturally cohesive to European narrative forms as that of Australia, Canada or New Zealand. Such tendencies toward cultural homogenisation in studies that purportedly take a global view of children's literature, make it even more necessary to question truth claims made by universalist approaches as represented, for instance, by critics like Nikolajeva and Shavit (already referred to in quotes above), which utterly ignore huge portions of the written world.

The next section of this chapter will try to assemble a body of evidence, especially in the context of Indian English children's literature, that will address such continued exercise of "past imperial supremacies" - to borrow a term from Heather Scutter (21) - in the field of children's literature in former British colonies. It is high time that a genre like children's literature, whose own marginal position in the field of literary studies has already been bemoaned by various critics, critically engage its own underlying structure of hierarchy and salvage the histories of those that have been neglected so far. Children's literature is a powerful genre in the way it exploits the power imbalance that exists between its producers and its consumers, but what will be even more interesting to note is how this power equation translates in the postcolonial context where the former colony is still seen in the shadow of its former coloniser's in particular departments. The next section of the chapter, will draw an extensive genealogical map of the development of the genre in India in order to study how despite having inherited the concept of children's literature as a separate category from the west, Indian English children's literature has come of age. It will attempt to show what legacies of the western understanding of childhood it has retained in the process, and where the breaks are that make Indian English children's literature stand apart. It will show how the anxieties of nationhood in the period right after independence made this genre in India assume a particular nationalistic form, which has slowly been changing to suit the needs of a global society in the last two decades. It will further show how such changes make or break stereotypes that have characterised assumptions about the postcolonial nature of India for long. It will show how such trends are trying to break the nation's strong dependence on imported books in order to create a market of its own. In doing so, how much of it is succeeding in truly representing the heterogeneous hybrid identity of a nation like India and how much of it has still remained the mouthpiece of the powerful dominant voices within the culture excluding the presence of the other marginalised voices.

II. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN INDIA

Introduction

Although Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Education" of 1835 is generally regarded as the beginning of a systematised English higher educational policy in India, it was as early as in 1817 that the Calcutta School Book Society had been set up which revolutionised primary school education in India and paved the way for the eventual turn that colonial education would take. It evolved out of the efforts put in by the missionaries in the early years of colonisation, who were the first to introduce the natives to English language in their proselytising enterprise. They started off with translating and printing the Bible in various indigenous languages but eventually became preoccupied with setting up primary schools. In August 1812, the London Missionary Society under the championship of Robert May, "an educationalist of no mean power" (Lovett 16), laid the foundation of a cluster of primary schools in the modern day Chunchura region of Bengal. By June 1815, the number of schools had gone up to sixteen and by 1818 there were already thirty-six of them with a pupil count of almost three thousand (Gupta 58). Although there were already Hindu and Muslim religious seminaries and other indigenous vernacular schools spread out in the region, there were no standardised pedagogical practices. The missionaries found it extremely challenging to run the newly founded schools in the absence of proper textbooks and school curricula. Analysing the situation, a review report addressing the society was filed at the end of the year 1813, which stated:

> The books which shall form the means of conveying knowledge to a nation at present immersed in worse than Egyptian darkness, become an object of serious consideration...Even in Britan, where Christianity in professed by all, no one thinks of confining children at school wholly to the scriptures. ("First Report of the Calcutta School-Book Society" as quoted in Gupta 58)

To combat this situation, the missionaries decided to design a basic school curriculum themselves and produce textbooks at their own Baptist-run Mission Press at Serampur, located at a forty kilometre distance from Calcutta, in order to supply to the schools.

The year 1813 was also important for a different reason. As Gauri Vishwanathan points out in the chapter "The Beginnings of English Literary Studies" of her book *Masks of Conquests: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989): "English literature made its

appearance in India, albeit indirectly with a crucial act in Indian educational history: the passing of the Charter Act in 1813" (Vishwanathan 23). This act renewed the East India Company's charter by another twenty-years, but with an additional resolution which stated England's obligation toattend to the welfare and development of its colony by working towards the betterment of the lives of the illiterate and immoral natives. This brought about two major changes in the way Britain had so far envisioned its relationship with its colony, Vishwanathan continues: "one was the assumption of a new responsibility toward native education, and the other was a relaxation of controls over missionary activity in India" (Vishwanathan 23). Till then, the English parliament had consistently refused to officially sanction large scale proselytising work in India by the missionaries for fear of appearing threatening to the natives and causing an insurgency that would make them lose their precious colony. But the new resolution fostered newer ties between them (although some amount of preventive checks continued to be exercised on the missionaries), leading to the beginning of an active association between both parties which was immediately reflected in the field of primary education. The biggest concern facing them was to find a way of introducing the natives to modern education without directly resorting to any religious means or hurting their indigenous sensibilities. Abhijit Gupta notes in his paper "The Calcutta School-Book Society and the Production of Knowledge" (2014) that these two impulses were adequately addressed by the missionaries associated with the Calcutta School-Book Society. The Society largely depended on the missionary sector to draw up the course structure, the teaching materials and the methodology, making sure that no religious books were used as part of the course design. The main objective of the Society, immediately after it was set up in the year 1817, was "the preparation, publication and cheap or gratuitous supply, of works useful in Schools and Seminaries of learning" (*The Thirteenth Report of the Calcutta School-Book Society* as quoted in Gupta 59). Although there was a strict order of not "furnish[ing] religious books" in any part of the design, there was nothing said about the exclusion of "moral tracts, or books of moral tendency" (ibid.). In fact, use of such material was encouraged given the fact that it was believed that such material had the quality of improving character without "interfering with the religious sentiments of any person" (ibid.).

What proved immensely advantageous for the Society was the active presence of the local intelligentsia, harvesting a healthy coming together of the coloniser and the colonised, and generating "the first wave of Indian demand for Western curricula and training, articulated nearly two decades before Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* of 1835"

(Gupta 59). It was the Society's aim to broaden the base of participation from the locals, as a result of which the group took adequate measures to have representatives from among the Hindu pundits, as well as the Persian and Arabic scholars. There were also representatives of the Company along with the missionaries. The locals who were part of this Society were from among the urban Anglicised elite, including the likes of Radhakanta Deb, a scholar belonging to the wealthy nobility of India, who was "instrumental in compiling the two-part *Niti Katha* of 1818-1819, a translation chiefly from Aesop's fables" (Gupta 60), which remained a part of the school reading lists for a very long time.

With this eclectic group of people, the Society began its work of framing and producing a basic curriculum for the Indian primary schools. They closely followed the model that had been drawn up by the missionaries in 1813 with the addition of "Selection of Scripture Ethics". Bengali was made the language of preference, followed by Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit in that order. Three language subcommittees were formed "one for English, one for Bengali, Hindi and Sanskrit, and one for Arabic, Persian and Hindoostanee" (Gupta 60). Although, at this stage the number of English books produced was far less as compared to its counterparts in the Indian languages, the use of the English language was seen as gradually becoming the language of the learned just as Latin and Greek had been in Europe. To demonstrate this, Gupta cites an interesting passage from the *Second Report of the Calcutta School-Book Society's Proceedings* as follows:

> The English language possesses strong claims to the early notice of this institution. Though it were unreasonable to expect that it can ever become the vernacular language in the country, it ought certainly to be considered as an important instrument for the diffusion of useful knowledge, as it will probably, ere long, become the learned language in India, as far as the Latin and Greek languages have been considered in Europe. As far as we can open to the Natives the presence of the English language, so far we put them in the possession of true knowledge, Natives learned in the English may become highly useful instructors of their fellow countrymen; they may become the repositories of science in the country, and no very remote period, may communicate the tone of general information, and perhaps also a portion of that intellectual rigour, which we ourselves have received through our learned forefathers of Europe. (*Second Report of the Calcutta School-Book Society's Proceedings* as quoted in Gupta 60-61).

As Gupta aptly points out, this can be seen as a precursor to the state of Macaulayism that was to spread over the country in another two decades. With "two titles" exclusively in English and a large number of "bilingual titles and translations from English-language sourcebooks" (Gupta 61), the Society began the trend of importing books from the west.

The popularity and usefulness of works like *Niti Katha* prompted the Society to sanction a collection of European tales as proposed by Tarachand Datta, who had been employed by Captain Stewart of Burdwan. As Gupta mentions: "The work would be called 'Manoranjanetihas or Pleasing Tales' and would be issued in two formats: a monolongual edition of 2000 to be printed from the Mission Press of Calcutta and a bilingual edition of 1000 to be prepared under the superintendence of Rev. Pearce" (Gupta 63). One of the largest expenses incurred by the Society was sanctioning a print of *Britis desiya bibaran samuccay, Abridgement of the History of England from the rule of Julius Caesar to the Death of George the Second* in 1820, which was translated by Felix Carey (the son of William Carey, who was in charge of the Serampore Mission Press) from Goldsmith's *History of England*. The Society also spent a large amount of money on illustrations, as they were considered "a necessary part of the pedagogical process" (Gupta 64). The number of bilingual titles that were produced kept increasing with time, with the effect that *Dig-darshan* - the first monthly magazine in Bengal published with the intention of spreading educative information among the youth - was simultaneously published in bilingual editions along with a third version which was published solely in English.

By 1818, the Calcutta School Society, an independent educational institute, had been founded under David Hare's initiative, in order to "introduce identical teaching methods at different schools, reconstruct and develop old schools, and build new ones if necessary" (Mukhopadhyay n.p.). This foundation further increased the number of schools that were under direct British superintendence. The requirement of books for all these schools were satisfied by the Calcutta School-Book Society, conceptualised and printed at their own press. Although the boundaries of the Society was mainly confined to the city itself, by 1821 it had published "as many as 1,26,464 books and pamphlets in several languages which included Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Bengali, Sanskrit and English" ("Calcutta School Book Society" n.p.). By 1833, English district schools had been set up at Delhi, Benaras and Allahabad (Srinivasan 25). Thus, as Gupta points out, the Society's intervention was as crucial to the development of the print industry in Calcutta as it was in popularising the use of English books as initial reading matter for the children of the country. The large scale exposure to

English books among the Indian population that followed, especially after 1835 is now known too well, but the Calcutta School-Book Society was definitely responsible for setting up the groundwork initially and making the native market more conducive and welcoming towards English books. So in 1835, when the Education Act was proposed by the then Governor-General William Bentinck on Macaulay's advice, which made English the formal language and medium of instruction in Indian education and channelled a move from an education based on the English language to one that was exclusively dependent on English literature, some of the structures were already in place. By 1917, an exclusively English education had largely become a norm in the colleges in India. English gradually became a mark of elitism and first-generation Indians who had been brought up in a westernised form of education, encouraged their children to attend English-medium schools and sometimes even sent them abroad for higher education. Thus, along with importing English texts from the west, India also imported the idea of children's literature as a separate category, since before this, reading materials in India were largely shared by both adults and children alike. This section of the chapter will look at how the western impact transformed the idea of children's literature by first looking at the concept of childhood as it existed in the pre-colonial period, followed by the colonial period and finally the period after independence.

Children's Literature and the Idea of Childhood as it Existed in Pre-Colonial India

The pre-colonial period was dominated by stories from the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and their numerous adaptations. India also had a rich culture of oral tradition in the form of ancient lore, classical tales and folk tales, which were popular among the masses. But there was no separate literature for children. In fact, there was no separate category of childhood in the Indian tradition. In the study *Inner World: A Psycho-analytical Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1981), Sudhir Kakar attempts to "systematically identify a *cultural awareness* of the child" by looking at the "views of children expressed and reflected in various parts of the Indian cultural tradition" in order to explore the "traditional conceptions of the nature of children and childhood in India" (Kakar 190-191). He takes up passages from ancient law books, books on traditional Indian medicine, the epics and ancient and medieval literature that deal with children in order to draw his inferences. One problem with this study is that the picture of a childhood it builds up is exclusively that of an upper class Hindu identity which is essentially male. This is even admitted to in the disclaimer that "large parts of the Indian tradition of childhood are solely concerned with boys and ignore, if not dispossess, girls of their childhood" (Kakar 191), but not systematically redressed. The

other problem with the work is something Kakar himself mentions right at the beginning of his study when he points out that of the many variations of the Hindu myth and its interpretations he has made a conscious effort to choose the best known popular versions but "may not always have successfully resisted to choose the versions which support [his] theses most aptly" (Kakar 5). This provides the author with a considerable amount of agency which, however, can lead to misguided conclusions, as one of the reviewers of this book also mentions: "The author does not systematically evaluate the myths, and does not indicate how the Hindu people themselves analyze the myths. We do not learn what myths are considered most important to the people, nor whether these myths are the basis of the value system and the action patterns of the Indian people. The interpretations provided are arbitrary, and must be considered as hypotheses that require further investigation and support" (Kerr 796). Nevertheless, Kakar's analysis can be helpful for understanding why an essentialist Hindu identity of childhood has remained dominant in Indian children's literature.

The first instance that Kakar takes up is from the *Laws of Manu*, an ancient text of Indian law which has been highly criticised for its casteist and sexist nature. It places the child at the bottom of the social pyramid in the company of "persons belonging to the lowest castes and those who have lost their caste by practising forbidden occupations, the mentally deficient and the mentally disturbed, slaves and hired servants, actors and vagrants, the old and the sick, newly-married women and those who are pregnant (Kakar 191). The adult is expected to treat the child with protective indulgence, which also gives them the authority to practice corporal punishment on them in instances of disobedience. Kakar justifies these views on the ground that "brutal forms of child abuse were common mistreatment" (Kakar 192) in other ancient societies as well.

Moving on, he takes up the case of childhood treatment as prescribed in Ayurveda - a traditional system of Indian medicine. He discusses how this system is markedly different from the area of modern paediatrics, since within Ayurveda it is believed that child development begins "not with birth but with conception" and the "pre-natal period is as important as the (if not more so) as the period of childhood proper" (Kakar 193). The reason behind this is the belief in rebirth where the soul from a past life is said to enter the new body at the moment of conception - an outlook that undermines the child-ness of a child, since it is seen only as a continuation of its past adult self. From the third month of pregnancy, the foetus is seen as a unit in conjunction with the mother and the mother's every wish is considered as an indication of what kind of an adult the child will grow up to be. This also

explains why mothers are seen as integral to a child's life in India (a trait which was also seen developing in the Victorian period in Britain), making child-rearing an exclusively feminine domain. In an exceptional way, however, this also gives a lot of agency to the expectant mother in an otherwise patriarchal society, making it mandatory to indulge all her cravings. This also indicates how insignificant the phase of childhood itself is considered to be within Indian tradition where society is even willing to renegotiate the position of a woman, who otherwise occupies the lowest rung of the social ladder, by placing her before the child, although ultimately it might be the woman who is blamed for a miscarriage or for giving birth to a girl or for the adult growing up to be somebody of ill repute.

In depicting the representation of childhood in the Indian epics, Kakar takes up the case of the *Mahabharata* in particular and mentions that out of the "three hundred and fifty odd references to children" (Kakar 196) in it, most are mere records of birth, some of them are instances of adult mourning in the event of a child's deaths and the rest are all attached to the adult's intense longing for a male child, as it is only a son alone who can salvage the parents after their death. The other references to childhood are all scattered. Some are of "unrelieved disgust" (Kakar 198) because of the child's association with the procreative act. At other times they are idealised as beings untainted by desire and thus godlike. Kakar then goes on to discuss the way childhood is depicted in other works of classical Sanskrit literature. In none of them, he points out, are children understood separately as a category irrespective of their parents. He then takes up the case of the classics of the regional languages - especially the case of the Hindi literature that sprang up in the medieval age under the Bhakti movement - and shows how Surdas and Tulsidas reverse this treatment towards childhood by placing the child Krishna and the child Rama at the centre of their literary creations respectively. These are celebrated childhoods, but then these are childhoods of divine figures. The divine child is allowed to be spontaneous, naughty and fickle, but in a real child, such behaviour is not always appreciated. Thus, the divine version of childhood is only an idealised and "exalted" version of the real child, one which Kakar calls the "utopia of Indian childhood" (Kakar 204).

Finally he refers to *ashramadharma*, a scheme within traditional Indian thought where human life is categorised into different stages which are defined by certain 'tasks'. He writes: "*Ashramadharma*, however, focuses largely on the period of youth and adulthood, and neglects to assign any formal importance to the stages of childhood" (Kakar 204). In order to prove his point, he takes the example of Ayurveda which breaks down childhood into

different formal units in terms of age, each transitional period marking a ritual that is practiced by society in gradually initiating the child into the world order (like *namakarana* or the naming ritual, *chudakarana* or tonsuring rites, *vidyarambha* or initiation into formal education and finally *upanayana* or the thread ceremony which marks the end of childhood). Kakar notes: "By ceremoniously marking the transition points of a widening world of childhood and placing the child at the centre of rites that also command the intense participation of the whole family, the *samskaras* heighten a sense of both belonging and personal distinctiveness - that is, they strengthen the child's budding sense of identity" (Kakar 205). Childhood in Indian society had always been understood in terms of a larger picture, as Kakar points out, and never as a separate category in its own right. The problem with understanding childhood in this way lies in the fact that this larger picture is always a reflection of the dominant cultural structures, which in this case is prominently an upper class male Hindu identity.

In the pre-colonial era and also after independence, when India was trying to develop a national identity by harking back to the country's rich mine of oral and folk traditions, the major influences on literature for children have been these traditional sources, classical or folk, which have been representatives of the dominant culture. These sources namely the epics, the Brahmana Texts, the *Kathasaritasagar*, the Puranas along with a large number of ancient Indian Sanskrit classics, have all been essentially Hindu in nature. Even the folk influences on Indian children's literature, as pointed out in A.K. Ramanujan's oft-quoted statement that real children's literature in India mainly "lives in tales of passion and trouble" buried in its rich oral tradition which "are only a grandmother away", has been made mainly in reference to "Hindu families" (Ramanujan 8). Thus, from sharing reading material with adults to having the same material tailor-made to meet the adult decreed suitability criteria for children's literature, Indian children have essentially been fed stories dominated by the idea of only one kind of childhood.

It is in particular the *Panchatantra* tales which are believed to have had the greatest impact on children's literature, not just in India but also outside. This group of stories, set against the frame narrative of a king commissioning Vishnu Sarman - a revered brahmin - to teach his wayward sons 'niti', or the art of successful living through stories that would both instruct as well as entertain, uses the structure of animal fables to string together a series of moralistic tales. Originally written in Sanskrit, these tales were first translated into Pahlavi (middle-Persian) by Burzoy, a scholar physician who had come to India from "the court of

King Anushirwan in Persia", around 550 C.E. and carried out of the country (Jafa "The National Seminar" 9), where its popularity gave rise to many other translations and adaptations of the original. Michelle Superle, in her study *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl* (2011), points out how didacticism has been and remained one of the prime characteristics of Indian children's literature and attributes it to the influence that the *Panchatantra* tales have had on the way the genre has developed in the country. Having said that, one must also note that although these tales were set in the form of addressing young boys, there is no concrete evidence that they were primarily meant only for boys, or for children alone. Composed around the third century B.C. when reading material was not specifically categorised according into adults' or children's, the tales from the *Panchatantra* might have easily been shared by both.

So, as can be seen, in the pre-colonial period there was no separate understanding of the child. The family was considered to be the basic unit of life and the child was primarily understood in terms of the family (Jafa "Children" 1). In fact, the period of childhood was also very short in the Indian tradition, especially for the girl child. As Nilanjana Gupta and Rimi B. Chatterjee mention in the introductory chapter of *Reading Children: Essays on Children's Literature* (2009):

> ...in India, [until] recently in history the average life expectancy had been so low that most people couldn't afford the luxury of a 'childhood'. The child's first encounter with public life was usually its own wedding, conducted in some cases before the child was even old enough to walk. For girl-children especially, this made the whole idea of childhood a cruel joke...no one had any clear idea of the difference between a girl and a woman, or indeed if there was a difference. (Gupta and Chatterjee 9)

Against such a cultural backdrop, where a distinct category of childhood did not even exist, there was evidently no separate literature for them. Literature, largely comprised of an assortment of classical and folk materials, was shared between the adults and children, even though women remained largely marginalised and in most cases excluded. Referring to the status of women as readers within the Indian family set up, Gupta and Chatterjee mention:

> Even in the richest households she would be expected to work as soon as she could speak and carry out simple tasks, a servitude that lasted until death. The

> taboo against reading and writing for women in orthodox households was maintained by superstitions, such as the belief that a literate woman's husband would die leaving her a widow... In social groups of less status, the moral prohibition against women's reading was less effective than the material scarcity of resources, all of which were invested in young males who were regarded as future breadwinners and saviours of the family. (Gupta and Chatterjee 10)

Thus, in one way or the other, women hardly had the privilege of being considered as readers until very recently, a fact that is reflected in the dominance of male characters in Indian children's literature. Moreover, most of these materials - which were to be found in both oral or written form - were essentially Hindu in nature, despite the diversity of the Indian population. Although in India the concept of children's literature was largely inherited from the west, after independence there was a revivalist tendency within the genre with the aim of establishing a nationalistic identity and promoting a feeling of patriotism among the children of the newly independent country. It is for this reason that much of the children's literature from the early period of free India depicts the story of an essential Hindu male childhood, a trend which continues to influence the literature in this genre to this day.

Colonial Impact on Children's Literature and Childhood Studies in India

Going back to where we had started, it was then the coming of the British, the proselytising work undertaken by the missionaries and the eventual setup of the Calcutta School-Book Society that paved the way for the development of a modern idea of childhood in India. As has been reiterated time and again by theorists of Indian children's literature like Meena Khorana: "British colonial rule had a tremendous impact on children's literature in the subcontinent" (Khorana xi), especially after the Education Act of 1835. With the Society laying the groundwork for English studies in India at the primary level, (text)books began to be written solely for children for the first time in India, even though only for educational purposes. This move not only popularised the idea of having a literature separately for children, but also influenced the regional languages to realise the need for the same and urged them to come up with their own contributions to the field. Starting with the production of textbooks, there was a gradual diversification to include magazines (beginning with the Bengali children's magazine *Pashwabali*) and eventually stories for children. This period also saw the beginning of fiction writing in English for children in India, whose success inspired other Indian writers of adult fiction to take it up professionally - although more as an

experiment at this initial stage because writing for adults still remained their main priority. Nevertheless, what it definitely did was to familiarise the people with the idea of having a separate literature for children and inaugurating a new phase of children's writing.

In Bengal, the impact was the strongest. Given that the British had established their initial base in Bengal, the Bengalis had been the first ones to come in contact with the modern idea of childhood. The fact that the printing press which produced these books for children was first established in Serampore by the missionaries and then eventually moved to Calcutta, further helped the process. Eventually, by making Bengali the language of preference in 1813, the Society encouraged the movement in Bengal even further. Consequently, the first children's magazine in India was one in Bengali named *Pashwabali* (Dutta 2, Srinivasan 31). Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, often referred to as the father of children's literature in India (Srinivasan 31), emerged as the most prominent figure in the development of Bengali children's literature with his creation of the Bengali primer called *Barnaparichay* which is still used to teach children the Bengali alphabet and the basics of reading and writing (Gupta and Chatterjee 11). The other work of his that earned him quite a reputation was *Betal Panchavimshati* (1847), a retelling of an old Sanskrit text, which is a collection of twenty-five fantasy tales set within a frame narrative, where king Vikramaditya promises a tantric that he will capture Betal (a celestial spirit) for him, but is thwarted each time in his efforts because of a riddle-game that he agrees to play with Betal before he can finally capture him. The growing exposure to English literature influenced writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore as well, who themselves started writing for children that draws on Romantic ideas about childhood. Their works, as Gupta and Chatterjee point out, tried to build up an 'Indianness' derived from classics like in *Shakuntala*, legends like in *Rajkahini*, and heroic historical tales like in *Katha o Kahini*. Abanindranath also went on to write a story entitled *Buro Angla* which was in fact based on *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* by the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf. Rabindranath branched out to write several plays, a dance drama, stories and his own series of primers called the *Sahaj Path* for children. The Ray family (Upendrakishore, Sukumar and Satyajit) also playeda huge role with their own printing house, where they wrote and published extensively for children, starting with Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's *Tuntunir Boi* and *Ramayana for Children*. However, it was the enormous success of Reverend Lal Behari Day's *Folk Tales of Bengal* (first published by Macmillan in 1874) and Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakumar Jhuli* (1901) that first made people realise how lucrative it was to publish for children. This was followed by

Premendra Mitra's stories about *Ghanada* and Narayan Gangopadhyay's tales of *Tenida* (Gupta and Chatterjee 12). Thus, children's literature had developed into a full-fledged flourishing industry in Bengal quite early as compared to the other regional languages, although as far as question of gender representation goes, it was as biased as the others in its blatant absence of girl characters.

Children's Literature in the Some of the Major Regional Languages in India

Looking at the history of the development of children's literature in the other leading languages of India like Assamese, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Tamil and Telugu, one can find a similar trajectory. Before the coming of the missionaries, all the regions, where these languages were spoken, depended on the rich oral and folk traditions of the country. Various local adaptations of the epics were available but there were no books solely for children. Here too, proper printing of children's books began with the coming of the missionaries, mainly starting with textbooks and then venturing out to include translations from tales like the *Panchatantra* or *Hitopadesha*. As Gupta and Chatterjee validate: "in almost all Indian languages, the first books produced for children during the colonial era were either translations of the *Panchatantra* or retellings of *Aesop's Fables*" (Gupta and Chatterjee 13). Apart from this, there was also an increase in the number of translations from western works - both classics as well as folk/fairy-tales (more popular titles included Hans Christian Anderson's *Fairy Tales*, Daniel's Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) - into the various Indian languages. Finally, mostly under the supervision of the English, children's magazines were established in these different languages that further promoted the initial period of growth of the genre in the respective language.

In Assam it was the *Arunodoi* magazine (1846) and the periodical *Jonaki* (1889) that initially impacted the field by publishing translations from western and Indian sources respectively (Phukan 270-272). In Gujarat, the earliest books to be brought out for children were in the form of textbooks, written in the Gujarati language and introduced by the missionaries. The formation of the Gujarati Vernacular Society in 1848, under the championship of Mr. Forbes, a British administrator, also proved beneficial for the growth of children's literature in Gujarati. Encouraged by the founder of the society, poet Dalpatram took to writing for children and once the process had been initiated, other writers joined the league. *Baljivan*, founded in 1919, was one of the earliest Gujarati children's magazine that

further helped in the spread of children's literature in Gujarati by publishing "reading material for children of eight years and above" on a monthly basis (Mohan 329). In Kannada, the first primer was brought out in 1878 by Cha Vasudevaiah (Rao 364). In Malayalam (spoken in the state of Kerala, which has the highest literacy level in India today), the first book written for children is believed to be *Cherupaithangalkku Upakarartham Englishilninnum Paribashappetuthiya Kathaka* published in 1824, where the author translated stories from English. *Balan*, established in 1948, is considered to be the first Malayalam magazine for children (Nayar 380). In Marathi, magazines played a huge role and *Balbodhmewa* was the first magazine to be brought out in the year 1872 which mainly featured translations of Biblical stories (Jafa 38). In Oriya, lyrical materials based on a storyline ('Chautisa', 'Koili' and 'Boli') were initially used by the Abadhans or the early teachers to teach children the Oriya alphabet - although it was not exclusively for children. After Orissa (where this language is mainly spoken) was brought under the British rule in 1803, Oriya children's literature took a major turn with the introduction of the British educational policy (Mohanty 412-429). In Tamil too, children's magazines played a huge role in the propagation of children's literature, especially the quarterly periodical *Bale Deepihai* which was set up by the Christian Society for Nagercoil in 1840 (Ananthakrishnan 430-443, Jafa 38-39), to which writers from Sri Lanka and Malaysia also sent in their literary contributions (Jafa *International Companion* 804). In Telugu, the understanding of children's literature as a separate category came with the coming of the Britishers, just like in the other languages. Its development also followed a similar trajectory, beginning with translations mainly from the *Panchatantra*. However, unlike the other languages, Telugu magazines dedicated solely to children came only by the 1940s, as before that it was published as only a small part of adult magazines (Satakarni 444-457).

It is perhaps better to take the case of Hindi children's literature separately, as it formed one of the larger subsections of children's literature in the regional languages in India during the colonial period. And also because, it is possibly the only branch of regional children's literature that can still compete with the production of Indian English children's literature on an equal footing today. It was as early as 1803 that writing for children had started to be published from Fort William College in Calcutta under the guidance of John Gilchrist (a scholar known for his expertise in Hindi and Urdu), a period which saw the production of numerous translations from Sanskrit, Bengali and English into Hindi. This picked up with the establishment of the Indian Press at Allahabad and 1889 onwards many

Hindi writers started bringing out Hindi titles and magazines for children (Bajpai 344). Thus, magazines played a huge role in the history of Hindi literature for children too, which has grown to be almost at par with its English counterpart in the present age. *Bal Bodhini*, which was started in 1874 and was chiefly concerned with girls' education, is believed to be the first children's periodical in Hindi. The other periodicals that followed in its pathway and went on to become extremely influential were *Vidyarthi* (1914), *Shishu* (1915) and *Balsakha* (1917) (Chandra "Siting" 28). Nandini Chandra's doctoral thesis "Siting Childhood: A Study of Children's Magazines in Hindi, 1920-50" (2001) conducts an extensive research of these Hindi periodicals that formed the staple diet of the North Indian children during colonial times. She mentions how these periodicals formed "the dominant literary mode of the times" (2) and helped stamp the identity of the child subject as a separate category, much more than the children's books available during that time did. Her study is an attempt at analysing the kind of subjectivity that these periodicals generated and the effect that these early constructions of child subjectivity had on the way that the genre developed in the future. She notes how this subjectivity grew as a response to two extreme positions into which the creators of these periodicals could be segregated into - one influenced by the tenets of the colonial education and the other by the ongoing nationalist movement. She finally concludes that despite the various internal cracks that these divisions led to, the child as a subject had more agency then and was culturally more adept than the present child who she believes is "only used to the encapsulated knowledge of the contemporary culture industry" (Chandra "Siting" 315).

Early Indian English Children's Literature

The first story book written in English for Indian children is believed to be Mary Sherwood's *Little Henry and His Bearer* (*Chota Henry*), which was published in 1814 and, set against the backdrop of India. It explores the "relationship between an English child and an Indian child who attends on him, who is eventually converted to Christianity" (Srinivasan 32). Novels of this kind, generally referred to as the "missionary novels", became very popular among many western writers leading to a spate of such writing. *The Last Days of Boosy* (1842), also believed to be written by Sherwood, belongs to this category of writing and serves as a second part to *Chota Henry*, continuing the sad story of the Indian servant Boosy's life story till his death. Apart from proclaiming the greatness of Christianity, this novel also includes "long passages denouncing Hinduism and the 'evil' nature of its followers" (Khorana "India" 169). Charlotte Chandler Wyckoff's *Jothy: A Story of the South*

Indian Jungle (1933) is another such novel that exposes the superstitious nature of Hinduism as opposed to Christianity. The life of the protagonist and her family is shown to change dramatically, and for the better, after their conversion to Christianity. The main aim of these novels, as clear from the above instances, was to sing the praises of Christianity and encourage conversion. There were also stories written by western writers that focused on the exotic nature of India through adventure stories like Christine Weston's *Bhimsa, the Dancing Bear* (1945) or tales based on royal intrigues like Jean Bothwell's *The Thirteenth Stone: A Story of Rajputana* (1946), all of which ended up exoticising the Indians and presenting stereotypical images about the place. The best- known among them, however, was of course Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*-series. He was also known for writing *Kim* (1901), a novel which glorifies the British Raj.

Besides these western authors, there were also Indian writers who wrote for children in the English language by the twentieth century. Dhan Gopal Mukherji is usually considered to be the first one to do so, referred to many as the "Indian Kipling" (Srinivasan 34). Although by the time he was writing for children he had already immigrated and settled down in the United States, his fiction managed to get across an insider's viewpoint - rich in intricate details about the Indian landscape and blended occassionally with Indian myths - in a way that was different from his English counterparts. He mainly wrote wildlife fiction set in India, which included *Kari the Elephant* (1922), *Jungle, Beasts and Men* (1923), *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924), *Ghond the Hunter* (1928), *The Chief of the Herd* (1929), and *Fierce Face: The Story of a Tiger* (1936). His best-known novel was *Gay-neck* (1928), the story of a carrier pigeon and his companion Hira, who serve the Indian contingent of the British army during the First World War. The book was very well received and Mukherji won the Newberry award for it. Another Indian writer in English who had joined the league was Reginald Lal Singh, who published the *Gift of the Forest*, together with Eloise Lownsberry in the year 1910 in New York. However, unlike Mukherji's novels, this one was, as Srinivasan points out, obviously written for a "non-Indian readership" (Srinivasan 34) as is evident in the way it "perpetuates the usual exotica and stereotypes about India: teeming wildlife, sages chanting Sanskrit hymns, cobras being calmed by music, and maharajahs on tiger hunts" (Khorana 170). Finally, there is R.K. Narayan, who won millions of heart with his *Swami and Friends* (1935), a novel that revolves round the unforgettable character Swami and his adventures in the beautiful fictional Indian town of Malgudi.

As can be seen from the above trajectory sketched above, the colonial educational policy led to a "marked class structure in education as upper class children were generally instructed in English, hence producing an English-speaking elite that was educated at western-style schools, reading and demanding imported books in English" (Khorana xii). Thus, the children's literature of the colonial period was mainly dependent on imported books (a trend that still continues), severely stunting the development of any original children's literature within the country. But at the same time, it also bred a new group of writers - both Indian and European, who brought about a revolution in the Indian children's writing industry and also ushered in an era of Indian children's literature in English.

Children's Literature and Childhood Studies in India, Right after Independence

Even though the basic foundation had already been laid in the pre-independence period itself, it was still a half baked industry with very little 'quality' work, in fact very little work in general, at the time of independence. As Khorana mentions in the Introduction to *The Indian Subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young Adults: An Annotated Bibliography of English-Language Books* (1991):

> ...at the time of independence from the British in 1947, there were very few books written specifically for children. The studies of K.A. Jamuna and Arvind P. Dave, who have done extensive research on the history and development of children's literature in the subcontinent, indicate that...adult writers in all the major languages wrote a variety of juvenile books and magazines because of their concern for the educational and moral development of children. While there were some poems, songs, folktales, short stories, and non-fiction available to children, the fact remains that there was a scarcity of books to extend class material, and the concept that reading is an enjoyable and entertaining experience that satisfies the basic needs of a child was nonexistent. (Khorana xi)

This lack was exacerbated by problems linked to the fact that India as a nation that had been ruled over for centuries by colonial powers and had just attained freedom. Immediately after independence, India's main concern was to create an overarching national consciousness that would serve as a "glue" which would hold "the new and rather variegated nation together" (Gupta and Chatterjee 14), and generating stories from the new nation's perspective was considered one way to do it: "political awakening was followed by a cultural renaissance" (Rao 68). And, just like in the western tradition each religious and cultural shift also affected

the attitudes towards childhood, the same was true for India. Like the west, children "were seen as an important ideological vessel in the influencing of the population from previous...beliefs" (McCulloch 6) and in order to penetrate the deepest layers of the society, indoctrinating the child with the new cultural turn was considered to be the best way. This was a tendency that was recurrent in the history of all cultures, be it "[t]he cases of the Puritans first in England and, later, in America, or the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany 150 years later, or the Egyptian Enlightenment at the turn of the twentieth century", each time the prime targets were children leading up to their respective "ideology, linked with a strong educational doctrine...which formed the basis of official children's literature" (Shavit 28).

Thus, at this stage the Indian children's literature was mainly guided by a postcolonial consciousness. Children were essentially seen as "the promise of a New India after 200 years of foreign domination" (Khorana "The English Language" as quoted in Superle 23) and the aim was to use the space of children's literature as a space to disseminate nationalistic ideology. As Mohini Rao points out: "...there was the anxiety to assert our Indianness and national pride, make children proud of their country and their national heritage" (Rao 68). The immediate reaction was to find inspiration in Indian traditional literature - the only domain of literature that had remained untainted by colonial influences, and one which had remained popular with children in India even though it was not solely meant for them. This move was further guided by the fear of a newly formed nation on the cusp of modernisation that it would lose its rich cultural heritage to "changing family patterns, technology, rapid urbanization, mass media, and western-style education" (Khorana xix) unless it was immediately revived. Thus, there was a flurry of rewritings of the old classics and folklore. Nationalistic concerns also led to the "publication of biographies of national and religious leaders" (Khorana xviii). The rest of the market was dominated by poor quality writings heavily aping the western mode. The biggest impact was made by the *Amar Chitra Katha*-series, a comic book conceptualised by Anant Pai and published for the first time in the late 1960s by the Indian Book House in Mumbai. Pai understood the real potential of the comic book medium and the pulse of the new nation. He borrowed stories from Hindu mythology, converted them into the comic form and brought about a revolution in the Indian comic-book scene. Despite the fact that *Amar Chitra Katha* was largely responsible in "reproducing Hindu cultural consciousness in the name of preserving the 'national heritage' of India" and making the "transition from 'Hindu' to 'national' seem so natural" (Chandra "Constructing" 1), its clever use of the concept of childhood innocence combined with Hindu religious

iconography proved to be a winning combination that went on to create a lasting impression in the domain of Indian children's literature. The best part was that, because of the way it marketed itself, it had the approval of both the government as well as the parents and went on to do roaring business. But, in terms of original fiction, there was still nothing on offer and likely so, because the industry was plagued by multiple problems from all corners.

The immediate concern was to first focus on literacy rather than invest in creative writing. Kamal Sheoran aptly noted: "in a country where thousands of children are doomed to illiteracy, the urgent need is to provide textbooks and other basic needs for rudimentary education. At this point, to speak of children's literature as a specialized field is far-fetched and fanciful" (Sheoran 127). Till the 1970s therefore, as Khorana points out, the market was dominated by textbook publishing. The most important objectives were "the transmission of knowledge, character building and moral values" (Khorana xii). Textbooks were modified to suit the need of a nation still trying to come to terms with its newfound identity. The level of creative writing being attempted was limited to developing classroom readings with exercises aiming to expand the pupil's vocabulary and grasp of the language. In the context of India, this stress on language education alone in the initial phase after independence was understandable given its situation of low literacy, because of which the publishing of children's creative literature had to take a step back for the time being. Writing in 1991, Khorana demonstrates the gravity of the situation by providing the following statistics from various sources:

> In 1981, the literacy rate in India was 36.23 percent. According to World Bank estimates, by the year 2,000 India will have the largest concentration of illiterates in the world (*Challenge* 24). Female literacy rates are much lower, especially in rural areas, than those for males throughout the subcontinent. Another disturbing factor is that since the population in developing countries is increasing more rapidly than school enrollment, the number of illiterates increases every year. In addition, because the dropout rate is very high most children who receive only first-level schooling are likely to become illiterate after the age of fifteen (Gupta 10). (Khorana xiii)

On top of that, since the existing infrastructure was primarily invested in increasing the literacy level among its people, there was no further avenue left to set up adequate children's libraries. So, reading for children began and ended in class and did not extend to reading

outside the classroom. The lack of lending libraries or inadequate collections at the ones which existed, has been a recurring concern raised by the members of the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), the Indian section of IBBY, founded in 1981 for the promotion and development of children's literature in India. In an article entitled "Better Books for Children" (1989), the secretary general of the association Manorama Jafa mentions that out of the 2,500 libraries in India only 500 have children's sections and only 30 are exclusively for children. She also mentions how school libraries do not encourage children to borrow books and serve more as a "custodian" of books rather than as "a motivating force for promoting the reading habit" (Jafa 4) - a situation that I have had personal experience of even though I went to a convent school in Siliguri (the third largest city in Bengal) and passed out as recently as 2005.

The next big problem in publishing books for children in a country like India was (and still remains) its multilingual situation. Khorana mentions that "India...has sixteen major languages with over 1,500 dialects...although English is widely used for official work...With so many languages, no book in any one language can get wide circulation" (Khorana xiii). As of 2013, these numbers have gone up to "22 languages and 1652 dialects" (Jafa 2). In reality, however, only a very small percentage of the population uses English as their first language and the ones that do mainly belong to an affluent backround. But despite that "over half the books published each year are in English" (Khorana xviii). Although such developments in the English language has also encouraged the regional languages to follow suit, they have been unable to compete with the English books at the same level. This has been a prime reason why most of the leading characters in these books have been representative of only one kind of essentialist childhood that enjoyed by the urban, middle class children (Superle 4). Nonetheless, in a country of multiple languages, English is increasingly being seen as an emerging link language that can bring together the variety of people spread across the length and breadth of the country. Recognising this merit of the English language (which has been now suitably 'Indianised') and the role English has come to play in the global scenario, the language started to be "taught with varying degrees of competence at school levels" (Srinivasan 35). Citing from S. Radhakrishna's Report of the University Education Commission (1950), Srinivasan writes how English was prescribed to be taught in "High schools and in the universities" in order to keep in touch with the modern world. A three language formula was introduced to make sure that all children in India should be educated in English, Hindi and their regional languages (Srinivasan 35-36). However, as we stand today,

we are still far removed from having attained this goal as a result of various impeding forces, and even now out of the majority "[o]nly about three percent of India's population speak English" (Baldridge n.p.). So despite the idealistic vision of considering English as a pan-Indian link language, in reality it is "actually an elite one" (Superle 26) making the English language children's books in India "exclusive cultural constructs which ostensibly serve to foster language skills as well as to provide entertainment, but also indoctrinate hegemonic values and norms, shaping the young members of the socioeconomic group that will soon become the new nation-builders" (Superle 27). This had been a prominent feature of Indian English children's books even till a decade back, featuring mainly urban middle-class protagonists and catering to a narrow view of the Indian society exclusive of the under privileged section of its rural population belonging to the lower castes and classes. Superle notes: "These seemingly democratic, inclusive texts are deliberately produced primarily for middle- and upper- class urban Indian children, thus perpetuating a built-in exclusion of other Indian children who lack the financial, geographic, and linguistic means to access this body of literature, and are therefore not exposed to its 'prepatory' outlook on life, which could be seen as providing moral and intellectual tools for future success" (Superle 28).

My thesis attempts to read the Indian English children's books produced in the last two decades by a new group of publishing houses, whose aim it has been to counter such exclusivist tendencies in their writings and create books that are truly representative of the heterogeneous and multicultural reality that is India. Although, the target audience of these books still remain a privileged few, these books are at least attempting to familiarise them of the other marginalised childhoods that are still a reality in this country. While my thesis can primarily be looked at as an extension of Superle's work, it attempts to go beyond the scope of her work. By looking at novels that have come into the market as recently as 2017, I extend the timeline of Superle's work (which looks at novels between 1988-2008) by almost another decade. Moreover, while Superle's work looks at both Indian English texts as well as texts from the Indian diaspora, my work is strictly a study of Indian English novels. Finally and most importantly, while Superle's work focuses mainly on questions of nationhood and girlhood, my study goes far beyond that by including questions of caste, class, communalism, disease, death, disability, violence, war, crime and broken families.

The other problem faced by children's publishing houses in India was "poor financial resources of the reading public" (Khorana xiii), which exists even today. With a large chunk of the society living below poverty line in India, only a select few belonging to the upper

classes can actually afford to invest in supplementary reading material for their children. Children, who have no financial independence, can hardly buy their own books unless it has been facilitated by their parents. This means that the market logic of children's literature in India has been challenged right from the beginning to produce "books for a limited readership with low purchasing power" (Khorana xiv). Moreover, there was (and still is) a deficit in proper marketing strategies and means of distribution. In the children's literature industry, where the production cost is much higher as opposed to the adult book industry, this can adversely impact the final sales figure further intensifying the economic losses incurred by the publishers in this field. Therefore, despite having the technical agency, Indian publishing industry hardly found good reason to invest whole heartedly in children's literature for a very long time, resulting in books made of low quality paper and falling far below the literary standard. As Arup Kumar Dutta mentions in "Promotion of Literature for Children: An Author's Point of View", succinctly summing up all these points in his observation:

> The commercial publishers, of course, have a point. They are in the business not for fun or charity, but for money. Publishing a good book for children is more costly than its adult counterpart. Because the same book has to be sold at a cheaper price than books for adults, the margin of profit is lower. Moreover, a book for children is more difficult to produce because it must fulfill certain criteria of attractiveness in appearance and acceptability in content and language. If, after so much toil and sweat, they do produce good books for children and these don't sell, why should they publish at all? (Dutta 2-3)

Thus, battling with a number of such problems, it is no wonder that children's literature in India, distinct from adult literature and educational textbooks, took years to create a separate niche of its own in the publishing industry.

Another factor that has very often been taken up by AWIC - some instances of which has been cited below, is the lack of adequate support both from the government as well as the private sector, a situation which remains largely unchanged even now.

> It is...commitment to children that is lacking in our country. To get this commitment our publishers need certain incentives. And may be this is where government can step in. If there [sic.] are publishing books despite a limited market, certain concessions could be made available to them. Paper could be

> supplied at subsidized rates. As also inks. (Vijaya Ghosh in her article "Children's Books Today - An Editor's Views" 6-7)
>
> Economics in the production of children's books should not be an excuse for inferior production under any circumstances...It needs planning at the government level as well as private sector level. (P.C. Sandal 28)

The growth of children's literature in India has been severely stunted by the fact that apart from textbook publishing, this industry holds no economic gain for most participants. The market is still dominated by an influx of imported books. There is no proper recognition of Indian children's authors in the country due to the lack of proper marketing or prestigious awards. Jafa writes:

> There is a need to provide adequate incentives. The foremost incentive is to provide recognition to writers, illustrators and publishers. Recognition will create a new environment and will give encouragement to creative people...The present level of payment to writers and illustrators should improve and the terms of payment should be similar to what writers of adult books get...To improve the standards, come prestigious awards should be established to encorage writers and illustrators. (Jafa "Better Books" India 3)

Despite the abundance of authors, illustrators and publishers, the "lack of monetary rewards and adequate recognition" (Khorana xiv) serves as a deterrent to most, as one ends up spending more from one's own pocket. Thus, very few people find the courage to choose this field as their career option. There are hardly proper literary fests organised for children alone. The ones that happen take immense efforts on the part of the organisers to find sponsors and the ones that are there face the threat of a shut down for a lack of funds as was about to happen to Bookaroo - an annual Indian festival of children's literature that is held in Delhi, the capital of India, forcing it to "resort to crowdfunding as recently as 2015" (Gupta n.p.). Fortunately for Bookaroo, despite all odds it has managed to pull back itself time and again and recently has also managed to bag the Literary Festival of the Year award at the London Book Fair International Excellence awards on 16th March 2016. In an interview with *Scroll.in*, Swati Roy, Jo Williams and Venkatesh M. Swamy - the three member team behind the festival mention how the literary festival has had to constantly fight with "unpredictable sponsors" and that "[s]ecuring funding is an issue for all festivals, but a children's literature festival is even less attractive" (Gupta n.p.). Although Bookaroo managed to salvage its

presence, in most cases these attempts die out also because of a lack of awareness. Even if there are people who would like to sponsor such events, there are no common channels of available information that would inform them about these events. Expressing anguish in a different context but equally applicable in this case, Nodelman terms this as an "ongoing ancestry-amnesia of children's literature criticism" and points out that "the field of children's literature studies is still too young to have firmly established means of circulating information about new research" (Nodelman 135) because of which present critics working in the field are not even aware of existing previous research. It is the same in the case of such children's literary festivals or book fairs, where there is no single potent platform through which such events can be advertised. Even if there are sponsors who would like to invest in this field, they are unable to do so for lack of information, thus causing such events to fizzle out even before it can be materialised.

The first publishing house to bring about a change in the publishing scene for children's literature in India was Children's Book Trust (CBT). Renowned Indian cartoonist, K. Shankar Pillai realised that Indian children needed to read more of 'quality' supplementary reading material, available to them at a price range that would be within the reach of the average Indian child. With that aim in his mind and partial help from the Indian government (Superle 24), he founded the new publishing house in 1957. He pioneered the drive towards writing for children by beginning to contribute to the genre himself. Its main aim was to create texts that were representative of an 'Indian' ethos. Talking about the initial phase of CBT C.G.R. Kurup mentions in "A Perspective": "Unavoidably and desirably, the first phase of CBT'S publishing enterprise was the culling of stories from the rich heritage of the *Panchatantra*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, other classics and old tales" (Kurup 12). Then it went on to publish books on various subjects starting with science and technology, and information books. In due course of time, Shankar realised that along with encouraging authors to write for children, it was also necessary to train them and help them better the art form. With this initiative in mind, he started organising various workshops, for both writers as well as illustrators. Some of the finest writers and illustrators of children's literature in India emerged from these workshops. With Shankar at their helm, CBT also managed to establish a library with "over 40,000 titles" as of the year 1999 (Kurup 12). The AWIC was also a result of his efforts to set up an association that would carry out research on children's literature in India, spread an awareness about the importance of children's literature among people, promote reading habits among the children and also to encourage new writers. The

association started bringing out its own quarterly journal *Writer and Illustrator* - a first of its kind in India, right from the year of its inception with an Oct-Dec 1981 issue, which features discussions on various aspects of Indian children's literature, book reviews, interviews with writers and illustrators, biographies and stories that have won awards at competitions organised by the association itself.

These competitions organised by CBT have been a unique feature which has led to the discovery and launch of many new talents in the field. Beginning in the year 1978, these periodic competitions gradually emerged into a space where new ideas could be experimented with. There were three prizes offered in the first year where the topic was as general as stories with an Indian background reflecting Indian life. It was also one of the first attempts to encourage original creative writing, thus initiating a move away from retellings of folk tales and ancient classics. The main find of this event was Arup Kumar Dutta, whose adventure novel *The Kaziranga Trail* won the first prize. Dutta went on to become a leading name in this genre, specialising in adventure tales set, and exploring themes like poaching of rhinos in the jungles of Assam, or plight of the visually challenged people etc. Subsequent competitions, based on different thematic concerns also saw the emergence of other writers who went on to revolutionise the genre in this early period. Writers like Nilima Sinha, Dilip M. Salwi, Paro Anand, Poile Sengupta, all emerged from these competitions and went on to establish their names in this field. They experimented with mystery novels, science fiction, humour, plays written for children, non-fiction, picture books, teenage novels and various other kinds of writing for children. By 1999, CBT had to its credit "over 900 titles in English, Hindi and other Indian languages" (Menon "Children's Literature" 27).

The government finally joined the league, also in 1957, and started a children's book division under its National Book Trust (NBT) publishing house called the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya. They started producing really cheap reading material for children and having them translated to as many languages as possible to reach out to a wider audience (Superle 24, Srinivasan 36). By 1998, NBT was already publishing "5000 copies each of its English and Hindi titles" (Srinivasan 37) - the master copies from which translations are commissioned into the numerous other Indian languages. They also send out mobile vans to different parts of the country where "[c]hildren in rural and tribal area too come up to...ask for "a book for a rupee"..." (Srinivasan 38). Over the years, NBT also organised seminars, information campaigns, reading clubs and other initiatives in order to propagate reading habits among the Indian children.

Along with these big organisations, there were also other organisations that slowly became involved in the publishing and dissemination of children's books in India. Publications Division was yet another government initiative launched in 1941 and dedicated to bringing out books for children on a wide range of subjects. The textbook publishing was generally taken care of by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Vikas Publishing House, India Book House, Frank Educational Aids (Pvt.) Ltd., Thomson Press, Ratna Sagar, Hemkunt and Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat) and Sahitya Akademi are few of the other publishing houses that have contributed to the field, although many of them have since withdrawn themselves from children's books publishing. By the 1990s other big publication houses like Rupa and IndiaInk had also entered the market by launching their children's section. Eventually international publishing houses like Harper Collins, Scholastic and Penguin also became involved by producing both adaptations of western classics as well as producing Indian writing.

Conclusion

In thus tracing the genealogy of the development of children's literature in India we realise that this genre has come a long way. First, there was no separate concept of the child in India and hence no separate literature for them. Whatever was there, was mostly a part of the oral tradition. With the colonisation of India by Britain and the subsequent coming of the missionaries, books began to be written that were solely for children. Initially there were textbooks produced in the indigenous languages, then English was introduced and bilingualism became a norm, then the Education Act of 1835 was passed which made English a compulsory language, this meant that the country started to depend on imported English books from the west having very little English literature of its own, but this also the growth of the publishing industry in the regional languages which continued to remain so for a very long time. Along with books, India also started importing western ideas. The idea of children's literature as a separate category came to India through such colonial contact and created a space for itself within the Indian paradigm. In the colonial period it meant writing books for children in order to indoctrinate them with a new language and culture, in the post-independence period it meant writing books to instil nationalistic feelings among the future citizens of a newly formed country and in the globalised age it means writing for the children of a developing nation who will hopefully lead the country to make a mark on the global plane as economic and cultural equals at par with all the other advanced nations. The construct of the child has been accordingly moulded through each of these stages, defining its

nature through the projection of adult aspirations. The idea of the Indian child has been constructed as a vessel of change burdened with the insecurities of a developing postcolonial nation, thus emerging as a unique case of childhood with its own genetic makeup very different from the western parental body of ideas that had given birth to it in the first place. However, some hereditary qualities were retained in this new born being - as is the nature of genetics, justifying its inclusion in the larger context of the genre.

Like its western parent body, the Indian child is seen as an innocent being prompting adults to take up a protective attitude towards them. This led to a streak of overt didacticism that has been a characteristic of the genre as it developed in the initial stages of its growth in the western tradition. Having began much later than its predecessor, Indian children's literature has just about begun losing it didactic nature to assume a more pleasurable nature. This move from instruction to delight has been peculiarly slow in the case of Indian children's literature as compared to the western tradition mainly because of the difference in their material realities - there is a reason why countries like India are called developing nations. It had to first tackle the questions of widespread illiteracy, poverty and technical backwardness before it could move to something as secondary as 'pleasure' reading. Reading material - creative or technical, had to first suit the educational purposes, making didacticism much more potent here. However, colonial education had created a group of upper class English speaking elite, who further complicated the process of growth. In a country of various languages and culture, the coloniser's language was envisioned as a link language when in reality this language was only accessible to a privileged few for a very long time and still remains largely the case. Nonetheless, publishing progress in this language was the fastest as the colonisers had already stunted the pace of growth in the regional languages through prolonged neglect. This meant the intended audience in mind had to belong to a particular class position, giving rise to a literature targeted towards a small elite of the dominant group where other groups were marginalised or stereotyped. Among these marginal others, women occupied a prominent place. In India, where the idea of girlhood itself was nonexistent, the gender divide was not easy to transcend. Even when the category of child was recognised, it was essentially a male child, who therefore had access to literacy more easily than girls. So this upper class urban child addressee in the Indian English children's novel was primarily a boy for a very long time. Even if there were girl centric novels, the characters were highly stereotyped. Moreover, the initial taboos within the genre were imported as it existed in the western parent body of the childhood construct. Sexuality was a major forbidden area, along

with the portrayal of violence, use of abusive language and negative representation of parental figures. The use of simple binaries and optimistic endings were the basic standard. Thus, fighting with incorporating modern western modes and retaining traditional Indian ones, the use of English language vis-a-vis the regional ones, Indian English children's literature emerged as a unique kind of subcategory of the larger genre.

Superle undertook a close reading of one hundred and one English novels written for children aged eight to eighteen between the period of 1988 and 2008 by Indian authors living in India, the United Kingdom and North America in order to analyse this uniqueness and found these writings to collapse into a sort of cultural essentialism, focusing mainly on upper-class or middle-class protagonists. Furthermore, she found that the issues of India's harsh reality, socioeconomic hierarchies, and caste and class issues to be marginally touched upon or mostly glossed over. Written in the coloniser's language (that has since become our own even though it has primarily remained a mark of the elite), she found the Indian construct of childhood as a postcolonial nation's aspirations of projecting an ideal imaginary nation comfortable in its well-adjusted bicultural identities when in reality it is only a reflection of the society's hegemonic value system (Superle 3-4). Naomi Woods tries to analyse why the construction of childhood in India is so elitist in her essay "Different Tales and Different Lives": "This false picture of childhood is the legacy of colonialism and the colonial educational system, which continues to inform India's discourses of childhood and education. The definition institutionalizes structural and representational inequality that privileges the elite and disenfranchises those who do not "meet the standards"" (Wood 170). The modern liberal western idea of childhood that has informed the Indian idea of childhood is a privilege that majority of the population in a developing country has not yet achieved. At the same time, it is a reflection of the aspirations that the country has for its children. So the ideal Indian national child that Indian English children's literature upholds is an imaginary construct that is held up as a norm for the others to emulate. Alluding to Sirish Rao, V. Geetha and Gita Wolf's work *An Ideal Boy: Charts from India* (2001), Wood mentions how this ideal Indian child is the one that is "often depicted on the educational charts sold in kiosks and distributed in schools, is male, Hindu, hygienic" (170). According to Woods, the basic depiction of this Indian child as per the western ideals as playful, innocent and pampered actually ends up ignoring or patronising the many children in the developing country whose fates are not so benign.

The Indian English children's literature publishing industry saw a break in this pattern from around the late-1990s, when many small independent children's publishers entering the market. As Woods writes: "Since the early to mid-1990s, India's children's book publishing industry has burgeoned, with many presses, such as Tara Books (founded in Chennai. 1994), Pratham Books (founded in Mumbai, 1994), and Tulika Books (founded in Chennai, 1996), producing high-quality work with progressive or radical orientations. Recognizing the importance of telling stories about many different kinds of children and rejecting the notion that children ought only to hear about happy or morally proper themes, these publishers see children's books as places to tell important - and traumatic - stories about the recent past..." (Wood 177). To this list I would also add Young Zubaan (founded in Delhi, 2004) and Duckbill (founded in Delhi, 2012). These publishing houses have completely revolutionalised the face of Indian English children's literature by challenging such above mentioned ideas of Indian childhood and pointing out that "assertions of national identity exclude through definition" (Wood 170) and that the "first step in rectifying this situation is to critique this abstraction of the "ideal child" and instead depict the complex realities that belie his typicality" (ibid.).

The main vision that is commonly shared by all these publication houses is to overcome "the pressures that stifle creativity: narrow constraints of production costs, government policy, and traditional taboos" (Agarwal 6). For Tulika the aim has been to "create books that convey an 'Indianness' that is contemporary and inclusive, reflecting a diverse and plural culture in every respect" (Menon "A trendsetter" n.p.). Radhika Menon, the mastermind behind Tulika publishing house, further mentions how the goal has always been to subvert stereotypes or just reflect a reality that adults tend to keep away from children's books (Menon "A trendsetter" n.p.). Anushka Ravishankar, one of the founding members of Duckbill and a renowned Indian English Children's writer reveals: "Our aim is to create books for Indian children which help them understand the complex contemporary world. They're imbued with the values that are important for our times: the equality of all races, religions and classes, tolerance, justice and kindness. Themes like homosexuality, single-parenting, war and class differences are rare in Indian children's books...Duckbill addresses the huge gap in books for older children with creations which have fun, whimsy and experimentation in form and content" (George n.p.). Zubaan, which introduces itself as "an independent feminist publishing house" mention that the aim of their children's section Young Zubaan has always been "to be pioneering, cutting-edge, progressive and inclusive"

("About Zubaan" n.p.). Shamim Padamsee, the writer and educationist and brain behind Youngindiabooks.com, a website which publishes book reviews and papers on Indian children's literature notes that the children books nowadays "grapple with real problems" and that publishers "do not shy away from publishing books for kids on sensitive topics - female infanticide and drug abuse are no longer taboo topics" (Mazumdar n.p.). Most of these publishing houses bring out multilingual titles, but English is a constant among all of them. Menon cites a newspaper report in her article "Children's Books in Indian Languages - Old Ideas, New Initiatives" (2011) which pitches the sales ratio as 30:70 for Hindi and English books respectively. Menon mentions: "The reason cited is that parents want their children to read in English rather than in Hindi as English is seen as the language of empowerment. Reports of more and more parents opting to send their children to private English medium schools corroborate this picture. The conclusion, therefore, is that there are fewer readers of books in regional languages compared to English" (Menon n.p.). Despite the increasing number of English readers, in the context of India it is still a very low count. It is thus interesting to see that these publishing houses are targetting the same set of privileged few - maybe a few more extras with growing literacy and knowledge of English, but presenting them with a different set of Indian childhoods that have hitherto found no representation within this genre. Many of these publishing houses are also trying to translate these stories into multiple Indian languages and trying to reach as many children as possible from these different backgrounds who have so far hardly found characters that they could identify with.

What are these different Indian childhoods? This is an obvious question that stems from the realisation that the world of childhood that has been dominant in Indian English children's literature so far has been only an imaginary idealised state. What are those realities that are excluded from this idealised space? In trying to incorporate those alternate realities, these new publishing houses have tried to move towards a more realistic depiction of the Indian diversity, without the "soft-focus [that is present] within much apparently 'realistic' children's fiction published in India" (Superle 13). This sort of a move towards realist fiction in children's literature had started evolving in America since the 1950s and in the United Kingdom from the 1960s. It was also propelled by technological advance, where by children had already started being exposed to certain 'harsh realities' of life through television, internet and the other new media, realities that were so far considered inappropriate information for the child. This new move was further influenced by developments in child psychology which "disrupted the notion of children as innocents in need of protection from the harsher realities

of the world, acknowledging the darker and more complex nature of childhood experience" (Pearson and Reynolds 68). The move from an essentialist upper class white male narrative to including other 'ordinary' lives might have also been a direct result of the widening of the social demography of child readers because of high levels of social funding towards schools and libraries in the west (Pearson and Reynolds 69). As Lucy Pearson and Kimberley Reynolds mentions in "Realism": "The once taboo themes of kitchen-sink realism appeared steadily in children's literature during the 1970s and 1980s. The problematic nature of including such material in books for young readers was overriden by a belief in the need for instructive material on controversial issues" (Pearson and Reynolds 68). Some of these taboos were areas such as "seamier side of the working-class life", "illegitimate pregnancy, abortion, inter-racial romance and homosexuality", "less positive authority figures", "ambiguous" child characters (Pearson and Reynolds 68), "divorce, puberty, bereavement and bullying", "pre-marital sex", "drug use", "teenage sexuality" (Pearson and Reynolds 69), "societal failings", "effects of violence and totalitarianism " on young children, "horrors of genocide" (Pearson and Reynolds 70), "slang-heavy first person narrative", "swearing" (Pearson and Reynolds 71), "family breakdown", "AIDS" (Pearson and Reynolds 72) etc. "Childhood death" (Pearson and Reynolds 69) which had been "deemed too negative or distressing for children's literature" (Pearson and Reynolds 69) ever since the Victorian age, also made a comeback. Disability also became an area of prime focus. In India, a similar kind of movement began with the coming of these new publishing houses from the late 1990s. Keeping with the Indian diversity, caste, class and communal issues were also incorporated within this mould.

However, even though publishing houses have finally opened their doors to such taboo subjects - unlike before when most of them would play safe to keep up the sales figure, the purchasing group is still largely divided in their opinions regarding 'how much is too much' for their child. For this reason, even though different tales that talk about different childhoods have slowly infiltrated the Indian English children's literature market, many parents and schools have chosen to ban these books on the grounds of impropriety rather than welcome such changes. There have also been instances where authors have been forced to change plotlines and resort to stereotypes, after a failed manuscript reading session at schools - cases which I will take up at length in the subsequent chapters. Even now, these publishing houses laments, most Indian parents are unaware of these upcoming Indian novels and would rather buy books by western writers than experiment with Indian voices. Bijal Vachharajani writes in an article "Tell me a story of the wonderful witch" for *The Indian Express*:

> ...writers are cutting through stereotypes and superstition to write books that are reflective of our times...Yet, log onto a bookseller's website or visit an average bookstore, and you will see fairy tales, mythological and gendered books topping the popularity lists. The appeal of these stories is undeniable. Many of them are better packaged and marketed. Spend a few minutes in the aisles of an airport bookstore, and you will observe that many parents are clueless about most Indian authors. (Vachharajani n.p.)

Menon, from Tulika, agrees that it is not "a lack of talented and sensitive writers" but "a system — perpetuated by the big publishers, distributors and the book-buying institutions like schools and libraries" (Menon "Taboos" n.p.) that has been the biggest challenge. So these small publishing houses (including some old ones who have also joined the league) aim at identifying such writers and illustrators through their workshops who have different stories to tell and publish their works to show that although their work challenge "traditional canons by being unpredictable, innovative, subversive and risk-taking" and often deal "with issues that are taboo or considered unsuitable for children" they are worth telling because in the hands of "a talented writer the same issues are communicated with a sensitivity that opens the child's mind in ways that more conventional books do not" (Menon "Taboos" n.p.).

My aim will be to attempt a close reading in the following two chapters of such kind of texts within Indian English children's literature that have come out over the past two decades and to analyse how they have tried to 'break taboos and expand horizons' within this genre. However, I would like to enter into the discussion with the understanding that "taboos" or "breaking taboos", both positions stem from particular ideological biases. It is a known fact that every literary production, be it for the adult or the child, will inevitably carry biases and to think otherwise would deliberately be an occasion of naivety. However, within children's literature, the weightage of such biases assumes much graver proportions as compared to the presence of such biases in adult literature. This is because unlike the adult reader, the child has no prior experience of the world and hence no relative mark to compare it against. So authorial intent assumes supreme significance in case of children's literature, making the genre more susceptible of being controlling as compared to most other literatures. This is of course based on the assumption that literature has the ability to shape an individual. In the case of children's literature, this assumption is the strongest and is accordingly used by the producers to be able to mould the impressionable minds of its young readers in a way that they deem suitable. The underlying subtext which questions what expertise do these people

have to determine what is suitable, most often goes disregarded, because when it comes to children's literature, nobody is afraid to have an opinion. Hunt explains this attitude in the following way: "As children's books are an expression of a power-relationship, are mediated through adults, and are unprotected by any supposed literary status, adults commonly feel free to put their judgements into practice and control the books just as they control their children" (Hunt *An Introduction* 255). The need to control, comes from an over-protective sense of responsibility that the adult feels towards the child, having inherited it from the Romantic ideal of considering the child as an innocent being - a view that has had the most lasting impact on the discourse of childhood. The power imbalance existing between the adults and the child intensifies the extent of the control. From the publishers to the buyers, children's literature has to pass through various levels of control before it finally reaches the child which makes it impossible for the child to exercise any right over what it may really want to read. It is perhaps a growing awareness of this power and responsibility that adults have over children (not because they are 'innocent' but because they are 'inexperienced') that has made these new writers and publishing houses to make a conscious move from 'not saying it' to 'saying it rightly'. Even though there is a perfect chance that this 'saying it rightly' might not have been rightly done at all, it might prove interesting to see what are the steps that are being taken towards that direction and how successfully (or not) are they managing to break taboos that force the writers to adhere to an essentialist idea of Indian childhood, opening up spaces to incorporate new unheard voices that are equally representative of the diverse and multicultural Indian childhood.

CHAPTER II

BREAKING TABOOS IN THE TEXTS AIMED AT YOUNGER CHILDREN

Introduction

As discussed in the previous two chapters, the history of children's literature has always been one that has been divided into the purposes for edification and entertainment. However, when writing for children from the age group of say six to twelve, popularly called middle readers, the onus on the author is perhaps more to educate rather than entertain. These children have just reached the concrete operational stage - or the third stage of Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development; the first being the sensorimotor stage (from birth to about age two) and the second being the preoperational stage (from about age two to seven). Their linguistic and cognitive capabilities have reached a level where they can start reading on their own, with little help from adults. However, as the child in this group moves up the age ladder, its language and acquisition of basic skills develop at a dramatically accelerated rate (Ojose 27). In the initial stages of this phase, children are just beginning to move from a one-dimensional mode of thinking and understanding to a more logical way of thinking. As the child grows and reaches the latter part of this stage, they start becoming interested in "the rules that govern their lives, including what happens when the conventional wisdom is questioned" (Yuan 200). Children at this age become comfortable with inductive reasoning, but have still not acquired the skill sets for deductive reasoning - a skill which is more developed at the young adult stage. Although such understanding of child development by sorting them into discrete stages has earned Piaget a lot of flak, especially for ignoring "complexities of intraindividual and interindividual variation", it has still had a lasting impact on "curriculum design" (Hopkins n.p.) and in turn also influenced creative writing for children at this stage.

Right at the very start, we realise the extreme power imbalance that is at the heart of this genre, especially with regard to children of this age group. On one hand we have the all knowing more experienced adult - who not only writes but also "publish[es], edit[s], review[s], criticise[s], select[s] and buy[s] children's books on behalf of children" (Lesnik-Oberstein 3). On the other hand there is the child, who is

"less experienced and less educated into their culture than adults" (Hunt *An Introduction* 3). This leads to, what Samajdar says, a "philoprogenitive desire to discipline, warn, mould and initiate" that underlies the world of children's literature (Samajdar 3). Thus, as Hunt says, it is "arguably impossible for a children's book...not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism" (Hunt *An Introduction* 3).

But this is something that we have already touched upon in the previous chapter, that "[t]here is no such thing as an unbiased book" (Klein 1). How then is it different in the case of children's literature, especially at this concrete operational stage, where the power imbalance is higher than usual? Authors might try to keep the books syntactically simple, but ideologically they are not at all innocent. At the same time, the readers are also not really innocent, as the Romantic ideal would have us believe. Rather, they are 'inexperienced' and hence lack the "checks and balances available to the mature reader" (Hunt *An Introduction* 3) that can help them better navigate in the sea of ideology that they have been pushed into. In such a scenario, the seemingly 'trivial' domain of children's literature assume the form of a powerful ideological tool that needs to be dealt with a lot of responsibility by adults - and not in way of the Romantic responsibility of 'protecting' the 'innocent' child from the 'harsher realities' of life. Hunt explains this matter as:

> ...it cannot be denied that 99.9 per cent of children's books are written by adults, nor that all those writers will, necessarily, have an agenda. Even those writers who claim to be nothing but entertainers have their own ideological stance, their own ideas of what is right and wrong, their own way of seeing the world, and it is impossible that they should not in some way convey this is their writing, manipulatively or not...This means that dealing with children's literature involves responsibility, because what may at first sight seem like trivial or ephemeral texts are in fact immensely powerful. They have been read by millions upon millions of people at the period in their lives when they are most susceptible to new ideas....The question is: if we, as adult readers, see...male exploitation and female repression...or sexism and class distinctions...do we not have a duty to do something about it? What goes into children's minds is our responsibility... (Hunt "Instruction and Delight" 15-16).

Although, this viewpoint is based on the debatable premise that books have a huge influence on readers and that being responsible has the same meaning for everybody, it cannot be denied that this has always been a dominant concern within children's literature. Based on the English linguist M.A.K. Halliday's work *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (1978), critics like Murray Knowles and Kirsten Malmkjaer point out how language becomes a "powerful socialising agent" in a child's life whose initial brush with "the social world...social customs, institutions and hierarchies" is through language of the texts that we give them to read (44), which in turn are expressions of the accepted dominant adult world order. Out of this world order emerge accepted norms of what is right and what are taboos. These taboos might be culture specific. Some of them might even be universally accepted. But in both cases, they reveal "anxieties about the vulnerable reader, sexual and religious norms, and the threat of the 'other' to dominant ways of understanding the world" (Miller 121). My study is an attempt to study how taboos play out in the context of Indian English children's literature and how some of the twenty-first century authors are trying to break down those taboos in order to challenge the "dominant ways of understanding the world". By doing so, they are further allowing the genre to give space to the polyphonic voices that have been a part of its childhood forever, but have hardly found the means to express itself.

In the following sections, I divide my primary texts into four different categories, depending on the types of taboo that they break. These are the categories of Caste, Class and Communalism; Gender and Sexuality; Disease, Death and Disability; and Broken Families. Although I group a particular text under a particular category, it does not mean that it does not touch upon the issues from the other categories as well. Despite that, I choose to classify each text under a particular category, depending on the major issue that becomes a driving force for the novel, and then go on to deal with all the other issues in detail. The way each taboo lies interspersed with the other taboos shows how prejudices have a way of existing in groups. For instance, the narrative might show a girl doing various things that might be considered a taboo within children's literature, but when it comes to drawing up her characteristics, she must be beautiful, good in English and poor in maths, and like all things pink and flowery. So even if some of these novels are comfortable with breaking the taboo to the extent that a girl is shown as going for IIT coaching, she still has to be portrayed as someone dumb who does not understand what is being taught in these coaching classes. My

study tries to show how these taboos unconsciously coexist in the minds of people as an entangled mass, how they are challenged within these narratives and how despite being challenged they are sometimes only partially breached because of the various layers that the taboo operates upon. Finally, the attempt is to show if these texts have been able to broaden the horizon of Indian English children's literature at all, by breaking these taboos.

Caste, Class and Communalism

The legacy of the colonial education gave rise to an elite class in India that added on another layer to the already existing divisive hierarchies in the Indian society. As Naomi Wood points out, despite being based on the European liberal foundation, the British education system was also not free from an upper class bias. I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, how working classes hardly had any representation in the educational policies in the initial period in Britain and there was constant fear that educating them would threaten the ideal society's balance - a society where none of the marginal groups had adequate representation. As Gauri Vishwanathan's work may further prove, an abstract universalism was prevalent in the British educational system which sought to create an ideal Englishman by ignoring the material realities (103). When the same system got inducted within the Indian context, especially with an English bias which was not readily available or relevant to everybody, it ended up creating a false ideal by debunking the material realities of the multicultural Indian context. In due course of time, this became the new norm. The best example of the impact of this education could be found in an episode from R.K. Narayan's life:

> Narayan's first English lesson went along these lines: 'A was an Apple Pie. B bit it. C cut it.' Narayan could see what B and C had been up to; but the identity of A eluded him. He had never seen an apple before, not to mention a pie. The teacher, who hadn't seen an apple either, wondered if it wasn't like idli - the South Indian rice-cake. (Mishra 193)

This was how the English educational system got inducted within India - almost like a parody - without caring to link it to the proper context. Nonetheless, with time, this education and the literature it propelled generated a status quo that became increasingly difficult to desist.

The persisting problems of a developing country further encouraged this norm in its inability to come up with suitable structures that could challenge such hegemonic formations. The literacy problem, which has improved over the years, is still far from achieving the expected goals. The ever increasing population and the widespread multilinguality are not helping the situation either. Female literacy levels are still far lower than that of the males. Although the Indian Constitution has mandated free education for all children up to the age of fourteen ever since the year 1949, this reality has been far from achieved. Being underfunded and understaffed, the government-run schools have never had enough resources to fulfill its purpose (Wood 174). On top of that, with irregular teacher attendance and unpopular teaching techniques, these schools have been nothing more than liabilities (Wood 174), a fact that Mathangi Subramanian touches in her novel *Dear Mrs. Naidu* - a text which I will take up later. Having opened up the education sector to the private players has resulted in a growth of a number of schools all over the country. But the high fee structure and dominant mode of teaching have never provided the children from underprivileged backgrounds a comfortable ambience to study in (Wood 174). Cases of bullying on class lines are common, an angle which Himanjali Sankar takes up in her novel, which I will be studying at length in the next chapter. Wood also cites observations by researchers who have noted down instances where even teachers have refused to touch low-caste children and subjected them to physical and verbal abuse (Wood 175). This has, obviously, had direct repercussions on the kind of literature that gets written, where such caste and class issues have been dealt with in two distinct manner. Mainly it has been to exclude the marginal others. In other places, these children have been portrayed as a "foil to the wealthy child, as recipient of charity or other intervention to 'save' them from their surroundings, depicting their interpolation into the dominant society in terms of values and norms that define them as Other and Abnormal" (Wood 175).

The new realist change that has come about in this genre over the last two decades have been to combat this form of othering which had become a prevalent feature in Indian English children's literature. The few books that I discuss below in this section are the ones that have managed to break the existing modes by directly challenging the existing caste and class issues instead of accepting these contradictions complacently. I also take up the communal angle through Nina Sabnani's book and show how communal othering also operates in a similar fashion as caste and class politics

within the Indian paradigm. I would like to reiterate again that these books are mainly addressed to the middle readers who are just beginning to read on their own. Against such a backdrop, it will be interesting to see how such complex ideas get conveyed by authors to the children of this age group who have started looking at the world from another's perspective just recently. However, before I enter into a close reading of the following books, I would like to forewarn that although caste and class issues are the main focus of the book, there are other allied issues regarding gender, overbearing authority figures, crime, labour etc. that enter into the narrative as supporting tropes. My attempt will be to do an overall reading of the text, taking into consideration all these aspects but mainly focusing on the caste, class and communal angles.

Trash! On Ragpicker Children and Recycling (1999) by Gita Wolf, Anushka Ravishankar and Orijit Sen, is one such book that mainly focuses on the story of street children. It had evolved out of a series of workshops that the authors had done with ragpicker children. Aimed at children between the ages of nine to eleven, the book deals with the issues of child labour and the environment. One of the earliest texts (written just a year before we entered into the twenty-first century and hence included in this study) in Indian English children's literature to deal with a social issue of this kind, the book is also notable for using an unconventional figure as its protagonist. However, given that such books were still not easily available or welcome in the Indian market at that point of time, it is understandable that the book constantly tries to prove its suitability to its adult buyers by preceding the narrative with a note to "Parents and Educators" which makes an appeal that "problematic themes have a place in children's literature" and that "books can deal openly and honestly with the harsher realities of life, which children see around them everyday" (n.p.). The book is further designed in a fashion that it can be sold as both a story and an informative companion with little boxes containing factual details. Finally, the book ends with "a discussion on questions the book is likely to raise in the child reader" (n.p.) emphasising that the text is only to raise awareness and not to make the reader feel responsible for such real life situations. In this way it assures the parents (the principle buyers) that the book will not have any adverse effect on their child.

Eleven year old Velu runs away from his village Ponnambadi, near Karur, to reach Chennai. He is forced to leave his house and two sisters in order to escape his father's beatings. A chance meeting with Jaya, a ragpicker girl, at Chennai Central

station, is what saves him from his pitiful state. He not only finds a friend in her, who shows him around the city, but she also helps him find a job for the time being - that of a ragpicker. Although "he hadn't run away and come to this new place to dig through garbage bins" (Wolf, Ravishankar and Sen 15), Velu is forced to take up ragpicking in order to survive on his own, till he has actually found an appropriate job for himself. While most Indian English children's writing tries to portray the parents in a positive light, in the case of children like Velu it is not an option. For them, it is better to be away from parents who beat them up (like that of Velu's father) and snatch away all their earnings, to waste it on drinks (7). In both cases, they end up as victims of child labour because in the absence of adult figures who can take care of them, they have no other choice but "to work to support themselves" (15) - as the adjoining information box in the text also points out. Be it children like Velu, who come from unhappy families, or like Jaya, whose family lies below the poverty line, "working is a necessity" (15).

The authors of this text had initially planned on giving the story a happy ending, in which these children like Velu and Jaya do not have to go back to work anymore. However, they eventually chose to stick to reality as closely as possible - a reality which statistically proves that things hardly change for these children because of which they have to continue with their work (106). Moreover, since the money is not much and the competition so fierce, even a goodwill gesture by them is rebuked by the elders. For instance, when Jaya's father - a thin man with a moustache, introduced for the first time as smoking a *bidi* - finds out that Jaya has picked up Velu on her way, he catches her by the hair and slaps her instead of complimenting her goodwill gesture: "How many times have I told you not to pick up strays from all over the city? There's no place for anybody here" (13). Jaya promptly lies to him telling him that it was Velu who had followed her all the way and sticks her tongue out at him when he pushes her away and goes back to their hut.

None of the adults are shown in a positive light throughout the text, be it Jaggu, the scrap-dealer, or Dorai, the moneylender. Velu and Jaya's friends like Dasan, who works in a restaurant, has marks on his arms, and it is a known fact that the restaurant's owner beats him up (38). Such abuse makes him grow cynical about studies "I can't fill my stomach with alphabets" (41) and forces him to continue with what he is doing instead of making him quit his job. Dasan's friend, who works in a garage, is thrashed by his boss even if he is late to work by even ten minutes (53). The only people shown

to be nice to the children are Brother, the priest who teaches them at the pavement school, and the social workers, who conduct a workshop with them. However, although they encourage the children to learn and play, the children do not seem to trust them with their own problems. Never once does Velu let them know how he is being bullied by Dorai and his apprentices Raja and Selva, to make him pay back double the amount that he had borrowed from him. These children are even wary of the police, fearing that they will be beaten up and locked up instead of being heard. Although the information box accompanying this episode points out that everybody irrespective of their class, caste, gender or age is entitled to police protection against violence, Jaya has a different story to tell. Thomas, one of her friends, had been implicated in a case of theft by the police and beaten black and blue and imprisoned, when all that he had done was to go to the police to return a necklace that he had found near a bin (49). As Indira N. points out in her review of the book: "Velu cannot go to these 'good' adults for help against the corrupt money-lender. I read that as a message saying that ultimately, street children have to fend for themselves, protect themselves" (n.p.).

The story continues more as an informative text where both fact and fiction come together. It attempts at bringing those living at the margins of society to the forefront and spreading awareness among other child readers that despite their profession - which is considered to be "dirty" - the child ragpickers are also children who need equal opportunities as available to any other child. The childish banter is well established within the narrative of the novel - where these children juggle between working, playing, dreaming, making friends or fighting, especially at their evening pavement school and the three day workshop that they attend. At these occasions we see a different side to them. They pester Brother from their pavement school to teach them songs instead of making them read. In case one of them can read a little better than the others, they start showing off. They fight amongst themselves over a pencil (38), tell on each other (39), are excited about a mere bus trip - rushing into the bus all at once pulling each other and shouting even though Brother asks them to get in a single line (70), are more interested in the teas and the lunches or playing on the swings rather than answering questions about ragpicking (75) and are also pleased to receive compliments (78). At other times they have to work and act mature, adapt to their surroundings and become as street-smart as Jaya. It is only rarely that they find the time to play and relax. It is only close to midnight, when there is nobody to shoo them away at Marina Beach,

that they get a chance to go to the playground and play on the ladders and the slides (52-53). Even Velu, who loves reading and writing, can barely make extra time for practising because ragpicking takes his entire day: "he had to work all day just to get enough food to last him for the next one...Every day felt like the other and it never seemed to end" (53). Similarly, Jaya's friend Lakshmi, who is a domestic help, has to look after her small brothers after work (41) and does not even find the time to attend the pavement school, which conveniently happens in the evenings.

By taking the subject of these characters occupying the lower echelons of the Indian society, the authors also find a way of introducing the caste system to child readers. They establish how important garbage sorting is for the human community. In this way, the text finally urges the readers to question as to why are then the people who help clear the dirt, considered as "dirty" (81). It is then explained in the fact-box alongside the story, which mentions how in India the "dirty" work has always been doled out to the lower caste people, which then became a family job, making it difficult for an individual to break out of the caste system. The lowest castes were made to do the "dirty" work and whoever did this work was considered inferior, thus turning it into a vicious cycle. These families are so poor that they hardly have basic living rights. This forces them to send their children for work even though according to law children below fourteen are not allowed to work in any job that might be dangerous for them. There is constant reminder for the readers to understand that the protagonists of the text are children just like them, but become victims of a system that is beyond their control. All that can be done is to make their jobs easier by being sensitive about the way garbage is disposed off from homes.

Yes, in comparison to the other texts included in this study, this work comes across as overtly informative. The story line does not have a plot as such, but rather tries to incorporate as much of the real situation as possible. The information boxes provide a break in the narrative forcing the reader to juggle between fact and fiction. However, it is important to look at this book as one of the early attempts to experiment with unconventional characters who are not passive or inferior and do not rely on any outside source to rescue them from their ordeal. Such had been the case with most other novels that have previously tried to experiment with similar characters. One example would be that of Radha Padmanabhan's *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* (2000), where Kupi, the ragpicker girl, has to be rescued by Suchitra, a middle-class girl and the protagonist.

By choosing to give the final agency to Velu himself, this book avoids making such stereotyped representation of a similar theme.

Paul Zacharia's *Ju's Story* (2009) is another book that explores a similar theme. The text was published under the banner of "Different Tales", a project that was undertaken by the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, "to present stories about life-worlds of children belonging to dalit and other marginalised communities seldom reflected in children's books" (Nayar n.p.). It is the story of a young girl, who has just turned thirteen and is on her way to enter high school. What makes it 'different' is the fact that she comes from a lower socio-economic group where attending school is easier as compared to arranging for the basic materials that one needs to attend school. Ju's mother, who is a widowed domestic worker, has to request the women of the houses that she works in to give her their throwaway goods, so that her daughter Ju can use it as 'new'. Although the differences between children like Ju and the ones that are dominantly portrayed within Indian English children's literature are stark, Zacharia tries to keep the narrative as neutral as possible. He does not leave out any detail that establishes Ju's difference from the upper/middle-class norm of childhood that is prevalent in India, but at the same time he also makes sure not to overtly sentimentalise Ju's poor existence. Although Ju loves the smell of new clothes - "Ju breathed in the delicious scent of the new clothes" (Zacharia n.p.), she is equally happy to make best of a bad situation, use the handed down clothes and imagine them to be brand new - "[t]hey were entering her life for the first time and therefore they were brand new as far as she was concerned" (n.p.).

The story revolves round a simple plot of Ju finding an unaddressed but stamped and selaed letter in one of the handed down mathematics books that her mother has procured for her for her new class. Why is coming across a letter so important for Ju? Because receiving a letter has been one of Ju's biggest desires. She longs to find out who is that letter for, what does it say and why was it not posted? However, in highlighting Ju's emotional turmoil over such a seemingly trivial matter, the author points out her difference from the dominant 'other'. The differences are similarly pointed out over little life choices that they - both Ju and her mother - have to make. Although most of their belongings are second-hand, their rationing is done logically. Textbooks could be old, but notebooks had to be new (even if few) - for one cannot write in already written notebooks. But Ju had to make sure to write in small letters so as to not exhaust the pages too soon. Other school things - down to the clothes she would wear, had to be all second-hand. But even then, the footwear had to go to the mother who had to walk a lot between houses to get to work and Ju had to stay barefoot because her walking

requirements were not that much as compared to her mother. Her mother would also ration the food items and items of daily domestic use, to last each month. Ju, whose full name was Poomarathil Ramu Manju (Poomarathil - her family name, meaning "upon the flowering tree", and Ramu from her father, in short P.R. Manju), would often feel that by giving her the nickname of Ju, her mother had rationed her name too! People would ask her "if it was a Hindu, Christian or Muslim name" (n.p.) but she would reply that it is 'just' a name.

Her father, who had been a tailor, had died in an accident when Ju was only one. He had been hit by a careless driver while returning from work. What makes her situation more tragic is the fact that they did not possess even a single photograph of the man, making Ju often wonder how he must have looked like. Her mother, who had been widowed so early, could only cry when her father was mentioned. Ramu's colleague, Ali, would often help them out, altering old dresses for Ju or gifting her new ones on special occasions like her beginning with high school. Through Ali, Zacharia very casually introduces a Muslim character within his story, without marking out the differences that loudly. It reminds me of Saheer's dilemma from Nuaiman's short story "Textbook" (published as part of *Untold School Stories* as brought out as part of "Different Tales" by Anveshi). In the story, Saheer adds a random Muslim name in his answer to a question from a text dominated by Hindu characters, explaining that he did so because he had been troubled that "nowhere in this text is there a Muslim's name" (Nuaiman n.p.). Zacharia also does this in the way he portrays characters from other religious communities and classes. When Ju come's across Lisie's grandmother on her way to the church, she is surprised to be called "beautiful" for the first time in her life. Ju had been wearing one of Lisie's old dresses, which makes Lisie's grandmother confuse her with her own granddaughter. When she realises her mistake, she exclaims, "You look so much like my grand-daughter Lisie in that dress!" (n.p.). Very subtle for a young inexperienced reader , but for one who is familiar with the context - the message runs clear - differences between individuals are just superficial.

The other thing Zacharia does is to make his protagonist a mathematics lover. Not only is her main character a girl, but also one who "loved mathematics" - a combination usually not found in children's fiction - most of which like Balaji Venkataramanan's *Flat-Track Bully* (dealt with in detail later in this chapter) likes to believe that girls do not understand maths. These differences, thrown in as tiny little details, make the narrative unique but not overtly jarring. Sitting on the earthen floor of their tiny hut, studying in the light of a little kerosene lamp while her mother lay fast asleep, little Ju makes lives of

children from such different backgrounds seem different, but not so different as to make her seem like an exotic other who cannot speak for herself but has to be represented by a privileged other. She does not need rescuing, nor does she need pity. Although most of her belongings have been handed down to her by the privileged classes, it is the result of her mother's hard earned labour and not a case of charity. Most of these privileged others, in fact, occupy the fringes of Ju's narrative as she goes about her life, figuring her things on her own terms if not at the same level as these others. The hard hitting reality is doled out by the author at the end, when Ju finally decides to act like a "postwoman" and deliver the un-posted letter back to its original occupant. On her way she is stopped by the postman, who out of his own goodness promises to deliver it on her behalf, but in the process unknowingly thwarts that tiny bit of agency Ju had sought to exercise. There is no final meeting between Ju and her ultimate 'other' Sarojini - the one to whom the letter belonged to.

Another example under this category would be Balaji Venkataramanan's *Flat-Track Bullies* (2013). It addresses a lot of issues within its story-line but the main issue at its heart is based on questions of class that exist in the Indian society. Narrated in the voice of an eleven year old boy - the pages of whose diary we are made privy to in the form of the novel, the story starts with an anti-authoritarian stance. The protagonist raves and rants about the rat-race that he has involuntarily become a part of because of his parents' pressure on him to excel in life on the terms that has been set out for him by them. Beginning there, the story slowly moves into many other things, but the prominent sub-plot is one that takes up the class angle in the Indian society when the boy lies to his parents to make friends with boys from the lower rung of the society. The ensuing situation that the protagonist Ravi Venkatesan lands up in because of this transgression, is what brings the story to its denouement. Apart from the fact that the story dares to criticise the authoritative adult figures in a child's life, something that is not usually to be found in Indian English children's literature, what makes the story even more interesting is the quirky style of narration that it appropriates. In fact, it was this very factor - the typical Chennai dialect that the author uses for his narrative style - which had piqued the interest of the publishers in the first place as had been conveyed by both Anushka Ravishankar and Sayoni Basu (founders of Duckbill Books) during the 2015 Duckbill Writing Workshop, of which I was a part of. For Samina Mishra too, this is one of the most noteworthy points that make the novel stand out of the rest, despite its strong storyline. She writes:

> One of the most common beliefs is that children should read English books to improve their language. That would make Flat-Track Bullies, with its strong, unselfconscious voice, drawn from the aspirational lower middle class context of the child protagonist a no-no because it is far from written in the Queen's English. (Mishra n.p)

What is so unique about this narrative style? The language is very conversational. It uses a lot of the lingo that is usually associated with a boy of Ravi's age. It brings in a lot of popular references from films and sports. What it also does in addition to all this, is go beyond the popular belief regarding the use of curse words in children's writing by using it rampantly. However, one soon realises that the transgression is only of a limited kind as the author makes sure to disguise the "cuss words" as fruit names: "the larger the fruit, the greater the anger" (Venkataramanan 8). While this adds on to the fun of reading when Ravi goes "Royal Apples", "Crazy Bananas" and "Grumpy Grapes" in the initial phase of the novel, it slowly turns out to be quite monotonous towards the end.

Nonetheless, that does not take away the credit of the novel of addressing few seminal questions that plague Indian children of the twenty-first century. Ravi, through his childish banter, reminds the readers time and again how childhoods get lost in order for a child to emerge a winner in today's competitive world. Born to a software engineer father, the expectation out of Ravi is that he follows in his father's footsteps, irrespective of his own interests. Worse still, he is expected to live his father's life in reverse and undo the failures he himself had faced. So, he has to "attend IIT coaching coz [his] father failed to get into IIT" (10). So, whether Ravi wants to "become Spiderman" or "someone like Superstar Rajnikanth" or "at least a Sachin", it is his mom and dad who get to have the last say. On those rare occasions when Ravi dares to bare his soul to the question of "what's your ambition in life?" by confessing that he wants "to be a cartoon creator" (54), he manages to stun his audience rather than impress them. For the others, it is usual to dream of becoming a "doctor, engineer...may be a few astronauts here and there" (54) rather than breaking away from the herd-mentality. Ravi is shown to be quite self-reflective on that count. He knows that the only thing he likes doing is "doodling" and that he would love to be a cartoonist someday. However, he is also aware of the flipside of being honest with his parents, who would immediately enrol him into a drawing class and totally suck the pleasure out of the thing that he likes to do best. In instances such as these, Ravi points out how children too are forced to

come up with their own mechanisms to better mould the authoritative hold that the adults practice on the young. The best way to achieve this, according to Ravi, is to realise the truth that "parents likes, children's likes, same same" (10).

The only two people that Ravi is least critical about are his grandparents. His Grandpa's version of his childhood shows how different childhoods used to be. This further validates what Hunt expresses in the Editor's Preface to *The Illustrated History of Children's Literature*, when he writes that: "The concept of childhood shifts constantly from period to period, place to place, culture to culture - perhaps even from child to child". For Ravi's Grandpa, the annual vacation is "the period of true learning, worldly learning" when one should only do things that make them happy. He believes vacation to be like a dessert - "to be enjoyed" (79). This is completely in opposition to what Ravi's parents makes Ravi's vacations to be. His vacation is moulded according to a timetable prepared by his mother, packed with coaching classes; hardly any different from the school timetable. But what Ravi gradually realises is the fact that his parents are not the only ones behaving this way. The case is similar with the rest of his classmates and their parents too. All the parents want their children to settle down abroad and in order to achieve this they make their children go through the same drill as Ravi's parents.

Apart from pointing to these facts, the other major thing that this novel does is to closely interrogate the class biases that are existent among such parents; attitudes that slowly percolate down to their young ones too. As Superle has pointed out in the "Introduction" of *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl*: "these children's novels...more often privilege particular values of the powerful middle class and exclude other Indian 'voices'." (Superle 17). She further mentions how in Indian English children's literature, the girls are portrayed as "primarily urban, middle-class girls, whereas girls from rural regions, low-caste groups, or low socioeconomic status are either absent from these texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girls to rescue them" (Superle 41). Her observations are equally true for boys. However, in this novel, the author tries to undo such stereotypes as much as possible. Ravi has two sets of friends - one that has been assembled by his parents and the other which he calls his "real friends" (18). Out of his two 'real friends', one is Durai, two years older to him and the son of their housemaid who used to work at Ravi's place at one point of time.

Through Durai he befriends two other boys, Suresh (who pronounced his name as Sures without the 'sh' sound) and Anthony. He also meets Gopi (Suresh's nineteen year old brother who stopped growing after he got some fever when he was three or four) and his little pup, Rascal. Venkataramanan uses a lot of the stereotypical images only to subvert them. These boys are shown to be taller and physically tougher and stronger than Ravi. For example, Suresh, who worked at the local provision store as a delivery boy, is said to have a "mush", muscles and hairy legs. His clothes seem ill suited, according to Ravi, with shorts that seemed odd on him and a t-shirt with "marry me" written all over it. Anthony is also said to be tall and lean, and appears to be a bully when we are first introduced to him. These boys are ones who have not been able to complete their education so they have to work despite being a minor. However, they are equally enthusiastic about playing and juggling between work and playtime. They have an attitude contrary to that of Ravi's parents, where they do not care what the other thinks, be it when they take a piss on a neighbour's wall or when they smoke. As Ravi gets to know them better, playing with them while bunking his coaching classes, he realises that most of the prejudices that his parents have towards children like these are untrue. For them "gilli danda" is not classy enough, while bey-blades and video games are. For Ravi's mom "marbles is a game for those who use Indian-style toilets" (105).

However, the book has its own set of problems. While the narratorial style is what makes the book distinct, it is the narratorial voice which obstructs the flow of the novel by appearing inconsistent at times. Anand Venkateswaran's review of the book for *The Hindu* entitled "One summer in Chennai" mentions that: "Narrating a story in the first person is an ambitious attempt and one fraught with many risks. For one, it demands consistency not only in language, but also in perspective typical of a young boy. Venkataraman [sic.] obviously finds it difficult to crouch all the way through, and often stretches into a 'grown-up' position. He uses Ravi's voice to voice his opinions on everything, from numerology to sport, health, cricket, Facebook, honesty and much else. Only, he sometimes drops the screen and the reader can tell he's a grown man talking in a boy's voice" (n.p.). Other readers too have found this a problem with the book as evident in Moushumi Ghosh's words, a reader who has reviewed the book on *goodreads*, "There were instances when I felt that Ravi was an adult and not a child" (n.p.). As far as Ravi's character goes, that too seems inconsistent time and again. A boy, who is critical of his parents' superstitious ways, spends the entire novel offering

coconuts to god in exchange of his wishes being fulfilled. Like for instance, the fact that his dad is contemplating on changing his name for "numerology's sake" (2) is seen by him as crazy. Moreover, at times Ravi appears as someone who is a spoilt-brat while at other times he appears considerate of others' needs. On one hand it seems like he is genuinely fond of Durai as a friend, while at the next instant he is caught bragging to Shweta, "Durai and I are thick friends. I don't care if a guy is rich or poor for making friends" (127).

The other issue with the novel is the way it creates gender stereotypes. Despite all the stereotypes it tries to deconstruct, it forgets to do so with the gender types. In trying to address grave issues such as class divide and the rat-race that plagues childhood, what it fails at is at establishing gender equality. These biases seep in so naturally throughout the novel that it proves how social conditioning that encourages sexism runs deep within the societal spaces. The novel creates a definite divide of what it is to be a girl and what it is to be a boy, right at its outset. It goes on to exploit these stereotypes even further by playing with the concept of looks - what is conventionally considered beautiful and what is not. All these viewpoints seem to have been inspired by popular images as spread by the media. So when Ravi has to explain how beautiful Shweta is, he mentions that "she has got film-star looks" (23) with flowing hair, fair skin and sharp nose. As such popular images go, Shweta is gifted in the department of physical appearance but seems to be a "criminal waste of talent" in her mental faculty department. She bites her nails at basic level math and Ravi immediately comes to her aid by letting her copy from his answer sheet. He conveniently assumes that Shweta would have done much better in "ballet classes" than such a boring class of math. Even when later on she gets a twenty on twenty-five for a slip test, Ravi finds it "unbelievable" (159) and chooses to believe that the teacher had given five bonus marks to all girls on account of women's week. As 'girly' as she is, Shweta hates the use of curse words and giggles "like any beautiful girl would" (118). She likes being complimented, even if is at the cost of making fun of somebody else on the basis of their looks. She is extra sweet to people when she needs a favour - a fact that irritates Ravi a lot. He writes in his diary: "I feel all girls are lucky, I mean the pretty ones" (119). She is gullible and believes every cock-and-bull story that anybody feeds her. Ravi's amazement at this quality of hers is evident when he exclaims, "Strangely, Shweta bought my crap" (130). At other times he grows jealous when Shweta giggled

with excitement "at whatever crap Ramesh threw at her" (139). When she accompanies Ravi and Ramesh for the temple float festival, she gets together with Durai's sister Raji for a kolam competition - as expected out of the girls - while the 'real' boys roamed about the ground smoking. Since Ramesh stayed back to assist the girls, he was immediately bracketed as less of a man. When they finally win the third prize at the competition, their (Shweta, Raji and Ramesh's) gestures are equated with that of the contestants at a beauty pageant - hands over mouth, hugging and high-fiving each other.

These references are not just used to describe Shweta, but become signifiers of all things 'girly'. So whenever somebody giggles, he is dubbed as a girl. When Ravi finds out that Ashwini, his dad's friend's son, has a room with pink walls and everything arranged in order, he calls it a "girl's room" (166). Ravi's mom is shown to be a fussy woman, whose desire is to enrol into salsa classes. Even when Ravi wants something for his mom, it is the wish that his mother would watch more cookery shows to improve her cooking. It is considered natural for girls to cry in the open - like Ravi's mother crying on seeing someone on a television reality show sing well (167), but the same is sacrilege for a man. "I wanted to cry on Shweta's shoulders. But then you see, I am a man. So I excused myself to the bathroom and cried my heart out and came back happy" (71). The other occasion when one finds such gross stereotyping is when Ravi's cousins from Delhi visit him on their way to Tirupati. Ravi is shocked to see Sanaa, one of his cousins, wear skimpy clothes. "Sanaa, though thirteen, is wearing a six-year old's top and a five-year old's shorts. Seriously, where are they from - Delhi or Denmark?...I dare not think of what they would wear if they went to US or somewhere" (49). Further, it is Sanaa who is shown to point out how backward the girls in South India are in terms of their dressing style. "Mommy, see those girls out there. The type of clothes they wear, soooo old-fashioned," she exclaims (50). However, apart from these stereotypes, the book makes an interesting case in point.

The next book that I will study under this category is Vithal Rajan's *Jungu, The Baiga Princess* (2014). This book is divided into two parts - the actual story and an afterword which gives detailed information about the Baiga tribe of Chattisgarh on whom the story is based. Most of the texts that I deal with in my study are either based in Delhi or surrounding north Indian regions or the southern part of India. The first thing that struck me about this book was the fact that it was based around a place that is so rarely depicted in Indian English children's literature. The next thing that is interesting about this book is that it deals with the tribal

community of this region, the Baigas, who are a part of "the great communities of Adivasis we refer to as Gonds, who live all over central India" (Rajan 99). As the Afterword mentions, these people are believed to be "India's ancient Adivasis, or the First Settlers of the land" (95). Although recently Tara publication house has been experimenting with different indigenous art-forms of India for their picture books, where Gond paintings form a large majority, there have been very little work to be found about the various sub-divisions of the larger tribe, especially like that of the Baigas. By bringing the readers' attention to the plight of these tribal community in central India, Rajan manages to bring to the forefront another such different childhood that exists occupying the underbelly of the Indian society. He dedicates the book "to the survival and welfare of the tribal communities of India" (Rajan Dedication) and declares at the outset that this is a book with a purpose.

The book works on various levels of distinct bipartite divisions. One is the good and the other is the bad. One is the idea of the western mode of modern living, while on the other is the indigenous lives of the tribal community based on ancient modes of living. It refuses to take up the grey areas of pro-'development' and anti-'development' arguments. Moreover, it also attempts to showcase the Baigas through the eyes of a boy who has been brought up on the western modes of boarding school education at Dehra Dun. This marks out the Baigas against a stark opposite. Instead of delving into the nuances of the Baiga life as a way of life which is different from the dominant mode of living as understood by the modern community, it splits the narrative into the two divisions of the modern west and the spiritual east. However, this book is important because of its namesake, Jungu, who although is not the main protagonist of the novel, serves as a foil to our modern day boy Sunil and opens up a world of different childhood to the uninitiated through the perspective of someone (like Sunil) that these outsider onlookers (the intended readers) can easily relate to. Further, by valorising the tribal way of living, which goes against the grain of the modern idea of 'development', and by making the little boy stand up to the adults (who are government representatives), the book breaks the taboo of maintaining the sanctity of adult authoritarian voices that define the narrow hegemonic idea of what it is to be the norm.

The story is about Sunil, a young boy studying at a boarding school in Dehra Dun, who has to spend his vacations with his father's friend Uncle Vish. This is because his own parents have gone to settle his eighteen year old sister Puja in Ann Arbor as she is about to begin her college life. Uncle Vish, who is the Secretary for Environment, has been given the task of driving out the few remaining Baigas from their settlements in the heart of the

forestland in Chattisgarh in order to turn it into a tiger reserve (16). Having a working wife and no one else to look after Sunil in both their absences, Uncle Vish proposes to take along Sunil for this expedition promising him an "educational trip" (3). It is on this trip that Sunil meets Mathieu Lambert (Matt), a French anthropologist, who has accompanied the group as a consultant. He is the first person to give Sunil the other side of the story from the Baiga's perspective. At Baigaland, Sunil meets Jungu (half priestess, half princess), who not only becomes good friends with him, but also helps Uncle Vish catch a group of tiger poachers led by one of their own people. In the process, Sunil learns many things about the Baiga culture. Unlike Sunil, Jungu does not go to school. Her job is to hunt the forest for edible roots and plants, and medicinal leaves. Although she has never been to school, Matt demonstrates how she has her own mechanisms for calculations. She can perform complex calculations in her head and use it to determine how much grain should be sown to get a particular quantity of harvest. Being a part of a community that has been performing the practice of herbal medicine for generations, Jungu is also an expert at healing wounds. When Sunil is chased by a bear mother, making him fall down and hurt himself, Jungu expertly deals with the situation by binding his leg with medicinal leaves that dries up his wound and also takes away much of the pain. Matt, the representative of the west, who also had a "medical degree" (59) before becoming an anthropologist, inspects his wound later only to exclaim at how effective Jungu's treatment had been, thus predicting a quick recovery.

Ultimately, however, the story reduces the agency available to these indigenous people by turning it into a fight between two groups both representatives of modern liberal ideas - but one who wants to give the Baigas proper city jobs and education, and the other who wants to retain their individuality. The fate of the tribal people is left to be decided by outsiders who weigh their existence in relation to the changing society instead of letting the people decide what they want. Apart from this, the story has its own flaws of sentimentalising the lives of the tribal people. Even before meeting Jungu or having any idea about the Baiga community, Sunil is seen having dreams of a girl who resembles Jungu - something that seems quite improbable. The stark oppositions built up between the two children invite exoticisation of the 'other' as being markedly different from the 'standard norm', rather than showing them as two individuals abeit with two different skill sets. Although Matt becomes a spokesperson demonstrating this angle by showing that despite having never received modern education like Sunil, Jungu is capable of using her own practical experiences in order to learn the ways of life, it is not overtly stressed. He goes on to refer to a myth of how "now and

then...a princess is born to [the Baigas] with remarkable powers" (61-62) while validating Jungu's identity, but the narrative is not built up properly and hardly gives any extra power to Jungu - who is just a silent spectator at these gatherings where adults are deciding her fate. The recurring motif of a "blue silk coverlet" (4) with "bright golden stars sewn on top around a silver moon" (ibid.) that is given by Sunil's favourite teacher Miss Dhar to Sunil to comfort him or to "give it to someone else who needs it" (6) emerges as a symbol of the protective benevolence of the modern society on the tribals. In the final scene, Sunil leaves it with Jungu, putting it around his shoulder like a shawl (90). The exotic protective nature of the coverlet from Kalimpong, given to Miss Dhar by a "soothsayer...half Tibetan and half Scottish" (4) aims at creating a space of coming together of the western ideals with the eastern ones, but does not achieve at attaining that in the narrative itself which makes the west seem more powerful - be it in their opposition or benevolence.

Why then is this text important for my study? How is it helping break down boundaries that have kept the genre dominated by versions of narrow hegemonic Indian childhoods? In all these respects, the story actually fails to generate a distinct individual voice of the 'other'. However, what makes the story relevant to my study is how it challenges the idea that the adult authoritarian voice can never be wrong. Here, since the adult group represents the government, the book actually challenges the taboo of never criticising the power at the centre through which the nation defines its identity. In fact, when the poachers are nabbed, Chamanlal Singh - one of the government's own and the person leading the racket - hints at his influential contacts high up in the system. The arrest does not seem to unnerve him one bit as he smiles on his way out with the comment that "The former Solicitor General has never failed in court" (82). Also, albeit in a very instructive manner, the novel alerts its readers to "Forests Rights Act", how forests are being destroyed by the government in the name of development, how it is affecting the tribal people who know no other way of life and are perishing. It also provides an alternate vision as to how one could balance both ends and use these tribal communities for forest protection services instead by creating a special subvention within the Tribal Welfare and the Environment Ministry to provide monthly fees to them for their services (88). With all its problems, Jungu emerges as an empowered other in her personal dealings with Sunil within the novel (if not at the larger level), with her presence of mind, authoritative nature of taking charge of a situation and spirited nature of standing up against injustice.

Coming to Mathangi Subramanian's *Dear Mrs. Naidu* (2015), the biggest problem that I faced while dealing with this book was in deciding if I should place the book under the category of "Caste, Class and Communal" or "Gender and Sexuality" because the book addresses both. However, I finally chose to keep it under the former. This is because the major crisis in the novel is a girl's fight to change the educational negligence that children from lower economic background have to face. It poignantly shows how such inequality makes it almost impossible for such children to break the order of social hierarchies and compete on an equal platform with the quintessential Indian child who is essentially one from the privileged section of the society. Twelve year old Sarojini studies at Ambedkar Government School in Bangalore, with his best friend Amir. Her mother, who works as a domestic help at different houses, including at Vimala Ma'am's - a lawyer, who eventually helps Sarojini fight for her cause. The problem starts when Amir's elder brothers manage to secure a higher social standing through education and better jobs, which helps them move out of their shoddy neighbourhood to a posh locality and enrol Amir in a private school named Greenhill Public School. In her bid to stay close to her best friend, Sarojini's fight starts with securing a seat at Greenhill Public School through reservations under the Right to Education Act (RTE). However, she soon realises that instead of fighting the corruption of paying bribes to get enrolled at Grenhill or fighting the social snobs at such an elite private institution, it makes more sense for her to fight for their own government school, making it suitable to compete at the same level as that of Greenhill.

Having worked with children, both in India and in the USA, as a teacher and a policy analyst, Subramanian brings in a lot of her personal experiences into the narrative. She holds up the decrepit condition of government schools for us to see the truth of what Wood had to say about governmental educational institutes in India(which I refer to earlier in this chapter). They have an apathetic headmaster who does not care enough about the children studying in his school. He only comes on the first day of the month - just to pick up his pay check - and beyond that he has nothing more to offer. The rest of the teachers are irregular - some teach, some do not. Some new recruits, like Anne Miss, try to encourage the students to try new ideas and fight for their causes. Old teachers know that things will hardly change and spend from their own pockets to buy "extra supplies" for their students (Subramanian 55). The school building is in a dilapidated state with a giant hole in the gate which nobody has bothered to repair. Its walls are lined with garbage that people dump without any care, making the place smell funny. The compound is full of small sharp rocks that can poke

children through their worn-out shoes. There is no respite either in the summers - when it gets very dusty, or the rainy season - when the classrooms get flooded with sludge. The school cleaners are also not regular, making the school look even more shabby than it is.

The story unfolds as a series of letter that Sarojini writes to her namesake Sarojini Naidu, an Indian freedom fighter, poet and champion for women's rights. Suggested as part of a class assignment by their new teacher Miss Annie, Sarojini chooses to write daily letters to Mrs. Naidu, but gets so involved in it that she continues it even after the assignment ends. Through these letters we get to know about Sarojini's every feeling, unfiltered by any other medium. We get a glimpse of her jealousies, her possessiveness, her grit and determination and her anger. As Payal Dhar says in a review of the book, Sarojini is the "quintessential 'good girl', good at everything, clever, obedient, confident, brave…" (Dhar n.p.), and one could only have wished for her to have shown a little bit more of her complex side. The only instance when we get to see her angry, is when she manages to gather people from her circuit to get together and work on the shortcomings of the school building but flares up at the injustice of it. She agonises over the fact that why should it be the construction workers who have to miss a full day at work and children who have to miss a whole day of school to build up the broken wall and dispose off the garbage respectively, when it is the government's responsibility to do it for free.

Although the understanding of the RTE Act and the setting up of the School Development Management Committee (SDMC) and understanding its various usages, occupies most of the central narrative of the text, the author manages to intersperse it with little slices from Sarojini's life, which bring out her difference from other Indian children. Being brought up by a single mother, whose father had left when she was really young, Sarojini is often at the receiving end of snide criticisms from her neighbours - "what do you expect from a girl with no father?" (53). This shows how children from broken families are discriminated and also looked down upon. That Sarojini's best friend is a Muslim boy, is a source of more criticism, be it from the adults - "[b]ad enough she was always with that Muslim boy" (53), or the other street boys - "Muslim boys like Amir who like to play with Hindu girls like [Sarojini] should leave India" (7). It shows how the country is divided on communal lines and how much animosity is meted out to people from marginalised religious communities or towards individuals who mix with them. Subramanian also paints a nice picture of community living that grows up between families living in such close proximity like that of Sarojini's, where they not only share thin walls and temporary roofs made of

whatever available scrap they can find, with each other, but also objects of everyday life that they run short of. At the same time they also know everything about each other and do not stop from gossiping about that amongst themselves. Apart from that, there exists a strict code of hierarchy even within this lot of families from the economically weaker sections who stay in that "coconut grove...squished between a brand new hospital and a shopping mall full of western stores" (12). For them the people from the construction site are dirty and backward. But they receive a similar treatment from people who are from places like Greenhill Public School, demonstrated in an episode in the book, where the secretary at Greenhill makes a great show of picking out something that smelt like Dettol to rub it on her hands after touching the same paper which Sarojini's mother had touched (47). Subramanian tries to bring out all these aspects through little tit bits that she throws into the letters Sarojini writes to Mrs. Naidu.

Talking about her initial skepticism about the book, Dhar mentions in her review:

> My scepticism-meter goes through the roof whenever I hear about children's novels about the 'underprivileged' written by authors who have lived and worked in the first world, even if they're of Indian origin. The exoticization of India's 'great unwashed' has unfortunately found its way into children's literature, and lately into Indian children's publishing as well. (Dhar n.p.)

However, Subramanian tries hard to steer clear from such obvious objectification and succeeds to a large extent. She tries to avoid contrasting Sarojini's plight directly with her privileged 'other' but rather focuses on the inner politics of the small group, their lived realities and the exploitative tactics that corrupt politicians practice to gather votes from this section in exchange of false promises. With legal advice from Vimala ma'am, inspiration from Mrs. Naidu's personal life and her friends' help, Sarojini manages to use the platform of Greenhill school itself to turn the fate of Ambedkar school, and emerges as really empowered. By making it a story where the child from the marginalised background manages to attain what is due to her on her own terms, instead of compromising her position by moving on to an elite school and conforming with the norm in order to move up the social ladder, is the happy change that this book brings about.

Apart from the issues of caste and class, the Indian community is also largely divided on communal lines. Apart from the Hindus, who are in majority, there are also pockets of other religious communities like the Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, who reside

in India. Even though the nation was declared as a secular state, the larger narratives revolve around portraying India as a Hindu nation. As can be also seen from the history of how the genre developed, the major focus after independence had been on reviving the Hindu classical texts, epics and mythology for the children of the country. The *Jataka* tales (of Buddhist origin) were perhaps the only other ones that were also equally popular in the country, despite being from a different religious group. Apart from that, the distinct image that the country was trying to create was largely based on the Hindu version of the nation. In the article "Childhood in Children's Literature" (2013), Manorama Jafa talks about the wealth of traditional literature where we find the depiction of Indian childhoods and they are all about the childhood of godly figures like Krishna or Lord Rama. She mentions Siddhartha or Buddha's stories, but apart from that we find no mention of any other religious figure. Same goes for Kakar's extensive study of the Indian depictions of childhood, which are all essentially Hindu. How do children of the other religious communities feel growing up in such an environment? Talking about observations made by education researchers and memoirs, Wood mentions how "school is frequently an anxious place for children of Dalits and Muslims" (Wood 179). A project that was shouldered by the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, took the initiative of studying the hegemonic functions that school books play on children in India. Noticing the alienating effect that these books had on children, they eventually decided to bring out a series of stories under the title "Different Tales" (one that I mention before in *Ju's Story*) that would talk about these other childhoods. Few of the books in these series look at how history textbooks taught in an Indian childhood hardly have any mention of Muslim figures. One of the lead characters Adil in these stories entitled "My Friend, The Emperor", comes to the conclusion "history doesn't like me!" (Jha n.p.). For these communities, textbooks are not always depicting the full truth. This has been a common trope in Indian children's literature. The recent bid on Twitter to remove the Mughal period from school history books by a group of Hindu nationalists (Trushke n.p.) and the proposal presented at Rajasthan University to rewrite the historical account of the Haldighati battle between Maharana Pratap and Emperor Akbar as a victory of the former (when it was the other way round), are instances that show that not much has changed (Singh n.p.). Against this backdrop, it would be interesting to study how communal taboos are being challenged and broken down by these new publishing houses. How are these complicated ideas being presented to young children? Are these new tales excessively

sentimentalised accounts of the unity between individuals from different religious communities (ideal but untrue) or are they a neutral narration of what really happens? I will use the following story to probe these questions.

Chintan Girish Modi asks a very interesting question in his article "Read With Me: Finding freedom in friendship this Independence Day" (2013):

> How do we expose children, beyond the regular self-congratulatory patriotism through songs, speeches and skits, to reflect more deeply about our country and the neighbour we have been taught to hate?

And, he gives the answer himself: "Stories may be a good place to start" and it is Nina Sabnani's *Mukund and Riaz* (2007) that he is talking about. It was originally a film, produced by NID (Ahmedabad) for the Big Small People - a UNESCO Israel Project (a collaboration between seven schools around the world) - for which she won a certificate of merit from the Tokyo Broadcasting System, Japan. Later the same film was converted into a book for children, co-produced by Tulika and NID, which has since been translated into many languages. The main attraction of the film was how Sabnani had told the story by animating pieces of cloth - a collaborative effort between "the craftswomen who did the embroidery...and computer animation which allowed for the bringing together of the hand and the machine" (Animation Express Team n.p.). The embroidery itself - which "uses the art of women's appliqué work which is common to both Sindh in Pakistan and Gujarat in India" and hinting at the "shared common memories, history and craft" (Singh, Paritosh n.p.) between the two nations, adds a deeper meaning to the narrative. Having converted it into a thin thirty-two pages book, advertised as for five years or above, the beauty of the book is how this cloth animation has been incorporated within the narrative of the book serving as pictorial accompaniments. Based on her father's memories, the story - set against the partition of the country - talks about how two friends get cruelly separated and put on two sides of the border and highlights how "friendship between children knows no barbed wire fencing" (Sabnani Blurb). For Sabnani, the writing of the book was also "a profoundly personal journey" because "the story was told to her in bits and pieces by her father, Mukand, who came from Karachi to Mumbai at the age of 14 years" (Modi n.p.). The boys in her story too are that young, trying to understand what is happening around

them and why are they being separated, exploring an extremely complicated theme in a simple fashion.

The friendship between the two boys, Mukand and Riaz - one Hindu/Sikh and the other Muslim - is like between any two individuals. However, nowhere in the book has their religious differences been pronouncedly stated. They play together, read together, help each other and even share their life stories with each other. The only indication to their different religious backgrounds is in the caps they wear in the adjoining illustrations - Riaz wearing a black skull cap, and Mukand wearing his favourite cricket cap which Riaz loves but Mukand does not like sharing. Their surroundings have been made more authentic with few local touches, be it in the portrayal of the bonesetter of Keemari, or Kembel Street where the boys play cricket, or the boys' favourite bakery where they get buns with biscuits inside them, or the gurudwara outside which sits Mukand's dear friend Ladaram Faludawala. The markers of both the religion blend so well into each other that it is difficult to discern where one ends and the other begins. There is no overpowering presence of one over the other. At the same time, the colonial backdrop has been well fitted into the narrative with episodes of military vans full of English soldiers patrolling the street and telling the boys to go home.

The little moments of kindness and warmth exchanged between the diverse communities all living together is presented well. The boys chase each other and when Mukand falls down from the cycle it is Riaz who takes him to get it fixed. The white-bearded, skull-cap wearing bonesetter, known as Keemari ka Bhaiyya, who lives in Keemari, close to the Karachi harbour cannot be easily forgotten. He is "everybody's friend" and fixes Mukand's broken arm without taking any fees from the boys. The boys in turn slip in some money into his donation box. On Sundays it is Mukand's turn to be generous when he looks after other people's shoes outside the gurudwara, serving them ice-water procured from his friend the Faludawala. Ladaram also returns the favour by treating Mukand to kulfi and gives him a bucket of water to take home. The boys are shown to be happy and content, dreaming of a happy future among friends and family. The society of pre-partition India in what is today Pakistan, would presumably have been a Muslim dominated space. However, the book and the movie go to great lengths to reveal the syncretic undercurrents of society as remembered by Mukand. Amidst Muslim bonesetters and bakeries, there also are possibly Parsi kulfi sellers, Sikh

gurudwaras and the somewhat ambiguous religious background of Mukand himself which can be either Hindu/Sikh. What is emphasised in the transactions between the communities, especially from the point of view of little Mukand, who is the central character in the text, is the lack of equivalence or expectations of reciprocity. This runs counter to our modern idea of service exchanged where the central element is that of the fee. The Muslim bonesetter refuses payment, although a few coins are voluntarily put into the donation box; little Mukand arranges the shoes in the gurudwara free of charge, earning only the blessings of those visiting; Ladaram provides ice-water for free to those coming to pray at the gurudwara. Inter-religious interactions are, therefore, to a large extent reciprocally non-monitised with people instead relying on goodwill which is built up through a refusal to monitise. Hence, society is largely shown to be devoid of communal polarisation and instead to be largely based on harmony and best wishes.

It is only while returning from school one day - on the day their teacher does not come - that the narrative takes a turn. When Riaz comes in a little later and tells Mukand that the country has been divided into two - India and Pakistan - Mukand notices the change in the air. He finds the beautiful locality of theirs identified with its colourful peacefulness has turned into a battleground with "people chasing each other and shouting" and "blood on the streets" (n.p.). He still does not fully understand "what is happening" but along with his family's preparations for a hasty departure the narrative suddenly takes a three-sixty degree turn. During the final moments of their departure, it is Riaz who helps them with everything. He brings them kurtas and Jinnah caps so that they can disguise themselves as "everyone else" (with no direct mention of what everyone else looks like) and can leave Karachi unnoticed. He drives them to the harbour, although he is not old enough to drive and puts them on the S.S. Shirala ship leaving for Bombay. In the final moments of farewell, Mukand parts with his precious cap and throws it towards his friend. They wave at each other till they cannot see each other anymore. That is their last meeting. They never meet again, but every time Mukand see's the Jinnah cap, he fondly remembers his best friend.

The beauty of the book, apart from its illustrations, is the fact that it tries not to impose a point of view on the reader. It follows a linear line of narration, just reporting things as they, are instead of passing any judgement or giving an opinion. The playful banter of a child has been well captured in the friendship between Mukand and Riaz. Despite focusing more on the friendship element of the story, Sabnani has not kept from

presenting the violence in the backdrop. There is a sudden and rather shocking change in the society that Mukand grew up in with the declaration of partition. The teacher does not come to school, Mukand must pass through streets filled with dead and dying people - the mention of which is in the "blood" that he sees on the streets, and the father directly tells him that "their lives are in danger" (n.p.). However, it is still the syncretic bond with Riaz that ultimately save their lives. It is Riaz who provides the means of camouflaging their identity in order to successfully evade the blood on the streets and the danger. Despite remembering the partition as a traumatic event that separated communities, the book also highlights how the possibility of survival was made possible only because of an underlined healthy respect for each other's religion based on a long tradition of symbiotic communal living. The final exchange of caps between Mukand and Riaz cements a trace of each other's identity through the remainder of their lives. This exchange is all the more relevant because while Mukand's cap is a symbol of his desire for cricket and a future of hopes and ambitions, Riaz's cap is a marker of identity and tradition. It is fitting that Mukand retains the memories and traditions of his childhood and the pre-partition period of India, while Riaz presumably is left hoping for modernity and future - both dreams to be left unfulfilled in the modern nation states of India and Pakistan.

However, for the child, what is possibly translated the best is that various communities can co-exist without necessarily devolving themselves into rigid communal ghettos. Talking about this effect that the book had on its readers, Modi mentions a particular episode from Nina's life:

> Nina once met a teacher in Bangalore who shared her experience of having a Muslim girl in her class who became the target of several hushed insults and anti-Muslim conversations after the September 11 bombings in the United States of America. The teacher introduced Nina’s book to her students, and facilitated conversations around it. The book struck a deep chord with them. Apparently, they stopped making hostile remarks about Muslims, and the girl in that teacher’s class felt a lot more comfortable. (Modi n.p.)

In an interview with *Animation Xpress*, Sabnani mentions how her movie had also been sent to Pakistan, the place which had only existed for her through her father's memories and which she hopes to visit someday to "see where it all happened" (n.p.). It is

interesting how Sabnani recreates the flavour of that age through mere stories that her father shared with her, which assumes such life-like proportions that she even received letters from a person "who recognize[d] the places by seeing the movie" (Animation Express Team n.p.) and eventually turned out to be her father's classmate. Sabnani, who had initially started making the movie with the aim of getting her father's voice across with the romantic notion that her "father's friend Riaz would watch the film, and they would somehow get to meet" (Modi n.p.), finaly had not been able to achieve that as her father passed away before that. But, by presenting his stories to the present generation - a story of an extremely traumatic period of Indian history, to children just beginning to read on their own, she translates an era of friendship that existed between individuals irrespective of their religious backgrounds.

Gender and Sexuality

In a society where the child is seen in conjunction with the mother (Kakar 103), where children's tales are considered to be "only a grandmother away" (Ramanujan 8) and where majority of the writers writing children's texts are women (Sunder Rajan 102), it is a pity that there have been very few texts that have been truly representative of the women situation in India. As the history of the development of this genre in India makes it evident, the concept of girlhood had been a largely non-existent idea in India till a very long time and there has been very little progress even today. In the past, as has been pointed out in the previous chapter and as Gupta and Chatterjee's study also points towards, girls were expected to take up household responsibilities as soon as they were able to work (Gupta and Chatterjee 9-10). This hampered their literacy level to a large extent. While boys went to schools, girls were supposed to stay home and master the domestic chores. This is not much different from what we have seen happen in the early stages of the western tradition, also pointed out in the previous chapters. Thus, right after independence, lower level of female literacy discouraged the publishers to revolve their texts around women characters, as the primary readers consisted of boys. Even when women characters were used, they were portrayed as playing second fiddle to the male protagonists or in overtly stereotypical roles. With growing literacy levels and awareness regarding feminist issues, more authors started experimenting with lead women characters, but as Superle's study notes their extent of empowerment was limited, glossing over harsh realities that women still have to undergo in the country like that of female infanticide, forced marriages and child abuse (Superle 13). In the

past few years, there has been a slight increase in the women literacy level, further impacting existing gender roles, but even then the number is pretty low as compared to its male counterparts, a fact that Wood's article demonstrates (Wood 174). This has had direct cultural impact, forcing women to adhere to conventional gender roles by making them feel like liabilities on their guardians. A recent case in India will further validate this point further, where a sociology textbook prescribed by the Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Education for class XII surfaced, which stated: "If girl is ugly and handicapped, then it becomes very difficult for her to get married. To marry such girls bridegroom and his family demand more dowry. Parents of such girls become helpless and pay dowry as per the demands of the bridegroom's family. It leads to rise in the practice of dowry system" (The Wire Staff n.p.). Against such a backdrop, authors are trying to focus more on the grim realities of being a woman in India - fighting abuse or just to be born, rather than creating aspiration ideal figures that hardly bear any resemblance to the real life situation. In fact, some of these books, also try to challenge the taboo of ill-behaved girls by portraying some really strong women characters who can even kill for their ambitions - as evident in Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Ice*, a text I will take up in the following chapter. Moreover, having already discussed the "history does not like me" phenomenon that we find in many Indian books that centre around Hindu-characters and exclude all other marginal communities, we will see how these new authors analyse the same phenomenon in the Indian women context. At the same time, many of these authors also venture out beyond the limited space of man-woman gender discourse to include narratives of alternate sexualities, challenging the taboos of heteronormativity and gender transgression. The following section is a study of texts like these within the genre, that not only challenge gender based taboos but also try to break them.

The first line of Ranjit Lal's *Faces in the Water* (2010) reads:

> ...my family is very proud of...the fact that only boys have been born in our family for generations - they say no one can really remember when a girl was born the last time" (Lal *Faces* 1).

Dressing it up as a fantastical tale, Lal deals with the grim topic of female infanticide in this novel. Aimed at children of the age of eleven or above, the book narrates a complex tale in a manner that would raise awareness about this social evil without scaring away

its readers. As Shamin Padamsee has rightly pointed out in the review of the book: "A story that could have been dark and gloomy actually becomes light and effervescent". Winner of the Vodafone Crossword Award. 2010, in the juvenile fiction section, the book takes up gender issues rampant within the country and introduces a topic to young readers that is difficult to explain. The book has its own problems; the major one being that the fantastical well-world that the ghosts of the girls of the Diwanchand family inhabit once they have been disposed of has not been well etched-out. Apart from that, there are other glaring loopholes in the narrative that the reader has to ignore to keep up with the reading. Despite all these glitches, the book still remains an important one for having taken up an issue like this in, especially in a country where gender discriminatory crimes have been rampant with very little support at the grassroots level.

The story revolves around the Diwanchand family, where no daughters have ever been born and where none of the family members ever feel sick and die really late. Their secret is a mystery magic well which is tucked away in a corner of the Diwanchand's huge ancestral farm - only about an hour and twenty minutes drive from their house in Delhi, whose water is drunk by the entire family and considered to be some sort of an "elixir". When fifteen year old Gurmeet, one of the brother's sons, is asked to spend some time on the farm because of renovation work happening at their house, he discovers the nasty secret that their family has been safeguarding for years. The family has a reputation to keep - that only sons are born to them for those that give birth to girls are weaklings. To keep up this reputation, every time a girl is actually born to one of the wives in the family, the body is disposed off in that well from which comes their drinking water. Curious about the magic well, when Gurmeet happens to find it on his own despite all warnings to stay away from it, he is shocked to find "faces in the water" staring back at him. The faces are that of his sisters and cousins who had been victims of the violent fate that the daughters of the Diwanchand family has to undergo, but instead of polluting the water had continued to live their lives as they would have had they been alive and blessing the family with the life nourishing well water. Not long after this the summer turns into one of fun and frolic which Gurmi shares with his ghost sisters and cousins. However, when his mother is brought back again to the house, to have twins this time - who turn out to be girls again, it is up to Gurmi to save his newborn sisters from being discarded and making his family realise the atrocity of their actions.

The book centres on the Indian society's obsession with having male children and the fate of girls as a result of that. It is considered as a matter of "great honour" (88) by the Diwanchand family members that the family has only had sons and no daughters. However, it is revealed that it is not that the family has never had daughters, but that every time a daughter has been born she has been made a victim of female infanticide. While the men are responsible for carrying forward this tradition, the women of the family - the wives, who give birth to these sons, are shown to be equal participants in this system, even if they are sometimes shown to be reluctant or repentant. Surinder aunty, Gurmi's father's elder brother's wife, described by him as "an overweight warthog with a painted face" (49) is, however, portrayed to be the main antagonist - closely followed by Gurmi's father. She, a gynaecologist herself, is shown to be not only responsible in supervising the birth of the sons but equally responsible in disposing them off if daughters were born. All of this is shown to be carried out in the make-shift operation theatre set up at their farmhouse, making the disposal system much easier. Not just that, it is also revealed that she has a clinic for this purpose, which Gurmi aptly points out as the slaughter house for baby girls (96), because of which the police has been keeping her under their radar. Perhaps, through her Lal tries to point out how women themselves become agencies of propagating patriarchy.

Through the narrative, Lal tries to question why such an attitude exists in the minds of people. This has, perhaps, been best answered by Surinder aunty, who is absolutely blind to the follies of killing female infants. Once, when Gurmi happens to ask this aloud to her, she reasons that girls are nothing more than a bunch of "silly squealing girls running all over the place trying to tie ribbons in your hair. They are quite useless and then you have to get them married and all that nakhra and expense...And who will look after us when we're old? Our fine, sturdy sons of course!" (88). Every time Gurmi's mother is depressed because of this deadly family tradition, Surinder aunty does not fail to remind her of the "amount of money that has been saved" (95). How tradition and its fulfilment becomes so important for people is evident in how the "great tradition" of the Diwanchand family takes so much precedence on its members that people start following it like a sacred truth. Thus, the idea that bearing a daughter is a sign of weakness becomes a part of the unquestioned 'tradition' which nobody else has the power to challenge or overthrow. As Nandini or Nanni tells Gurmi: "The great Diwanchands don't have daughters...wimps have daughters" (20). So, when

Surinder aunty - a qualified gynaecologist herself, states that if Sushmaji, Gurmi's mother gives birth to sons then it will be alright but, "If not...the tradition will be upheld regardless..." (170), one realises how strong the roots of traditions are. Despite knowing that the gender of the sex is determined by the father's gene rather than that of the mother, she is willing to sacrifice sense over tradition. Same thing happens in the case of Gurmi's father who regardless of the change that comes over him because of his interaction with his daughter's spirits, holds onto the tradition for tradition's sake: "The tradition must and will carry on no matter what" (178). Finally, when Gurmi foils their plans of disposing of her twin sisters into the well, Balvinder uncle makes a last attempt to make his brother do the 'right' thing by the family's great tradition and says like a "dreadful robot" (195) that "If Sushmaji has had girls again...the great Diwanchand tradition must be kept on..." (195). The fear is more about what other people will say and that they will be reduced into a "laughing stock of society" than realising the idiocy of their tradition.

Despite dealing with such a sensitive matter in a way that seems just apt for its young readers, it is equally depressing to encounter certain gender stereotypes that become part of the narrative almost innocently. The major problem that one may find with this narrative is the way that the girls and their characters have been described. Despite being cruelly murdered by the elders in the family, they remain forgiving towards them, not once questioning them directly. They do taunt Gurmi, when they meet him for the first time: "Boys - really they're so stupid and we're the ones that get dumped at the bottom of the well" (20) but are never shown to be vengeful as Mohini reasons: "They're our parents after all, in spite of everything. We can't do such a thing" (24). It seems as if the author is suggesting that girls are never vengeful and hence it is a loss for families who do not want them - a view that is overtly simplified. At other times, the girls are shown behaving in the manner of a poltergeist, like knotting up Surinder aunty's false hair, putting "a handful of dead bluebottles" into her teacup, swapping their father's "ordinary hair cream with a ferociously sticky hair gel" (112), tickling their belligerent father or painting his toe nails with red nail polish.

Even though Lal tries to keep a balance in drawing up a diversity in the characters of Gurmi's seven ghost siblings (three of her own sisters, and four cousins - two each of his uncles), the colour 'pink', the symbol of 'flowers' on their clothes, the lacy frocks and the 'girlie' giggles seem to form an integral part of each one of them.

The 'girliness' is maximised especially in the character of Lovleen who is described a "beauteous" (39) and "luscious" (58). Gurmi immediately notices how pretty she is: "pale and very fair with shiny light brown hair pouring down her shoulders, and...wearing a pale pink frilly dress and matching hairband...". With her rosy lips and pearly white teeth, Gurmi declares her to be "the prettiest girl" he has ever seen (44). When Gurmi gets to know that Lovleen is Balvinder uncle and Surinder aunty's daughter, he is surprised: "...how can that be? Surinder aunty looks like an overweight warthog with a painted face!" (49). To this Mohini sadly adds: "And she'll never know how pretty - and gori-chitti - her own daughter was. She'd kick herself if she did know" (50), as if Lovleen's beauty is the only factor that defines her as a person because other than that as Gurmi claims she "is a complete nitwit" (50). The character of Lovleen is built up to that end where she is shown to carry a "a very snazzy make-up mirror with her frequently stealing glances and constantly worrying about her looks or her new dress that has been soiled. She is shown to have a fascination for kissing "all boys" (39), developing a huge crush on Gurmi and kissing him all over his face, despite taunts from the others. She refuses to eat greasy stuff like jalebis afraid that it will "spoil her complexion" and result in pimple breakouts (53). Even Mohini, the eldest among them all and the most intelligent - as evident from her score of 99.7 per cent in her Board exams (31), constantly worries about her sisters bursting with sudden pimple eruptions (31). When Surinder aunty comes to visit them at the farmhouse prior to Gurmi's mother's impending pregnancy, Lovleen and her sister Sagari - her daughters, are shown to be taking it "quite well" the main reason being their mother's jewellery and make-up items. Initially it is said that "Lovleen has her eyes on that necklace of multi-coloured stones she wears and Sagari's interested in her make-up stuff" (92) and later on both of them are found in Gurmi's aunt's room in front of her dressing table decked in her make-up and jewellery (98).

While on one hand there are the biases that the Diwanchand family holds against the female sex which is reflective of the biases existing in the Indian society, the ghost sisters on the other hand are shown to hold prejudices against the boy clan as well. The presence of a stereotypical male and female divide can be discerned right from the very beginning, breaking down the world into simple binaries. So, when Gurmi meets his sisters for the first time, they keep on wondering about how boys are "stupid" and "brainless" (16) like him. Gurmi too describes them as giggly - like that is only a 'girly'

quality, mentioning how they "giggled in that silly way girls have when they're amongst one another" (58). Even in one of their virtual adventures, when they are playing a game of cricket, he keeps wondering how playing cricket with girls "is hopeless" (48), with their father having to purposefully drop catches or declare somebody as 'not out' even when they are 'out', in order to indulge them. At the same time, he marvels at their forgiving nature - as shown to be a girly quality, angry at how girls have absolutely no sense in such matters (107). Some of the frequent stereotypes seem to be used by Gurmi's father every time he has to chide his son: "why are you snivelling like a girl" (105) or that "only girly men are photographers, all those ponytail-guth wallahs" (107). The other stereotype that is exposed is that of the institution of marriage and the behavioural standards expected out of a man and a woman within its domains. The mother is shown to be trampled by both her husband and elder sister-in-law. Even though she is against sacrificing her daughter's lives for the sake of a meaningless tradition, she is said to have no choice: "Mama had no choice really if she wanted to stay married to Papa" (60). She is in perpetual fear of her husband's anger: "Balbirji will kill me otherwise...He was so disappointed and angry last time" (94), more worried about his demands rather than her own. Carrying the stereotypical representations one step further, Lal makes sure to make the entire house help talk in Hindi, to differentiate from the others. The western influence is similarly shown to sit heavy on the others who read only western authors and only listen to western music (61).

The biggest criticism doled out against this book, however, is how Lal lets the perpetrators of such violence walk scot free. Even though he starts the narrative of the story with an anti-authoritarian strain narrated in first person narrative by fifteen year old Gurmi, it slowly loses steam because of the overtly forgiving attitude of his ghost sisters who are the actual victims. Gurmi's anger and fear towards his father because of his rabid nature fizzles out when he is shown to have a change of heart because of his involuntary interactions with the spirits of his daughters. His fits of anger and bitterness seem to be explained because of the presence of a guilty conscience - which somehow gives him the right to perpetrate physical and mental violence on his wife and son. Surinder aunty's message to "not make fun of elders" (101) becomes a constant refrain ever since she enters into the narrative. Finally, when the truth is exposed and Gurmi's father plans to rebel against their great family tradition, what comes across as the main reason is his fear of being sent to hell and being "reborn as cockroaches" (195-196).

And finally he opens a home for abandoned girls, where he makes Surinder aunty to manage it for him as a mark of penance. Pointing out the banality of such an ending, a reviewer on *goodreads* writes:

> The author forgave the family for murdering their own daughters just because they semi- repented and much later, made some amends. It was an all's-well-that-ends-well type of ending that this type of book simply should not have. If you're going to write a story about a serious social malady, you can't leave your readers feeling cozy and comfortable that everything has worked out more or less without any lasting harm to anyone. If I'm reading about female infanticide, I want to burn in anger and I want to see some payback. I definitely don't want to see the murderer posing as a warden of a home for abandoned girls. (Manika n.p.)

Moving on from the representation of female infanticide within Indian English children's writing, we also encounter books like Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran's *Mayil will not be Quiet!* (2011) which captures the pre-teen growing up angst of a young girl through questions of identity crisis, sex, heteronormativity, cross-dressing - the list is unending. Their "spunky, outspoken and totally endearing" (Karim-Ahlawat n.p.) twelve-year old protagonist gives us a sneak peek into her journal where she has written down everything starting from what it means to be a girl and how is it different from being a boy, to who is a transgender, or why is it necessary to be fair, or how do people deal with deaths in the family or what is it to have a crush on someone, to what happens when you get your periods and what is sex - there is nothing that Mayil has left out. The title itself suggests that Mayil cannot stay quiet and one gets a glimpse of her talkative self through her non-stop jabbering in the text, written in the format of a journal. Written in a first person narrative, the authors manage to capture the voice of a tween about to enter into her teens, with her growing awareness of the outside world. Even her diary entries are quirky like her - sometimes "spontaneous, sometimes brief and sometimes elaborate and often irregular" (Artnavy n.p.) and drifting from one topic to the other without any set pattern. Although it is mainly a growing up book that takes up several questions that plague the mind at that age - some being really uncomfortable ones, gender issues lay at the core of the book. In a chat with the team at Saffron Tree, the writers mentioned that this book evolved out of a course that they did in college of which feminism was a part. On realising that much of it was "heavily theoretical" and

might be obscure for many readers, especially a child, they wanted to find out a way to dole out the same in a much more simplified version. They mention:

> Since gender is a construct that begins to evolve and develop since birth, we felt the need to create material that addresses it in a practical, everyday basis and from a child's point of view. The idea for Mayil began as a resource book on gender that could be used in schools and elsewhere to initiate discussions around the subject. However, in the diary format, the book addresses issues beyond gender too. (Artnavy n.p.)

This is the reason that although the text goes on to raise many other questions beyond that of gender, the main focus remains on how gender biases based on age old conventional and unchallenged ideas continue to live on and slip into our daily lives unnoticed. This is what makes the book stand out, being able to put such difficult ideas within a text meant for pre-teens, without sounding too preachy. It raises questions and makes the reader aware of certain things that we see around but never probe into, without necessarily providing a solution and leaving it up to the readers to make sense of their findings.

The story begins at the beginning of the year 2010 when Mayil is gifted a notebook by her Appa asking her to write in it every day. It is supposed to serve two purposes: one, to give "everyone's ears a rest" (Subramaniam and Rajendran *Mayil* 7) by giving Mayil a space to rave and rant; and secondly, to encourage her dreams of becoming a writer someday. It gives Mayil the space to vent out herself without being afraid of what the other person is thinking about her. Though she frequently worries what would happen if other people, especially her mother, would read what she has written, she is mostly honest about her naivety or criticisms within the space of her journal. She is truthful in expressing her jealousies, her insecurities, her crushes, her inquisitiveness about issues she does not understand, or her indignant attitude towards the elders of her family at certain times. Through her, the authors also point out, how children realise what are those issues that the adults are not comfortable discussing with them, although they do not always realise why. While looking at these uncomfortable questions, the authors also bring out the attitude of the Indian society towards certain subjects that are held as taboos or objectionable, especially in relation to a child. This

further complicates matter for the child, who ends up trying to figure out her questions from other sources which might turn out to be even messier.

Mayil is confused as to which are the words that are feminine and which ones are masculine while learning French from her mother's best friend Zainab Aunty. That is when Zainab Aunty teaches her a little trick: "The trick is to say the words out loud and if it ends softly, it's feminine and if it ends harshly, it's masculine" (13). However, Appa adds to her confusion by grunting that this rule did not fit his daughter as she "didn't talk softly like other girls" (14). Although her Appa laughs it off, Mayil is angry, upset and confused, not really understanding how this could be true given most of her friends were as loud and talkative as her. For her, it is even more confusing because it brings out the contradictory nature of her father: "Sometimes Appa acts so proud of me. My daughter this and my daughter that. Then he just says some things I don't understand" (14). The father, otherwise proud of his daughter, seems to have imbibed some of those set notions of gender indoctrination that expects certain behaviour from a girl as opposed to a boy. It is also shown how attitudes such as these rotate in a cyclical manner generation after generation. This is evident in the story of how Mayil's mother had once revolted against her mother (Mayil's Paati) in order to be allowed to "wear pants" and "cut her hair short" (36). Paati could not understand "why Amma wanted to look like a boy" (36). This shows how appearances and behavioural conducts become a crucial ingredient of creating gender constructs that propagate different expectations out of the two sexes, further leading to gender discrimination.

The way these notions unwittingly become part of everyday conversations seem to point out how such constructs overpower rational thinking. It is attitudes like this in the adults that infiltrate down to their young making them call a boy like Thamarai "a sissy" (11) for being weak at karate. Through her journal we get to know that Thamarai, Mayil's young brother, would rather "learn film dance" (71). Although initially shocked, their Appa relents and gives him the space to learn whatever he wishes to. But, Mayil is already confused in her head as to what it means to be a boy and how is it different from a girl. This is what makes her judge her brother for wanting to play with Mousina - the expensive vintage doll (30) Zainab Aunty had got for Mayil from France, because clearly "dolls are not for boys" (32). Even when Anu - the girl Thamarai has a crush on, finds out the doll in his room, she is curious to know if he plays with it or is it his huggy toy (89), and when she shares the information with her friend P.T. Usha, Thamarai gets

labelled as "Dolly" (89). Certain traits in Thamarai seem to set him apart from the average boy of his age as has usually been represented in Indian English Children's Literature. He hates karate and loves to play with dolls - even though when his friend Mithun comes to their home to play with him, both of them take all of Mayil's dolls and carry out horrible things on them like "bury them in the sand or cake their faces with mud or make them stand on one leg and then laugh" (31). He is also, as Mayil points out time and again, "crazy neat" (24) and "usually very neat" (82). What does it mean to be a son and how is it different from being a daughter - these questions enter into the narrative quite early in Mayil's journal when she dares to ask her teacher, Sujatha ma'am, why King Dasharatha wanted a son rather than a daughter in order to "carry" (9) his name. This is not an easy answer to give and her teacher takes a long time to answer before giving her a reason that made not much sense. But, that does not stop Mayil from asking the question all the same, wondering why would King Dasharatha want a son so badly when history bears proof of brave daughters like Jhansi ki Rani or Queen Velu Nachiyar (10) who fought for their country or ruled kingdoms even though very few people knew about them.

At the home-front, this gets translated into how different things are expected out of the father and the mother. The expectation out of the father is that he is the bread winner of the family and has to earn in order to support his wife, children and parents. The mother on the other hand, must sacrifice her career after her marriage and dedicate her life towards looking after the household, cooking and taking care of her children. Like for instance, Mayil's mother had wanted to become a journalist before her marriage (86). However, after her marriage she could not find the time to pursue her career. This made her frustrated at times causing her to vent out at Mayil and Thamarai. Mayil realises that her mother is angry at something else, but she gets confused when Amma tells them that she sacrificed her career for them and that they are being ungrateful. Mayil is aware that many other mothers work and feels that her mother could have also tried. Despite this, when the mother actually has to take up a job, Mayil can't help but miss her being home (99). Mayil's Appa, on the other hand, has a steady job. He is a financial consultant at the beginning of the story, but loses his job towards the end. While Mayil wonders a lot about the financial situation they would be in if her father lost his job, she realises the full situation only later when her mother has to take up a job and her father is put in charge of cooking - "I screwed up my face at that, but Ma

said that was 'sexist" of me'" (95). How a family as a unit propagates such attitudes through various ages is made evident in a passing reference about Mayil's grandparents' marriage too. On asked what Paati loved eating, Thatha is at a loss - "it's funny but he doesn't really remember Paati eating" (26). Mayil finds this weird but the authors try to keep the matter at that without really going into the logistics of how an Indian wife is supposed to eat her food only after having her husband has eaten his share. Such typical expectations out of a man and a woman within the marital setup are further probed into through the case of Malini Aunty, Mayil's mother's friend. Malini Aunty, who is shown to be a victim of physical abuse, had frequently come to Amma to share her problems. Later Mayil comes to know that despite such torture, Malini Aunty had refused to take any action because "he was still her husband and her parents would tell her that she should try and adjust with him" (88) leading her to eventually commit suicide.

The issue of suicides and deaths, which has mostly been considered to be a matter inappropriate for children's books, gets neatly incorporated within the narrative through such instances. The awareness about Malini Aunty's suicide also affects Mayil in a bad way. She regrets having asked her mother about Malini Aunty but cannot rest in peace until she has been told everything. She is unable to sleep at night and finally decides to go and sleep with Amma that day. She keeps imagining that Malini Aunty had dies by hanging herself from a fan (67) and ends up feeling sick. Even in school the next day she is unable to laugh at Jyothy's jokes, but feels much relaxed when Jyothy tells her that "it didn't make any sense to think about the way in which people killed themselves" (67). The other time that both the girls have to deal with the topic of death is when Jyothy's mother's cat Poonoose dies. Although Jyothi's mother grieves its death, Jyothy - who did not like it much, can't help but giggle. But, at the same time she is aware that it is a solemn occasion and that she should be a little sensitive, so she feels guilty at her behaviour and prays for the cat. While using the narrative to discuss the deaths of various kinds and normalising the topic, the authors also explore what happens when a loved one dies by delving into the death of Mayil's grandmother's death. On the occasion of her Paati's death, her otherwise talkative Thatha goes all "quietish" (25) staring into space with a blank face. Mayil knows that her grandfather missed Paati, but does not like to see him that way. Thamarai on the other hand knows exactly what to do. He urges Thatha to tell them funny stories about Paati, making him loosen up a bit.

The other issue that this book takes up is the curiosity regarding sex that pre-adolescents have. It all starts with the topic of periods and how that turns one into a "big girl" (34) which make the womb "ready to give birth" (53). The prominence that is given to a girl beginning her periods which made her ready for childbearing is evident from the fact how Thatha had kept up Paati's beautiful skirt to give to Mayil once she began her periods. Even among her girl friends, it is a "big deal" (45). However, Mayil is unable to understand the euphemisms used for periods, one of which is "chum" meaning an "intimate friend" (45). As far as Mayil is concerned, it is just uncomfortable having the sanitary pad brush against one's skin making them worry about stains. She hates the "sticky-wet" feeling and hates looking at her pad every time she has to go to the loo (47). The discussion on periods subsequently leads them to discuss sex and how children develop weird notions about it in the absence of adults explaining them the phenomenon. Parents - even Mayil's otherwise direct mother, do not know how to broach the topic and hence are forced to leave relevant magazines lying in the child's vicinity instead of directly asking them to read it (67). Mayil seems well infomed about lesbians and gays - thanks to the sex-education classes that they have in school, but is generally unaware about other alternate sexualities like that of a transgender given the amount of taboo that is associated with it. The one time that she actually comes across a transgender woman - not the ones who came in groups, clapped loudly and asked for money (15), she realises that other people treat them differently even though they might be like any other person. People generally ignored them, was scared of them or made fun of them - as did her Appa who did not let Mayil sit beside her even though the seat next to her was lying empty. How this sort of an attitude went on to effect young minds is evident when Mayil does not smile back at the transgender even though she smiles at her while de-boarding the train.

Among other things, the narrative also touches upon the topic of religious diversity within the country and how often religious biases ruined relationships. Like Thatha is open about his dislike for Christians considering them to be "too pious" (97). Even though Zainab Aunty, who was a Muslim and a close friend of Mayil's Amma, was always welcome at their place, once Thatha had unwittingly said something really bad about Muslims in her presence without realising that Zainab Aunty was a Muslim herself. Although Zainab Aunty had pretended not to hear it, Amma had become furious and not spoken to Thatha for days. Hearing this story, Mayil had been curious to know,

how her otherwise pleasant Thatha had said something like that. She had given him the example of her class which was full of people from diverse religions and how they all sang different religious songs at their assemblies and were content. At this Mayil's grandfather takes some time to think about it before answering that: "he believed in some things so much that it was hard for him to think any other way about it" (98), beautifully explaining how traditions overpowered the rationality of men and made them do things without questioning them. From sex to periods, crushes to love, jealousies to quarrels, deaths to suicides, what is right for a girl and what is right for a boy, friendships to marriages, poverty to morality, Mayil's journal brings up and addresses a lot of issues in a sensitive fashion. In doing so it also goes against the set boundaries as expected out of children's books, thus, expanding its horizons. As has been rightly pointed out Smitha, a reviewer in her review of the book: "There was no shying away from issues like gender discrimination or sex education. The book was completely devoid of gender stereotypes – loved it! Mayil, also packs in a powerful punch, and Thamarai likes dolls – and why not!" (Smitha n.p.).

The sequel to this book *Mostly Madly Mayil* (2013) shows the thirteen year old Mayil going on to her fourteenth. Subramaniam and Rajendran narrates the story in the form of diary entries again - Mayil's second diary, this time trying to maintain a balance between Mayil's growing maturity and the playfulness of her old self. Although it does not branch out to include as many issues as the first book, it still manages to address some other important taboo issues including sexual abuse, sexual urges, social hypocrisy and social discrimination. There is no distinct plotline, as the story proceeds in the format of diary entries for a whole year, but the authors manage to inject the social issues within these narratives instead of making them overpower the narrative stance of the book. The sequel, as usual, has been narrated in a casual fashion, maintaining the teen lingo. The text is accompanied by quirky illustrations by Subramaniam which are as funny as the narrative.

Among the many issues that the book deals with, the most disturbing ones are the two instances of sexual abuse - one faced by Mayil and the other by one of her best friends Ki. In case of Mayil, it is a brush with a flasher - "...I stopped and stared back at him...He was holding his penis in his hands. It was so gross. I really wanted to puke...I looked up at his face and he was smiling..." (Subramaniam and Rajendran *Mostly* 36). Not only do the authors break the taboo by using the 'p'-word, (the other 'p'-word taboo that it breaks is by referring to a messy period episode) they also deal with the episode in a very realistic fashion. The

nauseating feeling that this episode arouses in Mayil, the confusion as to why somebody would do something like that, the internal debate about sharing it with her mother or her friend, the fear that this might lead her mother forbidding her to go out alone again - all of this is nicely incorporated within the narrative. The second episode, is one that happens to Ki when she had gone to stay with her aunt. Her cousin, who was in college, kept hugging her whenever nobody was around and even grabbed her breast and threatened to put the blame on her, when she protested. Telling this to this boy's sister also did not help - she hushed the matter pointing out to the fact that such things were commonplace in a girl's life (48). Knowing not what to do or who to go to, Ki confides in Mayil, who promises to keep it a secret but accidentally blurts it out to her mother. Thankfully the mother takes charge and instead of blaming the girls goes and slaps the abuser, threatening him with dire consequences if he repeated the offence on Ki or anybody else. However, it points out to the helpless state that girls on the brink of maturity go through when faced with such situations. In most cases, confiding in an adult becomes the worst decision as they try to dust the matter under the mat or disbelieve the victim.

That the children at this stage slowly begin to discover their sexual urges and cope up with their bodily changes is another matter that the book deals with. It starts with Mayil going bra shopping with her mother to the episode when they are all getting wet in the rain, when their clothes become translucent. Seeing the boys stare, Jyothy drags her girlfriends away. But that does not stop Mayil, who promptly stares back at the boys and answers "Same thing YOU were looking at!" when asked what she is looking at (92). The authors also try to hint at how early gender constructs start forming in a child's mind by pointing out to the episode where Mayil overhears some juniors bad-mouth his brother for being so popular with the girls blaming it on the fact that "Thamarai was a girl" (82). Mayil's dance crazy on-conformist brother, who would be bullied at his dance school for wearing tights - "Tarika had once tried to pull his tights down in dance class and even after the coach had made her apologise in front of everyone, she had called him a "stupid runt" the minute they got out" (96), becomes a case point of how children who do not conform are treated like by other children unaware of differences. The authors also deal with the growing sexual awareness in teenagers through an MMS-scandal between two students at Mayil's school, where the entire matter is hushed up and instead of counselling children (as one of their quirky English teachers Sofia Soan feels), the school tries to handle the matter by imposing strict rules of banning camera phones at school. However, that such episodes do not stop a child from pondering about sex is shown

when Mayil cannot stop thinking about the video everytime she goes to the girl's bathroom where it was shot, or when Jyothy ends up asking them "Do you think our parents have sex?" (107) right after this episode has been handled with an iron hand by the school authorities. Children might be inexperienced by not stupid, this is a fact that the authors try to prove again and again. When Mayil's family goes to Kerala for a holiday, a bikini clad scuba-diver approaches her father, whose advances he politely refuse. Watching from afar Mayil immediately concludes her to be a "prostitute". Although her mother later explains the change in her father's behaviour, which Mayil describes as "acting strange", as a result of seeing a woman in a bikini - one that he is not used to (60-61), and advices Mayil to not judge people on the basis of their clothes, Mayil is perceptive enough to point out that her mother too does the same with one of Thatha's lady friend who wears sleeveless blouses and lipstick which is considered inappropriate for her age.

Such instances of adult hypocrisy is pointed out through other instances too and the fact that it does not escape the youngsters prove how perceptive they are - like the time where Mayil's grandmother had urged her mother to go for a second child because the first had been a daughter while everybody wants a son, but had ended up loving Mayil as much as she had loved her brother. The book also touched upon other issues that throw light on the existing double standards within the society, through instances of how Thatha had started thinking more about "social issues" after joining the Tribal Welfare and Protection Association, although he had never been so open-minded early in his life when he considered inter-caste marriages as impure or kept a separate glass for the maid at home (83). Mayil's own brush with such class discrimination happens on a school trip to Mysore where she starts interacting with a sponsored student Jacob, with whom she had never spoken to before, and realises that although she thought everybody behaved normally with him it might not be true because she herself could only think of the "[d]irty" "tiny housing board apartment" that he lived in (128) all the time she spent talking to him.

Many such small issues are spread out at numerous places in the book, be it references to honour killings (80), or the corrupt practices of the social welfare associations (130), or male jealousy over a wife's success (99), or flawed notions of beauty (114), or judgemental attitude towards elderly people falling in love again (50), but the book never becomes too preachy about these issues. The world of Mayil - a quintessential Indian child, is as fraught with issues of growing up as any other. That does not make her case any special than the others, nor does it make it any less. It is just a realisation that different kinds of childhoods

exist and one cannot compare childhood on a scale of a universal notion of what childhood is expected to be like. It shows how children internalise these notions and end up bullying others that do not conform to such ideas - because any difference ends up scaring them as an abnormality as evident in the episode when a person with a stammer writes to the column of "Agony Ant" for the school magazine wanting suggestion on how to prove that she/he is "normal" (118). The text raises many such issues and tries to spread an awareness about these differences by pointing out to the hypocrisy that both children and adults practice in dealing with the 'other', instead of preaching the right way from the wrong.

Next, we move on to Ranjit Lal's *Smitten* (2012), where the main antagonist in the original manuscript had been the father who was shown to sexually abuse his fifteen year old daughter Akhila. However, most schools were not comfortable with the idea of having the father as the perpetrator and Lal, despite being reluctant of using the stereotype of showing the stepfather as bad, had no other option but to change the character of the father to the step-father. Although sexual abuse within the family circuit is something that is a raging truth in our society, most adults try to remain blind to it or protect the child from its knowledge. In that respect, Lal's novel makes a brave attempt to broach this topic, even at the cost of appropriating stereotypes to placate the adults. The author tries to break down the issue in those various stages through which the child begins to understand it. Firstly there is the ignorance, secondly when the child begins to understand that something is wrong but cannot place it, thirdly when the child is told that what is happening is for the child's own good, fourthly when the child is sworn to secrecy and finally the post-abuse trauma. Along with this, the novel also probes into the case of having a depressive mother, a specially challenged brother and a bullying duo, issues that young children frequently grapple with.

Fourteen year old Samir Gill has an airbus commander for a mother and a banker - "head honcho in some fancy bank" (Lal *Smitten* 9) as a father. With both parents busy with their respective jobs, especially the father, which keep them outdoor most of the time, and no friends as such, Samir keeps himself busy with collecting and building "256 model cars" (35) or stealthily using the empty next-door apartment as his private headquarters for practicing his cricket or shooting skills. Playing outdoors has become a complete battle zone for him because of the presence of the Sachdev brothers - sons of a "big shot cop" (2), who amuse themselves in ceaseless bullying of harmless victims like Samir and using their father's position to threaten them into silence. That is the reason,

when Samir finds out that new people have moved into their adjoining apartment, he hopes that the family would have kids with whom he could form a gang and take down the "Sachdev assholes" (4). However, he is disappointed to find the family consist of an ever depressive mother, and a fifteen year old daughter with her specially challenged young brother. The only person who gives him some hope is their ever boisterous father Mr. Madhav Handa (7), who wins over Samir with his over friendliness and his extra-caring attitude, towards his children - especially his daughter. The rest of the narrative narrated in first person accounts of Samir and Akhila, go on to reveal how these two become thick friends, exposes the truth about the bullies and fights back sexual abuse. In the process, the two of them become much more than just friends - exploring their growing sexual maturity with each other.

However, apart from addressing some very serious issues within its plotline - having a depressive mother, a specially challenged brother, an alcoholic dead father, a step-father who sexually abuses his daughter, a pair of ruthless bullies and busy parents who loses their children's faith in them as confidantes, the book appears completely unrealistic on many accounts. The characters are inconsistent, the way the issues have been dealt with appears flippant without deeper study and worse still, it appropriates certain stereotypes that the book itself tries to dismantle. It is surprising how Samir, despite having a powerful character as a mother, seems to have this patriarchal attitude towards girls - especially towards the initial bit of the novel. For him the sister-brother duo next door does in no way meet his standards of a gang which could stand up against the Sachdev brothers. Akhila is "just a girl" (9) and according to him girls "occasionally - have some good sense!" (14) who cannot be relied upon because "you can never tell with girls" (20). The specially challenged brother, Sumit, for him, is "daffy" (9), "poor fellow" (11), "idiot" (11) with something "wrong" (23). Though he becomes good friends with Sumit too, there is nothing much that hints whether he changes his opinion of him or not. The step-father, Mr. Handa, makes him wish he had an attentive father like theirs. However, his behaviour comes across more as exaggerated than real as even Payal Dhar points out in her review of the book: "Mr Handa’s constantly hugging and kissing his daughter — even in the presence of outsiders — was so over-the-top and inappropriate that he felt like a bit of a caricature. To characterize a predator in this manner sends a rather disturbing message. It is well known than perpetrators of CSA are

able to behave perfectly "normally" when required" and that Samir finds it all "sweet" is surprising"" (Dhar "Smitten" n.p.).

The portrayal of Akhila has its own set of problems. Because she is a girl, her white pajama suit must have a "flowery pattern on it" (11), her salwar kameez must be "pink" (84) in colour and she should voluntarily take up the code name of "Venus" (48) instead of "Jupiter" for their hotline conversations over an "old-fashioned phone" made up of soft drink cans and some twine. However, these stereotypical cultural markers that become defining markers of girl characters are least of the problems with her. Having seen too much for her age - a father who passed away due to a liver failure caused by excessive drinking when she was only two, a mother who has been suicidal and depressed ever since her brother was born "a bit slow", and a specially challenged brother, she is extremely slow to apprehend her situation or gather enough courage to act up against it. She gets more dependent on Samir while Samir is too tongue-tied to do anything most of the time.

The book breaks up the society into binaries where sophistication is kept reserved for the English speaking folks and bullies are inadvertently Hindi-speaking. The Sachdev brothers - Madan and Bhushan, are shown hurling constant abuses in Hindi (annoyingly followed by its English translations each time), while harbouring a penchant for stripping Samir in Akhila's presence making dirty jokes all the time. Finally, the book ends on an equal ridiculous note with Mr. Handa taking his family and Samir to a hill side bungalow, openly declaring "what I do in this bedroom with my children is my business and only mine" (100), undressing Akhila in front of them all to feeble protests from Mrs. Handa and dancing with her naked while feeling her up (124), and finally dying by falling of a ladder. How Mrs. Handa "suddenly spring to life and take control in the end" (Dhar "Smitten" n.p.) is equally unbelievable. It comes across as too "convenient" (ibid.) where the society did not have to openly deal with the monstrosities that lie within a family - the so-called safe haven for children. It is true that books that deal with such issues have to operate within strict boundaries because of the society's opposition towards it, but such depictions can end up propelling stereotypes rather than breaking it down.

Disease, Death and Disability

The "general tone of hopefulness" (Nodelman and Reimer 209) that is supposed to be a marking feature of children's literature, gradually started waning away from the late twentieth century onwards as the historical account of the development of children's literature presented towards the end of the first chapter will prove. The contemporary authors are open to experimenting with ambiguous endings, although there is still a faint attempt to reach a certain resolution towards the end of the story, especially in the case of the literature aimed at this particular age group. Ever since the popularisation of the Romantic idea of the child as an innocent that needs protection, the grim realities of disease and death has been seen as harmful for the child's psyche. Again, as historical accounts will show, this has not always been the case. When the genre was dominated by the Evangelical writers, 'disease and death' were regular features in children's stories used in abundance to discipline children and forewarn them of the consequences that would befall them in the face of disobedience. The Romantic age opposed this notion and made disease and death as taboo topics within the genre. When critics started making a case for realism in children's fiction, they put forward the view that could be summed up by the illustrator Edward Ardizzone's comment:

> I think we are possibly inclined, in a child's reading, to shelter him [sic.] too much from the harder facts of life. Sorrow, failure, poverty, and possibly even death, if handled poetically, can surely all be introduced without hurt...If no hint of the hard world comes into these books, I am not sure that we are playing fair. (as quoted in Hunt *An Intro* 16).

This shows that, not just the construct of childhood, but the idea of acceptable realism also changes with socio-cultural changes. As Hunt would note: "Concepts of childhood ebb and flow, and concepts of acceptable realism ebb and flow with them. For example, after thirty years of fighting for the right to warn their children through fiction of what is 'out there', American liberals are now confronted with a right wing that believes that ignorance is the best defence and that knowledge *per se* corrupts" (Hunt *An Intro* 18). However, in India at present, Ardizzone's idea that "we are not playing fair" has become the defining factor of acceptable realism. Rather it is increasingly being accepted that "[c]hildren...have a fairly well developed sense of what they can cope with at different stages of their life" (Roy n.p.) and one should perhaps re-evaluate the censoring of such

disease and death oriented taboos. This section looks at texts that mainly focus on death, although there are other ensuing issues that follow from these occurrences and have also been analysed in detail. I take up the case of disability towards the end of this section - a category that is gaining quick currency within the genre.

Jayasree Kalathil's *The Sackclothman* (2008) touches upon the theme of death of a closed one and that of mental illness. Ten year old Anu's life turns upside down after the death of her elder sister Sajichechi. Her mother slips into a depression while her father turns to alcohol. Anu tries to make the best of the situation by acting all mature and trying to restore some normalcy, but without any effect. It is then that Chaakkupranthan, the village madman, enters her life. This man, whose real name was Narayanan, is shown to be a quiet man who loves wearing empty sacks and roams from house to house asking for food. It is on one of his trips to Anu's house that he meets the little girl and over time they form a strange bond with each other. The day Anu's Raghu Maman decides to haul Narayanan to a mental hospital as part of their club's annual charity programme, Anu has a premonition. Given the fact that the psychiatrist's medicines did nothing for her own Amma, save for making her drowsier, she could not fathom how this could be beneficial for her Sackclothman. But the adults do not listen to her and in the name of charity, force the madman to a nearby hospital, from which he later escapes. Unable to bear this loss, Anu falls into a high fever. However, in a climactic twist, this seems to restore the family balance to normalcy as the parents realise that they have another daughter that they need to live for.

The story begins with Anu pointing out her discomfort at the way the elders were always whispering around her.

> I hurried out...I could imagine their conversation. "Poor thing," they would be saying, lowering their voices into a whisper...I didn't like any of it. (Kalathil n.p.)

Although in their own way they were trying to protect her, trying not to ask her directly about her sister's death, but feeling sorry for her all the same. Anu "didn't like any of it" (n.p.). In some ways, Kalathil tries to point out the over-protective attitude that adults assume when it comes to children, especially when it comes to their literature. A death in the family coupled with a mother suffering from depression and an alcoholic father - are exactly the issues that one-must-never-write about in stories for children. But Anu's

life is far from the rosy happy life that most of these stories portray. She has an ailing Amma at home whom she has to be coaxed to get up and have some food, and a grieving Achchan whom she has to persuade to come back home directly instead of wasting his time at the bar. Her dysfunctional family is portrayed by their dying garden and Anu wishes that she was like Daisy (the character in one of her stories) who had magical powers and could go on exciting adventures. The adventure that enters into her life, however, is in the figure of the Sackclothman. Though scared initially, Anu breaks her inhibitions and tries to get to know him better when he comes to their house begging for food. This village madman who slept on the shop veranda next to the Post Office across the street from Anu's house, was once a fully functional man with a family of his own. Therefore, he understands what it is to be sad when Anu shares how sad her mother has been ever since the death of her sister. "Aren't we all sad sometimes," he consoles Anu (n.p.). While Anu is trying to handle her own sadness along with so much sadness all around her, she is the only one who realises that medicines cannot be the only way to cure sadness. "But then, Prabhakaran Doctor's medicines seemed to make Amma more sleepy and sad and not get any better," she tries to make sense of it herself (n.p.). She also understands that the relationship between her father and mother is deteriorating, but knows that as a child it is "safe to pretend that nothing was wrong" (n.p.). But she also can't help rebuking her father. "What do you care?" she asks (n.p.), but immediately knows that she has hurt him and tries to make matters light. The range of emotions that this girl goes through, although she does not understand half of them, just goes on to show that young children does not need protection but just a little bit of faith in them and this could inevitably be extended to include the reading choices that they make.

Coming to disability, an area that has garnered a lot of attention in India lately, we realise that the growing concern among authors today is to break away from what children's author Zai Whitakar would call "the *Taare Zameen Par* phenomenon" (Gopalakrishnan n.p.). The film, whose young protagonist suffers from a learning disability but can create magic with colours, takes us through this little boy's journey towards self discovery whereby he proves that academic performance is not the only scale by which a person's merit should be measured. He wins the painting competition at the end of the film and puts an end to all the bullying he has suffered all his life for his disability. However, what if he had not had any talent and had not won that

competition? The authors working with disability in children's literature today agree that to break this taboo one needs to treat these children as children first - as "mischievous, stubborn, playful, happy, needy…just like any other children" (Duckbill Books n.p.). Although books for children representing disability in the country (as also in the west) have always been at the fringes, it is not that India has never had such stories to tell. As early as 1983, Arup Kumar Dutta had won an award for his thriller *The Blind Witness*, where the chief protagonist who helps the police nab a group of smugglers is a boy with visual disability. There have also been many other texts that have used animal stories to represent disability in order not to distress the reader while introducing the subject - although authors now agree that children might not be able to figure out the human association in these stories for themselves unless pointed out by adults who read along with them (Gopalakrishnan n.p.). The problem in most of these cases have been that these children have been dealt with in an unrealistic fashion. Either they have been shown to possess special talents that salvage them from their disabled position (like *Taare Zameen Par*), or they are shown to find a cure for their disability (like in Shobha Viswanath's *Little Vinayak* where disability is seen as a solvable problem), or they are shown to be dependent on others (as Ramu depends on his friend Sunil or the undercover agent Uncle Gopalan in *The Blind Witness*). But in most of these cases they are shown to be unrealistically well behaved individuals who evoke the readers' sympathy. There have also been many early books (a trend which still persists) where villains were inevitably the ones with deformed features - a fact put out poignantly by a fourteen year old disabled boy in the UK, who had requested the publishers "to include more disabled characters in children's books, and asked why the villains of children's stories are so often 'deformed'" (Flood n.p.). Given this rising awareness, authors today are eager to find out ways to represent the disabled child, without reducing it into some sort of an exotic being in their desire for inclusivity. In the west, this move had started from the 1970s, while in India it has caught steam from the last few years onwards, along with the consciousness - as Menon has noted - that "stories featuring disabled children work[s] best when not thought of deliberately" (Sachdeva et al. n.p.). Many of these authors that I mention in my work have in fact worked as teachers at schools for disabled children and try to achieve Menon's vision by bringing their own experiences into the story. However, while talking about bullying, they also mention the adjoining problems that come with disability - including adult

expectations and relentless bullying by peers. My intention is to look at how these texts incorporate all such issues within their narrative.

Sujatha Padmanabhan's *Chuskit Goes to School* (2011) is unique in the way it explores the story of a girl who cannot walk, growing up in a place like Ladakh, where the rocky terrain is hard to manoeuvre into disable-friendly infrastructure, making it doubly difficult for people like Chuskit to lead a normal life. The only school at the little village of Skitpo Yul is a walk away, but the path is no easy walk - "you had to walk up to the main road. Just before the prayer wheel, you took the path to the left of the road that ran along a narrow stream...Near the poplar trees you crossed the stream by jumping over the big rocks. Once you got to the other side, a short walk up a slope took you to the school" (Padmanabhan n.p.). Despite that, Chuskit explains how everybody from her village walked to school and "with ease". The cultural difference rings clear as one realises that there are many other children who have to take so much effort to reach school let alone receive proper education. And for Chuskit, with her disability, it is a mere luxury to be able to attend school.

Nine year old Chuskit, at first had no realisation that she is any different from the other children. However, with time she begins to realise that "there were many things she could not do as easily" as the others, including her younger brother Stobdan. With doctors being unable to find her a cure (it is never explicitly explained what is the problem with her legs), she is forced to spend her early years sitting in front of the kitchen window every day, watching the scenic beauty outside and paint, while her mother cooked food. As for movement, she had to depend on others who would carry her around, till the day that her father gets her a wheelchair. The story beautifully shows how just a wheelchair brings so much happiness to their lives, finally giving Chuskit some mobility on her own. However, her new found freedom, as she realises, is only limited. The most that she could do was sit outside in the evening and watch the village children returning back from school. She would live vicariously through them, watching these children or other people who would return back from work to their village in buses.

It is during one such evening that a young boy named Abdul, who had come to give Chuskit's grandfather a letter from the bus conductor, asks her why does she not attend school. Chuskit explains how the uneven road to the school and the spring on the way were major impediments for a girl like her on a wheelchair. The boy asks her, would she want to attend school if those problems were not there? To this Chuskit answers with an emphatic yes

and we get to know how she has built up these little narratives in her head about attending school, making friends, playing games, wearing a uniform and even writing an exam. Her day dreams come to an end when her grandfather stops her midway and asks her to concentrate on learning as much as she can at home. However, Abdul does not let her rest her dreams. He takes up the matter with the headmaster, who then takes it up with his staff. The initial response from everybody is a 'no', but the headmaster does not back down. Under his guidance, the school children get to work to make the pathway from Chuskit's house to the school even and also to build a bridge across the stream with the help from the teachers. Finally, Chuskit's dream to attend school comes true.

Based on a true story, one which the author had been able to experience firsthand during a trip to a village in Ladakh, this story shows how a different culture deals with the issue of disability. Although eventually the entire village gets together to build the bridge, their very first reaction is shown to be negative. This is not because of the absence of awareness that disabled people have an equal right to education or the lack of infrastructure, but mainly because of the lack of resources and difficult natural conditions to develop such facilities. Even if the road is made fit for her to travel in, most of the schools in India are not equipped to have a disabled student, a factor which we see in *Kanna Panna* too - which I take up later in this chapter. Building a road is just the first one of the hurdles, followed by integral questions as to how will she write? Or, how will she play? Or, most importantly, how will she use the toilet? Thankfully the headmaster does not give up in this case. Nor does the young boy Abdul who initially convinces the headmaster by citing the lessons learnt at a civics class where he had learnt that every child has a right to education. Despite being a government school, problems of which Wood has cited in her paper and I have already alluded to before in this chapter, this school seems to have proper classes and enterprising people who are not scared to take up new challenges.

This text is unique in the way it studies disability through the lens of a different culture, which has its own limitations in dealing with disability - both physically as well as financially. Chuskit's only challenge is not the fact that she cannot walk, but that she comes from a family for which procuring a wheelchair is a feat in itself. Coming from a family where her brother is a first generation learner, there are challenges within the family structure too. The doting father reminds her how well she can stitch. Her grandfather gets angry at her for expressing her innermost desires of attending a school. Beyond that there is the rocky terrain of her village and the odd positioning of the school, that makes it difficult for a

disabled person to attend without depending on someone else. The opposition that Chuskit has within the text is not an able bodied 'normal' other but nature itself, which has to be artificially moulded by those 'others' for her to be able to achieve her dreams - a dream that is as basic as wanting to acquire proper education. In a developing country like India, these texts point out repeatedly why treating a disabled person like a 'normal' person becomes secondary to just being able to arrange for resources to keep a school running. The fact that it is ultimately the school children who have to pick up pebbles from the road to keep it even and construct a little bridge over the stream, shows how basic things in life becomes a luxury for the majority of the people in a nation like this.

Zai Whitaker's *Kanna Panna* (2015) is a story about disability where she uses disability as a secondary trope in the narrative. It is hard to tell that the child protagonist has a disability right till the end of the text. Usha Mukunda, who works closely with child readers and who has written a review of the book based on her own observations as well as those of children that she has read the book along with or interacted with later, says that one of her "sensitive" listeners had not realised that Kanna had a disability even at the end of the story. Whitaker's treatment of the subject in a very nonchalant "matter of fact-ly manner" (Mukunda n.p.) is what makes this book stand apart from most texts that deal with this subject. Kanna could as well have been a 'normal' child - "mischievous, happy child, who revels in playing with words" (ibid.), if not for a single incident towards the end of the story, which first hints that he might be different - although the hint is as subtly incorporated within the text that it could as well not have been there if not for careful reading.

At the event of "Children First", a panel discussion organised by Vidya Sagar in Chennai on 5th November 2016, to discuss books for children that represent disability, Whitaker had shared an experience to explain why she chose to narrate in the way she does. Karthika Gopalakrishnan, who wrote a report on the proceedings mentions that the writer knew from the start that she did not want her character to be "extraordinarily gifted or special" (Gopalakrishnan n.p.).

> "What will happen to the other children who don't have a special talent but do live with a disability?" she added, pointing out that she didn't want to repeat the "Taare Zameen Par phenomenon."
>
> Her book, *Kali and the Rat Snake*, is about a boy from the Irula tribe (a tribe of snake-catchers) who is discriminated against but comes to his classmates' rescue

> when a snake enters their classroom. "The boy on whom I had based the character is 30 years old today. When he heard this story, the real-life Kali said, "What about all the other Irula boys who can’t catch snakes?"' (Gopalakrishnan n.p.)

This is what she tries to achieve in her story, where she does not want to pedastalise her hero as an over-achiever, but rather like a normal boy who has an edge over the others in a particular situation. She also does not want to sentimentalise the way people treat him, showing how mothers and fathers of such children have their own expectations from him which might lower the child's self confidence. At the same time, there are his peers, for whom Kanna's difference from the set norm is puzzling making them behave like bullies.

We are introduced to shy, obedient Kanna who has to be ordered by his father to put his "head up" many times a day, while his mother has to remind him always to "tuck in" his shirt, "straighten" his collar and "re-do" his buttons. That is the extent of conversation that the parents have with little Kanna and Kanna has with his parents, because they don't know what else to talk to each other about. But Kanna's mind is a different place, almost as if he is a whole different boy. He confesses, "[t]here wasn't much to say...Or maybe there was too much to say" (Whitaker n.p.). In his mind he said all that he had to say, that too in rhymes - sometimes which he knew did not even make sense.

His life changes during a vacation that he goes to spend with his Chithi - his mother's sister, her husband and their two children. Kanna's Chithi and Chithappa had a simple rule: "Do what you like but don't bother us" and the children take it very seriously as they fill their pockets and mouths with sweets, untied the neighbour's cows, played with the goats and got dirty. On a trip to the cave temples one day during the middle of a week, the shy Kanna has a drastic makeover. The temples, set in a large maze of tunnels and caves are very dark to the normal eyes even on a bright day and needs to be artificially lit up by "large bright tubelights". While inside, the family experiences a power-cut which scares the entire family except Kanna. He does not realise why everybody is so "upset". When he finds out the truth, he has a transformation. The rhymes in his head comes out to his lips, as the once-shy but now-talkative Kanna leads the entire family out of the caves. He confesses, "Lights on or off, as if it made any difference to me. My body knew how to get out" (n.p.). From being dependent on others, Kanna feels great having a family of four depend on him instead and that does something to his confidence which only grows stronger with each passing day.

By the time he is admitted to school, it is quite late for his age making him the "oldest student" in his class and also the tallest. But nothing seems to bow down his confidence now, nor his rhymes, to the extent that he is ready to be openly naughty in class and earn the ire of his teacher. This also reveals the lack in the education system in India for many disabled people, whereby they are forced to join school much later than the other 'normal' children for lack of infrastructure to take care of their needs at an age when they are even more vulnerable. Later in the story, when he trips and falls on something in the playground and realises that it is Murugan, a fellow student, who angrily shouts at him "Can't you see?", he is cheeky enough to answer "No, I can't". He enjoys the "shocked silence" that his answer evokes and feels wickedly happy. And, with Murugan apologising, all barriers are broken down as they go on to become the best of friends.

Talking about the impact the story had on her little girl, a mother writes: "The seven year old in the house read the book by herself and asked me a few questions like what would it feel to see dark all the time and would people who can't see feel sorry for themselves? The book resulted in a healthy discussion in the household about physical disability" (Rs Mom n.p.). I guess, this is exactly what the author would have hoped for and this is what the new publishing houses aim at achieving. The little boy Kanna, is not portrayed in opposition to an 'other' who is different from him in all respects. Even though he is visibly not shown to be naughty, the colourful world in his head makes up for all his physical shyness, making him seem just like the other 'normal' boys. And, his normalcy is retained right till the end even when he leads his aunt, uncle and cousins out of the dark caves during the power-cut. Everybody has some abilities and some deficiencies, that does not turn them into heroes. It is just that Kanna found an opportunity, like any other 'normal' boy, where he had an edge over the others. Having grown with the knowledge of his deficiency, that one ability that he finds in himself gives him his voice back. The only other that he comes across - Murugan, starts off on an empathetic note but is quickly put into place by Kanna, normalising the relationship between them. The most interesting fact is the accompanying illustrations, where Kanna with big oval eyes is never shown to be any different from the others and just like that disability is normalised without any extra hype. Kanna's disability is never made too overpowering in the text that it emerges as more important than Kanna as an individual.

Arti Sonthalia's *Big Bully and M-Me* (2015) also has a unique pair for its protagonist-antagonist unit. This chapter book for young readers which tells the story of a small boy who stammers and the class bully, is "probably the first Indian book for

younger kids that tackles the issue of bullying", in the words of Tanu Shree Singh (Sonthalia "Arti Sonthalia" n.p.). Krishna, who likes being called Krish, is a Grade Three student. However, the problems in his life are much bigger and graver. He is the "shortest, skinniest boy in class" (Sonthalia 3) and the under-achiever at home as compared to his elder brother Bheem. But, apart from this, he has another added problem which most other children do not have and that is his speech impediment. Most of the story is narrated to us in first person and we realise that most of the things he mentions, especially his feelings about another person - is mostly in his mind. The first time we actually hear him speak is in the second chapter "Bumpy Me" when their class teacher announces that they are going to do an extempore show.

> I raised my hands. Usually I never ask questions but this was something serious, very serious.
>
> 'S-s-sir why d-d-do we need t-t-to do an ex-ex-extempore sp-s-s-s-speech?' (Sonthalia 8)

The immediate hollering that follows explains why Krish never asks questions in class and why this question was a serious one for him to ask.

This is also the reason that the Big Bully Ishaan can get away with insulting him all the time without Krish retorting back, even though he has his responses bubbling and ready in his mind. His speech problem makes Krish detest all events that involve a lot of talking. He tries to avoid all read-aloud times in class and misses all oral-tests. He even hates talking on the phone. Be it at home or at school, others complete his sentences for him and even if that is not what he wants, he chooses to remain silent and go ahead with it. In the climax of the book, when Krish finally has to pick up his topic from folded pieces of paper, he picks up one with "Communication". He aptly points out that nobody would know the meaning of communication as well as somebody with a speech impediment.

> You can't order in a restaurant without pointing at pictures. You can't scream or yell for your favourite team. You can't ask your brother his girlfriend's name. Nor can you ask how girls like Khushi are wizards. And why Green's family is so Green! (Sonthalia 61)

On top of that people seem to be intolerant towards him. Even the ones who are close to him, like Green - Krish's best friend, hardly has any idea what is going on in his innermost thoughts. Parents too - despite their encouraging nature (like that of Krish's parents) - can be overbearing on these children with their over-expectations. This can be seriously injurious for the child who can end up with low self-esteem. In a class, where majority of the children do not have the problem Krish has and have been brought up on a majoritarian world-view, Krish appears like an aberration that can be made fun of. All these angles have been widely dealt with in this book.

Talking about her book in an interview with Tanu Shree Singh, Sonthalia mentions:

> The plot came to me when I was doing a research for a short story on schizophrenia. My protagonist stammered, and the idea evolved from that. Usually, when someone stammers, we complete his words for him and we laugh at him. This issue has never been taken very seriously in our country. I did my research on stammering and what children face when they stammer. I also met the Indian Stammering Association leader in Hyderabad, who was kind of enough to let me attend one of his sessions. Listening to them, reading books on stammering, hearing podcasts, made me feel the trauma a person who stutters goes through, and I couldn't help but write about it. (Sonthalia "Arti Sonthalia" n.p.)

Krish, the protagonist, stammers. Every time he opens his mouth, his words break and jerk, making it difficult for others to understand what he is saying. At other times, words get stuck in his throat and do not come out (9). Although his teacher and his family is highly supportive and encourages him to try, he cannot understand why the adults have to arrange for such events and expect everybody to participate without taking into account those children who might be differently-abled. "Why can't teachers come up with shows like who can sleep longer, who digs out more mud or who counts more stars?" (14), he sometimes thinks, or "But why speak at all, why not just write? Why didn't anyone think about people who stammered??" (17). Another example would be the time when he was in Grade Two and their class was doing a play where Krish's mother made sure that he had taken part. Although he had just a line to say, he got stuck when his turn came and just could not get his lines out. Even though his mother had

been happy that he had at least gone up on stage, for Krish it had been an experience he would never like to repeat again. So, although the extempore competition was a "great idea" (11), it was not so for Krish. However, Krish is shown to have a supportive teacher, with quirky teaching methods and a family which never gives up on him, despite their tendency of expecting the same achievements out of both their sons. So, stories of the movie star Hrithik Roshan and King George VI, and how they overcame their stammering problem by never giving up, gives much hope to Krish and encourages him to give in his best.

The other important issue that this book deals with is the aspect of bullying which is not uncommon but is hardly dealt with in children's books. The very first time we are introduced to Ishaan, "the tallest meanest bully in the world" (3), he is shown to be elbowing Krish hard - so hard that he nearly fell on his face (2). This boy is shown to be a sharp one, good at basketball, extra-participative in class and competitive by spirit. But in his inter-personal relationships, especially with Krish, he is shown to be a big bully. He troubles him in various ways - calls him names, sticks out his tongue at him, makes fun of his stammering, mimics him and hits him whenever he could find an opportunity. He was so big in comparison to Krish's short stature that he usually got away with physically terrorising him. Although Krish contemplates seeking his brother's help, he is scared of its consequences and decides to tolerate all this in silence. Ishaan is one of the main reasons behind Krish's grave fear for public speaking. In Grade One during a read-aloud session, Krish had got stuck at the word "puffed" (10) when Ishaan had completed it by yelling it from behind leaving everybody in laughter. After that he had puffed Krish wherever he had met him, so much so that Krish even had nightmares of him puffing at him. When they are paired together as partners for the extempore, the ever competitive Ishaan is loudly vocal about his displeasure at the choice of his partner. He is mean to him, does not care for teamwork even when Krish tries to be helpful and even calls him a loser. It lowers Krish's morale as he too momentarily starts believing that he is one. However, the book does not paint Ishaan as a completely black character. It also tries to probe serious questions as to how a person becomes a bully and what is his own life like? This is dealt with in an episode where Krish has the opportunity to see how Ishaan's own elder brother behaves with him. Challenging him to a game of football, the elder boy pushes Ishaan just the way Ishaan used to push Krish. Each time Ishaan yelled "the older boy laughed and hit him again" (45), finally

pushing him down, kicking him hard and calling him useless. This is a bonding moment for both the younger boys when Krish decides not to get back at Ishaan by telling others of how he was treated by his elder brother and surprises him.

The way parents deal with children is another issue that this book touches upon. Krish's family is shown to be supportive - sometimes extra-supportive towards their son. However, they have an elder son who is a bright student who wins every competition he takes part in. Although not jealous of his brother, this makes Krish doubt his own abilities much more, especially because the conditions at home seem to be such that it is more favourable towards the elder one. So each time Bheem wins something, one of his demands gets fulfilled, but Krish is unable to compete at the same level and is cheated of his chances. His rusty yellow cycle is shown to be falling to pieces, but nobody at home seems to pay much attention to it. Every time he mentions it, he is reminded of the budget, even though Bheem gets the PSP as he had wanted. After Bheem's big win at a Spelling Bee contest, when the family goes for dinner, the conversation is all about Bheem's win. The moment Krish asks for a new cycle, his mother negotiates with him that only if he did well in the extempore he would get his wish fulfilled. Although his mother is not shown to be asking him to win it - only try - the conditions put on his demands seems unreasonable to Krish. Even though the book does not show the parents as completely authoritarian, it does raise its voice against such biased attitudes within the family where the child has to suffer. That the capabilities of two children might be completely different becomes secondary to the necessity to compete and win.

Although dealing with such sensitive issues, the book tries to maintain a non-didactic approach. However, there are some instances where it falls into the trap which most other texts from this genre fall into - which is, sounding too preachy. Although rare instances of this can be found in the text, the ones which occur, mostly blend in with the storyline. One such instance would be when Krish mentions how swimming was difficult for Khushi as speaking was difficult for him (46). Khushi was scared of water and still swam with armbands and a tube. Although Ishaan and the others made fun of her, it did not bother her one bit. Sonthalia keeps putting such inspirational anecdotes in the narrative, which boosts up his spirits every time he feels low. Nonetheless, the author manages to keep up the fun quotient of the book which is crucial to sustain the interests of early readers. The character of Krish's class teacher,

Dennis Fergusson - whom they fondly call Dennis the Menace, is a refreshing change, with all his unconventional methods of teaching. He is the epitome of fun, with even his lessons being taught through fun exercises. He makes his students run around class, jump up and down and never loses his temper when his students fail at something. Mainly, he is shown to be supportive and helpful, especially towards Krish, without forcefully making his students adhere to his instructions. Thus, the book through its choice of unconventional characters try to broaden the scope of characterisation within Indian English Children's Literature that gives equal importance to those multiple voices that have hitherto not found representation within this genre by virtue of not being part of the dominant majority.

Ranjit Lal's *The Dugong and the Barracudas* (2015), which was first published as a shorter story in the anthology *Whispers in the Classroom, Voices in the Field* (2012), also deals with the topic of disability. It addresses the question of how prejudices against such different childhoods seep into the child psychology from the adult world, making them turn into bullies towards anyone who deviates from the set norm that they are made to identify with. Rugged Rocks High School, the elite school situated near the sea in Chennai, has a new applicant. Alisha, the school's alumnus, has come to request the school's principal Farah, the former head-girl of the institution who had once stood up for Alisha in the past, to grant her daughter Sushmita a seat in standard eight of their school. However, Sushmita is not a 'normal' child. Although she has "nothing medically wrong with her" she is "big" and "a bit slow to grasp things" (Lal *The Dugong* 9). Because of this reason, none of the schools in the former places that her father had been posted before had agreed to take her on as a student, giving the excuses that "she would be too demanding, that they didn't have the resources, that she'd distract the other students whose parents would complain..." (10), forcing the parents to home-school their child up till then. Although Farah accepts Sushmita into her school, her classmates are not so welcoming. Most of them ridicule her because of her weight or slow grasping capability. The one boy in the class, Karan, who sympathises with her, is scared to stand up for her openly, for fear of being ghettoised. Sushmita, however, takes everything in her stride and keeps up her optimism until one day when a classmate spreads a rumour about her that makes the entire class ostracise her. For her, even ridicule is better than being totally alienated. This story goes on to show how she overcomes this situation and fights to be accepted with all her differences as a 'normal' person.

The loneliness that the girl feels is evident from the fact that she has three imaginary "pretend friends" Priya, Richa and Anita, with whom she is shown to have full-blown conversations. When she is given the good news that she will be attending school for the first time in her life, she is beyond herself with happiness. She is excited at the prospect of having real friends at last, pointing out to the fact at how these children are discriminated. However, as Farah predicts, putting her in the class with the other 'normal' children turns out to be like putting a big but harmless dugong from the sea among a bunch of ferocious barracudas in a tank. Although Sushmita is never seen losing her patience or optimism, the other children do not leave a single opportunity from ridiculing her. Natasha and Arun, the class prefects who are given the responsibility of showing her around, turn out to be her biggest tormenters, using their position to malign her. The text shows how peer pressure forces her only sympathiser from extending her a helping hand, for fear that he will also be treated in a similar fashion. Sushmita is the only person who chooses to give her oppressors the benefit of the doubt. When she is compared to an earthquake which is 9.5 on the Richter scale, she just laughs it off by agreeing that she does "wobble and shake a lot" because of her size. Having had no real interaction before, she takes it to be normal for people to behave with her in that fashion. She is compared to a hippo (22), asked mean questions like whether she makes a lot of methane (28) and fed a lot of misinformation about school assignments. But she is never once shown to doubt their veracity. Instead she tries to match up to their levels by proving what a good friend she can be.

The only time she manages to outshine the others is at a boxing match set by Mr. Darukhanewalla, between her and Arun. However, this takes an ugly turn when Arun's girlfriend takes it as an insult and tries to teach Sushmita a lesson by telling her that Karan has a crush on her and wants her to swim across the lagoon to prove that she too likes him. Despite knowing that swimming across the lagoon is forbidden, Sushmita takes up the challenge and almost gets expelled. But even under the force of adversity she does not give away the name of the perpetrator. Instead of having a change of heart, Natasha uses her silence against her and spreads the rumour that she had tattled on her. This is what turns the entire class against her, making Sushmita feel doubly alone and vulnerable. Finally with Karan and her class-teacher, Miss Desai's intervention, she manages to come clear and win back her position. The book portrays how bullying and disability become synonymous in our society, mainly because children are ignorant about the existence of such different childhoods. It also dismantles the myth about innocent and sensitive children, by showing

that even children are capable of utmost cruelty. Further, Lal shows that although Sushmita's sympathisers always try to protect her, all that she wants them to do is have a little faith in her. As long as she has that support, she is perfectly capable of fighting her own battles.

The next story which I would like to look at under this category is Zainab Sulaiman's *Simply Nanju* (2016). On the Facebook group "The Reading Raccoons - Discovering Children's Literature", Vaishali Shroff, a mother, expresses concern when suggested Sulaiman's book for her eight year old:

> I really want to get him *Simply Nanju*. My biggest concern is he cannot bear stories where the children are going through any kind of hardship. He starts sobbing. I've told him many times that it's important to read these stories while focussing on how they talk about overcoming those problems.
>
> He abandoned Matilda...he cried while reading Paddington!
>
> But give him any book on the space, universe, human body, general science, biographies, or anything funny, he will swallow them. He even reviewed Shamim's biography on APJ Kalam. (Shroff n.p.)

To this Sayoni Basu, one of the founding members of Duckbill comments: "Well, *Simply Nanju* is actually really funny" (n.p.). This, in fact, is true. Sulaiman's *Simply Nanju* is a school story about a mixed bunch of children - obedient, naughty, mischievous, bully, so on and so forth, children who will make you laugh out loud with their antics. The only difference is that they are all children with special needs. However, it does not end there. It is also a text that gives us a glimpse into families from the lower socio-economic background to which these children belong. It is also a mystery - a double mystery that Nanju and his best friend Mahesh solve. However, Sulaiman deals with all the issues quite deftly, without making any aspect become overpowering over the other. By creating a space where all children are disabled, apart from the adults who look after them, she manages to give enough prominence to the lives of these children alone without sentimentalising their existence by comparing them with an abled other. The rich variety of diversity is evident, as the varying degree of their disability is dealt with neutrality, that is neither too sympathetic nor distant. They are treated just like any other bunch of class five students, with their own friendships, petty fights, competitions, jealousies, crushes and bullying.

While writing about how her experience of working at a school for children with special needs made her first think of writing a book like this, Sulaiman mentions an episode on the Duckbill Blog that had been a direct inspiration. She mentions how she used to offer special treatment to Pramukh, a disabled boy in her class, who despite his shortcomings was super smart and consistently the class topper. However, with time, she realised a change in his behaviour to the point that he would be openly rude to her. On introspecting the matter, Sulaiman realised that the fact that she was treating him specially was mainly because she felt sympathetic towards him that he was so smart despite his disability - one that would perhaps kill him even before he reached adulthood - and this must have become evident to Pramukh. All that Pramukh ever wanted was to be treated like a 'normal' boy and not like some star object out of sympathy. Sulaiman went back to treating him like just any other and within days Pramukh was back to the way he was (Sulaiman "We are all" n.p.). While penning down her book, it was her sole intention to use this experience in the way she narrated her story - the reason why she never lets her readers feel pity or alienated from the child characters that she portrays. She just presents them as 'normal' as any other children, just with some obstacles - as is the case of any other 'normal' children.

Nanjegowda, Nanju in short, is the main protagonist of Sulaiman's novel. He is a ten year old boy with a spinal defect that makes him "walk funny" (Arundhati n.p.) and unable to tell if he has to go to the bathroom, because of which he has to wear a diaper at all time. His best friend is the super smart Mahesh, who is wheelchair-bound, and his arch "nemesis" is Ronit, who has lost the use of his right arm after being crushed by an overtaking bus (Sulaiman 5). Nanju has a secret crush on the class topper Aradhana, who was born with a thin twisted frame that made her cave in and form a gentle hump whenever she had to carry some weight. It also made her right hip jut out upwards slightly (30). When Aradhana's class exercise books start going missing, Nanju takes it upon himself to solve the mystery. Together with his best friend, he realises that it is the new boy Pratik's doing. In the process, Nanju also manages to nab Kevin, the bully from the sixth standard, in the act of stealing from the school nursery - one of Nanju's favourite places in the school. The back-story to each of these incidents are even more sensitively told that does not once make the plotline split into binaries of good or bad. Pratik's alcoholic father, who has lost his job in the city, wants his son to be educated in order to uplift their social position. However, in his inebriated state he is no longer the doting father, but an abusive monster who beats his son black and blue whenever he is unable to secure full marks in his school assignments. This compels him

to steal Aradhana's notebooks to sell it as his own to his father, in order to escape corporeal punishment, after which he always returns them back When his father finally discovers his con, he beats him till his leg and a hand is broken, following which the father goes into hiding. Kevin, on the other hand, has been brought up by an aunt. His father has never cared about his existence and his mother worked as a domestic help in Dubai. This makes him fall into bad company and resort to stealing in order to make some extra money.

Little incidents make the narrative seem even more real and lifelike. The children are occasionally taken out for school picnics, but since school outings are always supposed to have some educational outcome they are taken to the Vigneshwara Science & Technology Park - which turns out to be such a bore than teachers are forced to leave the students to their own antics. The children are also made to participate in Talent Shows where they can "take part in a fancy-dress competition or perform a short act, either individually or in a group" (18). Different kinds of performances are described, but the fancy-dress category is the most entertaining - like the "Grape Boy", whose father, an auto-driver had taken meticulous care to blow up balloons and cover him up, or the "Provision Store" whose mother "had rigged two sturdy sticks from either side of the wheelchair that supported a third horizontal one placed about two feet above his head" from which hung various objects like crushed chips packets, empty Eclair wrappers etc. (83). Talking about the real life event that inspired Sulaiman to come up with this idea, she writes:

> The kids and parents were asked to use what they already had at home to make the costumes. The result was creative, affordable and organic ideas. Unlike regular fancy dress competitions, where parents and kids team up to prove that their rented-out costume is the fanciest and most expensive, this event had humility and genuineness which was very touching. (Taneja n.p.)

Apart from this, they also have annual cricket matches with the Nethra School for the Hearing Impaired (21) where the spirit of competitions runs as high as the happiness of the others who can miss their classes in the pretext of the match. The lingo used by the children add charm to the narrative, evoking laughter at them "tensioning" or "shutyamouth"-ing, which as Sulaiman explains is "an interesting jumble of their mother tongue and what they learned at school". She further adds that: "As teachers, we would try really hard to change this and make them speak “proper English”. However, I’ll admit that I cracked up every time they used them. I secretly wanted them to talk more like that!" (Taneja n.p.)

Although the adult world is shown to be thoroughly interspersed with the lives of these children, they are never made to overpower the world that the children inhabit. Teachers are shown to be as irritated with the children creating a ruckus in the class as would be any teacher in a 'normal' school. They are not treated any differently just because of the fact that they are disabled. They are forced to stand up and wish "good morning" to a teacher who has walked into a class. They are scolded for scoring low, sent to the principal's office for misbehaviour and threatened with parents' call in case things went out of hand. A new teacher Asha Miss, from Nagaland, is shown to join the school, who becomes an instant favourite with her outdoor classes and her way of teaching through word games. The Ayammas or the school governesses are shown to be of various kinds - some kind, some caring, other openly mean towards the children for making them wheel them around, or clean up after bladder accidents. A mushrooming romance is also hinted at between the driver Karthik Uncle and a senior Ayamma Bhavani Amma - but nothing is stated explicitly and it is interesting to note the exchange of smiles between the two adults through the child's eyes still unsure as to the extent of their friendship.

Jaya Bhattajarji, reviewing the book on her blog, finds it to be a timely publication, given "the debates about the 'Accessible India Campaign' and the Central government having released the 'Inclusiveness and Accessibility Index' that measures the actions and attitudes of different organisations towards people with disabilities" (Rose n.p.). What it does is to create a world where these disabled children have to opposition to measure up against. Also Bhattajarji finds it as a lack within the novel, it appears to be more empowering as the standards by which 'normal' childhoods are measured are completely absent from the narrative making it more inclusive than others. Sulaiman herself confesses at being "torn between writing a really hard-hitting book which showed how relentless the double whammy of poverty and disability can be, and writing about how inspite of all their hardships, these children really live for the day and are determined to extract every last ounce of joy from it" (Vaccharajani n.p.). This is what gives the narrative a matter-of-fact approach that neither flattens it out with stereotypes nor becomes overbearing for young readers. At the same time, it also introduces readers to the world beyond the domain of 'normal' childhood which is expected to be the mark against which all other childhoods are measured.

Broken Families

"In the Indian tradition, the family is the focal point of community life and children are perceived only as a part of the family" (Jafa 1), thus writes Manorama Jafa in "Children - Their Culture and Literature". This is a recurring idea that we find reflected in many children's literature critic in India. This has been an idea that has been part of the Indian subconscious since the early ages, as our traditional literatures will bear evidence too. Kakar's study, as mentioned in the earlier chapter, shows how the child has always been seen in relation to its family, beyond which it has no separate identity. Even when Ramanujan mentions his growing up years in "Telling Tales" where he talks about his initiation into Indian folktales, he centres it around his family - his big joint family broken down into two camps, one of the father (through whom he was introduced to the Indian traditional and Anglophone literatures) and one of the mother (where he discovered "tales of passion and trouble" of the Indian folk tradition). The idea of a family in India is traditionally that of a joint family like this with grandparents, uncles, aunts and parents all living together, but the divisive technique is the same - into two distinct camps - one of the father and the other of the mother (the masculine and the feminine). Describing the birth ritual in Indian households in "The Child in Indian Tradition", Kakar not only reinforces the existence of this divide in 'normal' Indian households but also mentions how they have different roles and rituals assigned to them - the mother lies in labour inside, the family prays for the baby's (preferably male) safe delivery headed by the priest outside, the father performs the birth rites after the child is born, he then leaves to celebrate with a feast outside, the mother goes off to sleep cuddling the baby. Although such rituals are hardly followed in toto and in the same fashion today, the process of birth and growing up are processes that are seen as community acts within the Indian society where the community stands for the family members first complete in its masculine and feminine counterparts. However, nowadays, families are hardly that big or 'normal'. As a report "The changing Indian" in the *Hindustan Times* states: "In urban India today, that shape [of the traditional 'normal' family] has morphed into more of an amoeba". Increased effects of globalisation and westernisation are being cited as reasons for this, prompting "a liberalisation of the stringent notions associated with the term 'normal family'", says Joseph MT, associate professor of sociology at University of Mumbai (HT Weekend n.p.). With the breaking down of families into nuclear families, many of which is run by

a single individual, the traditional idea of the Indian family is slowly collapsing. But, the idea of such a heteronormative family with both parents present is still a prevalent one and the instant image one has when thinking of a 'normal' family. This has also been the 'normal' depiction of families in books for children. Realising the need to address the issues of those other children in India who are being brought up in broken families by single parents, the new age authors have tried to challenge another taboo within their narratives. This section is a study of such a text, that tries to give to such children a protagonist to identify with and sensitise the other child from a 'normal' family to the existence of such childhoods.

In the citation note for the Crossword Children's Book Award 2014 for Shals Mahajan's *Timmi in Tangles* (2013) the jury had mentioned among other things:

> Timmi comes from a non-traditional family and that fact is presented in a matter-of-fact manner, challenging heteronormative settings in a gentle, positive way. (Dhar "Crossword" n.p.)

A family like that of Timmi was rarely to be found in Indian English Children's Literature. Timmi's mother is a single parent but Mahajan does not make a huge uproar about this fact nor does she make this issue central to the character of Timmi. Aimed at young readers, this book brings together the adventures of Timmi (almost six years old) who effortlessly moves between her world of reality and imagination. Mahajan achieves all this without slipping out of the character for a moment and maintaining a consistent voice throughout. This young protagonist has sometimes been called a "feisty young heroine" (Sippy n.p.) and at other times "irrepressible" (Shireen D. n.p.). As Shireen D. has mentioned in the review of the book on *goodbooks*:

> Timmi’s voice never falters and the reader sees the world as she sees it – making sense of its complexities in her own individual manner, having her own opinions about things, asking questions that baffle her and finding answers to what needs to be explained. Timmi is your regular urban Indian child, and Mahajan subtly and cleverly also inserts markers of a child growing up in our changing contemporary times. (Shireen D. n.p.)

This indomitable spirit of Timmi with her need to assert and have an opinion of her own is what inspired the jury of the Crossword Children's Book Awards too. And, never in this entire journey of Timmi do we find Mahajan talking down to her character.

Timmi lives with her mother and Kamal Mausi, who looks after her when her mother is not around. Timmi's mother "worked in an office and wrote and wrote on the computer" (Mahajan 4). Timmi has an imaginative mind. She can turn drab reality into a land of colours. So when she hears the story of the Raja of Ramirpur during her first adventure "The Golden Turban", she stops being a little school going girl and decides to become the raja. The moment she takes this decision, there is no stopping her. Knowing that "rajas never went to school" (3) because "school was for small children" (3) she rebels against being sent to school. It is interesting how Mahajan reverses the gaze completely by getting into the head of little Timmi. Hence, when Timmi's mother refuses to listen to her demands, Timmi is not to be demotivated. Like a parent would have labelled a naughty girl who does not listen to them as a 'bad girl', it is Timmi who passes judgement on her mother. "This must be a witch," thinks Timmi to herself (3). Even when things get sorted between them, Timmi does not give up her rights as the king. So a truce is called upon between mother and daughter, and Timmi decides to go to school but in her raja clothes - "the yellow towel tied like a turban on her head, with a shiny purple button at the centre, the blue bathrobe with pink elephants, and shoes covered with shiny bits of paper" (12). Braving inquisitive bus conductors and laughing children, Timmi reaches her class but soon realises that their class teacher was not happy with her transgression. "Ms Karkare did not say anything. But she did not smile. She only smiled when you were neatly dressed and said 'Good morning, Miss,' and bobbed your head up and down'" (15). When Timmi goes back to school in the same attire on the third day too, Ms Karkare hands her a sealed letter and asks her to pass it to her mother. This scares Timmi, as she knows very well what happens when a parent is handed a letter from the school authorities. She initially decides to leave school altogether, but is later convinced by her mother to continue. She gets a photo of hers clicked in the studio as the king and hangs it up at their home, assuring that the raja would always be there guarding their house even when Timmi was at school. Timmi's adventures are that of a normal six-year old child. This story does not try to bind her within the walls of obedience, but rather shows an indulgent mother who gives her the space of making her own choices. It is only when authoritative figures like Ms Kurkure

try to mould her according to the conventional notions of a 'good girl' that Timmi feels threatened and scared.

This same conventional notion of the 'good' and the 'bad' is brought forward again in her last adventure "A Good Girl". The day had turned strange during the second period at school, which was the drawing class where "Ms Naidu asked them to draw their homes and their families" (56). For Timmi this was a very "important drawing" and she "wanted to make it the very best" (57). Her drawing was a direct reflection of Timmi's personality where reality and imagination merged together to form a colourful whole. She had painted a round and yellow house, with orange doors and green roof. The roof was open on one side so that whenever Timmi wanted to she "could ask Juju the giant to lift it up and let air come in" (57) or even rain. Among her family members, she started with her Amma and then went onto include Kama Mousi with lots of food, Timmi herself, her mother's friend Paro Aunty, as well as lots of her toys including the white puppy Floppy. The whole drawing took her a lot of time to complete and left her completely drained of energy. But, she was proud of her drawing and was eager to show it off to her drawing teacher. Ms Naidu found it "interesting" but before she was done describing her the entire drawing, she was already praising Simran's painting. Simran's drawing with its neat little house and garden and four stick figures standing one after the other with neat labels of "Papa, "Mama", "Simran" and "Bittu" underneath them earned her the praise of a "good girl" (61) from the teacher while it left Timmi baffled. She found the drawing "irritating" and "boring" and could not understand who served her food. Simran replied with an air of haughtiness that her mother served her food and that hers was a real family portrait because it had her parents and her brother, while Timmi's paintings only had servants and toys. A fight breaks out between them when Timmi calls Simran stupid and in turn Simran points out that Timmi's painting has no father or brother and has somebody other than her mother serving her food - implying that Timmi is stupid. Simran's words disturb Timmi as she keeps on wondering about the truth of what she had said. As luck would have it, in her very next class Ms Karkare starts teaching them a lesson on a good girl named Preeti who lives in a big house with her parents and her brother and went with them to the beach on Sundays where the father bought them all ice-creams. Even when the teacher shouts at Timmi for being fidgety and asks her to be a good girl, Timmi is confused as to "how could she become a good girl" (64). If having a father and a brother was the mark of a good girl then Timmi

did not have the agency to be one. It is only when she reaches back home after school, puts in a lot of thought into this matter, adds Idli-amma and Juju the giant to her drawing along with the three with yellow flowers - all things that make her happy and feel complete, she rests in peace. The added bonus is when both her mother and Kamal Mausi praise her drawing and pamper her with ice-cream (albeit without a father figure) that Timmi realises that "it was not so difficult to be a good girl after all" (69).

The preconceived notions of 'good' and 'bad' that Mahajan criticises through the character of Timmi, seem to bear evidence to what the Crossword Book Award jury had to say about the book:.

> Rooted firmly in contemporary urban India, Timmi's world reflects everyday experiences that resonate across myriad childhoods and at the same time creates room for representations that show us that the tangles in Timmi's world are as much created by the grown-ups as by her. (Dhar "Crossword" n.p.)

However, hitherto the Indian English Children's literature has only focused on "a narrow, hegemonic version of the Indian nation" (Superle 4) and left out such voices from the myriad other childhoods found in the nation. If indeed "the early years are critical, formative years of our lives and the stories we hear can have a profound impact on how we see the world" (Dhar "Crossword" n.p.), we need to have more stories like that of Timmi that bring forth these voices with a greater degree of clarity and a lesser degree of essentialisation. This would prevent the future Simran-s of being mouthpieces of the hegemonic forces which propagates conventionalism as normal and everything else as not.

Conclusion

Writing in 2011 and looking at a total number of sixty books from the category of Indian English children's literature - where the earliest text she looks at is from the year 1990 and the latest is from 2008 (twenty-one books from the twentieth century and thirty-nine from the twenty-first), she comes to the conclusion:

> ...while these novels vividly imagine positive social transformation through portrayals of empowered Indian children on the one hand, the aspirations of the texts are, on the other hand, those of the hegemonic group and are

> therefore restricted to what will best serve their middleclass, upper-caste goals—in both national and transnational contexts. This is a by-product of the circumstances of composition...the results of which include a prescriptive portrayal of Indian girlhood, portrayals of national unity and multicultural harmony that appear at least superficially diverse but actually uphold existing sociopolitical hierarchies, and essentialised portrayals of Indianness. (Superle 178-180)

She lauds the optimism in the novels and the intent of the authors to move beyond conventional modes, but she also expresses anxiety that although these novels apparently invite the child readers "to imagine new possibilities that redefine participation in national aspirations, bicultural identity, and traditional approaches to gender, they also seek to contain these readers within the parameters of normalcy they inscribe. As a result, they often replace prescriptive traditional cultural norms with prescriptive contemporary cultural norms [where] [c]ontent and cultural values may be different, but the methods remain the same" (Superle 179) - that of inculcating the readers into a hegemonic idea of what India imagines itself to be in the modern context.

My study, as reflected in this chapter, looks at seventeen books from the twenty-first century Indian English children's literature aimed at middle school readers. Although it takes up one text from 1999, one from 2007, and two from 2008 (the latest year Superle's work incorporates), most of my primary readings are from the period where Superle's work ends to the year 2016 - one from 2009, one from 2010, two from 2011, one from 2012, three from 2013, one from 2014, four from 2015 and one from 2016. I notice a further expansion of the boundaries within this genre, from what Superle had last encountered. There are conscious attempts being made to understand the hegemonic ideology that rules every taboo that has so far dictated this genre and an initiative to move beyond. There are newer codes for tolerance, sensitivity and awareness being sown, that are trying to break the apparently multicultural but in actuality narrow representations of Indian childhoods that have ruled the genre so far. Yes, there are still many problems that one encounters as my close readings have demonstrated but there are more representations of children from different backgrounds without overt sentimentalisation.

While many adults still feel strongly about the appropriateness of certain issues within children's novels, authors are increasingly breaking boundaries in order to introduce children to a huge range of issues that exist but have been hardly addressed till now with this amount of sensitivity. When asked if this is too much for children, especially of this age group, author Ranjit Lal suitably explains: "Today's children are exposed to the world through the internet and the social media. We cannot censor them" (IANS n.p.). It is, perhaps, time to regard children as readers who are not so vulnerable to deal with such complicated issues, and realise that taboos have no place in such literature. Like Ankita Roy of Zubaan publication house believes, one must have faith in the capabilities of our young readers to know how much is too much for them and thus 'play fair' as Ardizzone would have us play. As we have seen, children's literatures are based on the construct of the child that reveals what kind of future adults imagine to build. Therefore, such a shift within Indian English children's literature can only point to the fact that authors are now more confident to move beyond the western modes that have dictated this genre so far to incorporate distinct voices from different childhoods that have existed, and still exist, within large spaces of developing countries like India, to embrace a postcolonial identity that dares to imagine itself irrespective of the 'colonial' in its 'post'-colonial existence.

CHAPTER III

BREAKING TABOOS IN THE TEXTS AIMED AT YOUNG ADULTS

Introduction

The term young adult did not gain much momentum up till the last few decades. Of course there was the acknowledgement that there was a developmental stage situated in between the period of childhood and adulthood occupied by individuals who were not immature enough to be considered as children but still not mature enough to be adults. However, given that it was a trend for children to join the workforce as soon as they were considered to have matured enough, sometimes as young as the age of ten, nobody really thought it necessary to discursivise about this period. As Michael Cart says, "Simply put, until 1990 we were a society with only two categories of citizens: children and adults" (Cart 2), where by "we" he primarily means the American society - since the popular consensus is that young adult literature is "an American gift to the world" (Cart 1). In 1904, with the publication of *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, G. Stanley Hall brought the idea into common parlance - albeit not as "young adult" but pre-empting the modern sense of the term. Although criticised for being highly "flawed" (Cart 2) and later mostly discredited, at that point of time it emerged to be extremely influential, especially among the educators. Accordingly, the school-going age of individuals increased and more and more adolescents started going for further education before entering the workforce. Finally, the Great Depression of the 1930s provided the watershed moment, pushing the "teenage youth out of workplace and into the class-room" (Palladino as quoted in Cart 3). With this emerged a definite youth culture - a resultant of throwing in a group of young people together in each other's company. By the 1940s, this started "morphing into a new-kind of youth, the teenager" (Cart 6), the term which was first used in print in *Popular Science Monthly* on September 1941. By 1958, Jean Piaget had published his *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, whereby he further proved the distinctness of this stage of development from the others by dividing human life into various cognitive developmental stages and showing how the cognitive capability of adolescents mark them apart from children and adults.

This is the stage which comes after the concrete operational stage, one which Piaget refers to as the formal operational stage - from around age twelve to eighteen. The logical reasoning of the individual at this stage extends to include abstract concepts too. The person becomes capable of both hypothetical as well as deductive reasoning. While at the earlier stage the individual relies on real life experiences to draw their conclusions from, at this stage the individual become capable of coming to a conclusion by applying logic to abstract concepts in a hypothetical manner. Again, one should not forget that much of Piaget's reasoning have now been decried or refined, like for instance theorists now agree that this stage emerges in individuals a little later than Piaget's estimate and that it cannot be held as universally true (Danner and Day 1600), it is still believed to yield the same results in "nearly all normal young adults" (Danner and Day 1606), hence proving that we cannot totally rubbish his theory.

However, writing specifically for this age group did not take shape as a distinct category for a very long time. Cart sees the American Library Association's decision to form the Young Adult Services Division in 1957 as the moment when the label of young adult was introduced into the professional vocabulary with the understanding that these individuals have special needs that need to be separately addressed. As the discourse around this new category arose, a new literature started shaping up around its tenets. Although looking back, one may agree with critics Nilsen and Donelson in seeing *Little Women* and *Ragged Dick* written by Louisa May Alcott and Horatio Alger, Jr. respectively and published in the year 1868 as one of the first examples of such kind of writing (Nilsen and Donelson 42). However, it is with *Sue Barton* written by Helen Boylston and published first in 1936 that the "dawn of the modern teen-age story" is said to have begun with a "thunder" (Edwards 88). Finally, with Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* being published in 1942 "the new field of writing for teen-agers became established" (Edwards 88).

So it can be said that this genre gathered impetus from the 1930-40s onwards, when authors started to write to suit the needs of this newly discovered age-group and the publishers began to publish realising the underlying profit in this area. After the World War II, when the society slowly stabilised, the increased affluence saw the beginnings of pocket money being given to children, thus making them somewhat financially capable to buy books of their own choice, further igniting the interest in this field (Cart 11). Like any other form of literature, this sub-genre of children's literature also saw its own trajectory of figuring out itself. In the initial stage, as evident in the twelve teenage profiles published in the *Profile of*

Youth in 1951 (edited by Daly), the prevailing idea was that this stage like that of the earlier stages was also representative of childhood innocence as had been popularised in the Romantic period. This is still the initial phase when people were trying to come to terms with the idea of young adults being different from younger children. As Cart mentions: "Almost none of them smokes or drinks; drugs are never mentions; none of the students is gay or lesbian or a gang member. None is emotionally troubled or the victim of abuse. Instead, their biggest concern (the book calls it "A National Problem") is whether to go steady. They also "resent" parents who refuse to understand or recognize the importance of fads and customs in high school...Perhaps life really was simpler back in the 1940s!" (Cart 15-16). The other factor was that during this time, adolescence was "primarily an experience of middle- and upper-middle-class kids" (Cart 16). By the late forties, however, there was a growing awareness of the illusory nature of this innocence. The growing statistics of sexual activities among teenagers, teenage pregnancies and abortions, juvenile delinquency and the presence of teen rebels began resurfacing as real facts through investigative reports (Cart 17) although these issues (especially that of sex) was still largely absent from the literature of this group till about the 1960s. These reality checks as well as the post-war social upheavals of the 1960s led to the budding consciousness among novelists to not keep these issues outside the literary space anymore and rather aim at a more realistic approach. Cart quotes George Woods, who was the children's book editor of the *New York Times Book Review* at that point of time, who wrote in 1966:

> One looks for modernity, boldness, for realism. The teen-age novels, especially, should grapple with delights and the dilemmas of today's teen-agers. Delicacy and restraint are necessarily called for, yet all too often this difficult problem is resolved through avoidance. A critic in touch with the world and aware of the needs of the young expects to see more handling of neglected subjects: narcotics, addiction, illegitimacy, alcoholism, pregnancy, discrimination, retardation. (Woods as quoted in Cart 26)

There was a realisation that violence was an equal part of young adult life and should be included in such narratives. All in all, by the late 1960s "YA literature was in a hectic period of transition from a literature that had traditionally offered a head-in-the-sand approach to one that offered a more clear-eyed and unflinching look at the often unpleasant realities of American adolescent life" (Cart 29). Authors became bolder in their writings to the point of breaking taboos by the late sixties and the early seventies (Cart 30). In 1974, with the

publication of Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, ambiguous dark endings were introduced to young adult novels forcing writers to break away from the comfortable complacency that forcefully maintained in writings like this. His message was clear, to show people that the world of the young adults was exactly like the we inhabit or "read about in our morning papers and see depicted daily on the evening news" (Cart 31) and by hiding it under an apparent romanticism we are not helping these individuals but rather sending them to the real world with a false consciousness, unprepared to face reality. By late seventies, however, the forceful depiction of realism in young adult fiction had taken on a formulaic nature giving rise to the single-issue based "problem" novels which fell into the trap of representing reality only at the surface level and then turning into "weak testimonies to life's essential goodness" (Abramson as quoted in Cart 33) where good triumphed over bad.

By the 1980s, however, young adult fiction had become aware of the increasing immigrant situation in America, leading to a multicultural turn to the literature with a focus on being politically correct. The brief period of the seventies before that saw a return to the "unrealistic romance novel" (Cart 35), but with the multicultural turn authors became more aware about challenging "power structure[s] that subordinates people on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age and religion" (Rudman as quoted in Cart 43). This trend has gradually trickled down to the present age, when authors have become increasingly unafraid about breaching taboos, creating controversies, or even getting banned. The issues of sexuality, violence and death have become regular features of young adult novels. Many of these novels have also assumed the nature of crossover fiction - whereby the books are being aimed at both adults and young adults. That children read books meant for adult has been a truth since eternity. This new change has made it possible for the reverse phenomenon without any prior prejudice and without the fear of being judged as having inferior literary taste. According to me, this has partly contributed to the fact of making people see children and young adult novels in a new light at par with the literary standards of adult literature.

In India, the idea of young adult literature - just like that of literature for young children, has come from the west and is a fairly recent phenomenon. Writing about the "infrastructural and ideological constraints" that the Indian children publishing industry has to go through, Devika Rangachari mentions that it is a positive sign that new writers who are contributing to Indian English young adult literature are making "sustained efforts to explore the field and publishers are increasingly willing to test new ground" (Rangachari 25).

However, both Rangachari as well as Deepa Agarwal - a well-known Indian children's writer, agree that the homegrown variety of the young adult literature is still taking baby steps (Rangachari and Agarwal). There still exists a huge demand of imported books even if they deal with issues like "single-parent families, relationships with the opposite sex, teenage pregnancy and mental fears or complexes...and issues of race, oppression and injustice and the problems face by teenagers in migrant communities...No issues are really taboo" (Rangachari 20-21). However, when it comes to Indian books, such themes "seem rather tame", and Rangachari attributes this to the "conservative and conformist cultural ethos" prevalent in the country (21). Going back to the earliest articles published in this area, I find that be it R.K. Murthi's "Literature for Teenagers: Demands and Challenges" (Jan-March 1983), R.K. Murthy's "What Young Adults Do Not Like To Read" (Oct.-Dec. 1988), or Indira Ananthakrishnan's "Books for the Young Adult: A Need" (Oct.-Dec. 1990), all of them very simplistically define this stage as a stage of "transition" where the individual is no longer a child but not yet an adult. The foremost concern is to write suitable books for these individuals who are eagerly waiting to understand the adult world, but there should be some element of optimism like that of books for younger children "that would temporarily make him forget all woe and care and simply make him laugh out merrily" (Ananthakrishnan 27). There is also the idea that does not like anything imposed on them -

> The teenager rebels against any attempt to impose ideas on him, any suggestion to him to accept things at face value. (Murthi 19)
>
> At this difficult age of growing up, the individual pops up like roasted corn to contradict and oppose whatever is told to him. (Ananthakrishnan 26)

From these simplistic understandings of the teenagers in the Indian context that the country was quite behind in trying to figure out this category, when it had moved to the stage of boldly breaking taboos in the west. As a consequence, since the Indian writers had still not figured out their target audience, the number of books available in the country till the late 1990s were not as revolutionary as the west both in terms of quantity or quality. This is something that all these critics agree. Ananthakrishnan talks about a one-day seminar conducted by the National Book Trust in collaboration with the Authors Guild of India on "Reading material for youth" and mentions how the small gathering which had attended the seminar had agreed to the fact that "the age-group of 14-18 was a particularly neglected one so far as writing for them was concerned" (Ananthakrishnan 28). Both Murthy and

Ananthakrishnan had also tried to analyse the situation better by conducting a survey among Indian young adults. One of them, Anu, tells Murthy: "Uncle, I wish writers don't take upon themselves the role of preachers. Books should primarily entertain. They should not try to moralise. If any message is there, it should be delivered in such a way that we get it, even though it is not spelt in so many words. That is where your art should find full scope. For that, you need real dexterity, true skill. That is one inadequacy which we spot in most writings for young adults. That is why we don't like them" (Murthy 16). Another such young adult, Mita, tells Ananthakrishnan: "I try to read adult books. But many times, they bore me. Because of lack of books for our age-group, we have to read such books" (Ananthakrishnan 28). These are young adults, studying in English medium schools and well versed with western young adult literature and all their answers are based on comparisons they make with the western variety of young adult literature. It brings out two points: firstly, how uninspiring they find the Indian variety of young adult literature and hence, secondly the Indian market's dependence on its western counterpart.

However, although these critics write about the lack of adequate young adult literature in India and agree how the existing ones fail to address the complexities of this particular transitional stage of life, the suggestions they provide seem tame and based on the dominant image of Indian childhood that exists and has been talked about at length in all the previous chapters. Murthi talks about a "quest for realism" in teenagers (Murthi 19) but suggests books on "adventure, outdoor activities, conflicts, encounters with strange situations which show the teenager as an individual capable of fighting against odds and finally emerging triumphant" (Murthi 20). Only briefly does he touch upon the need for "social content" in Indian young adult literature, that too to include "branding of a girl by her master or of a teenager kept in bonded labour" (Murthi 21). He treats the subject of sex, which has been a regular part of young adult literature in the west since the 1960s, very ambivalently and although he writes that it is necessary to mention it, he also feels that "[s]ex will not become a dominating influence if the teenager has found his plans for his future" and hence the mention of sex should be limited in such literature and teenagers should be told "that there is a time for everything" (Murthi 23). It is interesting to note, how his young interviewees have a completely different opinion on this - something that I will touch upon in detail later in this chapter, showing how adult perception about what they want children to read and converting that to propound what children like to read is completely at tangent with what the young adults actually like/want to read. And, here, we must keep in mind that the interviewees are

all from an upper-middle class background, fluent in English and the western culture. Renu Singh Malviya's interesting research on "Reading Habits of Early Adolescent School Children of Delhi" (Oct.-Dec. 1984), where she uses data collected from 493 children from different socio-economic background to analyse reading trends in Indian children and young adults show how it is the upper-middle class group of parents who are most bothered about suitability of the reading content in comparison to the lower or the upper economic groups - "...middle socio-economic class parents show more vigilance in selecting books cautiously and economically" (Malviya 17). Since they are also the major buyers - "Mid-fee school children read different kinds of books which are brought by their elders for them. This fact has been reported by 62.5 percent of mid-fees school children whereas 45 percent and 30 percent of low-fees and high-fees children have, respectively, the said fact" (Malviya 17), it is but understood why the initial bout of young adult literature had to cater to what their prime consumers considered as suitable reading material and hence most the taboos of caste, class, communalism, gender, sexuality, disease, death, disability, war, crime, violence and broken-families were left as it is. This is evident in how these critics justify such trends through their writings. Even when Venka, one of Murthy's young interviewee says that "The blind which once covered up such facts during Victorian times has been ripped apart" (Murthy 15) and Anu, the other interviewee mentions how they disapprove of writers who have a tendency of staying away from "facts" (Murthy 17), Murthy justifies that "No writer will ever agree to dwell at length on these things when the target group is children" (Murthy 15) and "Maybe, we feel it is good to leave you with your innocence for a longer duration" (Murthy 17).

The texts that I look at, which are all fairly recent publications, challenge this sort of an idea that had been the dominating feature of Indian English young adult literature. Events like "LSD: Love Sex and Darkness in Children’s Literature" which was organised by SCWBI India in collaboration with Max Mueller Bhavan on 27th December 2014, try to pose these questions to adults who are involved in the production and dissemination of this kind of literature - "writers, illustrators, storytellers, publishers and other people interested in children's books" (SCWBIINDIA n.p.) as to whether the time has come to expand the "boundaries in literature for children" (SCWBIINDIA n.p.). At the two opposing poles of this argument stands:

> So it is only fair to explore what the boundaries should be. Should themes like love, sex, violence, mental illness, addiction, suicide, and sexual abuse find space

> in children's literature? Or are we adding to the turmoil that a child already faces trying to adjust to the demands of the world? (SCWBIINDIA n.p.)

Repeating what Ranjit Lal had answered when asked if there should not be at least some things that are still considered as taboos in children's literature, I would like to show that these new strands of young adult literature coming up in Indian English are just trying to say out loud that: "Newspapers have it all. Whatever we are trying to protect children from is printed each day and delivered to our houses. In fact they read the gorier version there" (SCWBIINDIA n.p.), so one might as well write about them in a space where there is scope for dealing with it in a much sensitive fashion, while at the same time challenging the dominant upper-middle class idea of childhood dominant in this country (which comes from the western model) and breaking away from it to become truly representative of the country's multicultural postcolonial identity.

Like the previous chapter, I divide the following texts into five different categories - one extra category from the junior group, depending on the types of taboo they break. These are the categories of Caste. Class and Communalism; Gender and Sexuality; Disease, Death and Disability; War, Crime and Violence - the extra category; and Broken Families. Like the previous chapter, although I group a particular text under a particular category, it does not mean that it does not touch upon the issues from the other categories as well. Despite that, I choose to classify each text under a particular category depending on the major issue that becomes a driving force for the novel and then go on to deal with all the issues in detail. The way each taboo lies interspersed with other taboos shows how prejudices have a way of existing in groups. Like for instance, violence might be considered a taboo within children's literature, but a woman practicing violence is a bigger taboo. So even if these novels are comfortable with breaking the taboo to the extent that a man is shown using it, to show a woman using violence is completely out of the question. Like the previous chapter, my study tries to show how these taboos unconsciously coexist in the minds of people entangled with each other, how they are challenged within these narratives and how despite being challenged they are sometimes only partially breached because of the various layers that the taboo operates upon. Finally, the attempt is to show if these texts have been able to broaden the horizon of Indian English children's literature by breaking these taboos.

Caste, Class and Communalism

Describing India's diverse cultural ethos in her article "A Need for Literature in the Service of Tolerance", Manorama Jafa writes: "A country with 18 major languages, 1652 dialects, 8 practising religions, innumerable cults and beliefs and widely different food habits and dress codes, India presents a unique picture of the microcosm - a whole world in itself!" (Jafa "A Need for Literature in the Service of Tolerance" 2). Despite that, as Superle's study of contemporary English-language Indian children's literature shows that most of the texts in this genre have central child characters who are more "homogenous rather than diverse" (Superle 86) belonging to the urban and/or middle-class, upper-caste sections of the society. These texts, narrated from the focal point of view of the protagonists, hardly leave any agency to the Indian children from other backgrounds. Agreeing with her observation, especially in relation to class, Himanjali Sankar mentions how in India "we tend to take class for granted...My children's exercise books all assume that they come from certain class positions and are familiar with things like phones or access to technology. My main concern while writing the book was to ensure my tone was not condescending" (Chari n.p.). Extending this argument to the issue of caste, Anita Roy from Zubaan points out that if one is lucky they might still find some "good" lower class people, but finding a mainstream book which has all characters from "lower caste or class background" is extremely difficult. People think that books with central characters that belong from different caste and class backgrounds are meant only for those sections of society instead of realising the importance of having them as part of the mainstream literature and presenting the idea of inclusivity among the privileged others (Chari n.p.). I would further extend this argument to communal issues and note that the same goes for having characters from other religious communities. The book that I take up in this section, attempts to break these taboos of caste, class and communalism by basing its narrative in the Delhi communal riots of 1984 and exploring its repercussions in a mixed group of children from different caste, class and communities. Although this book has often been studied as a feminist text, given its portrayal of strong women characters who are not afraid of turning violent when the situation demands, I have chosen to include it under this section for the way it ties up the issues of the three c-s in its depiction of a motley crowd of children.

Ranjit Lal's *The Battle for No. 19* (2007) charts out the experiences of eight schoolgirls (the eldest among them being sixteen years old) on an educational school trip to Agra via Delhi during the 1984 riots. A historical fiction that brings the issue of

communal riots right to the heart of young adult fiction in India, the inspiration of the novel had come to Lal through a completely unrelated photograph which he had chanced upon. "It was a story inspired by a photo of intrepid school girls who had helped build a road from their school to the village where they lived. From there on the characters took on a magical life of their own," he mentions in an interview given to Nupur Sharma for *The Hindu* (Sharma n.p.). What he had, however, wholly retained from that photograph had been the spirit of resolute determination that he had seen on the faces of the girls which he had used to paint the characters in his own novel. So, not only does the novel brings forward the theme of violence - that too of the communal kind, to a genre that had mostly shied away from using it, it also foregrounds the issue of women empowerment by making all his protagonists to be young girls from a small hill town in the Himachal "in the mountainside hamlet near Kasauli" (57). This further gives the author the scope of exploring the sub-plot of gender discrimination in the novel where Puja, the main protagonist, manages to impress her father with her "guts" (178) and prove, as Superle mentions in her reading of the novel, that girls are "not simply as good as boys, they are better" (159).

By using a group of eight school girls spread across different age groups and communities, Lal manages to create a rich ensemble which further gives him the opportunity of exploring multifarious voices. Puja is a born archer with leadership qualities, while Sheetal - her best friend, is brave and physically the strongest among them all. Seema is "sharp as a fox" (1) and makes quick decisions that help them out of the trickiest of situations, while Gauri is an excellent cook and takes care of them all by tending to the housework. Sangita is technically proficient and helps them whenever something needs to be fixed, whilst Jaya, otherwise shy and quiet, is a ferocious animal lover. Payal (Seema's younger sister) and Ritika (Gauri's younger sister), the youngest in the group - aged twelve and eleven respectively, are naughty and bubbly and add to the liveliness of the novel. Although Puja is shown to be the major protagonist in the novel, Lal does equal justice to all his other characters. Each of them has large contributions to make and is absolutely indispensible to the plot. While the other girls always look up to Puja for the plan of action - although she keeps on wondering "Why her? Why did Sangita, Seema, Gauri, and even Sheetal look at her like that every time there was a crisis? As if she had the answers to all their problems!" (59); Puja makes each one of them do what they do best. Sheetal, also sixteen years old and Puja's best

friend, is one of her chief aides. Be it breaking window panes to enter the house where they took refuge in or fighting alongside her, Sheetal is shown to be a daredevil. Seema - the one with the conventional good looks, gets the girls out of many situations through her acute observational skills and the workings of her sharp brain. It is she who first realises that the nameplate on the gate of the house where they are hiding has a Sikh name and changes it to the name of a South Indian Congress MP with her calligraphic skills, thus saving them from the first attempt at onslaught and buying them some more time. Sangita, the South Indian girl among them - "dark with teeth so brilliantly white" (1), complies with Seema's plans and helps her execute it with her technical suavity. She helps unscrew the brass letters from the nameplate, rearranging the according to the new name Seema comes up with, neatly sealing up the remaining holes with M-seal and dabbing them with " brown shoe polish to merge them with the board" (40). When later on few men come back to check on the house again, it is Sangita who throws them off-track with a volley of Tamil, despite being really scared to face them. Jaya, soon to turn fifteen, also plays along with the plan by coming up with the idea of removing all the photographs from the house, so that in case somebody ended up entering the house by force he would find no trace of the actual Sikh owners and would be further confused. Later it is she who steals up to the main goon when he has managed to corner the other girls and hits him on the head with a hockey stick, leaving him unconscious and momentarily saving the others. Gauri is the one who takes up the housework, cooking for them all and even baking a cake for Jaya, who celebrates her birthday while in hiding. Even the youngest of the lot, Payal and Ritika, support the elder girls by following whatever they are asked to do. Later when the children realise that Jogi and Simi - the young children of the owners of the house have been hiding in the *barsati* of the house, Payal and Ritika become instant friends with them and put them at ease. At the end of the novel, Payal is shown to be contemplating marrying Jogi - showing that their friendship eventually grows into something else, also "promoting intermarriage" (Superle 74).

The novel starts off at the point when these girls are returning from their trip, when on their way back they manage to draw attention to themselves by virtue of their Sikh turbaned driver. Indira Gandhi has just been assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards making a large chunk of the Hindus rise up in revolt by inflicting violence on the entire Sikh community. Kartar Singh, their driver, becomes one of their victims. The girls'

first brush with violence is when a crazed mob spits on the face of Kartar Singh, throws a petrol bomb at their jeep and finally pulls him out and butchers him brutally. Going against expected norms, Lal gives graphic descriptions of how the mob beat Kartar Singh to a pulp and put him on fire, "dancing around him, shrieking their savage song, '*Khoon ka badla khoon*!" (9). Fortunately, the girls escape and manage to seek refuge in a house that belongs to a rich Sikh family with two children. The girls initially find the house empty, but are later surprised to find the two children hiding in the *barsati*. Amidst the crazy violence going outside, the story relates how they survive throughout the period and also manage to fight back the mob when they realise who the original occupants of the house were. Later in the story when the children come face to face with their opponents, they are scared for their lives, but they do not stop fighting back.

A note at the beginning of the novel points out that although the events described in the novel pertain to the 1984 riots in Delhi, "they could have easily occurred during any of the many, many such periods of barbarism that have rocked the nation previously or since" (Lal n.p.). Lal bases his descriptions on actual events that had occurred during the riots. The news playing on transistors at the backdrop helps surround the story with the actual frenzy that had caught up the nation during that time. However, as the above mentioned note points out, Lal's intention was to bring together all such instances of violence through the depiction of this particular event. Violence erupting from such deep seated communal hatred is something that is considered inappropriate for young readers. But, Lal's novel goes against all such set standards. It is interesting how he does not make his novel into an anti-violence sermon but makes his characters fight back with equal ferocity. However, he does slip in messages of the banality of such hostility through questions that the girls ask themselves and the thoughts squirming in Puja's mind. The perpetrators of violence are compared to beasts - "wild dogs bringing down a wildbeest" (8), "shoal of piranhas" (10), "he's like a tied-up crocodile" (133); while the entire chase is compared to the symbol of hunting and butchering - "the terror of being hunted down by a barbaric mob on the loose, out of control, looking for people to tear apart" (11) or "...stabbed and butchered that day, people that he had garlanded with their own intestines?" (131). Unlike popular practice within children's literature of showing the adults in a positive light, this novel actually makes these girls criticise the hypocrisy of the adult population - "Why did adults always, but always, preach one thing and practise exactly the opposite - and think that no one has noticed? Especially

us?" (61). Almost as a direct attack, Lal makes Puja wonder why adults take children to be dim-witted? Rising in revolt against such monstrosity, Puja is not scared to show her rage. Her murderous thoughts are equally violent, almost matching that of their attackers - "They should all boil in oil. Pour a tureen of bubbling boiling oil over them, or better, slowly ladle, and snap your fingers and dance as they screamed...and their eyeballs bubbled" (62).

The story gives full agency to the young children without sounding too patronising or preachy. The girls single-handedly manage to fight their assailants and keep it off till help arrives right at the very end. Even then, it is Puja's "hunter's draw" that saves the day by killing off the main goon - "the man with the scruffy beard" foiling his plan of re-negotiating with her father Major Talwar by holding onto Simi as hostage and embarrassing him by asking him to "take down his trousers" (172). Even the two young children, Jogi and Simi, are shown to be brave and enterprising given their hostile circumstances. Jogi, only eleven, is shown to have planned their entire hideout which had managed to fool even the girls, while little Simi had followed her brother's orders and did not give selves away by crying. At the end of the day, Lal turns it almost into a victory of female-hood, when he makes even Jogi disguise as a girl before going out to look for help.

In fact, the issue of female empowerment has a larger role to play within the novel. From the very start, Puja is shown to be a victim of gender discrimination within her own family. It is gradually revealed through the story that her father - a Major in the army, is ashamed to have a daughter instead of a son who could have followed his legacy and is indifferent to her achievements. Her mother, on the other hand, believes that a girl should stay at home and help with the domesticity rather than follow her own passions. Even though she excels at archery, her father is shown to be totally dismissive of the fact, while her mother had "moaned about what people were saying about her catching the bus once a week to the monastery on the other side of the mountain" (59). Unable to contact home while in hiding to evade being butchered at the hands of the frenzied mob, Puja almost instinctively knows what would be foremost in her mother's mind. It would not be the concern over her safety but rather the angst that - "what will everyone say...a girl missing in Delhi for two nights...running wild...who would marry her now?" (113). This theme is taken further in the struggle that Puja has to undergo to master the art of archery which she has an inborn talent for. It had been at the school's

annual fete that she had first picked up a bow and an arrow for the first time, just six months before this incident. Even as the lama had charged out apologetically shouting that archery was not for girls, he had been silenced by Puja's perfect aim. He had been so amazed that despite his belief that "girls must never, never pick up a bow and arrow" (90), he had invited Puja for weekly lessons in archery at his monastery. While she had gone for these lessons, she had always taken her friend Sheetal and her *Bhutia* puppy Bhim with her. For Puja, Sheetal's act of bravery to protect Bhim from a wild leopard in the hills was an added inspiration. Proving wrong the common belief that women were physically weaker and easily terrorised, Sheetal had single-handedly fought the leopard with a bamboo shaft and not been scared even when the animal had slashed down her back badly or when she had had to get fifteen stitches to mend her clawed back (60). The novel almost appropriates the symbol of the Pandavas into an all girl unit. Puja takes up the role of Arjuna, while the hefty Sheetal can be seem as assuming the role of Bhima. Interestingly enough, Sheetal's dog is given the name "Bhim" and is an integral part of Puja's training in archery. One of the prime lessons that she acquires from her teacher is to concentrate on her target like the way Bhim "concentrates on the ball in her (Sheetal) hand just before she throws it" (92) and to make it into her whole universe. One can find echoes of this training throughout the novel, every time Puja has to aim her arrow at some target. The other characters in the novel too, are shown to be equally brave when the situation demands. Even though before the eventual "Battle for No. 19" the man tries to encourage his group by provoking them to be macho - "If you are scared of girls, you need not come" (144), they are soon made to realise how tough it can be fighting against mere schoolgirls.

Although subtly used, there is also a class angle present in the novel. Coming from a small town near Kasauli, none of the girls seem to come from well-off families. For them the Sodhi bungalow in which they take shelter is like a huge palace. They are immediately in awe of what they see - the curtains, a side table with a toy menagerie, the immense aquarium (17), their collection of masks and weapons, the well-stocked fridge, the bathroom with the perfumed soap and shampoo (80), the cupboards brimming with various kinds of things, etc. They keep on referring to its owners as posh and the house as a museum. However, we find no direct bias against the girls who evidently belong to a lower class. The fact that Payal and Jogi might be in a relationship

later on in their lives which might culminate in a marriage, is not just propagation of inter-communal marriages but inter-class ones.

However, despite being unique in its choice of subject matter and its execution, the novel still falls prey to certain preconceived stereotypes, showing how these ideas seep into one's inner psyche and get naturalised. Like for instance, the fact that although both Puja's parents seem indifferent to their daughter's passion and dreams, it is the father's admonishing attitude that bothers Puja the most. Throughout the novel, the father's indifference is a nagging presence in Puja's thoughts. In Puja's mind, her mother's attitude appears to be only secondary to that of her father's almost as if in acceptance of her complacency within the societal patriarchal setup. She finally wins back some respect from her father when she saves both her father and Simi from the man with the scruffy beard with her archery skills. Her father's wonderment is evident when he exclaims, "No...no damn son could have shot like that!...No damn son would have had the guts to attempt a shot like that!" (178). The final acceptance has to come from the patriarch of the family who ultimately realises his daughter's worth. Given the feminist setup of the novel, the fact that Puja can attain emancipation only through male acknowledgement is somewhat defeating of the novel's true purpose. The other irony lies in the fact that although the choice of schoolgirls as his novel's protagonists might have been to bust the myth that girls are weak, Lal ends up making his characters doubt themselves based on the same myth. "What could they, eight schoolgirls, do against twenty-five rioteers?" (43), this is a fear that keeps recurring in the minds of these girls. When Kartar Singh is dragged out of his jeep and beaten with rods, the metaphor used to describe his reaction is - "big, belly-laughing Kartar Singh - was screaming like a schoolgirl-like one of them" (8). Other instances of such stereotypical slippages can also be found in the novel. Towards the very beginning, when Kartar Singh is still alive, he is said to have flaunted the reflective sun-control film which he had fitted to his window by exclaiming, "You can look out, but no one outside can see you - like rajkumaris in a zenana!" (7). The idea that a woman needs to be kept protected from the glances of the outside world, seem to be reflected here, which again goes against the feminist ethos. The other jarring example of this can be found in the episode when Seema uses her influence over Jogi to make him agree to take up the disguise of a girl. To get him to do that, she appeals to the conventional patriarchal ideology that Jogi is already indoctrinated with. "And you are the only man here, to protect us nine girls!"

Seema reasons out with Jogi, who keeps getting entangled in her manipulative tactics. For him, Seema is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen and hence, is ready to "do anything for her" (118).

Rahul Srivastava's *What Happened to Regina that Night* (2012) is another novel that can be included in this category, for dealing with the issue of another marginal group - the tribal community of India. Similar to Vithal Rajan's *Jungu, the Baiga Princess* (a book which I analyse in the previous chapter), this novel too tackles the question of forceful usurpation of tribal lands and the subsequent identity crisis that befalls these groups in the name of modernity. This novel also begins in a similar fashion as that of Rajan's. A thirteen year old schoolboy Kabir, is travelling back from his boarding school in Bangalore in a train, in order to spend his winter vacation with his father who has recently been posted to a small town of Antarpur as the Assistant Divisional Railway Manager. In his half wakeful and half sleepy state, induced by the rhythmic motion of the train, he dreams of his beautiful history teacher Ms Rahel, on whom everybody in his class has a huge crush on, including him. On reaching his destination, Kabir's introduction to the Kands - the original tribal inhabitants of that area, also happens through a young girl Alika, or Kandi origin, who assumes a major role in the novel. However, that is where the similarity between both the novels end. Srivastava's novel takes on the form of a full-fledged thriller, which as Kareena N. Gianani notes: "weaves in murder, mystery and some fascinating history beautifully" (Gianani n.p.). Although, the purpose of both the novels is the same, the mechanism in which they do so is completely different. Srivastava's novel does not attempt to create a simple binary opposition between the tribal community and modern society. The representatives of modern society in his novel seem to be condescending towards the superstitious Kands. But, at the same time, Srivastava also points towards the shortcomings of the modern society, managing to burst the bubble of superiority that modern society assumes. In this way, Srivastava's novel addresses many other issues in between that seem like they are not directly related to the tribal question, but in reality are very much influenced by the prejudices one harbours against them. These issues would be that of child labour, child abuse, segregation in the way a town habitation is set up, downright rejection of a particular way of life which the majority population does not understand and referring to it as mere superstition for lack of a better understanding, and finally never allowing people from a particular strata of society to cross over to the other side through constant condescension. Coupled with this, the author also touches upon the issues of land occupation through armed usurpation, continuing animosity between the conquerors and

those that were relegated to the periphery because of this, the modern logic of development that is used for further usurpation and the role of political leaders that use their power and position to aid this process.

Kabir is an unusual protagonist. He hails from a broken family; his parents having separated when he was only four. Without sentimentalising this situation, the author does not shy away from mentioning how most children like Kabir have a "pendulum-like quality" (8) to their lives in trying to divide their time between both parents. Apart from the fact that Kabir spends the majority of his time with his mother, who is completing her studies in England, there is hardly any other mention of her. We are, however, introduced to his father, who seems awkward, distant and unable to connect with his son. So, when Kabir gets more and more involved in solving the legendary murder mystery of Antarpur - where a benevolent nun had been burnt alive by unknown assailants twelve years ago, his father hardly has any clue till the very end. When he gets to know the truth, instead of asking Kabir to tell his side of the story, he just packs him off to his mother.

Alika, is another unusual character in the novel, who plays second fiddle to Kabir. Kabir meets her at the Railway Club for the first time, where she works as a helper in her spare time. Despite being a Kandi, she speaks perfect English, albeit with a native accent. Kabir learns that she was left behind as a child by unknown parents twelve years ago and had been brought up by the entire Kand community for some time. Finally, one of the railway officers and his wife had offered to legally adopt her and take her away to Bombay with them. It is from them that she had picked up her English from. However, it soon became known to everybody that she had been taken away to help the couple as a servant and was also abused for refusing to comply. It was then that old Mrs. Bertha Alvares, a member of the Anglo-Indian community of Antarpur, had rescued her and brought her back to the town. As the story progresses, Kabir finds out that Mrs. Alvares was Regina's mother - the nun whose murder mystery had remained unsolved, while Alika was the daughter of a Kandi couple who were leading the revolution against Mr. Rajan, the powerful and corrupt government official who was trying to usurp their land for bauxite mining.

Through a history book, which Kabir picks up at the Railway Club library, Srivastava reveals the Kand history of how the forest-based community lost their land to a warrior prince from the Rajhans dynasty, who had set up his kingdom in Antarpur and pushed its original occupants to the periphery. That was the beginning of their downfall, worsened with

the coming of the Britishers, who rapidly uprooted their forests to set up railway lines. The Kands, whose main source of income was the forest, soon found themselves in an impoverished state forced to occupy the forested hills surrounding the town of Antarpur and clearly demarcated from the main settlement area. Through the depiction of life at Kandoha Hill, one of the Kand settlements lying closest to Antarpur, Srivastava paints the picture of the self-sufficient Kand way of life. However, the modern occupants of Antarpur seem to be unable to understand that. The Kand children working at the Railway Club are mostly ignored. Kariamma, the powerful Kand storyteller, is treated like a beggar in the town market. Even Nishant, one of those rare Kands who had been able to step beyond his immediate Kand identity by embracing modern education, faces invariable discrimination from the people of the town and is forced to retrace back his steps to Kandoha Hill.

In a final sequence, where Mr. Rajan uses his position as a government official and incites a mob to attack the Kands in order to oust them from their hamlet under false pretexts, Srivastava shows how prejudices can be exploited. The crowd seems to be swayed by the majoritarian view of life and anything that stands apart becomes a threat for them. Mr. Rajan uses this fear to his advantage and provokes a riot-like situation by spreading distrust on religious lines. His main intention is, however, completely mercenary, whereby he wants to usurp Kandoha Hill for mining purposes by stealing the documents from them that prove the legality of the Kand occupancy of Kandoha Hill. Taking advantage of the fact that the illiterate Kands will be unable to fight their case in a modern legal court, especially without the legal papers, Mr. Rajan hatches his plot quite beautifully, before Kabir comes into the picture and foils his grand plan. However, Kabir's role in the novel is not simply as an emancipated outsider who comes and rescues the vulnerable tribal community. Coming from a broken family without any fixed roots, he himself is part of those marginalised groups of children who do not form a part of the mainstream idea of Indian childhood. Moreover, as the plot unravels, we realise that it is in fact Alika who was leading the action from the very beginning rather than the other way round. Even before Kabir's arrival in Antarpur, the revolution had been underway, led by a group of Kand rebels residing deep inside the nearby forests and fighting their battles from there. In this way, the novel manages to steer clear of the trap that Rajan's novel falls into - of giving the benevolent representatives of modern society the power to rescue the vulnerable tribal community from their ordeal. At the same time, it manages to raise some really difficult identity questions in the process that are usually held as taboo areas within Indian English children's literature.

Gender and Sexuality

Talking about how she got her idea to write *Slightly Burnt*, Payal Dhar mentions: "The idea that children might have questions about sexuality, their own or of others, is a terrifying thought for us, adults, and the way we deal with it is to pretend it does not exist or shut them up when they bring up the issue" (Sharma n.p.). Given this is the general trend in portraying sexuality, it is clear that issues of alternate sexualities are all the more likely to be considered as taboos. This is exactly the idea that we get from the questions that R.K. Murthy had posed to few school going young adults in an interview to find out what is it that the children of this age group like to read - an interview that I have already alluded to earlier in this chapter. However, it is interesting to note the answers that these young adults give, which is completely contrary to the adult opinion. Venka points out:

> We are not prudes, Uncle. We know something of man-woman relationship too. You may say we are growing up faster. Well, in your days you would never have had a chance to see all those advertisements on TV. on pills and *nirodhs* and all that. We are at an age when we can feel it in ourselves, a sense of excitement in the presence of members of the opposite sex, Natural, too. So we get angry if a writer glosses over this reality and refuses to treat our feelings correctly. (Murthy 15)

Nitin points out:

> Don't try to project unrealistic things. For example, never talk of girls travelling by buses, yet never facing the ugly evil eveteasing. (Murthy 16)

Anu agrees:

> ...Maybe a good writer can even tell us how to handle these wolves. And, mind you, some of them are old enough to be our fathers...It is not endemic. I mean, the evil. But it is there. And all of us, girls have been subjected to it, in some form or the other. It is here that good writers can help. They can deal with stories where this evil is brought out and exposed. May be, some boys, who get mistaken ideas that unless they tease girls, they will be considered lacking in virility, may realise how much they hurt us by their attitudes. But, to tell a story aimed at the older group of children, without talking about such evils, is to adopt an artificial stand. And we children hate such artificiality. (Murthy 16)

The books that I take up in this section are ones that break the taboo of treating Indian young adults as prudes and introducing them to the world of gender and sexuality without restricting them within the dominant discourses of patriarchy or heteronormativity.

Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) starts off with fifteen-year old Muskaan fighting for her life at the hospital after an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. Although it begins with an omniscient narrator, the rest of the story unfolds through three narrators - Aaliya (Muskaan's best friend), Prateek (the class hottie), and Subhojoy (the class topper), and Muskaan's story is revealed through three different perspectives. The story then goes back five months in time building up the events that led to Muskaan's suicide attempt. Muskaan is shown to be different from her group of close friends' right from the beginning. Her "white converse shoes, with neon coloured laces on one and blue laces on the other" (Sankar 11), her "odd striped socks" (33), her "irresistible masculine charm" (17), her aversion towards things "what girls do" (35) all point out her difference from the rest. All this becomes clearer when finally she kisses Aaliya and confesses that "I've known forever that I'm gay" (38). The story not only foregrounds the issue of homosexuality, it tries to address the issue through various lenses - the oblivious, the traditional and the liberal. Very interestingly, Sankar coincides Muskaan's suicide date with that of the reinstatement of the 377 IPC Act that recriminalized sexuality - 11 December 2013, making sure that the issue lies at the heart of the novel.

Narrated through recollection, the story begins with a waxing session where Muskaan directly states to her friends that "everyone doesn't feel good about the same things" (18). Despite being the central character around which the action of the novel revolves, the readers do not have direct access to Muskaan. One only gets to know Muskaan through the perspective of three other children - out of which two are her friends and one not. This fair girl "with green eyes" (22), is unanimously declared as good-looking. Be it Subhojoy who finds her "quite pretty", or Prateek who declares her to be "beautiful" (22) or even Arvind - a random boy Prateek befriends at the club both Muskaan and he go to, who refers to her as "that pretty chick" (49). Her family is also declared to be "pretty classy" by Prateek with a successful interior designer for a mother. That she comes from an affluent family is evident when Subhojoy visits her house for the first time and finds it "obscene" (79) that a family of four people could live in such a large house with such expensive furnishings. Even Aaliya finds her lucky

"to have a garden with a tree house" (37). Apart from this, Muskaan is also a good student - possibly Subhojoy's only competition in class, that Subhojoy whom the principal refers to as an exemplary student (28). Despite all this, people do not fail to notice that she "is a bit strange" (25). As the story unfolds, one realises that her strangeness lies in her inability to conform. Her "lack of interest in stuff like dating and fashion" (63) was a huge botheration within her own friend circuit. Prateek finds Muskaan to be a "weirdo" (48) when she turns down his proposal to go out with him. Even his sister confesses that she finds her "a little strange" (23). Random strangers at her club also think her to be a "psycho" (49) and judge her for wanting to sit alone with a book instead of talking to them. Although she has always been called different things by different people behind her back - be it "a snob" (50) or "snooty brainy" (50) or "weird" (34), the real bullying starts only when word gets around about rumours floating about her which are "strange" (59). Divya confides in Aaliya how "Meenakshi was telling me that they've always wondered about Muskaan and how she doesn't seem interested in boys" (59). On the other hand, her own girl gang - who had always bullied her trying to make her conform, suddenly turns more worried about her but are unable to approach her.

Through Aaliya's version of their story, one realises the amount of peer pressure that had been on Muskaan before the actual pronouncement on her strangeness. It was as if the others already knew what was wrong with her and had to coerce her to mend her ways before it was too late. Before actually hearing it from Muskaan, Aaliya confesses: "Do I really not know? Have I not known for the last year or more what is bugging Muskaan? At some level, we all know but pretend not to" (33). Finally, with Muskaan's emphatic declaration, Aaliya realises that she had "already guessed at some inner level" (41). However, this knowledge had on some level made them more determined to try and make her do the accepted things before attempting to transgress, as Muskaan also points out to Aaliya: "You guys treat me like this kid gone astray who just needs to be beaten into shape" (40). This is evident in the very first encounter with Muskaan's gang, when all of them are trying to cajole Muskaan into getting her body hair waxed. The occasion is described as a "sacred event" (12) like an "exotic ritual" (14) with the knife ready to force the "victim" into the sacrificial fire (14). According to them, being civilised means to conform to the rules of the society and be groomed according to the set standards, because having hair on body, especially for girls, can

only make them into "cave-dwellers" (10). Their agenda is clear. As best friends, their duty is to "manage her life for her" (11-12) and make her do what they think is "right for her" (19) even if they have to nag her for a year to relent into doing something that they want - like that of waxing her body hairs out. What they don't realise is that Muskaan finds it "interfering" where she can't do a single thing without them breathing down her neck: "And none of you seem to understand. Like, you're so clueless, it's pathetic" (39). She feels it is unfair that they refuse "to see what was staring you in the face" acting like Muskaan is a cute and crazy person who must be cajoled into behaving (39). She is still willing to tolerate it all for her love for them, but she is not ready to buy into the argument that such things are "like a cult thingy" (17) which one has to do to "belong, whether one wants or not" (17). She tries to make them understand that everybody does not like doing the same things (18), but is unable to get across her point to them.

Aaliya, on her part, acts like an oblivious partner to all this despite being the closest to Muskaan and agreeing with her on most things. When Muskaan is being forced into say yes for waxing, she is the one who points out that "it is her body" and nobody else can insist on what she should do with it (18). She is perceptive enough to notice that every time she touches Muskaan, she stiffens up her body: like when she "turned around and placed my hand on her thigh. Muskaan stiffened her thigh muscles" (14) or when she "...gave Muskaan a hug...But Muskaan didn't hug me back. She stiffened her body and tried to move away. She always does that when I hug her" (36). She also is the one whom Muskaan kisses atop her tree house before confessing that she has always known that she is gay. Aaliya seems perfectly fine with it, giving in to the kisses - her "first kiss" (97) and later even confessing that the kiss had "blown my mind and made the rest of the world disappear" (66). At that instant she feels that all of it "seemed so natural" (41) and also comes to the realisation that "Love is strange. It just happened. And it was something awesome. It couldn't be wrong" (41). However, after the entire episode she suddenly chooses to distance herself from Muskaan, not talking to her and even refusing to take her calls. As we enter more and more into her mind, he realise her inner struggles. On one hand, she likes to break rules and do stuff "that raises eyebrows" (97) on the other hand she is confused as to her own sexuality and struggles to come to terms with her. The baggage of what is expected out of her sits so strongly on her head that she forces herself to be conventional. She even kisses a boy at a

farmhouse party thrown by one of Prateek's friends to find out how she felt about that and feels reassured when she likes it. That in turn causes her to realise that she may be bisexual, creating further angst in her. She becomes conscious of the fact that gender didn't matter to her more than the person: "I could equally well be attracted to a boy or a girl" (100). But she comes to the conclusion that: "I plan to condition my mind to be attracted to boys only...It would make life that much easier if I could just do that" (100).

The other end of the spectrum is presented by Prateek, born to rich parents, who make sure that their son mixes within their own class. He represents that section of the society who comes from a privileged sheltered background and remains embedded within the system so deep that they can hardly rise above the level of oblivion. For a family like that of Prateek's, it is normal for a man to go and earn while the woman stays back at home looking after the domestic sphere. Prateek's mother's other job is to watch the news on TV and stay updated so that she can discuss politics at parties she attends with his father. This too, according to his father, did not really matter much as "she knew enough about the things that mattered in life" like organising birthday parties and making sure that her children went to school in spotless white shirts. Anything other than this is an aberration that such people do not understand or hope to understand. Their only link with people from the lower classes is to look upon them as an opportunity to showcase their charitable nature or to win their loyalty: "My dad gives a lot of money to charity. And my Meena mausi was scolding my mom for paying more than the market rate to the maids and servants. But Mummy said it's okay, it makes them more hardworking and loyal and so what if she pays thousand rupees more than the neighbours? She is just a kind person." (110-111). During those rare occasions when they actually come across people like Subhojoy's mother looking "like a maid" in "a sari and oily hair" (52), they do not really know how to behave with them. Prateek's mother thinks Subhojoy's mother to be "one of the ayahs and asked her to go and sit with them" (51). Their children grew up having fun at other's expense, criticising families like that of Subhojoy's for gifting "a plastic tiffin box" (52). This is highly reflective in Prateek's character, who lacks the wit to answer back in his own defence but is quick to form judgements about other people. For him Subho's family is not a "good family" (49) and inviting a person like him for Rashika's birthday party, even if it be by the birthday girl herself, without consulting him is annoying as is "hijacking a private conversation between boyfriend and girlfriend" (71). So, it is no matter of surprise when we realise

that it all comes from Prateek's father and tauji who continuously keep reminding him that "These homosexuals are just trying to get attention. Best to avoid them" (68), or that it is "unnatural" (83) or "not quite normal" (69).

Muskaan herself falls into self doubt now and then but tries to back up her thoughts with proper research. "Did you know that homosexuality is common in the animal world too, contrary to what people think?" she tells Subhojoy, giving him examples of male dolphins, sea horses, clown fish and other animals and birds (82-83). While all this is going on and Aaliya is still confused about her own orientation distancing herself from Muskaan, Muskaan is forced to slowly pull out of the group. That is when she bonds with Subhojoy, a loner himself, who feels othered among the rest of his classmates for his different class background. Muskaan and Subho end up bonding over their otherness. Son of a father who is a salesman in a chemist's shop and a mother who works in a small tailoring unit in a garage, which makes Indian clothes for the neighbourhood aunties" (47), Subho's main aim in life is to excel at school and win scholarships. His formula for success is simple - not have any friends and focus all of his energies into his studies. It is oddly pleasant how he slowly grows close to Muskaan and becomes her sole support system in the days running up to her attempt at suicide. What makes their bond stronger is their feeling of being an outsider - Muskaan because of her sexual deviance and Subho because of his class background. He surmises: "She talks about the world as if she is a bystander, not like she belongs to it. I also do that. Perhaps that is what makes us friends" (80). Muskaan respects his "bullish strength" (75) built up over years of being bullied for being "easy and obvious targets" (75) with his broken English and shabby appearance. Subho, on the other hand, wishes Muskaan was tough enough to "deal with her life and whatever it throws her way" (76). Usually polite and sensible, it is also his way of concealing "the resentment he feels towards spoilt rich kids like Prateek, who can casually misplace a phone that costs four times as much as the combined monthly salary of Subho’s parents," notes Singh ("Gay, straight or crooked" n.p.).

Little instances from the novel stay back, like when Subhojoy dreams of wanting to "see my father reading a thick, hardcover book at a shining and polished dining table with a glass top, as my mother, wearing a pretty sari, hands him a mug of coffee", but is immediately brought back to reality with how Aaliya might have reacted to such "gender stereotypes - dad reading, mom all dressed up, serving coffee" (82). The adult

world does not really directly enter into the narrative otherwise, except for instances when Aaliya's mother vents out her rage at the re-criminalisation of homosexuality. Although quite liberal as compared to the other mothers, Aaliya considers it all to be pretence. For her, her mother's armchair activism amounts to nothing where she raves and rants at social injustices but herself leads a socially decreed life living with all the advantages of belonging to a privileged class (135). On the other hand, there are characters like Mrs. Joshi at Muskaan's school, who does not even try to rave and rant. They would rather try to cure Muskaan off her homosexuality by urging her to play football with the boys in the sun (84). There are also mothers like Muskaan's mother who would not say anything directly to her daughter but would gang up with her friends to bully her and put them up to buying a dress for her on the pretext that she is "sad" that Muskaan wears "only trousers and jeans" (62).

The plot not just explores the coming out of a homosexual teenager; it also talks about how the society treats them by bullying them and isolating them. This novel is, as Gangwani writes in a review of the book, about Muskaan's attempt at trying to break free of the heteronormative structures and seeking acceptance, but goes on to show "how people who live outside the sexual mainstream are persecuted and made to feel like freaks; what peer pressure and the hegemony of adult prejudices, not to mention such judgements as the recent Supreme Court recriminalisation of homosexuality, can do to a young person already unsure of herself" (Singh "Gay" n.p.). Amidst such a scenario, it can get even more difficult for such a "bystander" when her own friend turns her back on her. This is how the novel precipitates towards Muskaan's attempted suicide when Aaliya accuses Muskaan to be a "criminal" (138) after her mother informs of the reinstatement of the Supreme Court verdict, IPC section 377 that "gays are criminals" (131). However, with Muskaan battling for her life in the hospital, Aaliya slowly comes to accept the fact that her love for Muskaan is much more than for just a friend. But at the same time, she loves the other sex equally. Although she tries to comfort herself by assuring herself, "It didn't mean that I was bisexual or something" (97), by the end of the story she comes to accept herself as she is. By the end, as Muskaan comes "out of danger", both Aaliya and Subhojoy try to forget their own differences and become friends, realising that love can come in different shapes and sizes and one has to just accept those differences and move ahead.

Payal Dhar's *Slightly Burnt* (2014) deals with a similar issue which as OO rightly points out in his review:

> No, it isn't a lurid tale of complicated relationships. Written for a young adult audience, it is a tale of young people coming to terms with the LGBT issue. How they are affected when they find out that their friends or relatives are lesbian or gay. (OO n.p.)

Sixteen year old Komal's world turns upside down when Sahil, her best friend for eleven years, tells her that he is gay. What had been a 'normal' life for her suddenly becomes crazy with a "messed-up version of Sahil" (Dhar 60). Everything starts seeming like a lie for Komal and she does not know how to deal with this new side of Sahil. Through Komal's inner struggle to come to terms with this fact, narrated in a first person narrative, the author raises some pertinent questions as to how the Indian society views sexuality and how such views penetrate deep into the inner psyche of people creating biases against anybody who does not conform to that set notion of existence. At the heart of this novel or that of Shankar's *Talking of Muskaan*, both published in 2014, we can see the direct repercussion of the December 2013 Supreme Court verdict of reinstating the 377 IPC Act which criminalizes homosexuality. These books not just talk about sex, but also force the young adult population of the country to ask questions about same-sex relationships. It opens up the space to enquire into what is 'normal' and who is it that determines what is 'normal'? It also empowers the readers to challenge the age old ideas of sexuality and be able to respect the other person for their choices rather than forcing them to comply.

Keeping the LGBT issue at its heart, the novel tries to raise awareness as to how one comes to terms with their own sexual preferences, how difficult it is for people who do not conform to the dominant strain of sexuality to express themselves, what are the misconceptions that people have about them, how biased society is against them, how such biases snub individual choices and how it threatens anybody who hopes to transgress. The majoritarian view dominates the society to such an extent that while heteronormativity becomes the marker of normalcy, one is taught to look upon everything else as 'unnatural' (124). So when Sahil shares his secret with Komal, she does not know how to react. "How long have you known?" she wants to know, while Sahil is unable to give her a definitive answer. Later on, when she discusses this with

Usha McDowell - their school councillor, she tells her about a friend of hers who had also got disconcerted when his sister had confided in him that she "was a lesbian" (76). What this friend of hers, however, had eventually realised was that this information changed nothing between them and it would have remained the same between them even if his sister had never ever told him about her sexual preferences. In a way, she tries telling Komal that it really did not matter when he had found out or how long he had known, because it changed nothing between the two of them and he was still the same person that he had been. All that had changed was her mindset towards him and it was what the majoritarian society had forced into the minds of people like Komal who fortunately (or unfortunately) belonged to the mainstream.

How even cultural productions favour the majoritarian view point is made evident when Komal wonders about how most movies cater to a heteronormative romance angle. She wonders: "What does he feel when he sees movies like these?" It eventually leads her to the question of sex and what kind of physical proximity did these couples engage in. Being the "quintessential individualist" (15) that she claims she is, she eventually realises that rather than seeing it as an individual choice, most people tend to obsess more about the sexual angle to being gay, lesbian or a transgender, just like she had done. This happens during a free period, while lazing around the school garden, when their discussion drifts to this topic. Komal's classmates are quick to pass a judgement against the LGBT community as being "gross" and "yucky" (81), glad that the cultural determiners of the society were intelligent enough to "censor all that stuff on TV" (81). Their biggest fear is that "there's no telling what they'd do" (82) or "what if...they...did something" (82). Komal is equally quick to ridicule their logic: "Yeah right. That's all they do, day and night. And even if they wanted to, what makes you think they'd choose you?" (82). It is the repression that is practiced by the society which builds up such an outlook which makes them seem like some aliens rather than as any other ordinary person with an individual choice. It is also this very repression that makes people uncomfortable to talk about sexuality as a whole - be it hetero- or homosexual, leading to many other misconceptions. While parents shy away from discussing such matters with their children - like Komal's father who cringes at the fact that he had even signed on the consent forms allowing sex education to his daughter in school since class V; best friends like Komal and Sahil, who otherwise share everything with each other also "don't talk about *every*thing" (125). Komal's cousin Simar Didi

almost does a "double take" (61) when asked if she knows "any gay people" (61). She vehemently denies with a dramatic "Whaat? No, of course not!", almost as if it was unnatural even to talk about it. After a while, however, she confides in Komal: "I saw a documentary once about men who wear women's clothes" (61) making Komal wonder how they were even related. It also shows how ignorant the general mass is regarding the LGBT community, mixing one for the other without making any attempt at actually trying to know them. Later on, in an epiphanic moment Komal realises how such cultural productions - be it the romantic comedies and Bollywood or the Mills & Boons "soppy love stories" (165), were all around hammering things into one's head:

> ...sometimes directly, sometimes not - that boys like girls and girls like boys and that's the way the world goes round. Telling you what you should like rather than helping you figure out what you do like...It's so easy to just accept it and not have to think about it...Remember that scientist guy who rang a bell before feeding his dog?...That's what we are like - stupid dogs who are trained to think in a certain way. (Dhar 166)

The society gets symbolically represented through characters like Neeli Maasi who have set notions about gender and who do not like to deviate even a bit from the traditional ideas that they have grown up with. Even though Komal is only sixteen, by virtue of being a girl her entire motivation in life should be towards finding the right groom for herself, or so Neeli Maasi believes. And for this reason, weddings seem to be the ideal place: "You might catch someone's eye. You know weddings are useful that way" (99). Also, the imagination of marriages is inevitably understood in the heteronormative sense. For a gay couple to marry each other, the only possible way is to leave the country (100). So, when Sahil's mother brings back his Nani's sarees back home after her death, the expectation is that it will pass on to Falak (Sahil's eleven year old sister) and Sahil's wife. On the other hand, boys are supposed to be inherently sporty, according to her. So, when she finds out that instead of Vikram (Komal's fifteen year old brother) it will be Sahil joining Komal's father (Satish Chacha) in the "fathers and sons cricket match" as part of the traders' association picnic (39), she is "sad" (106). She quickly dismisses Vikram's claims that he doesn't like sports and is not good at them with: "Rubbish. All boys love sports" (106). She is worried that Vikram might have a fever because for her a boy not doing what is expected out of him according to the society is equivalent to a physical ailment. Later on, when Sahil is stumped out by

Maitreyi, Sahu Uncle's daughter who once played for India-19 and since then has moved on to the senior team (57), Neeli Maasi is displeased at her instead of cheering for her. It is difficult for her to believe that it was in fact a 'girl' who got Sahil out. However, once she realises that that is the case she shakes her head disapprovingly "casting her eyes around for Maitreyi and mumbling something about girls who looked and behaved like boys" (109). Although Dhar points the gun from Neeli Maasi's shoulders, the entire text is replete with such instances - sometimes even expressed by the parents or for that matter even Komal herself, showing how ingrained such ideas are within the mind of the general mass who are bound by traditions. Like for instance, for the traders' association picnic the idea is to have a fathers and sons cricket match, while for the daughters and mothers it is the "lemon-and-spoon race" which as Komal rightly points out is "a stupid race that three-year-olds like" (39). That too, on the final day, "mysteriously disappeared from the itinerary" (107) leaving it an all-boys show. The pleasant surprise is, however, Sahu Uncle's two daughters - the younger one twelve and already playing for "Delhi or Haryana" (57), who take the sons by a storm with their brilliant performance.

While it is still relatively easier for girls to compete for their rights in the patriarchal setup of the Indian society, the same is not even close to being easy for the others. This is evident in the discussions between Komal's family members surrounding the 377 Act being reinstated. The very first reaction by their father is to shield them from the issue by declaring that "It's nothing for you children to be concerned about" (122). According to him, "It isn't for people like us", while for Neeli Maasi it is a matter of shame and she would rather turn of the television than know about what the situation is all about. This is what happens between Komal and Sahil too. Komal does not even want to listen to what Sahil is feeling like. For her, it has been a betrayal as Sahil has not confided in her earlier. It is only when she starts talking to Usha ma'am that things start falling into perspective. She realises that the traditional notion of selfhood not only makes it difficult for people like her to accept the truth, but that it is equally tormenting for people like Sahil who do not even want to accept it to themselves. As Sahil later points out to Komal: "Telling you was part of admitting it to myself" (87). For the rest of the world, it is a matter of fearing "unnatural sex" (124) - one that does not culminate in reproduction. As Usha ma'am reminds Komal, even if law would have favoured the LGBT community, the heteronormative society would still not be comfortable with

accepting gay or transgender people as individuals in their own right. This is something even Vikram understands, despite being younger than Komal. "It's because men made the rules," he says, explaining how "it's called patriarchy" and how that is the way society is set up "it's to keep the power with men" (102). Although he says this in reference to Komal's exasperation over the "fashion gender divide" which makes women's clothes "inconvenient" while men are "unencumbered" (101), he sums up the entire problem, concluding "Why should clothing be any different?" (102). Rashmi, Komal's best friend after Sahil, is somebody who epitomises the societal expectations out of a girl. She is a "bit of a romantic" (15), who dots her i's with hearts (116), reads soppy love stories and watches romantic movies (165), crushes on "cute" boys (23), joins a photography club for the sake of being close to the boy she has a crush on (119), teases Komal about her closeness with Sahil - "always hanging out together...exchanging secret smiles" (30) and promptly blames it on the "sixteen-year-old hormones", gets grossed out by the idea of being in the same room as a gay person - scared if they did something to her and gets embarrassed to talk about sex (82). Despite Komal's love for her, she frequently gets exasperated with Rashmi's "pink cloud of romance" (103) or "lunatic love life" (153). Her friendship with Rashmi boiled down to "talking about periods" (64) or discussing boys - especially about Vikram, whom Rashmi has a crush on (119). In Komal's head too, Rashmi is built up as a stereotype of what she feels is expected out of her as a girl and it appears that she is more judgemental of her, resenting her rather than reasoning with her. For her, periods become the signifier of all things girls. So, when Rashmi feels jealous of how much time Komal is spending with Sahil rather than with her and suggests that they should hang out more often and do "girl things" Komal wonders what it means? "Talk about our periods?" (15). This association becomes a leitmotif throughout the novel, sometimes when she mentions that she talked to Sahil about everything but "periods...(thanks, Rash, for making me think about that)" (45), or when she starts hanging more with Rashmi and can "see my life stretching meaninglessly in front of me, talking about periods with her" (64). Despite her closeness with Sahil (which she keeps on reiterating by pointing out that she shared everything with him), sex and periods are the two things she decides to leave out. Even with Vikram, she uses the subject of periods to throw him off-balance: "telling Vikram that I'd run out of Whisper - a masterstroke on my part since he would rather die than cross-question me about that" (104). These inner biases of Komal's character is put to test time and again within the

novel, showing how one gets immersed in a system despite being judgemental towards people like Rashmi. For this, Komal is forced to cleanse off herself, not once but twice in the novel - first when she finds out about Sahil and secondly when she realises that it is her own brother Vikram who is in a relationship with her best friend.

What also comes across as equally refreshing in the novel is the unorthodox teaching tactics employed by the school where these young children study. Often referred to as the "weirdo school" (13) or the "alternative crap" (25) by Komal, it is a place promotes "holistic learning" (13) and considers competition to be unhealthy. With no exams till class IX, the school functions on weekly informal discussions, gender-sensitization seminars, sex-education talks and team-building picnics. Although some parents, like that of Sascha's would rather have him study at a boarding school which is much stricter or like that of Komal's father who would turn uncomfortable at the fact that the school has been holding sex-education classes among the students from a young age, people like Komal's mother are sensible to understand the merit in such teaching practices: "do you want them to be looking at dirty stuff on the Internet instead?" she explains to Komal's father (13). The teachers are equally relaxed be it their English teacher whom they all refer to as Einstein, their class teacher Rizwan Sir or the senior school counsellor Usha McDowell. Einstein has "frequent trips about how the CBSE syllabus is useless" and lets them do quirky exercises that make them think. It is during one of these exercises that Komal first realises that Sahil might be keeping secrets from her. Rizwan Sir presides over their group discussions during "That Time of the Month" at school (35) and provides his suggestions for family issues as well as love issues with equal enthusiasm. It is this openness that allows students like Parvez to share his family problems about how his brother - who had permanently damaged his right arm after an accident, has started treating everybody in a mean manner and nobody knows how to do anything about it. Usha (because that is what the students are supposed to call her) plays a far greater role in the novel. Unable to deal with Sahil's confession, it is to her that Komal eventually turns to. She is casual in her attitude when Komal walks into her office, giving her time to adjust and not appearing too overbearing. The moment Komal is seated across to her, she regrets her decision and tries to leave half expecting Usha to try and stop her. Usha, however, just casually asks her if she would come back some other time, assuring her that there is no pressure, giving Komal the courage to go on and share her feelings. Komal is amazed at the way she nonchalantly talks about gays,

lesbians and sex with her, hinting at the fact of how adults hardly find it comfortable discussing these things with children making them unused to such honesty regarding issues which are seemingly 'uncomfortable'. This is reflected in the way these children behave at home, completely contrary to how they behave in school. Parvez does not know how to talk to his parents about his brother's situation. Sahil is absolutely certain that he will never share his secret with his mother; "Are you mad?" he retorts when Komal asks her the same (100). Later when he starts getting anonymous letters and is freaked out, Komal asks him: "Is there any grown-up you trust?" to which Sahil replies with a "no" (113). Gurpreet, the "class swot" (7), cannot even confide in anyone that he would rather "go to a normal school where they prepare you for the IIT entrance exams" (181) than stay within the relaxed atmosphere of his own experimental school.

Usha's intervention in the matter between Komal and Sahil might have turned into being heavily preachy if not for Dhar's innovative technique of introducing some really difficult concepts. The author does not make Usha the sole spokesperson but makes Komal come to her own conclusions by asking herself questions which Usha raises during their conversations. The first time Komal starts questioning the way she was reacting towards Sahil is when Usha helps her realise that "at some point it has to stop being about" her (76). It is not as if anything has drastically changed with Sahil or their relationship. It is more in Komal's head than outside and that is how society makes the majority conform by getting into their heads. "He's just so normal, how did he end up like this?" (77), Komal asks her. "There is nothing abnormal about him," Usha replies, "Nothing to fix, nothing to cure. It's as normal - or abnormal - as being straight...if you really sit down to audit, you'll see nothing's really changed" (78). Usha makes her reason with herself that it is not that Sahil had lied to her but that she had been the first person he had confided in the moment he had come to terms with it herself. In a situation where the rest of the world including the legal system is against the rights of the LGBT community, it is only friends who can support them and help them overcome their own panicky status. Komal finally realises that "the world has been telling me that there's only one way to be normal and some part of me had still been believing it" (166-67). The novel raises some pertinent questions about how certain things become taboos and others not, and how can one go beyond such boundaries and think about these things rather than accepting them as they are.

Swati Sengupta's *Half the Field is Mine* (2015) is another young adult novel that deals with the gender question. However, by situating the narrative in the domain of sports, it does so in an innovative fashion, because as Payal Dhar has rightly pointed out in the review of the novel "[s]ports stories featuring girls are so rare, you could probably count them on one hand" (Dhar n.p.). What further makes this novel different is how it introduces the subtext of equality among individuals from different social strata while dealing with the question of equality among the sexes. Oli and Champa, two thirteen year old best friends, stand out apart from the rest of their peers on account of their unusual combination of dark skin-light eyes and their love for football - a game which is traditionally seen as a man's game. What is also remarkable about their relationship is the fact that Champa is the daughter of Oli's family's domestic help Arati Mashi. When other parents would not have approved of such a friendship, Oli's family is different. They are, as Dhar notes, "the poster family for feminism" (Dhar n.p.) where chores are divided equally, discussions hover round nuanced differences between 'sex' and 'gender', fair skin is not taken as a sign of beauty, taking on the mother's surname as a last name is not considered as unusual and children are encouraged to follow their dreams be it a daughter's love for football or a son's love for sewing. The world outside was not, however, as accepting of these differences. Oli's dark skin "did not fit" (8) into their conventional notion of beauty and Boom, Oli's brother's flair for stitching was teased as being a "*feminine* talent" (14). Although this does not once dampen Oli's spirit, we occasionally find her wondering about the reasons behind such societal outlook. Finally, it is only when the boys from their own football team decide to throw both Oli and Champa out - merely for being girls, that Oli realises how deep such prejudices run. That is also when Oli along with Champa decide to take matters into their own hand in order to challenge such prejudices and claim what is rightfully theirs.

Oli's initiation into football happens through Champa, for whom the game is everything - "her escape into rare realms of happiness and peace" (20). It is Champa who introduces Oli to the Patuli Superman Team, a team which had been put together by her and Yusuf, a boy from the neighbourhood with whom she used to play football with. Thereafter begins their daily evening practice sessions in a team of nine, where Oli and Champa are the only girls. They slowly begin to realise that none of the visiting teams that came to play friendly matches with them from other parts of Kolkata had girl team members. In fact, when these teams would see that the Patuli Superman team had two girls, they would immediately rule them out as serious players being of the common belief that girls cannot match up to

boys in a game of football. They would only realise their mistake when the girls would make their team win each time by scoring goals, thereby bursting their inflated egos. However, they have their own self-assurance punctured for the first time at a winning match against the Tollygunge Agrani junior club, when two boys from the losing team taunt them with lewd comments. They also suddenly become suspicious of the male audience gaze, which had so far seemed to them as nothing but appreciative. Finally, one of their own team members, Neel, tells them that "there is no longer any scope for girls to play in our team" (30), a month before the team decides to enter into an inter-club tournament organised by the Jalpaiguri district administration. That serves as a final blow, forcing the girls to confront the truth of how society views them and to fight for how they want society to see them as. While Oli decides to join Kuntala Ghosh Dastidar's football coaching institute for girls and prove their brilliance in women's football, Champa sets out for Jalpaiguri to meet the district magistrate and ask him why girls are not allowed in professional tournaments. The author introduces the readers to the concept of mixed football, something that is prevalent abroad and tries to break all set stereotypes against women playing football at par with boys.

Despite keeping this as the main backdrop of the story, Sengupta also briefly touches upon many other issues. She depicts the horrors of human trafficking, when a group of touts start shadowing Champa when she is on the run to meet the district magistrate at Jalpaiguri. She touches upon the issue of female molestation, when a man tries to feel up Champa on the train or when the girls are threatened with sexual violence by Neel before he tells them off - "you cannot blame boys if they touch you here and there on your body…Soccer is contact sports, after all" (33). She touches upon the fact of how even feminist mothers like Rini Basu are forced to ask their daughters about why they want to play with boys instead of in an all girls team, for fear that their daughter might get physically abused. She also touches upon the fact of how society views such girls, making mothers like Arati Mashi fear that this would make their daughter unsuitable in the marriage market - "who would want to marry a girl who played in shorts and a tee with boys all day?" (21). In this way, this book manages to address many taboo issues within Indian English children's literature and show the way forward. It is apt that Sengupta keeps the ending of the novel hanging, when the girls compete in a mixed team against the very boys who had thrown them out of their former team and the match ends in a draw to be resolved through "extra time or a penalty shootout" (162).

Disease, Death and Disability

In the second chapter, I have shown how our traditional literature has had a huge influence on the development of Indian children's literature and how it continues to influence it. While one mostly talks about the richness that our traditional literatures have added to our lives, Dipavali Debroy in her article "The Theme of Disability in Indian Children's Literature" talks about the adverse effect that such literatures have had on the society, especially with regard to disability. She writes: "[The Indian epics] have however associated disability with evil or malevolence" (Debroy 26). Her article tries to pick up those popular instances from our epics, where the person who has caused folly is shown to be with some disability. The 'slow moving' Manthara with a hump on her back in *Ramayana*, who had persuaded Kaikeyi to ask Dasharatha to banish Rama for fourteen years is one such example. While on his exile, Rama comes across the demons Viradha-rakshasa and Kavandha-rakshasa, both heavily deformed and hence of ill disposition. In *Mahabharata*, Dhritarashtra is born blind, and is shown to ignite the Kurukshetra battle by blindly encouraging his sons to do as they please. Debroy cites many such instances from not just the Indian epics but also Indian medieval literature and also from other literary sources. In most of these cases, she shows how disability gets associated with evil and how this has made society regard disability with suspicion.

For these reasons, but also because of the requirement of special skill sets to write for disabled children, Indian young adult literature has hardly been able to adequately contribute to this field. As Vinita Krishna says in "Storytelling for Children with Special Needs": "This section of children, who need understanding and thus pose a great challenge to our creativity as authors, much more than the children in general, are the ones that have been left behind for long" (Krishna 113). One might be empathetic towards children with disability, but the invisibility of such children from mainstream children's literature or around us for lack of proper infrastructure to make it inclusive for them, have made them morph into the 'normal' child's consciousness more as an aberration than as normal children but with different needs. Moreover, this has also served as a further alienating factor for the already alienated disabled child, who realises its invisible status both in mainstream literature as well as real life. It is to amend this shortcoming, that authors in the past decade have tried to use more disabled characters as their main protagonists and the texts that I study under this section are representatives of this trend. By dismantling this taboo, these authors have managed to bring to the forefront these marginalised voices who have been so far seen as deviating from the

norm and hence difficult to portray. Although this section is entitled "Disease, Death and Disability" the two books that I deal with here are mainly centred on the theme of disability. Both Leela Gour Broome and Devika Rangachari weave strong women characters struggling to prove their worth despite their disability, one which could as easily have been studied under the head of "Gender an Sexuality". But it is their disability that gives them the prime determination to seek out their identities and it is through disability that they experience the world of disease and death, the reason why I have chosen to study them under this category rather than the others.

Leele Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest* (2010) is a delightful read on many counts. Its thirteen year old protagonist Atiya with her polio-stricken left leg comes across as one of the most memorable characters in the twenty-first century Indian English young adult fiction. Broome never lets her disability overpower the many little episodes that form equally important appendages to the narrative. Broken families, loneliness, bullying, illness, death - the narrative weaves in all such multiple issues without making much of any incident. Moreover, having based her novel in a forest reserve area in south India, Broome also manages to touch upon the environmental angle by showing how much care it takes to preserve forested lands, how men (both the tribal people as well as officers from outside), animals and plants cohabit that space, and how the poachers and vacationers threaten to disrupt that balance. It also, in an uncanny fashion, brings together three of the most unlikeliest of companions - Atiya, Uncle Shivan - an old anthropologist and music genius suffering from a degenerating disease and the lone old rogue elephant Rangappa known for his grouchy and irritable nature, all of whom together find a place to share in their inner lying loneliness and find solace.

Atiya's father and her beautiful dancer mother Sarojini had a whirlwind romance which culminated in a happy marriage, made even happier with Atiya's birth. Although Sarojini's biggest passion is dance, she voluntarily leaves it after her marriage and willingly settles down with her husband and daughter in the forest. However, Atiya's birth makes her hopeful again as she channels all her ambitions on her daughter, till she contracts polio at the age of five and is left with a shorter left leg. Being unable to bear both losses, Sarojini leaves her family behind to make a successful career in dance in the city. Although Ram feels happy to be left with his daughter at least, he becomes extra possessive about her. Having lost his wife to music, he bans any sort of music at his house and starts leaving in constant fear that his daughter will one day leave him too. Little Atiya is, however, is happiest living in the

forest. Bullied at school for being "slow and dim" (Broome 1), lonely at home because of a father who hardly has time for her having immersed himself in work to drown out the pain of being abandoned by his wife, and severely restricted because of her own physical limitations, Atiya longs for some company. Like any other child of her age, she bunks school now and then to run away to the forest, has mental wars with his father over any disagreement and is not scared to go to any extent when she has decided on something. Never once does Broome make us feel pitiful towards Atiya's predicament. She is hardly shown to be vocally disobedient, but her underlying patient determination makes one love her more even when she openly transgresses.

Through the character of Uncle Shivan, whom Atiya fondly calls Ogre Uncle, Broome manages to introduce the stereotypical old man with an ill temperament bossing over other people. But Broome's old man is not the usual stock character but one who has a rich past to share. On a trek to the forest one Saturday, Atiya discovers somebody playing the flute and becomes enchanted with the music. She tries cajoling her father into allowing her to learn how to play the flute, but is harshly denied. That is when she sets out to discover the origin of the music herself and accidentally discovers Ogre Uncle and his wonderful daughter Mishora. Atiya gets to know how the anthropology department had posted him there to work with the Kurumbas - the local tribals, when he was only twenty-five years old, to find out more about "their customs, norms and traditions" (104). He describes that time as the "best years" of his life. During his stay, he meticulously documented their various customs, rituals and practices and went on to publish many research papers in international journals, earning him the title of "Learned Man of the Kurumbas" (105). Then he fell gravely ill and was nursed back to health by a Kurumba woman Misha, with whom he finally settled down with. However, his family in Chennai "was upset and never forgave him for his decision" (106). Out of this marriage Mishora is born, the patient thirty-year woman who eventually becomes a close friend of Atiya's. To celebrate the birth of his daughter, Uncle Shivan is gifted a bamboo flute by his father-in-law, which introduces him to music and he realises that his work on Kurumba culture has an entire segment missing - that of their field of music. That is when he begins to play the flute and master its intricacies, archiving the tribal music in great detail. In the meantime he has grown old, lost his wife and has been diagnosed with a degenerating disease at seventy that has foremost taken away his eyesight. Atiya, who had been extremely annoyed at him for his rudeness, begins to realise how circumstances had made him so. She requests him to teach him to play the flute and thus begins her weekly secret journeys to their place to

master the musical instrument, that becomes a healing process for both of them. Eventually, when he dies, he leaves behind all his research of forty-five years to Atiya, strengthening her resolve to make a career as an anthropologist.

By introducing Rangappa, the other member of this odd trio, Broome manages to explore some environment related issues as well along with showing the human-animal bond. There are many legends that have built up around the character of Rangappa over the years. This elephant, with the longest tusks in the area, is known to be a loner. It was apparent that he disliked people and could act unpredictably when he came across one. This had earned him the reputation of being mean and nasty and nobody usually messed around with him. Some predicted that he was ill, some like Atiya's father believed that Rangappa had been thrown out of his herd, or maybe he had been poisoned by the farmers from whose farm he had tried to steal sugarcanes. Associating his behaviour with her own experiences, Atiya comes to the conclusion: "He craves attention...And he knows he is unable to get it from his own kind. So, he turns to throwing weird fits, breaking branches, thrashing his trunk against the trees and terrifying human beings" (133). But Mishora gives Atiya a different perspective: "People probably do not leave him in peace. The jungles are getting smaller all the time, less wild and there are more and more of us around. How can the poor beast stay aloof, when there are so many "invasions" into his private space?" (126). However, nobody is really able to figure out the reason for his bad temper, until Atiya and Uncle Shivan discovers the truth. When Rangappa starts turning up for their flute lessons regularly, listening from the other end of the bank, the duo starts wondering about his link with music. Later it is revealed that Rangappa's mahout had been a flute-player. His sudden death had been a huge trauma for the elephant who had increasingly become a recluse and threatening others with his bad tempers. Atiya and Uncle Shivan's flute lessons calm him down and he turns into a new leaf, finally having found some solace. When Uncle Shivan dies, it is Rangappa who comes to convey the message to Atiya - an episode which beautifully captures how much can be exchanged without words.

A young girl, an old man and an old elephant - three different individuals, with their different disabilities, yet sharing the same pain of loneliness. Broome's story tries to show how despite all differences the underlying emotions are the same and the only way that a person can escape his/her pains is by sharing and discovering how similar they are with each other despite the differences. Broome manages to challenge all taboos within young adult fiction by showing disability, pain, death, broken families, blossoming love between two

divorced single parents and the list goes on. But her matter-of-fact narration is what makes it all the more unique as she never tries to impose her judgement in any way. Her main protagonist Atiya, from walking with a stick to walking in callipers, is as different a protagonist as can be found in Indian English young adult literature. However, the way Broome blends in her differences to make Atiya emerge as any 'normal' person is done in a very understated way. By avoiding the incorporation of an oppositional other to Atiya in the novel - except for Gopal - but that too briefly, Broome manages to represent the voice of the other as a distinct identity that exists on its own despite what the dominant discourses on Indian childhood would have us believe. In this process the author also manages to escape from falling into the trap of overt sentimentalisation that usually ends up ruining such well-meant narratives.

The next novel I will take up under this category is Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Ice* (2014). While Mayil had taken up the question of how history favours men and most women - however brave they might be, remain unheard of in *Mayil will not be Quiet!* - one which I have already explored in the previous chapter - Rangachari furthers her case with her young adult historical fiction *Queen of Ice*. She takes up the case of such an unheard female ruler who had ruled Kashmir from CE 980/1-1003 in the early medieval period in Indian history (Rangachari 174). The story of beautiful and intelligent Didda, princess of Lohara, is an even important story to tell, because not only was she born a woman who dared to sit on the throne by shunning all her male adversaries but also because of the fact that she achieved all that with a deformed leg. At a time when a girl child born to a king would most likely be "stifled at birth" (3) for fear that the king would be mocked at for not having produced a male heir - that too a lame child at this one, Didda evaded death due to a prophesy made by the king's astrologer that she was destined for greatness. Narrated in first person through two characters, both female - Didda and Valga, her carrier, the novel brings together "an exquisite balance of fact and fiction" (Rangachari Blurb) in questioning how great gender biases operate in the writing of history which erases the records of women rulers like Didda despite their immense contribution. At the same time, the unconventionality of Didda - born with a deformed leg in a royal family, yet achieving the greatness that the astrologer had predicted for her, gives the author the opportunity to explore women issues combined with disability studies. The plight of being born a woman, especially in those ages, is beautifully woven within the narrative of the story subtly pointing out

how certain things remain unchanged even today. At the same time there is a celebration of the strength of a woman with her determination to fight the prejudices that are associated with disability and eventually win against all odds.

Granddaughter of Bhima Shahi, the Shahi ruler of Gandhara, and daughter of Simharaja of Lohara, Didda carried the label of two great royal houses on her both sides. However, she had never really received the love and support of her father who had yearned for a male heir and bestowed all his fondness on his late brother's son Vigraharaja (although in reality he was Didda's nephew, the son of a brother who remains unnamed) (177) - a year younger to Didda. Her mother, on the other hand, was extremely proud of Didda, attending to all her needs with utmost tenderness. Described as "forceful, ambitious" by Didda, the queen was caught in a loveless marriage with Didda's "short-tempered, indolent father" who "frittered away his time and money on drunken pursuits and sycophants" (4). The marriage itself was a result of a political alliance traditionally maintained between the two royal houses of the powerful Shahi family of Gandhara with that of Lohara, commenting on how marriages pawned individuals for future gains. The marriage is proclaimed as "doomed to failure" (4) right at the very beginning, without painting any idealistic image of marriage, blaming the failure on the "mismatched union" (4) between Didda's father and mother. Nonetheless, on the occasions that a spat broke out between the two which gradually increased after she gave birth to Didda, it was the queen who had to "contain her anger" (6). The only time Didda's father is shown to be gentle is when she is pregnant with another child after several miscarriages, that too only in the hope of her bearing him a "full-term son" (22). That the woman is just secondary to her husband in marriage, where her qualities or desires as an individual never really matter apart from the benefits that her lineage brings along with her as well as her biological requirements, is reiterated in the taunts against Didda used by her father: "Learning is wasted on a girl...particularly one who will never even use her skills to attract a good match" (6).

Later on when Didda reaches the marriageable age of sixteen, despite her beauty she is unable to attract a proposal because of her disability. This further foregrounds the conventional notions of beauty, especially those expected out of women, to make them fit for marriage. She herself resents her lame foot dragging behind the other with the prior knowledge that it makes her look "ungainly and distinctly ugly" (20). She blames her fate for making her the way she is - "unsuitable in a world that has fixed ideals of

beauty and desirability" (20). Finally when her father does find a marriage proposal for her, it is to Kshemagupta, the puppet king of Kashmira and an unsuitable groom - that too only to be his second wife, openly declared as a "trade-off" in exchange for "a little land" (29). This is equally true of Chandralekha, Kshemagupta's first wife, "a mere pawn in the hands of her father and nephew" (57), who finally embraces *sati*-hood and is ready be burnt alive on her husband's pyre than live an affection-less life. To hint at the universality of the situation, Rangachari deftly juxtaposes the fate of a queen and a princess with that of Valga, an ordinary village girl from near Udabhanda, the capital city of Gandhara. The eldest one born to a family of many sisters and one brother - too many mouths to feed, she is chosen to be disposed off to her aunt's quarters in Lohara by her father on count of her "heavy features" with "no semblance of beauty" which would "never make a good match" (10). Valga's mother - like the queen, is reduced to being a silent spectator, sobbing at her husband's decision but unable to exert her own wishes on him.

Didda is not introduced to us as a calm and obedient child. Instead she is aware of her "quick temper" (5) and bitterness quite early in her life - by the time she was about ten. As she grows older, she starts recognising the two sides to her - one, craving love and encouragement, and the other seeking power to rule and crush those who taunt and humiliate her (40). Even in the account of Valga, she comes across as one who gets what she wants without allowing anything or anyone to "stand in her way" (18) - almost ruthless in her dealings. Despite acknowledging her favourable qualities, she is not insensible to her faults too - that of possessing an ugly temper, a selfish trait, being self-absorbed and extremely stubborn (31). She harbours dangerous feelings within her hear, ones that make her want to "harm" her father or "wound" Vigraha (40) for treating her with utter disdain. In a similar fashion, Valga too is shown to be an unconventional girl child - without her "mother's delicate beauty" or "father's chiselled features" (10), but unusually "strong" for a girl. When her father banishes her to her aunt's place, we are made privy to her "rage and tears, and...heart...full of hatred - hatred towards a world that decreed that a daughter must obey her father in all things even if he banished her from the only home and family she knew" (11). She even wishes that her father "would drop down and die" - a feeling of intense hatred displayed towards one's own parent that is usually unseen in such novels. She equally grows to despise her aunt, under whose care she is sent for, hating her "with a slow, burning hatred" (13). A seamstress in the

palace complex of Lohara, the aunt's main aim summoning Valga from her own village was so that she could help her with the housework in exchange of shelter and food. However, she is shown to be cruel with "temper tantrums" (11) who would work Valga "to the bone, hardly caring whether I am sick or weary, and feeds me just enough to keep me going" (13) and physically abuse her whenever she failed to keep up with her instructions. Naravahana, the other closest aide of Didda, is equally resentful towards his father who had married after his mother had dies and left his first son in Lohara to serve Didda when his new wife had given him a son (34).

The preference of a male heir can turn a father so bitter towards his own daughter is evident in the way Didda's father is blind to his daughter's intelligence. He is more father-like to Vigraha than to Didda and would rather believe him over her, silencing her every time she tries complaining about how the former bullies and tortures her. Even though Didda is a better scholar with brains and abilities than Vigraha who instead is known for his "perversity and malice and cruelty" (25), she can never be his true heir for "a woman doesn't rule...only a man can occupy a throne" (25). Didda's mother too has to bear the brunt of her husband's temper for bearing him a "cripple" daughter and is able to redeem herself only by giving birth to a son later. The harshness of this reality is understood by somebody as young as Vigraha too, who uses this fact to taunt Didda - "...she has given him a son. So she has made up for her mistake in having you" (38). The severity of this claim is evident when Didda takes her brother in her arms for the first time after he is born when her father storms into the room and rages at the midwife for letting "a cripple" hold his "precious son" (33). The pressure on the male heir is also pronounced. Be it their desire or not, they are expected to become kings even before they start understanding what it means. This is made evident when Valga gazes at Abhimanyu (Didda's son) for the first time. Instead of being exhilarated she is sympathetic of his helpless state with "a throne in his future and enemies to contend with that he doesn't even know...too huge a burden to place on this tiny scrap of life" (68-69). Later in the novel, when Didda decides to have a competition among the male members of his family in order to choose a successor, the children - the eldest among whom is only seventeen, seems to be strained and tired carrying the ambition of their families on their tiny heads (166) showing how frustrating it can be for these young children too.

This novel does not try to celebrate Didda for the greatness of her heart, but rather for her iron-willed spirit that encourages her to move on the path of greatness despite all the obstacles. Being born a girl, that too with a deformed leg, she is doubly oppressed under societal pressure but still manages to lose hope: "My destiny awaits me there...And I will seize it with both hands" (36). However, at the same time, instead of painting her as a white character, paints her in shades of grey. She is emotionally as erratic as any other individual - sometimes generous, sometimes jealous, sometimes friendly, at other times hostile; but what she never does is to accept defeat and that is where her greatness lies. Once she is married off to Kshemagupta, she moves to Kashmira - where her true greatness slowly starts to blossom. Her husband is immediately taken in by her, fascinated by her talk, her questions and observations, and she on her part exerts herself "in trying to dazzle him, bewitch him" (56). However, although her husband falls in love with her, she is never able to love him back judging him for being a weak king being run by his prime minister and father-in-law Phalguna. She starts learning about the rituals and practices of her new home with a greed akin to "a squirrel hoarding nuts" (63). She learns about the courtly practices, their subjects and the land in general. Having been told that the masses are "fickle" and "quick to switch loyalties" (63) she makes sure to keep them appeased at all times, a strategy which ultimately helps her fulfil her destiny. After the death of her husband, instead of sacrificing herself on her his pyre she chooses to rule the kingdom as a regent of the young king, her son Abhimanyu. However, neither her son nor her three grandsons are kings in the making. They have no desire in ruling and in some sense that sends "a flash of excitement" (92) through Didda. Ruling in lieu of the king gives her a sense of power that she had always desired but never given and she cannot understand why her son or grandsons were not interested in her. Silencing all doubts that a woman is incapable to rule, Didda not only leads her kingdom for five decades, assuring its future emphatically (172) but also finds acceptance as a ruler despite being an outsider who is also a lame woman. From having people being suspicious of her motives, many denouncing her for being a woman yet ruling as a regent (87), mocking her for being a woman ruler (96), considering her as an usurper, or an "unnatural woman who did not die alongside her husband but chose to play a part in the real world, the world of men" (98), she manages to silence them all by winning wars, putting down rebellions and converting Kashmira from being a weak kingdom "riven by warring factions, known for its bad governance, a tempting prize for a stronger power" (146) to a "powerful,

invulnerable, a much-sought-after ally, a place of impeccable governance" (146). From ruling behind her son and grandsons, she fulfils her destiny of ruling as just Queen Didda, minting coins bearing her name and insignia (160).

However, the ruthlessness of Didda is never kept hidden. She is in fact subtly implicated in the murders of all three of her grandsons and even her own son - all of whom were weak rulers. She is also shown to increasingly become panic stricken fearing rebellion and doubting her closest allies, which leads to grave consequences one of which is Naravahana's suicide. She is shown to be harsh in her dealing with even those that are closest to her. Like for instance right after her marriage when Valga refers to her as princess, she is quick to correct her to address her as the "Queen" (50). When she gets to know that Parvagupta - Ksemagupta's father had initially been a mere clerk and had ascended the throne by looking King Yashaskara and later killing his only son, she is enraged to have been "married into a family of looters and murderers who do not possess a single drop of royal blood in their veins" (60). The class conflicts seem to naturally blend in with the practices of those times, also hinting at how it still plagues the Indian community. So when Vigraha is repulsed at Valga - an "ugly, low-caste, filthy servant" (14) touching her, one finds resonances with the modern day society too. At the same time, even though one admires Didda for achieving what she did despite the biases against her gender and deformity, one also gets revolted at her own anti-feminist stance regarding any other women. When she beheads Yashodhara in full public gaze for rebelling against her, she notices his "pale-eyed wife" glaring at her but is quick to dismiss her as she considers her to be "powerless now that her husband is dead" (117). Later on, when her most trusted counsellor Tunga asks her if she would include girls as her successor, she reasons that the only girl raised within their family was not adept at the worldly affairs and hence it made sense to choose only from among the males (163). She is one leading character who attracts the readers with her moral ambiguity as opposed to remaining morally sound. She rages at the gods for making her a cripple (62), marvels at the irony of her kingdom which is suspicious of a woman ruler despite being considered to be "the material form of Goddess Parvati" where "any occupant of the throne of Kashmira is seen as part of the goddess" which is the reason why people worship "the Ardhanarishvara form of Lord Shiva - half-man, half-woman - in the valley (62-63), but is herself dismissive of female successors or weak kings. This story - with a woman ruler, born with a deformity, beautiful and intelligent but morally

ambiguous and ruthless in her governance tactics, and how she manages to fulfil her dreams but still gets invisibilised or trivialised (174) in the accounts of history - is nothing like what has been attempted before in Indian young adult fiction. This is what makes this novel unique.

Nadhika Nambi's *Unbroken* (2017) is one of the latest young adult novels to deal with the subject of disability. An active sports aficionado, fourteen years old Akriti finds her world turned upside down after she loses the use of both her legs in a road accident. When even her physiotherapy sessions fail, she is forced to become wheelchair bound. By the time we are introduced to her, she is already sixteen and in the eleventh standard. She appears bitter, extremely bitter with everything and everybody around her. All her friends seem to have abandoned her, except Preethi and Karthik - although they too seem to be slowly slipping away. But she seems especially bitter towards her family - her accommodating mother, her strict father and her too-good-to-be-true brother Ranjith. One could only wonder if it is because of the fact that even though both Akriti and Ranjith had been in the accident when their father's two-wheeler had lost control while trying to avoid a speeding bus (134), but it had been Akriti alone who had been hurt - her spine had been crushed making it unable for her to move the lower part of her body? However, Nambi does not dwell much on the accident and the immediate period after that, giving us no parameter whatsoever to compare the latter version of the Akriti that we see with her former self. All that we see is a despicable individual who we try very hard to like but cannot. In a strange way, this is what makes the character and the text so refreshing.

We understand her bitterness and sympathise with her, but she never lets that sympathy turn into empathy. Pointing this out in an interview to Andaleeb Wajid, Nambi points out:

> It's easier to empathize with a person when they're open about what they're feeling, so you can put yourself in their shoes. Akriti is so closed off, it's impossible to get inside her head. People are still obviously overwhelmed with sympathy for her because of the wheelchair, but empathy is unlikely because even the people she's closest to don't know how she feels. (Nambi "Nadhika" n.p.)

This is what Nambi's protagonist stands for - a fiercely independent girl grappling with her drastically changed condition that has suddenly made her dependent on others for every little

thing. Nobody can really understand what that might feel like unless really pushed into the same position. Akriti's bitterness seems to point out to us that unless we are in the same shoes as that of the sufferer, we can never truly empathise. Therefore she taunts people, making them feel guilty about her condition. She misbehaves, knowing well that people will let her get away with it because they pity her and not because they love her. In this way, she forces the readers to reanalyse the way one would instinctively behave with a disabled person. If at all anybody is really empathetic towards her, she chooses to believe the worse about that person, having lost the ability to have faith in the goodness of others. In reality, however, she still has feelings deep down but since it always bring about pain when it surfaces, she tries hard to become apathetic. She tries to put up stony walls around her to help her keep up her resolve, because she knows that any act of kindness might make her feel weak and vulnerable again. This is why she tries to keep people at bay through her repugnant behaviour, little realising that it is not easy to keep away people who really care.

Although the repugnance in the main protagonist causes for a refreshing read for most of the novel, it gets a little monotonous towards the middle. There is hardly any action, till Akriti's Appa discovers the cigarette packet that she had snatched from Karthik and inevitably blames his daughter for turning into a smoker. Akriti is so angry at her father's lack of faith in her, that she does not even try to fight for herself. She silently accepts her punishment, waiting outside on the porch of their house in her wheelchair as the rains come pouring down. This is one of my favourite sequences from the book, one of those rarest occassions when we are made privy to her innermost struggle without the stony wall around. She feels hatred towards her father for not having given her a chance to explain, but we realise that in actuality she hates herself that to have let down her parents. As the rains pour down, her emotions pour down too through her tears - something that we rarely find in the novel elsewhere. That she the sight of her friends Karthik smoking had disturbed her, that she had snatched away his packet but not rattled on him - although she says that she "wasn't the type of person who cared about ratting out Karthik" (92), and that she felt bad when her parents found her with the packet believing it to be hers, shows that she still cares. She is just afraid to show her feelings. Consequently she is tricked into going to a child psychologist, Dr. Rishi, when she finally starts opening up to her condition and accepting. Her entire journey is aptly described by him through the "five stages of grief": "First: denial and isolation; second: anger; third: bargaining; fourth: depression; and lastly, acceptance, some like to add letting go. I don’t, because I feel like that contradicts the whole principle of acceptance" (153).

Although Akriti is nowhere near the final stage even as the novel ends, we see a change towards that direction. As Nambi points out "she realises what happened to her is never changing, but the way she feels about it can" (Nambi "What" n.p.) and that is how she begins her journey towards acceptance. Through the character of Akriti, Nambi manages to go against the grain in creating a disabled character who is so good that it appears unrealistic. Instead of making us feel pitiful towards Akriti's state, Nambi makes us feel angry - an emotion that would have been better appreciated by Akriti instead of pity. This is why, despite locating the narrative against an upper middle-class backdrop, the novel manages to open up spaces for othered voices instead of falling into the trap of simple homogenisation.

War, Crime and Violence

At the event "LSD: Love, Sex and Darkness in Children's Literature", organised by SCBWI India, in collaboration with Max Mueller Bhavan and with the help of the organisers of Bookaroo - one that I have already referred to before in this chapter, among the many questions that had been raised, one had been regarding the use of violence in children's fiction. "Do books promote violence? Should there be boundaries?" - to which Rupa Gulab, another children's author whose work I will deal with in this chapter, had pointed out that "there are no boundaries in real life. Showing violence in books should not, therefore, be a problem" (SCWBIINDIA n.p.). This section of the chapter will look at how these doubts have been an integral part of the Indian consciousness with regard to children's books and how the newly emerging group of authors have tried to prove such assumptions wrong by showing that violence is an everyday reality in the lives of many children despite our attempts to believe that children and violence do not exist together. These writers broke this taboo by holding up the picture of those unheard Indian children's voices who have grown up amidst war, crime and violence (and still do) but have never been considered as a part of the mainstream Indian childhoods. They have also tried to do this by not really dividing up the world of these children into good or bad, but digging up the grey areas that lie in between. Violence exists in the lives of many Indian children in various forms - they could be victims of child abuse (as the children in *Trash!*), or perpetrators of violence themselves (like the evil duo in *Smitten*), or they could also be children born in war-stricken areas (as the stories dealt with in this section will show), although all of these instances have their own back story, be it poverty, bad associations or personal grievances. However, to keep it absent from children's literature by continuing to believe that the child is an innocent being not capable of violence and furthermore promoting that through children's literature is not just selling lies but also

voluntarily donning the consciousness of a false naivety. On the contrary, it is important to show violence but with the understanding that it is not as simple as it is made out to be and that it has its own complexities and grey areas. This is why writers like Paro Anand or Siddhartha Sarma (authors I deal with in this section) have dared to break the taboos in their writings and represent those children for whom violence is an everyday reality though ongoing wars (both personal or national) or acts of crime (forcefully or voluntarily). Understandably, discourses of war, crime and violence do not stand alone and are interspersed with the adult world of intrigues, the attempts to project it as an all male world by excluding the women's role and the glorious romantic image that is projected to justify it. Although I study the following texts with special focus on how it breaks the taboos of showcasing violence along with the issues of war and crime - of which it is a by-product (and to what extent!) - in Indian English young adult literature, I also look at these underlying issues that lie interspersed within the main narrative and are inseparable. The fact that these books mainly deal with the larger depictions of violence in the life of Indian children, it does not mean that those small instances of domestic violence that many children suffer from are unimportant, but that I have already dealt with them under the other heads where violence has played a secondary role within the larger narrative.

Paro Anand's *No Guns at my Sons Funeral* (2005) based in Kashmir is a book which deals with such othered voices that lie hidden underneath the dominant narratives of Indian childhoods for whom living with violence is as normal as the dominant Romantic ideal of childhood innocence would lead us to disbelieve. This book not just breaks the taboo by focusing her young adult novel around the theme of violence but also disproves the idea that one should protect children from the harsh realities of violence by alerting us to the author's real life experiences that had led to the writing of this novel - an experience that shows that there are so many children who are born into violence that trying to protect them from violence is nothing but a fool's errand. Anand mentions how she had visited Kashmir many times as a tourist and revelled at the beauty of the place not once being bothered about the dark realities that exist underneath and cause turbulences in the political situation of the place. The first time she got to delve beneath this surface beauty was while working on a project as the editor of the national Centre of Children's Library of the National Book Trust. The aim of this project was to build "The World's Longest Newspaper" by getting children - often those living in difficult circumstances, and spread across various Indian states and languages to contribute their own stories or opinions to create reading material for places

where the common complaint was that "there simply weren't enough books to read" (Anand "Kashmir" 56). The project extended up to approximately 825 metres of length, containing contributions from nearly 3000 children "in thirteen states and in sixteen languages" (Anand "Kashmir" 56) and ended up setting a world record in the Limca Book of Records. Unfortunately, while working on the project in Kashmir, the Kargil conflict had started off, making it necessary for the team to work in collaboration with the army. The team went to Baramulla and Uri - "places which make news only for strikes by terrorists. They are heard of in death, not life. I met children who had lost their father to such strikes, children who had been impacted by violence" (Saini n.p.). For Anand, the fascinating detail was that how all the inhabitants saw both the militant groups as well as the armed forces as enemies and considered themselves as being victimised in the struggle between both these forces. Most of the children from these places, in whatever languages they were writing in, had a common appeal - that of peace. However, the awareness regarding the complicated nature of violence began dawning on Anand when she visited the Tihar Jail, where almost 3000 young boys were housed for having committed a variety of crimes of varying degrees. When Anand met them, she was awestruck at how they looked like "baby-faced innocents" (Anand "Kashmir" 56) playing at the park within the jail. That is when she first started thinking:

> ...if someone's circumstance were mine instead of his, his choices would have been so different. And conversely, had I been in a situation other than my own, would I have taken those paths of violence that are so easy for me to abhor and disapprove of as I sit, sipping my shot of caffeine and think, "oh, what a bad man he must be". (Anand "Kashmir" 57)

Having been thus initiated into the greyness of violence, Anand started viewing the issue of violence in the life of these children in a completely different light which was further strengthened by the next project for which she had to visit Kashmir. She was asked by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation to "work with a group of young orphans of insurgency" (Anand "Kashmir" 57). The aim was to interact with these children and provide them with financial, emotional and educational support. The initiative saw a huge turnout and gave Anand the opportunity to interact with children from different communities - be it the Kashmiri Pandits or the Muslims. There she found out how influenced these children were with Bollywood movies, while to remember their local songs took them an entire night - a fact that Anand uses in her novel. Over the course of the project, Anand and her team tried to open up the kids with various word-games and other exercises, but faced the strangest problem when they

asked the children to do a story-building exercise. Even after giving them the first line of the story, Anand was surprised to see that most of the children were not able to complete the task. One of the problems, Anand realised, was that of language as she learnt that the "people of Kashmir speak in Kashmiri with each other, dream in Kashmiri, but they write Urdu and they are taught in English" and thus cannot "express themselves creatively in the language in which they are most comfortable" although they are perfectly okay with using the language for educational purposes. After reassuring the children that they would not be penalised for grammatical mistakes, Anand finally got them to write but was surprised to see that out of the fifty children (all of whom had lost their fathers to terrorists), forty-eight of them had written about how their father had died and that too for the first time in their lives. The children were visibly reliving the trauma - "crying, tearing up their stories or hiding in bathrooms" (O'Shea n.p.). Anand and her team made them all sit in a circle, giving them the freedom of sharing their stories only if they wanted to but requested them to at least listen to the ones who were ready to share their stories. It acted as a cathartic process where the children were not only partially relieved to have finally shared their traumas with others but also at realising that there were many others who had gone through a similar situation. This is when she found the inspiration to write this novel, by taking little instances from these real life experiences that were shared that day. She had especially used an unedited quote by a boy named Vipin who had written: "...that he'd like to kill every Kashmiri he meets. He says, why should they get to live in comfort of their home, when we are denied the same?" (Anand "Kashmir" 61). Later on hearing other's stories when this same boy realised that the Muslims had also faced a similar fate like him, there came a strange transformation in his demeanour, which made Anand realise that this hatred was far complicated than that of a simple communal kind.

Talking about her novel in an interview to *Deutsche Welle* to mark UNESCO's World Book Day, Anand had mentioned:

> You know, this is reality fiction, and a lot of children ask me: "Is it real?" Yes, it is. This particular character called Aftab doesn't really exist, but there are many "Aftabs" that do.
>
> Especially in Kashmir, boys face such a strange situation because they are never left unsupervised or alone. The terrorists are just waiting like vultures to recruit young boys who are alone. Parents are very frightened of this, so women will accompany a boy everywhere he goes. When he goes to school, his sister will

> accompany him, and even before the bell has rung, the women are waiting outside to pick him up.
>
> As a result, the boys are really stifled. They're desperate to be just regular kids. And it's those who are a little bit outside of the group - maybe those who are teased - who get picked up by the terrorists. (O'Shea n.p.)

It is this reality, one which we come across in the newspapers everyday but are averse to incorporating it within children's literature, that Anand's novel tries to showcase through the character of Aftab who gets enamoured by the discourse of freedom as preached by Akram, an enigmatic leader of a small 'terrorist' outfit and ends up losing his life.

Aftab, the middle child of a simple Kashmiri family, lives with his school-teacher father, housewife mother, elder sister Shazia and younger brother Amir in the Baramullah region. Although to the ordinary observer he leads a normal life, he actually has a dark secret. Despite being warned by his parents, he becomes involved in a tearaway group of terrorist outfit headed by the charismatic Akram and his 'brother' Feroze - both "firangi" Afghans. Competing with fellow "jihadis" Javed and Imran, Aftab becomes desperate to prove his loyalty to Akram, whom he loves like his own brother. Akram realises that and tries to play it to his advantage all the time. He openly sides with Aftab when Javed and Imran make fun of him and also trusts him with little secrets from his life including how Feroze had been left with a limp arm after being caught by the Indian army for successfully conducting an operation of killing twenty-seven Indian jawans when he was only twelve years old (Anand *No Guns* 28). Aftab, who is now almost about the same age as Feroze was then, is captivated by such stories of bravado and prays to be given a chance to undertake a mission himself just like Hrithik Roshan had been entrusted with in the Hindi movie *Fiza*. However, underlying this dreamy boy lies a small child who loves to be pampered by his mother and brought his morning tea to his bed, scared of his father for missing classes and praised by his peers for his fast-bowling skills. He also harbours a fear of blood and keeps it hidden from Akram and Feroze, afraid that they will take him to be feeble. Little does he know that Akram not only knows about his fear, but also how to manipulate his adoration for him.

Being a part of this secret organisation, gives him a different adrenaline rush which was missing in his life - he had confessed to Akram at their first meeting that "he was often bored" (32). He starts spending less time with his friends like the Sikh boy Angad or the Kashmiri Pandit Laxman, and more time with Akram and Feroze working out and preparing

for their next big mission. Every time his mother cautions him against such associations, nostalgically remembering the free Kashmir of her childhood when people could roam about freely without any fear, he dismisses her as a "hopeless case" (18). For him, all women are "helpless" (16) and useless as far as such fights for freedom is concerned. Here too, little does he know that his sister has not only known about it all along but had been in a relationship with Akram from two years before Aftab had come to know him. In a sudden twist to the plot, she startles Aftab by revealing how much she knows about their organisation and also by showing him how adept she is at lying and misleading the Indian army as opposed to Aftab. However, she is only a tool for Akram, who has been taught by his own trainer (and now enemy) that one should never get attached to anybody else in their profession. Although Shazia gets pregnant with Akram's child, she never finds the right time to share this with him. Instead she is used as a pawn to use her sexuality and deliver poisoned sweets to Feroze who had been captured by the Indian army and was being tortured. This is the only time we see Aftab opposing Akram's decision and raising his voice against him, but Akram soon manipulates him into going along with the plan. Finally, however, Anand gives the last word to the women, who knock out the weapons raised by the locals to pay respects to the dead with the cry that "There will be no guns at my son's funeral" (169).

The story points out to children like Akram and Feroze who get involved in such militant outfits and are trained to become attuned to the violence all around and indifferent to death. Through Akram's recollections we get to know how he had been forced by Sajid to care for pets and then kill them on order - each kill hardening him as a person. As for Feroze, he had crossed the border leaving behind his mother and sisters to get some job and earn a living, but had instead become involved in the organisation which had sent him on a mission that had crippled him for life. It also talks about the other boys who manage to stay away from such associations but still become victims to the ongoing violence. Many of them are forced to leave their homes for terrorist attacks that kill hundreds of innocents including their family members. Like for instance Laxman, whose family is forced to leave Kashmir after his uncle and his driver loses their lives in a bomb attack and Angad who dies at the end with Aftab when he triggers the bomb in a suicide mission in a crowded Sunday market place on orders from Akram. It is through Laxman's voice, that Anand gives expression to Vipin's words - one which I have already mentioned above.

Thus, Anand manages to touch upon a variety of issues that plague the lives of the children in the valley of Kashmir, making violence a regular part of their lives. Although in a

simplistic fashion, Anand tries to draw attention to the facts of how a terrorist is created, how foreign influences have an equal hand in these formations, how these groups operate in secret, how their activities end up creating communal tensions, how such works of terrorism also affect the common men in general, how it has led to the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits and how the army has been involved. The story has its own shortcomings. The plotline has several loopholes, especially in the way that Akram first gets spotted, which happens when he goes to a sweet shop with Aftab in full public view - a mistake that a militant of Akram's nature would never have commmited. Moreover, Anand uses a lot of non-English words which seem unnecessary and also makes the book inaccessible for many people who do not understand those languages. Apart from that, a character like Aftab is a rare combination for Indian English young adult literature and one can find only few instances of such kind. This boy, who unlike other boys of his age or ones who are depicted in mainstream children's literature, does not go to school regularly. He is brought up in an environment where officers in uniform, patrolling the streets with heavy guns, is an everyday sight. He is a child for whom negotiating a price with a militant in exchange for protecting the women in his family from being abducted is commonplace. He is a child for whom sudden explosions - be it at crowded market places or desolate roads, are normal. And thus, Anand shows, it is not normal when Indian adults choose not to speak about these childhoods in the same breath as that of the privileged upper-middle class childhoods that have so far ruled the young adult literary scene.

Anand follows up this novel with *Weed* (2008), which goes on to narrate the story of another family but shackled in a similar situation as that of Aftab's family. It is the story of a young boy Umer, who lives with his father, mother and little brother Umed in Kashmir. But he soon realises that his family has a dark secret, although he is unable to find out what exactly it is. One night, on being forcefully sent off to sleep early by their mother, Umer becomes suspicious and plans to stay up and figure out the truth. Soon he is surprised to hear his mother's raised voice in the adjoining room - a mother he had thought was only capable of weeping. Curious to know the truth, he overhears their conversation and realises that things are not right between his parents. He hears his mother admonish his father, but is shocked to find his Abbu says nothing in his defence. Finally he apologises to her, but still leaves the house - only to realise that he is being followed by someone. However, he soon finds out that his follower is none other than his own son Umer, who had sought upon himself to find out the truth. He is enraged and takes back Umer to their house, but this time he realises that it is

time that he makes a choice between his family and his secret life. He decides to choose the latter. Apologising to his family and putting Umer in charge of his mother and brother, he takes his leave. The rest of the novel is Umer's struggle to come to terms with the truth, his sense of responsibility towards his mother that almost stifles him, his helplessness at stopping his brother Umed leave in search of their father and finally his attempt to run away - only to be found by a kind old man who offers him a better job and the opportunity of making life better for both him and his mother.

The novel does not have a plot as such. It is more about the inner trauma that the family has to go through when one of their members chooses the path of militancy. The social stigma that is associated with such families is evident in the way Umer is bullied by his school friends, all of whom know the reality about his father. Umer realises that his family is different at each step. He keeps turning back to his father for the truth only to be lied to - "Beta, I am a soldier. I work for the good of everybody. Not like your friends' fathers who only look after their own pockets and stomachs" (Anand *Weed* 4). For Umer's father this is the truth, but as Umer realises the hard way, this is not how other people see them. At the same time, while the militants cause such splits within these families, the Indian armed forces are no good either. With their frequent curfews, they act more like prisoners towards these Kashmiri families rather than assuring them with a sense of protection. The novel shows how try as they might it is impossible for families settled in such troubled areas to give to their children a 'normal' childhood. While other children would laugh, play and go to school at their age, Umer and Umed have to struggle, first to be accepted, second to replace the absent authoritarian figures within their family and thirdly to do justice to those assumed roles.

After Umer's father and brother leave, Umer's mother is shown to become more and more protective about his son, turning his life into a living hell. However, her fear seems to echo the fear of those other mothers that Anand had mentioned in an interview to *Deutsche Welle*. She spoke how: "Parents are very frightened [that their children will be picked up by the militant groups], so women will accompany a boy everywhere he goes. When he goes to school, his sister will accompany him, and even before the bell has rung, the women are waiting outside to pick him up" (O'Shea n.p.). The stifling sensation that Umer feels is probably no different from what all these other boys must feel. There is nothing regular about their childhood, even if one takes into account their differences. This is what Anand tries to stress through this novel, showing that violence is not an external force but rather which drives a majority of the childhoods from such backgrounds.

One of the stories that Anand mentions having heard from the children in Kashmir while working among them recounts such a moment when the child encountered the father's death right in front of its eyes: "My father lit a cigarette as he left the house, I shut the door after him, then heard the shot that killed him at our doorstep...the smoke from his cigarette still hung in the house, not yet dissipated, but he was gone" (54). Umer's story is nothing similar from this child's. The night his father finally walks out of their house, he dies for the entire family as the mother had warned him. He only comes back as a lifeless body brought by the army, while there are so many other families who do not even get to bury their dead. Umer and his mother do not even have tears to shed when they are burying his body, because they have already shed all of them. They still have a missing member of the family and they do not know if they will ever see him again. The one day they decide to go out and have fun in the sun, they are caught in an explosion where Umer is seriously injured. The sense of right and wrong that governs this family can never match up to the sense of a 'normal' family. But that does not make children like Umer or Umed any less of a child. They are as representative of Indian childhoods, as are any other children being brought up in a secure privileged atmosphere.

The Grasshopper's Run (2009), published by Scholastic, is the debut novel of Siddhartha Sarma, a young journalist originally from Guwahati, Assam, currently based in Delhi (Borpujari n.p.). One of the central reasons why he wrote the novel, according to Borpujari, was to explore "the ‘delicate’ Naga-Assamese relationship, which has relatively soured over the years...which is why he has depicted the close relationship between a Naga and an Assamese boy in his book" (Borpujari n.p.). The novel is a young boy's adventure, with not a single woman character with a voice. It is only an absent grandmother, who is shown to be a woman of great character and substance, and who inspires a certain degree of terror, that breaks the otherwise completely male dominated world of Gojen Rajkhowa, an Ahom boy belonging to the most senior branch of the Ahomese nobility.

His family, from the time of his grandfather is shown to be close to the leading family of the oldest of the Naga tribes, the Aos. The grandson of the current Aos leader was his childhood friend, a young boy by the name of Shiluti, shortened to Uti. In some ways, the relationship between the two is shown to rather like that of two blood brothers. Uti's village is massacred by an Imperial Japanese Army unit commanded by the megalomaniac Colonel, Shunroku Mori. Uti manages to kill three soldiers before he

is captured and tortured to death. The news of the death of the young Uti travelled to his grandfather, who calls on for help from his friend, KC Rajkhowa, the grandfather of the protagonist of the novel. KC informs Gojen, who manages to extract the name of the Japanese officer responsible for Uti's death through contacts that his school principal had in the British Intelligence. The joint Ahom and Naga council decides that Mori must be killed and his ornate sword must be brought back as proof, as a reprisal attack for the death of Uti and the massacre. Gojen is shown to be a particularly adept runner, very efficient in the use of rifles as well as the knife, and particularly devoted to the memory of his childhood friend and blood brother. The rest of the novel unfolds around the events which lead to the raid on the headquarters of the evil Colonel Mori and the slow ascent of Gojen through personal trial, doubts and uncertainties, to emerge as a leader amongst the North-Eastern people (from the perspective of modern India).

The raids involve Lothas, Rengmas, Sangtams, Konyaks and Angamis, all of whom are shown have suffered under the Japanese occupation. Through this journey of growth, he is accompanied by his tribesman and loyal companion, Mopumeren, who is a veteran of the First World War. He gets his arms training with a local British Rifle Club, and his education in a British Missionary School in Bengal. At the same time he is well versed in traditional tribal lore and customs - both of the Ahoms as well as the Nagas. Gojen seems to be the fated leader, who is perfect to fill the circumstances - it is almost as if his entire life, indeed his entire family's history has been made out for this one mission. He has no flaws. He is a good runner, a very good student, has impeccable family background, is an amazing marksman with the latest rifle - in short, a character which seems to have been taken out of a superhero comic. The novel and the circumstances of the Second World War are only there for him to mature and realise his ability. This is achieved through his having gained the ability to not think of firing at another person, but at a target (Sarma 128). By the end of the novel, he has become the leader of the group (165) someone whose voice tone caused the men around him to "flinch a little" (187).

Of course, the novel is violent, although the author claims - "I had to tone down the violence a little bit because I could not make it too graphic or realistic" (Borpujari n.p.). One is nonetheless not too sure if the underlying message of the novel is either uplifting or morally tenable. The author seems to come from the position that children are anyways open to violence. "I also believe that children today are exposed to a lot

more things than when we were children. So, their level of understanding is more..." (Borpujari n.p.) The novel begins with a massacre, followed up with the ceremonial prolonged murder of Uti, who is ambiguously aged as a 'boy', young enough to have escaped the barrage of Japanese bullets aimed at waist height. The protagonist is aged thirteen, and is constantly referred to as a boy in the early part of the novel. The principal at the school urges him to not get involved - but the exhortations are enfeebled by counter arguments (27). He says: "You have to go back home; there is no help for it. There is no reason for me to stop you. There will be no exams... I was only a little older than you when I enlisted in '14. So many boys my age..." (27). By the time he comes around to telling him to not get too involved, we already know it's a hopeless case. It almost seems like it is the job of boys to go to war - a not too off the mark historical truth. What the novel seems to suggest is that younger boys are actually often better equipped to deal with the dynamism that war demands.

Indeed, one of the central binaries of the novel lies in the relative inaction of the adults, versus the continuous action that is to be found in the young. Within the novel space Uti is the only person who physically resists the Japanese. At his dying moment he thinks of the legend of the Molomi, and the grasshopper (195-196). While the grasshopper is supposed to be unique in being still, the title of the story gives out that for a change, the grasshopper must run. It is the boys who must act like men, and the men must consult, talk, write reports or follow the boys. It is this turning around of the adult order and the granting of agency to children that perhaps best marks out the novel from many other in the genre. While the gatekeepers of the society might see the novel as problematic in its portrayal of violence and strategies for children in the times of violence, this is what sets this novel apart in believing that the child is equipped enough to handle it. Moreover, what is undeniable is that it empowers the child character independent of the adults. Adults intervene, not to limit or govern the innate abilities of the child, but to empower and give freedom to them. The child is introduced to violence by the adult world, but he at least has the autonomy to finish it on his own agency.

The violence however, is couched in adult narratives specific to the culture of the area. Hunting is seen as acceptable as long as it is for food or as a gift "for those who deserved such good food" (44). The violence against the Japanese is almost democratically sanctioned through the council meeting and is clearly seen as a reprisal of the initial Japanese massacre. The politics, history and reasons behind the war

between the Japanese and the British do not concern them beyond this immediacy. Indeed, the rather detached nature of the Indians in general is sometimes unbelievable. Apart from the "more than 250,000 civilians who decided life was too short to be given up between the British and the Japanese" (15) and ran out of Calcutta, there is no mention of Indians from the other parts at all. The central focus of attention remains on the young Ahom boy and the Naga and the other tribals. Perhaps it is also a representational tactic hitting out against a nation that has always placed the people of the North-East in the periphery and silenced their articulations. The immediacy of the narrative also keeps the action focused and tight, apart from allowing the exclusion of other details, making for a fast paced read.

The complete erasure of the Indian National Army, which was fighting alongside the Japanese under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the thousands of other soldiers who had been fighting from the British side, and the Naga Scouts, is also the clearest indication that the author has consciously kept the issue of Indian Nationalism completely out of the ambit of the narrative. In some ways, the text is far more concerned about exploring the immediate silenced identities of marginalised people, their possible histories and interactions while acknowledging the presence and aid of the colonial power. Indeed, the British come across as sensible rulers who while keeping to themselves do provide essential intelligence, arms and ammunition, apart from accidental aid to our protagonist in the form of a timely attack that distracts the Japanese soldiers while Colonel Mori can be ambushed and killed.

The character of Uti and his bond with Gojen is also interesting in promoting a sort of brotherhood that is almost transcendental. At key times when Gojen is on the verge of faltering, it is Uti's spirit - a hallucinatory accompaniment to the otherwise lonely travails; that keep Gojen going. There is a hint of a mystical spiritual bond between the two, with Gojen merely completing the task that Uti had begun. There are constant references to the similarity between the two, their shared skills with weapons and physical fitness. There is also a linking done in the name of a shared heritage as sons of the chiefs of different tribes. Both are chosen from their communities for great things - it is only that Gogen must now complete the task that Uti has left unfinished. Perhaps the underlying spirit haunting the narrative can be traced back to visions of greater unity and cooperation between the Ahoms and the Nagas in their continued para-colonial interactions with Christian missionaries, tribal traditions, the west, Burma

and China and perhaps most immediately, an Indian state whose treatment of both peoples leave much to be desired.

The only problem one can raise with the novel is that it has been written like an all boys' adventure, with not a single woman character with a voice. It is only an absent grandmother, who is shown to be a woman of great character and substance, and who inspires a certain degree of terror, that breaks the otherwise completely male dominated world of Gojen. One of the reasons might be the fact that when subaltern voices first emerge from a space, they may remain rooted in patriarchal modes which while providing a space for assertion nonetheless embroil the characters into ways of acting and reacting in ways that in themselves are hemmed in and limiting. The novel thus falls back on patriarchal modes of engagement in its narration which is highlighted by the complete silencing of the women, who have otherwise played a sterling role in the society and politics of the region. However, the real strictures are perhaps also placed on the male who is told that anything short of hyper masculinity in the face of aggression is acceptable. Despite its many problems, the way Sarma breaks the taboo of using violence in a young adult novel, and rightfully placing it in a context where use of violence was commonplace for a young boy, is what makes the novel important in the context of my thesis. As Borpujari mentions, "These are stories that have remained unknown because they are about ordinary people from a region which the rest of India still knows very little about" (Borpujari n.p.) thereby showing why such stories need to be told. It is only through retellings of history can the marginalised voices which have hitherto remained buried find an outlet and challenge the existing dominant order of society.

Another book, that takes up the rarely written story of children from those poverty stricken belts of India who are forced to enlist as child soldiers with insurgent groups for promise of three square meals, is Swati Sengupta's *Guns on my Red Earth* (2013). Sengupta, a journalist, who has worked extensively in the Maoist belts in the Eastern parts of India, tries to incorporate her experiences of working in the so-called Red Corridor of India into the narrative of this novel. At Peek-A-Book, the children's literature festival held at Shilpakala Vedika in 2015, she spoke to a group of young reporters (all under the age of twelve and working for Deccan Chronicle to cover the event), where she mentioned how her experiences as a journalist had opened her eyes to the fact that "the police had children working in wars for spying just because they are easy to influence and less suspected" (Deccan Chronicle n.p.)

and this in turn had been the driving force that had compelled her to write this book. This in itself changes the common perception that manifests itself in mainstream children's literature, that children have no other responsibility in life other than attending school and acquiring education, while adults are responsible in making sure that children get to live that life. Sengupta breaks this simplistic vision of childhood, that is only accessible by the privileged sections, in order to tell the story of Shanto - the main protagonist of the novel, abandoned by his parents, abused by his caregivers and plagued by perpetual hunger.

Shanto Mahato, a fourteen year old boy, leads an unconventional life. An inhabitant of the quaint village of Chhotopelia in Lalgarh, he finds himself orphaned as a "tiny baby boy" (10), despite his parents being alive. His parents, much like Shanto later on, had been young when abject poverty had forced them to leave their village in search of work. Nobody would have found out what that had really led them had they not come back to leave little Shanto in the care of his uncle and aunt - Sukumar and Ashtami. It was then that the latter duo had found out that Shanto's parents had found 'work' among the armed Maoists squads, operational from in and around Lalgarh. The Maoist life, always on-the-move or in hiding, was not conducive for bringing up babies, because of which they were forced to abandon their only child hoping to come back for him later. But in their hearts they knew that this later would never come. This is how Shanto finds himself being raised by his uncle and aunt, helping them collect sal leaves from the forests and making plates out of them. However, at the end of the day there was never enough money to buy food to feed three hungry stomachs, breeding frustration in the hearts of Shanto's caregivers and making them vent all their anger on Shanto. It is around this time that Jhuntu dada, "part of an armed Maoist core group" (11), had impressed him with his growing affluence - his transition from a bicycle to a motorbike, and convinced him to join the forces - "a work that promised food, not a salary" (8). Shanto's decision to join the forces had been solely based on this promise, although he realises the true extent of his decision only after he joins the Maoist ranks. Living in the middle of the dense forests, sometimes in "plastic or tarpaulin tents" (11) and at other times under the open sky, the main agenda of these groups was to train young cadres like Shanto to aid in their covert operations that involved "planning and executing armed and violent resistance against the 'tyrannical' Indian government" (Roshan B. n.p.), whom they considered to be their prime oppressor. Shanto's training begins with small easy jobs of carrying information, although he is constantly reminded that his "training in arms" (13) would begin soon. Despite knowing the truth, Shanto is oblivious to what it truly means to kill somebody, until he becomes

directly involved in the killing of a bus full of policemen. That is when even the promise of food or the fear of being killed by his group for trying to escape or being caught by the police as a Maoist informer is not enough to stop him from trying to begin life anew.

Although, the novel is mainly based on Shanto's rite of passage, Sengupta also manages to get across some very complicated ideas pertaining to the Maoist movement in India, to its intended young readers. Even if the young readers are unable to understand the extent of this violent reality that consumes young boys like Shanto, it still manages to do something that very few Indian English young adult novel has managed to do. As Arundhati Roshan B. writes in her review:

> If young readers miss those nuances entirely, and relate to the story simply as a story, it is no big loss, for what Sengupta has done – and, to her credit, very subtly done – is to use the story as a forum to ask the difficult (and usually unanswerable) moral questions, while passing no judgments herself. Who is the villain in this case? The government, which dispossesses the marginalized? Its agents (the police and the army) who use their power to commit unspeakable human rights violations against the weak? Or the peasants who, left with nothing but their anger, mobilize their forces into a bloodthirsty army of vigilantes who kill innocents alongside their true nemeses? It is through reading books like Guns... that children subconsciously learn to look more closely at the blacks and whites they are presented with, and to see the fifty shades of grey in between. (Roshan B. n.p.)

Sengupta's subtlety is what makes the text work so well at various counts. She introduces such a large complex topic - which transcends mere boundaries of good and bad - without once letting it divert us from the main narrative. It remains as the backdrop of the novel, but at the same time manages to enter the text through its characters which is enough to initiate the uninitiated into the world of boys like Shanto. It is through Shanto's interactions with his group that we are given a glimpse into the lives of Maoist insurgent groups and Sengupta exploits all these opportunities in pouring out as much information on the background of the Maoist movement and its philosophy as possible. The wretched poverty in which the people of the villages of the 'Red-Corridor' live, their disillusionment with the government who has not been able to rescue them from their situation - as voiced in one of the statements that a Maoist leader makes: "the government babus eat up your portions" (12), the police atrocities

that have turned them bitter towards the state machinery - all of it is craftily touched upon. Having set this backdrop, Sengupta then easily launches into the narrative of how these conditions make the population of this area turn rebellious against the government - "their mission was to seize power from the government and empower the poor" (3). In this fashion Sengupta manages to paint a grey picture of a situation that would otherwise be looked upon as completely black. At the same time, she is careful enough not to glorify this insurgent movement. The manipulative and opportunist mentality of the elder leaders to pick out new recruits from among the most vulnerable, then forcefully indoctrinating the latter with their own ideology and finally robbing them off their free will to raise a family or leave - the novel touches upon the other side of this story too.

What I found interesting was this one episode where Sengupta deftly delves into the life of a cadre by presenting a normal day in the life of an individual in a Maoist camp, subtly hinting at how different it is from what we understand as 'normal'. Their mornings began at four-thirty and they were expected to be ready by six for a roll call. This was followed by breakfast, after which began their physical training ending with the cleaning of weapons to keep them in a perfect condition. This was followed by the "commander's class" (27) where the commander would:

> ...read out from books [to] explain the Maoist party's rules and objectives, their mission, why they had taken up arms and what battle they were fighting. Later...reports [were read out] from newspapers and opinions were shared on what the government and political parties were saying about Maoist activities. (27-28)

After this, they had some free time till lunch, when the seniors would escape to the adjoining markets to collect information about the movement of the police or to collect "tax money". After lunch, some of the cadres would visit the adjoining villages while others would stay back and continue the class. Everybody was expected to assemble at the camp again at five in the evening, when another roll call would be carried out, followed by another round of discussions and dinner before retiring for the night. The expectation was that this strict schedule was to be followed by all the members of the camp with "clockwork precision" (26). Sengupta also slips in other little details like how the leader of the group would always wear a mask and be guarded by the others, how even women were armed fighters although within the camp they would primarily be given the responsibility of overseeing the kitchen duties,

how the cadres would have their own code words and aliases, how the villagers from the nearby areas would protect the groups from the police, although there were also some among them who would resent the "Bon Party" (where Bon means jungle in Bengali - a name used to refer to the Maoist groups who would go to the villages after dark and tell the villagers about their mission) for forcefully collecting money and goods from them making them turn into police informers, so on and so forth.

However, the main focus of the story always remains on Shanto (which means quiet in Bengali), the quiet fourteen year old boy and his struggle to escape and start life afresh, and the story never once trails away from this main agenda. The otherness of his childhood is clearly marked out in the text from the beginning to the end. For Shanto, living on borrowed clothes - even though they are larger than his size and have to be kept in place with a coconut coil tied tightly around it, is a luxury. Possessing a mere number of three shirts is a great deal for him. Even though he earns his reputation as a fast learner among his group, he is still abused and mentally harassed by Asit - a cadre from his own group. At the same time, he is also loved and protected by another cadre - Anima didi, who turns into a mother figure for Shanto. Later on, when he decides to run away, his biggest concern is money without which he realises it would be impossible for him to take the train or the bus and get as far away from the group as possible in the shortest amount of time. He is forced to take up a job at a tea-shop near the Medinipur station, without realising that the owner is a police informer who eventually hands Shanto over to the police. He is kept a prisoner at the 'Lalgarh police station', locked up in a dark store room initially with his hands tied up. During that period he is given bathroom privileges only once a day, making him soil his clothes several times a day and filling him up "with sorrow, rage and humiliation, and he would end up crying himself to sleep" (119). This finally ends only when the DIG Abhijit Basu comes visiting, who also promises him a secure future in exchange of information about his group. Although Shanto is no longer mercilessly tortured after the DIG's strict orders, he is never allowed to leave the premises of the police station. On top of that he is forced to do risky jobs like scanning the rod for explosives with a "three-foot long S-shaped rod" with a rope tied to it, when it is well understood that it could mean death for ones doing the job without proper gadgets or training. This is what serves as a tipping point for Shanto who becomes desperate to escape from the police station. He does that eventually, hurting some officers in the process, before escaping into the dense jungles nearby. There he accidentally chances upon his former group mates and comes to know of their plan of derailing a train. He tries everything possible to foil their

plans and gets hurt in the process himself. Thankfully, he manages to warn Banerjee babu, the station master at the Medinipur railway station, who he had befriended during his stay there, and helps save the people on the train.

With all these loose ends finally tied up and Shanto emerging a hero, having redeemed himself, one would expect that the book would now end on a happy note. However, Sengupta foils expectations and chooses to use an abrupt ambiguous ending instead, pointing out to the fact that for boys like Shanto, there is no happy ending. As Roshan B. has pointed out in her review: "[Sengupta]...resists the temptation to tie up all loose ends and give Shanto a Karan Johar ending - or indeed a *Rang de Basanti* ending - which is very refreshing" (Roshan B. n.p.). In the end, our thin, short and dark protagonist Shanto just disappears into thin air - "[s]ome said that he had been kidnapped by the Maoists...Some said that the police had kidnapped him - to keep him safe from the Maoists or to extract more information from him...But some...felt that perhaps Shanto had gone away on his own" (163). In this way, Sengupta manages to counter notions about childhood as a universal privileged state that always has a happy ending. In the process she also manages to introduce "the children of one India to the children of another" (Roshan B. n.p). By showing that childhoods are not universally devoid of violence, Sengupta breaches a taboo that has for long seen the depiction of violence as an inappropriate subject matter in children's literature.

Broken Families

A BBC report on "What divorce and separation tell us about modern India" refers to a study by economist Suraj Jacob and anthropologist Sreeparna Chattopadhyay which shows that more people in India choose to remain separated rather than file for a divorce "because of stigma association with divorce" (Biswas n.p.). In the case of the woman, "remarriage becomes tough because of the prejudices against a divorcee" (Chattopadhyay as quoted by Biswas n.p.). Talking about "Second-Hand Stigma: Being A Child Of Divorce In India", Tarana mentions the insensitivity with which her schoolmates dealt with her when they got to know that her parents were going to get a divorce. She writes: "Divorce news is gossip, here. It's scandalous and gasp-worthy" (Tarana n.p.). She further mentions how lonely she felt and could not share it with anybody else for fear of being "judged and pitied" (Tarana n.p.). The same goes for the couples who are separated and do not get a divorce, or when a single parent decides to leave the family. For an article for *Hindustan Times* which probes the rise of

dysfunctional families in Indian films, Dr. Rakhi Anand, consultant clinical psychologist at Indraprastha Apollo Hospital in Delhi notes that "Most families in India have dysfunctional elements, or more precisely, 'unhealthy parental practices'. Like, fighting or using abusive language in front of children, using children against each other, disrespectful behaviour, and neglect of children, to name a few" (Paul n.p.). She further elaborates that the dysfunction could be on two levels, structural - among single or divorced parents, or functional - frequent fights among parents, one or more members of the family suffering from addiction, affairs etc. And finally she ascribes it on the changing family structures within the country, from traditional large joint families, to nuclear families to disparate set ups. However, despite the existence of such dysfunctional families, which Dr. Anand says cannot be labelled as "abnormal" - the social stigma attached to it has made it impossible for such units to be seen without any prejudice. And, this has strongly reflected in children's literature. One is reminded of Timmi - a text I deal with in the previous chapter, and how puzzled she gets to see that her friend's stick figure painting of her family comprising of both her parents, she herself and her brother gets a "good" while her imaginative family portrait including a motley crowd staring from imaginary friends to broken toys is made fun of. The books that I deal with in this section addresses the theme of broken families in the context of young adults and tries to break the taboos that surround it.

Rupa Gulab's *Daddy Come Lately* (2013), which had earlier been published as *Chip of the Old Blockhead* in 2006 by Rupa, is everything that Superle had found wrong with contemporary Indian English children's literature. The protagonist is a young teenager, Priya, who goes to an elite English medium school in Delhi, good in English but poor in maths, who dreads doing badly in her boards and going to a "cheapie college" where "everyone spoke Bollywood Hindi and wore shiny sequined clothes like they do on the local TV channels...probably say stuff like 'yaar' at the end of every sentence" (Gulab 85), who listens to English bands, judges people like Sheetal and Kajal who are weak at spellings and feels surprised to know that their Hindi teacher at school, Mr. Sinha, knows Shakespeare, and laughing her head off to hear him call Hamlet as Omelette (42). But the reason why I chose to include this in my study is because of the reason why despite conforming to the norm she still gets judged - and by her best friend at that, for being brought up in an "unconventional" way by a single mother (8). She is different and that is "a bad thing" and Aruna, her best friend knows that. She points out: "how many kids go back to an empty house after school, heat

their lunch in microwave and have only the TV as companion till their mums get back home, huh? How many in this building itself? You're the only one like that here, and there are over a hundred flats in this complex. You don't even have a maid to look after you..." (8). Most of Aruna's reasoning has its source in her 'normal' parents, but nonetheless it does not stop Aruna from internalising their outlook and judging Priya for that, even though it is apparent in the novel how much she loves her. Despite its attempt at holding a mirror to an unconventional life, the book, however, and sadly so, has a "conventional" ending, where the divorced parents are reunited in the end. At the same time it is interesting to see how the author chooses to do it. She not only deals with the taboo subject of divorce but also breaks the taboo by portraying adults, as Benita Fernando points out, whose behaviour cannot be distinguished from that of the youngsters (Fernando n.p.). By showing how whimsical adults can be in their own personal relationships - almost "childlike" when seen through the eyes of a child who has been trained to believe in the superiority of so-called mature and sensible adults who have transcended beyond such childishness, Gulab manages to break down the idea of the invincible adults.

Priya has been brought up alone by her single working mother under the pretext that her father is dead. It is no wonder that her life takes a somersault when she gets to know that actually her father is alive and wants to meet her and that she is a "post-divorce" child and not a "posthumous" child as she had grown up believing. Growing up with a single parent had been as comfortable for her as had been that of Aruna's growing up with her two sets of parents and an elder brother. So, it is not without reluctance that Priya agrees to meet her father. While Aruna is happy that she might get to have a taste at 'normal' life, Priya is terrified at the fact that the family balance might change. She has already decided that her father is "dad the bad" and that she grant him entry into their own familiar space within the family. Talking about the two reasons why Gulab chose to write the book, the author says:

> The first is, I'm sick and tired of our Indian hypocritical society: a woman must have a man in her life (ew), and I hate the looks of pity mingled with scorn directed at divorced women. The second reason is, I know a few children from broken homes, and I wanted to tell them, it's okay – my heroine was happy and centred with a single parent, so can you be. Also, while both your parents may be lovely individuals, sometimes they can be dreadful together, so a divorce is not necessarily a bad thing. (Kalpanaa n.p.)

Priya is an apt protagonist who shows that life with a single parent can be as fun and normal as living with a set of two parents.

However, coaxed and bribed by her mother and her best friend, Priya's favourite Pinkymasi, Priya is forced to meet her father. The plot proceeds in a very conventional fashion thereafter, where the father is an accomplished writer and manages to impress both Priya and Aruna and their other school friends by pitching in an excellent idea as to how to revoke the detention of their favourite English teacher Ms. Basu, and subsequently move into the next door flat as their neighbour which was very conveniently empty till then. The mother also starts behaving in a very coy fashion, getting jealous at any other woman that her ex-husband happens to mention in a positive light, making Priya conclude that she still has feelings for him. With Mr. Jeet Sarkar, acting like the perfect father, taking over Priya's maths woes and also winning her brownie points with Sanju (Aruna's brother and a prospective love angle) by teaching her how to play guitar, life seems getting back to 'normal'. However, what Gulab does in this process is to show how adults lie in order to manipulate children and how in turn children also learn to manipulate their parents. Priya learns how it was her mother who had walked out of the marriage and never told him that she was already pregnant with Priya. She also learns how her mother had gone against her parents to marry her father, but had been too ashamed to admit that they had been right when they had broken up, leading her grandparents to believe that it was Jeet who had been the culprit by cheating on their daughter. It is not without reason that Priya tags adults as "the filthiest liars ever" (52). On the other hand, Priya also learns how to manipulate her parents by using Aruna's experience at handling both parents - "the only nice thing about having two parents...If one says no, there's fifty per cent chance that the other one will say yes...this works real well if...parents are fighting" (95).

Although problematic on many counts, the book shows how children like Priya who mostly conform to the dominant order also have to face bullying because of the societal prejudice against divorced/broken families. This is best portrayed in Aruna's mothers conversation with her husband, voicing her concern: "Good for Priya to have a dad again, the girl needs stability in her life...And it will be nice for her to have a brother or sister these only children grow up to be selfish" (132), the conversation that prompts Priya to run away from home. It is problematic that it is the woman who is so intrusive about other's family matters and the man only grunts a "hmm", but this adequately sums up the society's prejudices against families that do not qualify as "normal" according to their standards.

Jobless Clueless Reckless (2013) written by Revathi Suresh is another young adult novel that tackles a lot of issues together but mainly through the lens of a young protagonist caught up in a "dysfunctional family". Like most of the other young adult novels that are part of this thesis, this too is written in a first person narrative. The narrator, fifteen (soon to be sixteen) year old Kavya, declares herself to be like Holden Caulfield right at the very outset of the novel. Kavya lives in a townshop called Grand Canyon in Bangalore with his eleven year old brother Dhrittiman, their mother, who works as "some kind of consultant and conducts training thingies" (Suresh 40) and Mowgli, their dog. Their father, Naresh, is an "alternative energy expert" (38) who travels a lot. At the time when the novel begins, he has been in Holland for a year, having left his family one find day without even saying goodbye. The crack had started appearing with fights that would go on and on. Over a short period of time they had been reduced to a dysfunctional family. Kavya's "smiling, happy Ma" (39) has become "mostly grumpy" (40). She had started either drowning herself in more and more work or crying her heart out. As for Kavya, it seemed like her mother had appointed her as some kind of "proxy mom or something for (her) stupid brother" (40). However, although Kavya keeps ranting about her "abominable" (8) kid brother, she surprises the readers with her sudden tenderness - cooking for both of them (and even for their mother on occasions), feeding her brother, indulging him and even putting him to sleep. That she herself is only a fifteen year old girl becomes much more prominent in instances like these when her vulnerability becomes even more pronounced. Apart from the fact that she was still trying to make sense of their situation at home (apart from shielding her brother from it all), the other problem that she had to constantly battle against was the unconventional route her mother had chosen for both her children. Their mother does not believe in "formal education" (50) and had fought with their Appa to have it her way. This had also been one of the turning points in the relationship of both Kavya's Appa and Ma. Initially both the parents had taken turns at teaching Kavya and Dhrittiman, till it had all stopped. The siblings had tried their hand at self-study for some time, before being taken over by their mother's sister and her American husband - Mads and Mark (both former teachers in the US), to be homeschooled at their organic farm located in the outskirts of Tamil Nadu.

The other mystery in Kavya's life is "Manisha". The novel begins with Kavya having a Manisha day. She claims that Manisha had once been a friend of hers, before

disappearing without a trace one day. Granddaughter to Kavya's next door neighbours, Manisha used to come to meet them from the US once in August every year for about three weeks. During that period, both the girls were inseparable. Shy and reserved Manisha preferred playing indoors, but Kavya never had a problem with it because they "never ran out of games to play" (1). This continued for some years, till Kavya was almost seven or eight. Then suddenly she got to know someday that Manisha had disappeared and soon after her grandparents moved away. Although Kavya had been really small at that point of time, she was never able to forget her having felt an "instant connection thing" (5). However, since all this had happened before the other children in the block had moved in and Kavya herself knew very few kids, nobody was really sure if Manisha had been real or a figment of Kavya's imagination. Her constant references to Manisha was either taken as a joke or used to make fun of Kavya.

The author keeps the mystery alive till the very end of the novel as the readers too begin to believe that Kavya might have transposed a figment of her imagination into the figure of Manisha to deal with her dysfunctional existence and had killed her off when her requirement had come to an end. This adds on to the mysterious charm of Kavya, that makes her attractive to many others. However, this also makes her the butt of all jokes especially among her girl gang comprising Lara and Niya. In fact, most of Kavya's stories are rubbished as hallucinations of her mind. For instance, the time when she is on her way to meet Lara, an oldish guy starts smiling and waving at her, and later asks her about her dog who had been keeping unwell for some time. It is later that it strikes Kavya that it was not possible that a complete stranger would have known about Mowgli's state. Worst still, when she tries to look for him again, he is nowhere to be found. This story is immediately dismissed by Lara as weird, while even Indu makes it into a spooky story later on. It is only much later in the novel that Lara's boyfriend Abhishek tells her that it might have been Ansh's granddad, who lived nearby and had a mental condition - he would occasionally escape to say things to strangers, that she had encountered that day (99). But all of this is taken to be part of the Kavya aura. The young boys are more attracted towards her than being repelled. However, the insensitivity with which this topic is broached every time when Kavya is around, shows how untrained the others are in being able to deal with people with such mental conditions. On one such occasion, when Niya is busy narrating Kavya's encounter with the old man who had vanished, Anuj confronts her: "Was Manisha there with you when

it happened? Is she there with you now? What's she look like? Manisha?" (48). The way the situation turns out to be, one realises that Kavya is treated like a freak show, forcing her to doubt her own self time and again. Finally, taking her aunt's advice she musters up enough courage to hunt down Manisha's parents on the internet and writes to them about her memories of their daughter. Right at the very end when she narrates the contents of the letter to Kiran - her love interest in the novel, the readers are reassured that Kavya had not been hallucinating and that Manisha had indeed been a real person. Kavya had just not been able to get over her death and nobody had really guided her out of her loss. In trying to keep her alive she had just turned Manisha into some kind of a joke: "I guess she was a joke. She was a joke because I made her one" (168) and instead of understanding her deep-seated sense of loss people had just aggravated her sense of loneliness by constantly making fun of it. The story passed on from one to the other, growing weirder in the process with many versions. All this only ends up making Kavya helpless and madder:

> I get mad at them all for making a joke of Manisha but don't seem to be able to do anything about it, apart from making feeble noises of protest.
>
> Bottom line is, I apparently kill small children. It's a stupid and annoying story and I get mad when little kids scuttle away from me when I so much as walk down the street where they live. (Suresh 20)

Such rumours spread by her own friends, reduces Kavya and her life to a joke rather than boosting her morale.

This novel also makes an attempt at criticising the authoritative presences in a child's life, especially those who are so unstable themselves that they cannot take care of their own children. In this novel too, Kavya's mother is shown to be depressed most of the times which she tries to cover up with excessive work. She is never around to support Kavya by clearing off the Manisha rumours (20) and is reluctant to answer questions of "what's rape" or "what's virgin" (36). Instead of answering their queries she believes in curbing all such sources of information, making her children even more helpless by denying them any agency of staying connected with the outside world - "no TV, no computer, no mobile phones...no newspaper" (38). At times when she is at home, it is Kavya who has to take care of her. While looking after her mother, if her brother ends up creating some mess - like the time when he mixed paint with Fevicol

and splashed his entire room with it (66), it is Kavya who has to bear the brunt of her mother's anger for not "watching him" (66) properly. It is especially difficult for eleven year old Dhrittiman who is scared as to "what's going to happen to us?" (73). He is even scared to ask Kavya, "Do you think I'm bad if I hate Ma?" (73). Later on when Paati (the old woman - their one-time neighbour, who comes to look after the children) tries to make Kavya understand that her mother behaved that way because she had had a sad childhood, Kavya is least interested to understand. "Like her sad childhood gives her the right to pass it on to me and Ditto like some fine legacy or something. Like, hey, this is my mom's first-ever gold chain and she gave it to me!...My mom gave me her whole sad childhood, can you beat that!" (130). On one hand Kavya's anger is justified, but on the other it also shows the vicious cycle that relationships get caught in. Finally when both their parents decide to switch custody - the father to keep the children and the mother to take some time off, it is difficult for the children to understand why their mother had chosen to keep Mowgli for company but give up her son and daughter (151). They are also scared to place their trust completely on their father who has been more like an absent presence in their lives.

The novel also tries to explore various other stereotypes that get associated with our lives and is difficult to get rid of. Even though Kavya is shown to be a well-read sensible girl, she gets highly disturbed with her brother's fascination for the colour pink or the fact that he is really good at handwork like knitting complex patterns. "Could he be gay or something?" (82) is a thought that constantly runs through Kavya's mind. Likewise, for Lara it is hard to believe that Kavya hates Barbies, for Kiran attending wild parties are "different for a guy" (158), for their neighbours Kavya's family is strange for homeschooling them and white men are inherently immoral (104), even Kavya's father believes that "girls from 'good families' get mixed up with bad western boys and destroy their lives" (155) despite having stayed abroad for a long time. Indu, who gets influenced by Kinkyni and has a drastic change, gets constantly judged by her friends for going to wild parties, wearing skimpy clothes, hanging out with older guys and pasting her picture all over Facebook. She on her part is shown to be much sorted in the head, happy to leave studies and get married to a rich guy. This is exactly what she achieves when she gets pregnant and has to get an abortion, after which she is supposed to be married off to somebody rich. That Indu's actual parents are village dwellers with six children out of which Indu had been adopted by her childless aunt comes as a shock

to Kavya, when she is informed about this at the very end of the novel. However, whether the author falls into the trap of creating newer stereotypes by showing Indu's apathy for education and desire to get married soon like her sister, and whether it has a class-angle to it or not, is only a matter of speculation.

In investigating cases of broken families within its domain, Indian English children's fiction has also taken an additional step towards including questions of adoption too. One such novel is Sampurna Chattarji's *Ela: The Girl Who Entered the Unknown* (2013) which shows how adoption still remains a subject of social stigma in India. She shows how hostile the society outside is, not just judging the parents for being barren but also wondering about the baby's unknown origin mainly in the lines of its caste/class/communal lineage. However, what effect it has on the confused little child is of far graver consequence than anybody else and this is what Chattarji's novel is mainly all about. In tracing the life of Ela, who makes this discovery on what was supposed to be the greatest day in her life - her thirteenth birthday - Chattarji takes us through the various phases of emotional struggle that the little girl undergoes in trying to assess her identity afresh. In this journey towards self discovery, the author also tries to include the questions of societal harassment, familial opposition and judgemental peers, things that make the going more tough for little children trying to grapple with this newfound truth. To make us understand her pain better, Chattarji takes us right into Ela's head as the story unfolds through her stream of consciousness. This makes us privy to her emotions in its raw unfiltered state, adding much weight to the narrative. Although it seems to drag a little towards the latter part, it handles the subject with dexterity and allows its intended readers to venture out of their comfort zones and get sensitised about the many different childhoods that silently exist at the fringes.

The instance of societal harassment enters quite early in the narrative, when her neighbours - "a nasty little boy and his gloating mother" (Singh "Catchers" n.p.) get even with her (the boy Ashok was disrupting the party when Ela decided to shake his shoulders and knock some sense into him) by dropping the news about her adoption like a bombshell. The utter malice and contempt ringing in the woman's words: "they were not my real parents...I was not their real child, they had picked me up from the street" (8) added to the trauma of public humiliation, makes Ela tumble down into the darkest alleys of her mind. Familial opposition is demonstrated through Ela's adoptive mother, Smita's family's reaction to the news that Smita and Mahesh had decided to adopt:

> Her parents...said they would cut ties with her, their only daughter, if she did such a disgraceful thing. No one in their family could contemplate such a thing. She was their only child, she owed them a real natural biological child. What kind of man had she married who couldn't give her such a child? Why had she married against their wishes anyway? Her childlessness was a curse because she had gone against the elder's wishes, and now she wanted to bring a *new* curse of unknown blood and unknown caste into the family? (216)

And finally, Tarana's reaction - Ela's former friend and desk-mate, becomes representative of the judgemental stance that peers might take. In an abrasive mail that she writes to her, sent on the same night of her disastrous thirteenth birthday party, Tarana accuses her of being a "fraud", a "sham" and wonders which "dustbin" she has come from (192). She also mentions that her mother has forbidden her from mixing with Ela any further, saying that she is glad that such is the case.

However, at the same time there are others who try to give her as much space and care to figure out things on her own while being at a close distance to hold her if she fell. Smita and Mahesh - Ela's cool parents whom all of her friends wanted to adopt, respect her silences and allow her to vent out her bitterness at them. Despite being in as much pain as Ela, they are accommodating and never force their adoptive daughter to do anything that she does not want to. Their maid, Manju, never stops pampering her with all her favourite dishes. Her father's sister, Jaya Aunty, takes a leave from work to stay with Ela for a while, occupying a bed in her room that has been redone. Her school gang puts in an extra effort, showering her with gifts and mails. In one scene, when Ela is slowly recovering, she sits down to read all the mails which have accumulated over time. It is heartening to see what her friends have written - confused themselves and trying to figure out things on their own. From sharing stories of how one of them could have been given in adoption to her childless aunt, to the desire that the naughty brother was not related by blood, to telling her how they have been meeting for regular discussions to understand the gravity of the situation themselves - they bring in a different dimension to the narrative. Chattarji also adds the story of another adopted child, Mahir - on whom Ela has had a crush, who tries to help her as much as possible having gone through the ordeal himself. It is ultimately the journal that he had thoughtfully gifted her when she was in the hospital that brings back Ela to life by helping her purge her emotions in its pages.

It is, however, Ela's inner struggle that remains the prime focus of the story. She feels betrayed by her parents and grows resentful towards them. Her mother's excuse: "you my baby came from my heart" (14) seems to her as underestimating her intelligence: "I wasn't a baby anymore, to believe such monstrous fairy tales, I knew where babies came from, I knew about sex..." (14). She starts doubting her entire life, wondering why her birth parents had abandoned her and feeling ashamed that she had grown up like a fool believing that each of her qualities had been inherited by her from Smita and Mahesh's genetic composition. On knowing how her parents had fallen in love with her when they had met her as a five-month old baby at a "nice place" in Orissa (11), all that she can think of is what was she doing in those five months prior to her adoption. She stops eating and eventually develops a rash that is caused by her psychosomatic reaction for which she is finally hospitalised. Although physically, people are able to see what pain she is in, they are unaware to gauge the extent of it without having access to her innermost thought process. As readers we are given a glimpse into that world, where Ela has created a "monster bird" that haunts her constantly. She manages to flee from its clutches only when she starts pouring her thoughts into her journal and creates the story of "The Girl Who Was Hatched From An Egg". At the end of the novel, Ela manages to reach a state where she is confident enough to step out into the outer world again. However, Chattarji refuses to give her a fairy-tale ending by making her confess that although she is much better and a bit more mature, she is still in the process of discovering herself and attaining a "normalcy" (214) that children like her and Mahir are not given freely but have to fight for.

One major concern of children's authors has been to practice self-censorship in order to stay away from taboo topics that might have corruptive influence on children. As Mark I. West mentions in his essay titled "Censorship": "these authors automatically assumed that they could not refer to sexuality, mention certain bodily functions, graphically describe violent acts, portray adults in a negative light, use swear words, criticise authority figures or address controversial social issue" (West 492). With time, the infallibility of authorial figures has become one of those ideas that has come to be challenged, but even today the instances of it found in books in India is very rare. This is what makes Andaleeb Wajid's *When She Went Away* (2015) an interesting read, where she deals with a 'faulty' mother figure who abandons her child two-months before her tenth exams, causing her life to crumble in a way the daughter could not have imagined. It is eventually revealed that two reasons had compelled her to do this - being reunited

with an old lover (who is a well-known oncologist) and finding out that she is suffering from cancer. What the book also does is to make the reader question how 'faulty' is her decision and can she really be judged for doing what she did? The other thing that is markedly different about this book is its choice of protagonist - a Muslim girl, something not found in most of the other books that this study deals with.

Sixteen year old Maria Suleiman is puzzled to find her mother gone one morning, leaving nothing behind but a small note addressed to her husband: "Leaving you and the kids. Khudahafiz" (Wajid 2). Overnight they become a "dysfunctional family" (7) - Abbu turns into this eternally angry person, Maria tries to juggle between school and housework and Saud - her fourteen year old brother, becomes more of a recluse. The family slowly realises their dependency on their stay-at-home mother - who did everything around the house even helping the children with their school work. It is not that Maria's Abbu, Sulaiman Bhai, could not cook, as he confesses: "I used to cook before I got married" (143), but it was his wife and Maria's Ammi's presence that had made him leave everything on her to manage only his office work. The only times Ammi got to herself is when she was over at Sharmila's - their neighbour "who lived across the hall, near the elevators" (13), which too was not taken happily by her husband. Sharmila's glamorous life intimidated Maria's Abbu, who never could place his wife with such friends (14). However, later on it is revealed that it is through her that she got in touch with Shehriyar - her old lover.

The insecurities and confusion that grips a young adult at such a drastic change to her everyday life is well presented through Maria. Her initial reaction is to look for her mother, find her, bring her back and restore their family to normalcy. At the same time, she wants to protect her father for this entire duration. She is scared that the little remains of their old family life that existed between the three of them would be destroyed if their father was to marry again on the insistence of his other relatives. So, every time Munni Aunty tried to act as a matchmaker, both the children are shown to rebel. Both the children are made to go through a rite of passage in being hurt, trying to understand what happened and finally letting go to begin afresh. Although the narrative falls flat at moments of high drama - not successfully getting across Maria's range of emotions - it gets across the message that life must go on, without being too preachy.

The conventional gender roles as expected out of marriage from a man and a woman are spelt out through the character of Munni Aunty. According to her a man needs a wife otherwise his children will grow up spoilt and the house will become a mess (29). "She says that this house needs a woman," Maria's Abbu tells her what her aunt had said (28). Maria is quick to quip in: "We really should hire a housekeeper" (28). That the status of the stay-at-home moms is almost equivalent to that of a housekeeper is evident from her remark. However, she is shown to be equally inducted into the system as evident in instances when she finds his brother "standing by the fridge and eating straight out of it" (9) because she is "not his mother" (9). Having seen her mother start cooking Sunday dinner from late morning or early afternoon, she is shocked to find out that Sharmila goes to sleep only at seven to wake up only around noon (36). It is not as if she is a person who does not question these societal decreed traditional roles, because every time she has to do kitchen work she resents "the unspoken consensus that just because I was a girl, I should replace my mother in the kitchen" (7). It is because when it comes to mothers the expectations are even higher on her to be selfless and dutiful at the same time. On girls, the expectations are to get them married as soon as possible, so that they can start looking after their husband's household. Munni Aunty's insistence on getting Maria married, even though she is only sixteen, bears proof to this attitude. The close surveillance mechanism that society practices to discourage most women from transgressing is evident in the fear for scandal that Munni Aunty tries to blackmail Maria's Abbu with. "The boy's side is willing even after they heard what your wife did", "In a few years, it will become more difficult to get s good proposal for her. These kind of scandals never die down," she continuously tries to reason with her father. On the other hand, Maria represents the free woman for her, who dresses as she pleases and aims to get higher education, all of which is a waste according to her.

Despite criticising such traditional ideas through the abhorrent character of Munni Aunty - the society's gatekeeper, the author herself falls into the trap of appropriating stereotypes. The boy on whom Maria has a crush, is the captain of the school basketball team - "the Basketball Guy" Kabir, one of the most popular boys in school. The girl who tries to come in between Kabir and Maria's blossoming romance is Sunaina, the popular one in their class revered by the others for her "fashion-related advice" (19) and adored by the boys because of her good looks. When Maria gets

introduced to her for the first time she "liked her" (18) but on getting to know her better is convinced that "there was no way this girl was going to spend more time with me, unless she was forced to" (19). Later on, she turns into one of the antagonists of the novel who sticks a paper behind Maria's back with "I STEAL BOYFRIENDS" written on it with a red felt pen in capital letters (135). She also takes her mobile phone in her absence to send messages to all the teachers "gloating" about how she got the basketball captain suspended (137). However, Maria being the good girl that she is, decides not to tell on her. Sharmila can easily be labelled as a character like Sunaina, with a hint of a redeeming quality in how good a friend she is to Maria's Ammi. She is intimidating in her independent ways, always in charge of her life, living alone, having guests over, partying all night, cooking fancy food, wearing gorgeous saris and make-up. At the same, she is a caring friend towards Maria's Ammi, encouraging her to follow her heart instead of obeying her conventional role. Despite this, she fails to leave a mark as a liberal character, contradictory in her love, hatred or annoyance towards one from the other. What it does so well is to not end on an optimistic note of the mother returning to the family and restoring the broken ties - forcing the reader to look upon her as any other ordinary human being and respecting her decisions when she chooses to break out instead of wanting to conform to being pedastalised as a mother or a wife.

Rupa Gulab's *Hot Chocolate is Thicker than Blood* (2016) deals with a similar topic like that of Chattarji's *Ela*, in a family that is socio-economically similar to that of Ela's. However, the difference here is that here the fifteen-year old protagonist Anu is an observer who watches her elder sister Diya go through a similar ordeal as that of Ela, after finding out that she was adopted. Their mother too gives her a similar explanation as that of Smita: "Anu was conceived in my stomach and you were conceived in my heart" (53). However, that does not stop Diya - the model daughter, student and girlfriend, from reanalysing her life and making certain choices that seem very un-Diya-like to everybody who knows her closely enough. This especially creates a wedge between the otherwise friendly sisters, something that Ela does not have to experience being a single child. Diya's parents confess that although the orphanage had strictly instructed them to tell her the truth at a younger age, everything changed when Anu was born to them. Believing that the news might have an adverse effect on Diya, making her feel inferior to her adoptive parents' biological daughter, they had decided to keep the truth from her. That they love both their daughters equally is proven throughout the book, but at that time Diya is unable to see that, sinking into an Ela-like self-

doubt. The text chronicles her various stages of self-mourning as Diya comes to term with the fact that she is adopted.

The story, however, begins with Anuradha aka Anu speculating if she might have been adopted, not once realising that it is in fact her sister who had been adopted. Having an overachieving sister who is also the epitome of beauty with "lovely thick straight hair" as opposed to her own "unruly mass of gravity-defying spirals" makes her wonder why is she so different from the rest of her family (8). This makes her reach the conclusion that she might not be the biological daughter of her parents. The truth, nonetheless, reaches her not long after this. Here too, just like in the case of *Ela*, it does not come from the immediate family but an outside agency. Aunty Madhu or Anu's father's mother's cousin Grand-aunt Madhulika, self-appoints herself for the responsibility of breaking the news to Anu one day when she is alone at home. "She's not your real sister!" she whispers to her conspiratorially (22), which Anu takes as a stamp of approval on her own guesses. It is later that night, when she shares the news with her parents that she comes to know the real truth. It is through her eyes that we see Diya struggling to cope up with the news, transforming into a whole new person overnight. She becomes a recluse, stops communicating with her own family, becomes Anu's arch-enemy, begins to seek refuge with newly made friends whom her parents do not approve of, starts blocking out her old boyfriend from her life and suddenly takes up a career in modelling. Unruly Anu, on the other hand, turns into a new leaf, in order to balance out the stability quotient within the family. Their guilt-ridden parents, however, seem hell-bent on appeasing Diya and over-compensating, rather than appreciating Anu for her eeforts, making her feel misunderstood and lonely. It is only through the intervention of a counsellor that both the daughters are finally able to work out their differences and reunite as a family.

Although the childhood portrayed within this book belongs to the mainstream idea of upper middle-class childhood prevalent in the country, it does raise some crucial issues that set it apart from the rest. Firstly, by dealing with the topic of adoption in a family of two children where one is the biological daughter of the adoptive parents, it opens up the space of exploring an interlocking web of relationships and emotions that remain same despite differences in background. Secondly, by initially portraying the character of Diya as the flawless daughter who undergoes a gradual descent after coming to know that she is adopted, it shows that even well assured teens may break down when subjected to trauma like this. Thirdly, by showing the guilt-ridden parents and their subsequent neglect of their biological daughter, it shows that adults can make mistakes too and end up adding on to the crisis

instead of solving it. Fourthly, the use of a counsellor in the plot manages to salvage much of the stigma associated with going to a psychotherapist. And, finally by openly dealing with complicated issues like adoption (how the news should be broken to the concerned and how one should respect the privacy of the birth-mother), teen-pregnancy (because of which Diya's biological mother had been forced to give her up for adoption), divorce (Diya and Anu's counsellor had undergone a messy divorce in her childhood) and being orphaned (Anu's favourite teacher Athena Rozario had lost her parents as a young girl and had been brought up by her aunt), the book manages to breach many existing taboo areas within Indian English children's literature.

Conclusion

Out of the seventeen novels that I deal with in this chapter, one from 2005, four from the year 2007 to 2010 - one from each year, one from 2012, four from 2013, three from 2014, two from 2015, one from 2016 and one from 2017, I see an increasing attempt to break free from all taboos that have restricted the genre so far. Most of them would agree with Siddhartha Sarma, who when asked if he was worried to turn away youngsters by using scenes and languages that have so far not been used in this field in India, replied: "I was concerned that some readers might be upset, but I believed, and still do, that one can't sugar-coat the world for any reader, young or old. One has to report on the world as accurately as one can. I call it 'to look the devil in the eye and not blink'" (Sarma "Siddhartha" n.p.). Out of the thirteen books that I look at, six of them are set in an urban background and deal with upper middle class children. Despite that, they try to move beyond the dominant construct of Indian childhood and make these young adults raise uncomfortable questions that break the myth of one universal childhood and helps one recognise the differences that are often brushed under the carpet. The remaining seven, do not even try to build up an oppositional other to the central character - one who is represented as an equally integral part of the Indian childhoods as the dominant others. These are the same characters who have so far found their differences flattened or exoticised in most cases, in order to fit to the idea of the ideal Indian child and find acceptance in the market.

In the domain of children's literature, where adults get the final say, it is more important to convince the adults to embrace these differences rather than the children. Children - be it of this generation or before, have always wanted to be given more credit

as readers and wanted to read what the adults have tagged as taboos, as evident in Nitin's plea, the young adult studying in an English medium school in Delhi, whom Murthy interacts with to know more about young adult reading preferences. He poignantly states:

> ...Treat us as growing adults. Young but not ignorant. Most of us have shed our innocence. And when a writer things otherwise, his output fails to please us. We may not know all the facts of life, the cruelty which dominates in diverse fields. We may yet be vague about the secrets of man-woman relation. We may not be clear about the corruption and chicanery which adults indulge in. However we can feel the tremors. The troubles are not beyond our sight. We watch them, day in and day out. Newspapers tell us of dowry deaths, bride burnings, labour, child labour...So, why don't you writers tell us, without reservations, about life in the raw? Maybe, that way, you will prepare us for life. We will know the pitfalls. We will be careful. To be frank, Uncle, I hate books which talk about goody-goody things, fail to deal with reality. We are not that naive (Murthy 16).

It is Murthy who persists and tells them about how authors in India feel that it would be better to leave their innocence untarnished for a bit longer, to which Nitin again replies: "And in the process give us much lesser time to adjust to the adult world?" (Murthy 17).

This is what these new writers have tried to attain through their books which are not scared to break down taboos and challenge the dominant order of Indian childhood. Although these books are not free from their own little prejudices and stereotyping, they have done something which Indian English children's books have not been able to do before. They have successfully opened up spaces and broken taboos by giving space to marginal segments of the population that have till now not found adequate representation within this genre. By bringing in concerns ranging from gender, caste, communalism and sexualities into the ambit of children's reading for the first time, it has furthered a new understanding of childhood that recognises in the child reader a greater agency of interpretation and reasoning.

CONCLUSION

My thesis began with an extensive discussion of children's literature as it is perceived in the western tradition. I tried to bring together all the dominant strands of discourses that have played integral roles in the evolution of the genre over the years. I even traced out the evolutionary history of the genre as it developed in the west. I explained that this was necessary before I moved on to the discussion of Indian children's literature, because after all it was from the west that the subcontinent had inherited the idea of children's literature as a separate category. However, in doing so, I also unconsciously laid out before myself a western model against which I could measure up the Indian one. Despite blaming children's literature as being essentially Eurocentric in nature, I made the same mistake of setting the western model as my standard. When Hunt preferred to choose children's literature from previously colonised spaces like the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada as examples of postcolonial literature, and left out India under the pretext that its narrative style lacks the cultural cohesion which the former possesses with regard to the standard Eurocentric norm of the genre, I expressed my displeasure. Nevertheless, in my own discussion, I fell back on the same divisions of categorising Indian children's literature into the pre-colonial and postcolonial. I found the pre-colonial to be culturally too distant from the modern idea of childhood, and the postcolonial to be an angst-ridden space trying to find a balance between tradition and modernity. The truth is that the idea of childhood as a western construct is so central to this discourse, that it makes it difficult for scholars of children's literature to deviate even slightly from that norm - especially in the case of studying children's literature from erstwhile colonial spaces. By default there is a tendency to fall back on a comparative mode, because we know no other way. Because the child at the core of the discourse is an English child and it ends up overpowering the forces that shape the child's subjectivity in all other culturally divergent regions. Furthermore, the myth sustains itself by emphasising on the similarities of children all over the globe and proposing a universal republic of childhood.

However, the truth of the matter is that no two childhoods are similar, neither is the myth of childhood innocence a universal truth. This is especially true in case of the Indian child whose self-making is "influenced by a complex interplay of factors such as caste, class, religion, and community" (Banerjee 183). The English child at the heart of the discourse of children's literature, on the other hand, is essentially of a Christian white urban origin. Efforts have been made to make it all-inclusive ever since the rising awareness of multicultural

studies, but it is still vastly different from the kind of multiculturalism that one experiences in India. The Indian child is a truly unique case and it is dangerous to read it in terms of a figure that is far more monolithic in comparison. My study tries to demonstrate this point by conducting an extensive analysis of the kind of taboos that are imposed upon children's literature in the country based on a universal understanding of childhood and why it is important to break away from those taboos to be truly representative of the Indian child. In a country where most children do not even get a chance to enjoy the privileges of childhood owing to widespread caste issues, communal disharmony, female infanticide, child labour and rampant illiteracy, it is difficult to sustain a discourse mainly based on the idea of protecting childhood innocence without descending into false homogenisation.

As my study has shown - especially the first chapter - the figure of the child is the most integral quotient in children's literature. Although that child has nothing to do with the real child's desires and aspirations, it is still a construct which drives the wagon of this genre. This construct is shaped by the dominant socio-cultural forces of an age and is mainly an expression of adult desires and aspirations. It is this construct of the child that the authors have in mind while writing children's fiction. But this construct also has to match the idea of the child that the principal buyers of these texts have in mind. This is because, it is ultimately adults who but texts for children, and if the texts are too transgressive for their taste, the book might not sell or worse, be banned. In India, the market for Indian English children's literature is pretty limited in that sense. The producers as well as buyers belong to the society's elite group. They are fluent in English, have easy access to western modes of thinking and are economically solvent to produce/buy books. Therefore, it is but natural, that children's fiction in Indian English is mainly driven by their understanding of childhood, which is heavily influenced by the western modes. However, this comprises only a fraction of India's population. India, the second most populous country in the world, is home to almost 1.3 billion people spread across the country's twenty-nine states and seven union territories. They belong to different religious groups, have different cultural practices, speak different languages and are from different socio-economic groups. Their selfhoods are fashioned accordingly, which cannot be flattened into one single overarching idea of an essential Indian self. This is why Indian English children's literature appears so restrictive in nature because the structure of the inherited discourse of childhood is such, that pluralities tend to get suppressed by a monolithic structure.

Over the past couple of years, the Indian English children's literature scene has undergone a drastic change. The country is almost seventy years old and no longer suffers from the insecurity of having to produce Indian children's books steeped in overt nationalist discourses - as was the need of the hour right after the country attained its independence. Thus, the children's literature market in the country can now finally move on to concentrate on other pressing issues that plague the country, even if they bring out the raw differences that exist underneath, rather than painting a picture of India as one indivisible whole. This further provides the space for experimenting with new topics - something that was not possible within the industry even twenty years back. Moreover, statistics indicate that, as of 2016, half of the country's population is below the age of twenty-five (Tan n.p.), pointing out to the fact that India is predominantly a young country with a prevalence of young readers. This has not gone unnoticed by the publishers, who have finally started realising the enormity of the Indian children's market and investing more in this field with the hope of doing lucrative business. At the same time, with the rapid growth of middle-class families and the rise in the average literacy level, the reader-base of the country has also expanded. To cater to this new group of readers, publishers have started experimenting with texts that are radically different from the usual and more suited to live up to the diverse Indian sensibilities. Along with this, the wave of globalisation has also hit the Indian market, fostering in multicultural concerns. As a response to all these fresh changes, many new publishing houses have opened shop in the country with the intention of capturing this market with adequate titles that were previously lacking. They have been daring enough to identify and reject the taboos that have plagued the genre since its inception as "fallout[s] of our colonial past" (Menon n.p.). The English children's literature in India today is eager to reflect the aspirations of a nation in transition, trying to find a fine balance between tradition and modernity.

Traditionally the India society has been one made up of many differences. From the ancient time, the country has been fragmented on caste lines. Having been home to people of different religious faiths, has also led the society to be divided on communal lines. With the introduction of the colonial educational system, a new class of people was created, further breaking down the subcontinent on class lines. As for the issue of gender, my first chapter shows how the country had always been more favourable towards a boy child. Before the specific category of children's literature came into being, Indian children used to subsist on folktales from the country which was freely accessible to all its readers with very little censoring. It was only after the influence western idea of childhood that the country started

censoring issues of sexuality within children's literature. Same was the case of disease, death and disability, instances of which were to be found aplenty in the country's folklore and epics. It was only after the colonial influence that these issues started being considered as taboos. As for war, crime and violence, the two major epics of India were centred on these issues. The famous battle of Kurukshetra in *Mahabharata* and the war of Lanka in *Ramayana* and the political intrigues leading up to them are perhaps intimately known by every Indian child, irrespective of their caste or religion. Once the child began to be regarded as an innocent subject who needs to be protected from such harsh realities of life, that these issues became taboos. The Indian society has always been about communal living with large joint families. As such it is not difficult to understand why instances of broken families are not celebrated within its culture, but even then instances of estranged spouses raising up their child alone can be found in multiple Indian tales. Two popular instances of this case, that I am immediately reminded of are - *Shakuntala* (where Shakuntala brings up hers and Dushyant's child alone) and *Ramayana* (where Sita brings up hers and Rama's twins on her own).

However, in the early years of its existence as an independent nation, the country was driven by a nationalist agenda. Rather than celebrating its differences, the main agenda was to establish itself as one unified nation. The partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, further added to its anxiety, and forced the country to further its agenda of unity. Since children were seen as the appropriate vessel to carry forward the message, the biggest impact undoubtedly fell on their literature. The above mentioned taboos, worked in its favour, by drowning out voices of differences, especially in the case of Indian English children's literature. Since the readership of the genre was mainly comprised of the English speaking, financially solvent, urban elite section of the country, there was not much hue and cry about such lopsided representation of Indian society within children's fiction. The picture of India that became normal within such literature was one where people lived in harmony in happy coexistence. The present changing trends that have been observed within the genre over the past couple of years, prove that the country has outlived its immediate urgency of putting up a united front. Now the writers can finally be self-critical and move onto exploring the real heterogeneous interior of the country. With the increasing impact of globalisation and the changing demography of the country, this change is not too untimely. The readership base has expanded, meaning that books are more easily accessible by people from different socio-economic backgrounds than it was before. So publishing houses are also no longer afraid in investing in such titles. However, given the inherent power imbalance within the genre, even

so called 'progressive' portrayals of the society can be equally problematic and needs to be carefully examined before propounding a verdict. My thesis tries to ask these questions by exploring the new trend of breaking taboos within Indian English children's literature against this backdrop and finding out if at all the horizons have been expanded. The thirty-four texts that I have picked up for this purpose, are among the more popular titles in this direction - as compared to the many others which have surfaced in the market - showing that even the readership base has become more welcoming of such changes. The other good thing about these books is that they are being made available in the market at very reasonable prices, especially the ones aimed at the younger readers, making it easily accessible to people from diverse economic groups. The attempt, clearly, is to reach out to as many people as possible.

Among the seventeen texts that I study in my second chapter, only six texts operate around binaries of the norm vis-à-vis the different childhood. As my first chapter has already mentioned by citing instances, it is not that the depiction of different childhoods did not exist before this within Indian English children's literature. However, the problem was that, although it had existed, it had always been used as a foil to the protagonist. These characters had not been given enough agency to operate on their own and had been always represented as being dependent on other children who belonged to more privileged backgrounds. However, in this case, we see that the trend has drastically changed. Publishers and authors are becoming more open to celebrating different childhoods, and are also equipping them with far greater agency than was available to them before. This agency might or might not lead them to an optimistic end, but at least they are not portrayed as helpless vulnerable individuals who need others to rescue them. In *Trash!*, the ragpicker children are never once pitted against children from more privileged families. Their characters are examined through their relationships with other children from similar backgrounds, instead of measuring them up against their cultural 'other'. Even though the Brother who teaches them at the pavement school initially seems like an outside agency introduced in the text as a messiah, the inability of the children to attend his classes - even though they conveniently happen during the evenings - totally undercuts that notion. At the end, despite knowing that he might be in tuble, not once does ask for help from the group of social workers who conduct a workshop for them. He earns the solution to his money problem through sheer luck, without the intervention of any outside agency. The same kind of agency is shown to be available to the protagonist of *Ju's Story*. Although she lives on borrowed goods, she does not earn it through charity. Rather it is her mother's hard-work that manages to sustain Ju's education. Each time

she comes close to an inevitable confrontation with the privileged 'other', the situation is miraculously averted. In *Dear Mrs. Naidu,* Anne Miss and Vimala ma'am seem to come to Sarojini's aid, but they are present in the text more as her accomplices rather than as saviours. It is Sarojini who decides what she will do with the information on RTE, and she alone who tricks the adults to dance to her tunes and renovate their school. Her allies in this entire scheme are two other children - one, who is possibly even lower in social status as compared to Sarojini's, and the other, belonging to a religious minority group. In *Mukund and Riaz*, a Sikh/Hindu boy is placed against a Muslim boy in Pakistan. For a change, it is the Sikh/Hindu boy who is the religious minority in this case. However, the interpersonal relationships have been built in so well within the narrative that it does not once feel that the story exploits a reverse technique of positing the Muslim boy as the one with the agency. Throughout the narrative, the boys help each other out in ways that it does not seem that one has the upper hand over the other. Even at the end, when the Muslim boy facilitates the Sikh/Hindu boy and his family's escape, the latter immediately acknowledges it by giving up his favourite cap for his friend. The books from the Mayil series follow a similar trajectory. It is Mayil against Mayil most of the time, as she pours out her innermost thoughts into her diary. Her parents, grandparents and brother become subjects of her literary creation, with Mayil interpreting them in her own way. Similarly, in *Sackclothman* it is Anu who emerges as a saviour by dragging out her depressive mother and alcoholic father from slipping away into darkness. In the story, she is placed against a strange madman, who is himself a social outcaste. In *Kanna Panna*, little Kanna is placed against a number of other children who are physically healthy and can be seen as the privileged 'other'. But the interesting thing about this book is that we are never really directly told of Kanna's disability. Like I mention in my analysis of the story, readers had also remarked that had they not been told that Kanna was visually challenged, they would not have realised it at all. Finally, in the episode when Kanna leads his relatives out of a cave in the event of a power cut, the message is clear. Kanna is not a superhero, but neither is he someone without any agency. *Big Bully and M-Me* posits the protagonist Krish against Ishaan, who seems to possess all those qualities that Krish does not. But despite his many qualities, the author chooses to portray Ishaan as a negative character who likes bullying vulnerable people like Krish. However, it is interesting how the book does not make it into a simple good against bad situation. When Krish discovers how badly Ishaan is treated by his own brother, he is assured that they are technically not much different from each other. Krish decides to keep his secret safe, earning Ishaan's respect. Thus, the agency is again with the disabled boy, though

in some sense, both the boys are equally disabled and hence not mutually exclusive from each other. In *Simply Nanju*, the author sets the entire narrative in a school for disabled children from the lower-economic background, thus eliminating any chance of dividing her narrative into binaries. Similarly, in *Timmi in Tangles*, Timmi's brush with the girl from a perfect family initially makes her question herself, but she soon realises that her approval does not matter at all. This is what gives her the agency, where she decides to discover her identity on her own terms. The six other texts that despite addressing taboo subjects end up falling into binaries of the self and the other are *Flat-Track Bullies, Jungu, the Baiga Princess, Faces in the Water, Smitten, Chuskit Goes to School!* and *The Dugong and the Barracudas*.

As for my third chapter, out of the seventeen texts that I analyse, only eight are ones where the helping agency comes from outside. In *Battle for No. 19*, the girls are left to fight on their own. The murder of their driver Kartar Singh, quite early in the novel, leaves them without any adult guidance for the rest of the narrative. The group of girls, from various socio-cultural groups, manage to teach the rioters a lesson on their own. Although Puja is shown making most of the decisions, the other girls also pitch in with their own contributions. The novel places them against the rioters, instead of placing them against each other. In *What Happened to Regina that Night*, the author unfolds the action through the character of Kabir, who appears to be the protagonist of the novel. His family background seems to place him in a privileged position combined with his well-placed parents and boarding school education. It is through her that we are introduced to the tribal girl Alika, the 'orphan' girl, who shares her anxieties about the deteriorating conditions of the Kand community with Kabir. However, just as we are about to think that it is Kabir, who will rescue them from his privileged position, we are proven wrong. We realise that the agency had always been with Alika, who had been the mastermind behind the whole rescue plan. It also turns out that her parents were in fact alive the whole time, while, despite having both parents (albeit separated), it was Kabir who was more like an orphan in her comparison. *Half the Field is Mine*, revolves around two characters - Oli, from a progressive Bengali family, and Champa, the daughter of their maid. However, it is through Champa that Oli is inspired to take up football and finally it is Champa who takes the initiative of approaching the district magistrate and convinces him to allow mixed teams to participate in the impending football tournament. Although, Champa is protected throughout her journey by her

mother's lover, it is ultimately through her own efforts that she manages to find a way out. Thus, even though the narrative is built up in a way that the other is placed against the standard, both are given equal agencies to combat their positions. The novel *Flute in the Forest*, explores the marginal position by putting three marginal figures against each other. A disabled girl from a broken family, an old recluse and an aging mad elephant grieving over the death of its mahout. It is in their dealings with each other, that they find a way to heal each other's pain, instead of reaching out to an outside agency. Similarly, in *Queen of Ice*, Didda is ready to go to any extent to suit her ambitions. She might appear sinister at times, but that she creates her own agency throughout the narrative is something that cannot be denied. In *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*, Aftab is shown to be manipulated by various adult members he encounters, especially Akram. However, growing up in a war ridden zone with other boys of different communities living in constant terror, Aftab seems to have more agency than the others. He does not have a 'normal' childhood, but the narrative does not try to make that point by weighing him against a standard. Akram knows the tricks of manipulation, but it is ultimately Aftab's own decision to become a suicide bomber. Not even his love for his family can deter him from his position causing his ultimate death. Umer's life in *Weed* is somewhat similar. His father belongs to a militant outfit, who abandons his family for his organisation. Umer spends most of his life under his mother's strict surveillance. Although he compares himself with his cultural 'other' - the boys whose fathers have regular jobs - but ultimately they live a life of constant fear just like Umer and are not much different from him. In *The Grasshopper's Run*, despite having help from an entire group of tribal warriors, Uti finds a way to avenge his friend's brutal murder himself. And, in *Guns on my Red Earth*, Shanto chooses to flee from his Maoist group despite knowing that he will be punished if found. He also foils one of their plans of derailing a train by exposing it. The rest of them, despite breaking taboos, fail to come out of the conventional English speaking, urban family setup. Although *Talking of Muskaan* introduces Subhojoy, it is Aaliya, who belongs to the upper class, who is shown to have the greater agency. The same is true for the other novels like *Slightly Burnt*, *Unbroken*, *Daddy Come Lately*, *Jobless Clueless Reckless*, *Ela*, *When She Went Away*, and *Hot Chocolate is Thicker than Blood*.

Having examined the primary texts in detail, the question to be asked is whether or not Indian English children's literature has been able to venture out into a new era of

breaking taboos and expanding horizons? My study seems to point out that there has indeed been a movement within the genre in the last twenty years towards challenging previously held taboos and subverting them. Have they been able to incorporate the voices of those different other childhoods that have always existed within the country but have rarely been touched upon within this genre? Yes, there has been an attempt to experiment with new kinds of voices that have hitherto been relegated to the margins of society. If at all they were mentioned in children's fiction, there had been a tendency to portray them as secondary characters, dependent on the dominant Indian child. However, increasingly they have assumed central positions within children's fiction, where they are not dependent on others to rescue them from their situation. This is a happy move and points towards the fact that the genre is ready to expand its boundaries. Does this mean that formulaic texts, based on the idea of the mainstream Indian child do not get written anymore? Of course they do. In fact, they are still doing better business in the country than the ones that aim at subverting taboos much more radically. However, the fact that despite such competition, the production of the books that address social issues has not stopped - in fact the production has increased over the years - means that the perception of childhood within the country is slowly changing. It also suggests that Indian English children's literature has come of age. It is no longer seen as a tool for furthering the nationalist agenda. The nation seems to have grown confident of its identity and is ready to explore its unique heterogeneous culture rather than trying to present a united essentialised image of itself to the world.

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Chapter I

I. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

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