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**BETWEEN THE LINES – CONSTRUCTION OF
THE CHILD IN INDIAN ENGLISH CHILDREN’S
FICTION**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation titled '**BETWEEN THE LINES – CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHILD IN INDIAN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S FICTION**', which is being submitted by **Suchismita Banerjee**, for the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is her original work, and it has not been submitted previously for the award of any degree of this or any other university.

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SUCHISMITA BANERJEE

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The Child in Children's Literature

The emergence of children's literature as an independent genre is of relatively recent origin. Until lately, children were largely dependent on simplified versions of adult books to serve their reading needs. The development of a separate corpus of literature specifically written with the child reader in mind may be linked to contemporary changes in attitudes and perspectives regarding the status and role of the child as a member of society. These developments in children's literature began in Western countries in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The notion of childhood has undergone remarkable changes in the last few centuries, particularly in the West. Peter Hunt notes that in the past, there have been extreme versions of childhood ranging from "the Romantic noble-savage child who is nearest to God, to the child seen as having been born evil as a result of original sin."¹ He observes that in medieval times, there was little concept of childhood as a distinct developmental phase, and in Elizabethan times, there was scarcely any concept of the differing needs of the child. That childhood is a culture-specific concept is clear from the differing ideas of children and childhood across cultures and over a period of time. While it is beyond the scope of this

study to attempt a synchronic and diachronic analysis of the various notions of childhood, a comparison of the Indian viewpoint as depicted in traditional Indian literature, with its counterpart as represented in Western philosophy, will underscore the differences regarding what constitutes childhood.

Since Indian philosophy does not accord much formal importance to childhood as a phase of development, the only other available source for depictions of childhood is the traditional literature of the period. Sudhir Kakar, in his definitive study of Indian childhood *The Inner World*, observes that the conceptualization of the human life cycle exemplified in the scheme of *ashramadharma* in Indian philosophy focuses mainly on the period of youth and adulthood.² Hence a study of ancient Indian texts becomes essential in order to historically reconstruct traditional notions of childhood in India.

Kakar notes that the references to children and childhood in classical Sanskrit literature rarely depict children as individuals in their own right. They are more often than not described as the fulfilment of a wish, with the emphasis on the parents' joy on having a child. In the *Mahabharata*, there are random references to children, most of which are positive and show an attitude of caring and affection for children. However, Kakar clarifies that even where children occupy centre stage, the spotlight is on the boy child, and the birth of a girl is given a mute, even cold, reception. Kakar cites Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* as an exception, where a child, and a girl child at that, is given the pivotal role, and

Rishi Kanva's love for his daughter is sensitively portrayed.³ It is in the literature of the Bhakti movement that childhood and its experiences become central. According to Kakar, accounts of Krishna's childhood in Surdas' poems and Rama's childhood in Tulsidas' poems helped to construct a "culturally approved utopia of childhood."⁴ He suggests that verses composed in praise of the childhood of Rama and Krishna are unconscious manifestations of a fantasy of childhood that is shared not only by the poets, but also by the audience, which is receptive to and actively perpetuates these fantasies.

Deeptha Achar maintains that childhood emerged as a category in the West around the mid-seventeenth century, and this conception of childhood displayed a shift in thinking from the earlier view that regarded children as proto-adults. She comments:

The transformation of the status of the child as Foucault suggests was a part of the massive epistemological shift of the Classical age. The child was now located in a series of material practices, in a set of relations and discourses which effectively constituted it as distinct from the adult.⁵

Achar compares and contrasts several eighteenth/nineteenth century European views of childhood and the place of children in society. In her opinion, twentieth century definitions of children's literature, which either privilege the differences between adult and children's literature, or render invisible their distinctions, owe

their origin to these debates. She opines that although the Lockean secular conception of the child was opposed to the Puritan concept of the child being inherently evil, both sets of beliefs asserted the necessity of adult authority over the child. While Rousseau maintained the Lockean separation of the child and adult, he did not privilege adult knowledge as Locke had done. The importance of constant monitoring of childhood was stressed in Rousseau's scheme. In the nineteenth century, children (particularly working class children) were seen as being in need of education to instil in them 'universal' values. This was done through the medium of children's literature. Achar argues that these values were really a function of power relations, and sought to subjugate the working class. Moreover, they reflected the anxieties of the middle class regarding what constituted appropriate behaviour among the lower classes.⁶

The above account suggests that the concept of childhood in the West has undergone several changes in emphasis over the last few centuries. Kakar refers to the opinion of some Western scholars that, within the ideological conflict between rejecting and accepting attitudes towards the child evident in Western philosophy, there has been a definite evolution of a humane and nurturant ideology "which makes the child and its needs central to the caretaking process."⁷ In contrast with the evolutionary mode that characterises the development of a Western philosophy of childhood, Kakar notes that the Indian tradition of childhood has not been riven with contradictions, simply because the child in India has always been a cherished and valued member of society.

Moreover, "the Indian tradition subscribes to an ideology that downgrades the role of the environment and nurture in the development of a child, and instead emphasises a deterministic conception of mystical heredity."⁸ Hence the model of socialisation of the child is, in his opinion, a Western construct that has influenced current Indian attitudes towards children. He points out that there is a specific stream in the Indian tradition of childhood that values precisely those attributes of a child which have *not* been socialised, for example, vivaciousness, mercurial anger and the capacity for intense sorrow and delight.⁹

Apart from diverse philosophic readings of childhood, differences regarding the concept of childhood occurred also as a result of economic and social factors. For instance, Hunt observes that when the mortality rate was high, it was not possible to conceive of childhood as a protected developmental stage, particularly among the economically deprived sections of society.¹⁰ Further, in the Indian context, a large section of the people live at or below subsistence level and consequently, the child is forced to give up her / his childhood and take on quasi-adult roles in order to eke out a living. For people belonging to these underprivileged classes, there is little scope for allowing children the opportunity to grow and develop at their own pace, or granting them the liberties and privileges associated with the phase of childhood. Hence, any theory of childhood has necessarily to be qualified with reference to the class, culture and stage of development of the society under consideration.

There appears to be a general consensus that the child has to be defined in terms of a contrast to the adult, whether in terms of degree or kind. Hunt refers to Nicholas Tucker's definition in *What is a Child?* which draws together trans-cultural and diachronic features of childhood. Some of these features are spontaneous play, receptivity to the prevailing culture, physiological constraints and sexual immaturity. Cognitive skills in children generally develop in a common sequence, although the exact stages may not be accurately predicted or classified. In Hunt's opinion, children are distinguished by their different attitudes to issues like death, fear and sex at different stages of their childhood. They tend to be more radical and flexible than adults, and less bound by fixed schemas. On account of their limited experience, their distinction between fact and fantasy is prone to instability.¹¹ Although individual children may depart from these norms in specific ways, it is possible to delineate certain characteristics that are common to children at various stages of childhood.

Children's Literature: Status and Function

The preceding discussion has shown that definitions of childhood are variable and open to modification. Therefore, Hunt suggests that since childhood itself is not a stable concept and is historically determined, children's literature can hardly be regarded as a stable, fixed entity. He also argues against the prevalent tendency to view children's literature as inferior to other forms of literature, because it assumes a "homogeneity of text and authorial approach that

is improbable, a view of the relationship of reader and text that is naïve, and a total lack of understanding both of the child-reader's abilities and of the way that texts operate."¹² Despite the fact that the implied audience in children's literature is relatively immature and inexperienced, there is substantial scope for theorising children's literature, researching the operation of ideology and uncovering the power relations underlying texts.

The ideological function discharged by literature has been discussed and analysed in various contexts. Gauri Visvanathan, in her analysis of the insidious manner in which Western cultural hegemony was strengthened in colonial India, elucidates the "relationship between the institutionalization of English in India and the exercise of colonial power, between the processes of curricular selection and the impulse to dominate and control."¹³ Visvanathan points out that the introduction of English literature in the curriculum of schools in India served the dual purpose of extolling the virtues of order and justice in Western society to colonial subjects, and inducing in them a consciousness of the inconsistencies and flaws of their own social system. She concludes:

A discipline that was originally introduced in India primarily to convey the mechanics of language was thus transformed into an instrument for ensuring industriousness, efficiency, trustworthiness and compliance in native subjects.¹⁴

Terry Eagleton demonstrates, through his account of the rise of English as a subject of formal study in Britain, how literature was used to consolidate the hegemony of the dominant class and ensure the continued subjection of the working class. In Eagleton's opinion, "Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power."¹⁵ Peter Hunt notes that in the case of children's literature, writers stand in a position of power in relation to their audience, hence there is a need to reconsider fundamentals and constantly evaluate the ways in which texts function.¹⁶

In the present Indian scenario, children's literature in English seeks to perform a similar function of indoctrination among children of the middle classes. Writers of children's literature in English participate in the knowledge/power nexus by speaking for or representing the child in literature, thereby constructing a paradigm of childhood that is a precarious union of Western notions of individualism and the Indian tradition of conformity. Vrinda Nabar notes the recent emergence of the middle class as a significant power to control and direct economic, social and political policy, and its strong ideological hold on patterns of thought :

As of today, rightly or wrongly, it is the middle class in India which controls the weapons of change. It is here that the sensibility-shift must be seen as desirable.¹⁷

Since English is primarily used as the medium of communication in the middle and upper classes, an examination of the literature produced for children in English is likely to reveal the imperatives that inform the discourse characteristic of this class.

Children's Literature: Definition and Origin

The definition of childhood is dependent on and influenced by the purpose for which childhood is being defined. Hence a discussion of what constitutes children's literature needs to be similarly qualified. Hunt defines children's literature as "books read by, especially suitable for, or especially satisfying for, members of the group currently defined as children."¹⁸ The genre of children's literature is barely a couple of centuries old, yet it has become a significant and potentially exciting field of literature today.

There are several opinions regarding the exact period during which children's literature may be said to have originated. Peter Hunt maintains that children's books "have been a recognizably discrete 'type' of text since the mid-eighteenth century."¹⁹ Prema Srinivasan notes that although Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket Book*, (considered the first of specifically secular literature for children) was published in 1744, the acknowledged classics for children like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Jungle Book*, *Treasure Island* and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

were written in the period between 1850 and 1932. This has prompted researchers to label the last decades of the nineteenth century the golden age of children's literature.²⁰

Children's literature in India owes its origin to the colonial experience. Most researchers agree that although folk tales and animal stories have been a part of the Indian oral tradition for thousands of years, the concept of children's literature as a separate genre has been imported from the West. The influence of colonialism and the spread of formal education by the missionaries resulted in the creation of a definite corpus of literature that specifically catered to the child reader. Hence, the earliest children's literature tended to be overtly didactic in keeping with its specific function of educating its child readers. Navin Menon notes that the dynamism of culture enabled a shift in focus from the compilation of texts designed to educate, to the creation of original literature designed to entertain.²¹ Manorama Jafa traces three phases in the development of children's literature in India. The first phase consisted of the transcription of oral and traditional literature into written form. In the second phase, select adult literature was translated and abridged for the benefit of the child reader. The third phase has been the publication of original, creative literature over the last century. While traditional literature was characterised by the presentation of the adult perspective and tended to be didactic, modern literature is more child-oriented.²²

The development of an independent genre of children's literature in India has also been linked with the formation of a pan Indian identity, and the subsequent evolution of the identity of the child as an entity separate from her/his family. Mohini Rao discusses the effects of social changes on developing trends in literature. She observes that the emergence of a new society influenced by liberated Western modes of thought led to an enhancement of the status and rights of women, and it became necessary to project these social changes in stories written for children. The publication of ancient Indian classics like the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* was undertaken with the specific aim of creating among Indian children a consciousness of their rich heritage. She notes:

Post-independence, the development of an Indian identity made it imperative that this identity be communicated in children's literature to instil in them a sense of national pride.²³

Similarly, Jafa observes that the evolving consciousness of the child being an independent member of the family led to special attention devoted to her/his unique needs. This consciousness, along with the growth of formal schooling, necessitated the development of a literature that specifically catered to the child reader. Thus, the origin of children's literature in India lay in the textbooks and supplementary readers written for children.²⁴

Classification of Childhood and of Children's Literature

Any attempt to categorise children all over the world in terms of certain common and enduring characteristics would be open to charges of essentialism. The uniqueness of each child's experience, which is a function of the interactive influence of family, society and culture, makes the task of seeking a common denominator arbitrary and reductive. Nevertheless, it is necessary for purposes of research to delineate broad and flexible parameters within which the various phases of childhood may be included. The sensory, motor, intellectual and emotional level of development of the child is taken into consideration while defining these parameters.

In India, the prevalence of the concept of different developmental stages of childhood owes its origin to ancient Hindu tradition. Sudhir Kakar notes that the *ashrama* theory codified by Manu and Gautama divided the human life cycle into specific phases. This theory was prescriptive in nature, as it laid down the patterns of behaviour considered appropriate to each phase.²⁵ Since the *ashramadharmas* focused mainly on youth and adulthood, Kakar turns to the ancient science of Ayurveda for insights into the Hindu image of childhood. It is in Ayurveda that Kakar finds a formal recognition of the various stages of childhood:

...the concept of a child developing through a series of stages requiring differential treatment by his caretakers, a notion that some historians of Western childhood consider 'modern', has always been a part of Indian folk-consciousness. It is expressed through such proverbs as 'Treat a son like a king for the first five years, like a slave for the next ten, and like a friend thereafter.'²⁶

According to Kakar, the period of late childhood as delineated in Ayurveda marks the child's social birth into the community. This phase (corresponding to the 7-12 age group) is designated as the *kumara* stage, and the male child's transition into this phase is marked by the rite of *upanayana* or initiation.²⁷ The Indian tradition concerns itself chiefly with the male upper caste child, hence these distinctions can scarcely be considered representative of all Indian children. However, the concept of the child beginning at this stage to develop a social identity is corroborated by developmental psychologists. Kakar compares Erik H. Erikson's psychoanalytic study of the individual life cycle with the Hindu theory of *ashramas*, and concludes that the eight stages delineated by Erikson can be correlated to the various *ashramas*. The fourth stage described by Erikson concerns the school age child and her/ his birth into the community. This is the stage when the child learns the skills required to function within the social sphere in preparation of her/ his eventual adult role in the community.²⁸

As children progress through the various stages described above, there is a corresponding change in their emotional and intellectual needs. According to Tucker, literature fulfils certain psychological needs in child readers, and the changing needs at every phase of childhood determine the kind of books they prefer to read at each stage:

...literature sometimes appears to reflect and relieve various common unconscious or only semiconscious fears and desires whose presence, in the reader, is in my view best explained and described by psychoanalytic theory.²⁹

Children's literature may hence be classified on the basis of the level of reading comprehension of children of specified age groups, and their appeal for the developing reader at different stages of childhood. Another taxonomy commonly employed focuses on genre: that is, books are placed in categories such as adventure stories, science fiction, realistic stories, school stories, myths and legends, books for single sexes and picture books.

Nicholas Tucker bases his classification of children's literature on Jean Piaget's explication of the various developmental phases of children. Tucker suggests that Piaget's research in the field of cognitive psychology can provide valuable insights into the appeal of certain kinds of literature for children. The ways in which children make sense of the world around them are likely to be

closely related to the types of stories they would prefer.³⁰ Tucker classifies children's literature into:

- i) first books (ages 0-3)
- ii) story and picture books (ages 3-7)
- iii) early fiction, including juvenile comics (ages 7-11)
- iv) literature for older children (ages 11-14)

The ability of the child reader to comprehend the words and pictures of the text is the basis for this classification. Books are graded according to the nature of the illustrations and the level of complexity in the words used.

According to Tucker, children belonging to the age group 7-11 are able to recognise certain typical conventions in terms of plot and characterisation. The child reader approaches the text with specific expectations. The preference at this stage is for stories with fairly predictable plot developments culminating in a happy ending. The characters in these stories are naïve and stupid (making the reader feel superior), or defiant and spirited spokespersons of the readers.³¹

Attempts to categorise literature for children in India in a similar manner, corresponding to the different phases of childhood, are of relatively recent origin, and are based mainly on surveys of what children like to read. This is because children's literature in English is itself largely a post-independence phenomenon.

Palai Mathew divides children's books into fictional books, factual books and poetry. Alternatively, he offers a two-fold distinction between imaginative and informational literature.³² In 1991-92, Prema Srinivasan conducted a survey of the reading habits among children aged between 10 and 15 years in seven metropolitan cities, and concluded that children of this age group preferred reading adventure fiction, school stories and ancient classics.³³ A survey by the National Centre for Children's Literature conducted in 1996 among public and government schools in Delhi indicated that children of the 9-14 age group enjoyed tales of mystery and romance, as well as animal stories.³⁴

The above findings corroborate Tucker's views that children of the 7-11 age group show a marked preference for adventure stories and works of fiction. Dr. Sukumaran Nair refers to Piaget's conception of the early mental development of the child. According to Piaget's model, the 7-11 age group constitutes the stage of concrete operations. This is the stage when the thought processes of children become stable and logical, enabling them to order their universe.³⁵ The growth of these faculties of logicity and stability in children equip them to relate to and enjoy stories with sequential plot development. This dissertation will hence concern itself with Indian English literature for children of the above age group.

Children's literature and theory

Ever since children's literature has been accorded a respectable status in academia, the relation of theory to children's literature has been explored from several angles, particularly by Western scholars. Nicholas Tucker, for instance, has attempted a fairly comprehensive study of the relationship of children to fiction (particularly British fiction) using psychoanalytic theory as his base.³⁶ Peter Hunt examines the relevance and inter-relationship between theory, criticism and children's literature. He points out that theory is important because it forces us to confront problems and seeks to explain the obvious.³⁷ Since children's literature is defined in terms of its audience, the application of critical techniques based on reader response theories is central to the coherent criticism of children's books. In India, however, there have been few attempts to explore connections between theory and children's literature. Sudhir Kakar has focused on the depiction of the child in ancient Indian texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as in the poetry of Kalidasa or the saints of the Bhakti cult.³⁸ He analyses the portrayal of childhood in these texts in psychoanalytic terms, and relates the attitudes towards children and child-rearing practices depicted in them to specific socio-cultural concepts.

Criticism of children's literature necessarily involves a certain amount of theorising, whether conscious or otherwise. Terry Eagleton notes that "Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of

one's own.”³⁹ The development of an explicitly theorised praxis will ensure that criticism continues to be self-conscious about its politics and ideology. The study of theory is not merely relevant for critics of children's literature. It is equally necessary for writers, researchers and teachers. As Hunt has remarked, “Rather more obviously than with peer-texts, authors must necessarily stand in a position of power” in children's literature. Therefore, people who work in this field need “to continually reconsider fundamentals”, and critical theory is essential in this regard.⁴⁰ An understanding of theory serves to educate the adult reader on the ways in which children's texts can be read, and to evaluate the politics inhering in texts. It also cautions the individual against accepting canons and values portrayed in the texts as established truths, and encourages a self-reflexive, questioning attitude that is particularly essential in the production and distribution of children's literature.

In the Indian context, there have been few studies exploring the relationship between various critical theories and children's literature. Kakar's study of Indian childhood focuses on the psychoanalytic and sociocultural aspects of childhood, with a section devoted to the depiction of children in ancient literary texts and medieval poetry.⁴¹ Discussions on children's literature in India have tended to be normative and prescriptive, describing what children's literature *should be* rather than attempting to link up with current critical theories.

Children's literature and criticism

Children's literature has a unique set of power relations to negotiate, because there is no one-to-one equation between producer and consumer. The writer/publisher of a book for children ostensibly produces a book for the child reader, but the norms that govern the kind of book that is written and published are dictated by the group of adults who are in a position to control the child's reading choices. Since parents and teachers are the persons who buy the books that the child reads, producers of children's literature often target the potential consumer (the adult) rather than the real or ultimate consumer (the child). These complex market factors are likely to skew any analysis of the impact and value of children's books.

The criticism of children's literature is fraught with similar complications. Books for children are generally written by adults, published by adults and very often purchased by adults. The criticism of children's literature is also largely an adult activity. Hence, there are bound to be certain reservations while accepting a particular critical viewpoint, since the critic necessarily stands in a position of power with regard to her/his material, and may conceivably be accused of misrepresentation. On the other hand, it is impossible to dismiss the criticism of children's literature altogether, because coherent, self-conscious criticism based on theoretical principles is essential in deconstructing the power relations that

constitute the text, and confronting the ideological assumptions underlying the production of texts.

Peter Hunt advocates a critical approach which he terms 'childist' criticism⁴², whereby texts written for children are evaluated in terms of their appeal to the child reader, and an attempt is made to see how meaning is made from the text. He acknowledges that practitioners of children's literature face ingrained prejudices regarding the status and value of their work, hence they are often denied the recognition due to them. This patronising attitude also extends to critics of children's literature. Hunt quotes Frank Eyre's opinion that "writers *about* children's books are still regarded, consciously or unconsciously, as a kind of sub-species of critic" and argues for a more responsible and respectable status to be accorded to the field of children's literature.⁴³

In India, criticism of children's literature has been, till recently, largely restricted to reviews of children's books in the weekend editions of newspapers, or interviews with writers and articles in journals on trends and themes. This is still a nascent area with scope for the development of a praxis that links both theoretical and critical principles. Since children's literature as a subject of serious study is of recent origin in India, there is a paucity of exhaustive or in-depth studies in this field. Most research is restricted to academic institutions, a trend critiqued by Hunt:

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Certainly, children's literature is sometimes seen as a new and promising field for literary studies, a new vein to be mined, when so many academic lodes are becoming rather thin.⁴⁴

There is hence a need for researchers, critics and practitioners of children's literature to work interactively in this field to enable the production of meaningful and enjoyable books for children.

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Children's literature and education:

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Although the current scenario is markedly different from that of the early post-independence period, prevalent attitudes to the value and function of children's literature in India appear to be unchanged. Children's literature continues to be linked with education, and the socialising function of such literature is still given primacy. Jafa notes that in other countries children's literature is considered a part of their culture, while in India it is tagged with education.⁴⁵ In fact, the largest amount of children's literature that Indian children are exposed to is in the form of material printed in textbooks and supplementary readers, leading Subir Shukla to make the significant comment by that "for a majority of Indian children, textbooks often circumscribe their view of 'children's literature'." Hence, textbooks may well be called the 'real' children's literature. Shukla notes that while the most successful book for children might sell in tens of thousands, print runs of textbooks even in the smaller states would amount to lakhs. Since the material in

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these textbooks is largely deplorable on account of excessive and overt didacticism, and the successful combination of “the pedestrian and the pedantic”, the child reader is more often than not alienated from the written word, and grows up believing “that reading is a ‘serious’, difficult and ultimately irrelevant activity.”⁴⁶

Children’s literature and entertainment:

In order to remedy this imbalance between educational books and books written solely for the enjoyment of the child reader, government-sponsored and private publishing firms have been making concerted efforts to make available a variety of low cost books for children. The primary motive of these books is to entertain rather than educate. Organisations like the National Book Trust and the Children’s Book Trust have made valuable contributions in furthering the cause of literature for children. By focusing on the needs of the child and promoting literature that primarily aims to entertain, these organisations have succeeded in creating a genre that fulfils an important need of children. However, by laying down guidelines and specifications for writers to follow, they tend to stifle the creativity and freedom of writers, and introduce a forced element in the literature produced which is unappealing to the child reader. This tendency of publishers to control and censor creative output is critiqued by Poile Sengupta, a prominent writer for children:

Our national book breeding institutions lay down 'rules'; writers must ensure that the manuscripts they submit uphold the principles of national unity, national and personal integrity, regional and religious tolerance, secularism, international understanding and global harmony! What subsequently emerges from this unholy mixture, is a moral science-cum-civics lesson with a thin anaemic story-line, which our English reading children shudder away from, to go headlong into books that are fun to read.⁴⁷

Contemporary writers of children's books in India acknowledge the need to produce a literature that is comparable to its Western counterpart not only in presentation and visual appeal, but also in terms of content that is primarily entertaining and only tangentially, if at all, educative. There has been a discernible improvement in the quality of children's books published by firms such as Puffin, Harper Collins, Ratnasagar, Indus Peacock, Tulika and Scholastic India. The Children's Book Trust encourages the emergence of new writers by sponsoring workshops and story writing competitions. The prime focus of all these efforts is to provide contemporary Indian children with enjoyable books that cater to their sense of wonder, excitement and fantasy without recourse to didacticism.

Children's literature: Status and Value

Children's literature has commonly been regarded or evaluated mainly in terms of its use. In most cultures, oral and written stories for children were composed with the specific object of familiarising the child with the social mores in operation within that culture and initiating the process of socialisation. Contemporary notions of childhood recognise the child's need for a literature that does not preach, and that explores and presents a world where the child is supreme and free from the oppressive demands of adults. Despite this acknowledgement, the value of a book for children is still habitually adjudged by adults in terms of its usefulness in aiding the socialisation process.

Peter Hunt points out that new modes of critical thinking have ensured that texts are no longer graded as better or worse, but only in terms of their differences. He asserts that the status of a text is a function of group power, and the dominant group in a society determines what kinds of texts are assigned value.⁴⁸ Hunt comments further that the evaluation of books written for children is often inflected with the critic's notions of what is good for the child:

There is, I think, a tension between what is 'good' in the exploded abstract, what is good for the child socially, intellectually, and educationally, and what we, really, honestly think is a good book.⁴⁹

Despite the above qualification of the nature of the value ascribed to a text, the fact remains that adult opinion regarding the value of a text quite often diverges from the opinion of the child reader, who is, after all, the intended audience. Tucker notes that the books of Enid Blyton continue to be vastly popular and appealing to child readers, even though adults do not subscribe to this view.⁵⁰ Even among children, opinion regarding the appeal of a book is likely to be divided, since children respond in a completely subjective manner to books, and are incapable of self-conscious criticism. Hence the determination of the value of children's literature remains a subject fraught with complications, and the status of a text is perpetually fluid and dependent on current socio-cultural trends.

Adult and Children's literature

There can be no clear distinction between texts intended for children and those written for adults. This is particularly true of literature of the nineteenth century, when books like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Treasure Island* enthralled adults and children alike. The twentieth century witnessed the creation of a genre of literature specifically catering to the child reader, yet classics like *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* straddle both categories. Tucker points out that these two books appeal in different ways to the child and adult reader. While children enjoy them at the level of an exciting adventure, older readers are likely to discern the irony in Twain's writing and glimpse the moral vision underlying the books.⁵¹ In the Indian context, the stories of R.K. Narayan,

Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray and Ruskin Bond continue to appeal to both adults and children. There are, however, certain characteristics of children's literature that distinguish books written for children from those designed for an adult audience. Prema Srinivasan traces the presence of recurrent themes in children's literature such as the quest motif, self-knowledge, rise and fall in fortunes and travel in time. She details a few typical features common to children's literature:

Among the distinct characteristics of children's stories are recurring plot elements (as in early folk and fairy tales), greater flexibility of narrative events and the presence of child protagonists. Characters in children's books tend to be slightly larger than life, more colourful and romantic than one may find in the everyday world.⁵²

Literature for children is relatively restricted in terms of plot development and vocabulary, since children find it difficult to follow extremely complicated plots. Tucker is of the opinion that children prefer books featuring plenty of action, and which deal with concrete events rather than with abstract discussion. Moreover, they do not relate to moral ambiguity because they are at a stage when snap moral judgements are made, and characters are unequivocally good or bad. The fictional world created for children must be comprehensible to them, with clearly demarcated values, explicit causal connections and the ubiquitous satisfactory conclusion.⁵³ As children become older and approach adolescence,

the distinction between adult and children's literature blurs, since the child's emotional and intellectual needs approximate those of adults.

Recent trends

Contemporary children's literature in India reflects the impact of globalisation and developments in communication. Books written for children today no longer depict an idyllic world untouched by reality. Themes such as communal disharmony, racial tensions, drug addiction, environmental degradation and familial discord are being portrayed and handled in a realistic manner by some Indian English authors. Writers have progressed from blindly replicating Western plots in an Indian setting, to creating stories whose action blends organically with the native milieu. Publishers have increased demand by adopting strategies like attractively packaged books, competitive pricing and aggressive marketing. Due to the efforts of literacy campaigns, the demographic profile is constantly changing and consequently there is a change in the nature of books demanded by the new reading public. Indian English authors and publishers need to be in touch with these changing needs and cater to them accordingly.

The following chapters of this dissertation will analyse the construction of the child in contemporary Indian English fiction for children. A selection of texts

suitable for the 7-11 age group published between 1995 and 2000 has been made. The major areas under scrutiny comprise the genre of adventure fiction and the depiction of the girl child in the texts under consideration.

Notes

- ¹ Peter Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991) 59.
- ² Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981) 204.
- ³ Kakar, *Inner World* 197-200.
- ⁴ Kakar, *Inner World* 201.
- ⁵ Deeptha Achar, "Adult Talk: On Defining Children's Literature," *Critical Theory-Western and Indian*, ed. Prafulla J. Kar (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 1997) 182.
- ⁶ Achar 183-188.
- ⁷ Kakar, *Inner World* 208-209.
- ⁸ Kakar, *Inner World* 199-200.
- ⁹ Kakar, *Inner World* 203, 210.
- ¹⁰ Hunt 59.
- ¹¹ Hunt 57.
- ¹² Hunt 21, 60.
- ¹³ Gauri Visvanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 3.
- ¹⁴ Visvanathan 93.

- ¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1983) 22.
- ¹⁶ Hunt 8.
- ¹⁷ Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Woman* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995) 49.
- ¹⁸ Hunt 61.
- ¹⁹ Hunt 17.
- ²⁰ Prema Srinivasan, *Children's Fiction in English in India: Trends and Motifs* (Chennai: T.R.Publications, 1998) 2.
- ²¹ Navin Menon, "Children's Literature in India: The Changing trends," *Telling Tales: Children's Literature in India*, ed. Amit Dasgupta (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Ltd., 1995) 54.
- ²² Manorama Jafa, "Children's Literature in India," *Telling Tales* 34-35.
- ²³ Mohini Rao, "Children's books in India: An Overview," *Telling Tales* 68.
- ²⁴ Jafa 34.
- ²⁵ Sudhir Kakar, "Setting the Stage: The Traditional Hindu View and the Psychology of Erik H. Erikson," *Identity and Adulthood*, ed. Sudhir Kakar, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979) 4.
- ²⁶ Kakar, *The Inner World* 204-205.
- ²⁷ Kakar, *The Inner World* 208.
- ²⁸ Kakar, *Identity* 7.

- ²⁹ Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (1981; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 3.
- ³⁰ Tucker 4.
- ³¹ Tucker 97-99.
- ³² Palai K.M. Mathew, "What is Children's Literature", *What is Children's Literature?* ed. T.V.John (Trivandrum: State Institute of Children's Literature, 1982) 21.
- ³³ Srinivasan 134-136.
- ³⁴ National Centre for Children's Literature, *Survey of Nehru Bal Pustakalaya Books* (New Delhi: NCCL, 1996) File A-II.
- ³⁵ Dr. A. Sukumaran Nair, "Developing Children's Literature for Information Areas- Major Theoretical Considerations," *What is Children's Literature?* 136.
- ³⁶ Tucker, *The Child and the Book*.
- ³⁷ Hunt 1.
- ³⁸ Kakar 196-204.
- ³⁹ Eagleton viii.
- ⁴⁰ Hunt 8.
- ⁴¹ Kakar, *The Inner World*.
- ⁴² Hunt 16.
- ⁴³ Hunt 36.
- ⁴⁴ Hunt 22.

⁴⁵ Jafa 42.

⁴⁶ Subir Shukla, "The 'Real' Children's Literature," *The Book Review*
vol.XXI.11(Nov.1997): 23.

⁴⁷ Poile Sengupta, "Writing for Children in India in English," *Telling Tales* 141-
142.

⁴⁸ Hunt 12.

⁴⁹ Hunt 15.

⁵⁰ Tucker 7.

⁵¹ Tucker 17.

⁵² Srinivasan 6.

⁵³ Tucker 9-10.

CHAPTER 2

APPEAL OF ADVENTURE FICTION

APPEAL OF ADVENTURE FICTION

This study proposes to focus on Indian English fiction written and published for children, with special reference to adventure fiction. The appeal of adventure fiction for children has been documented by theorists and researchers alike in the West. Nicholas Tucker, for instance, in his discussion on the differences in the literary tastes of adults and children, observes that in general, children

...will prefer books that deal with concrete events rather than with abstract discussion, and which have an emphasis upon action in preference to introspection.¹

In his opinion, children of all ages enjoy fiction because it presents the reader with a pattern of events that appears to her/ him more comprehensible than the jumble of happenings that make up real life. Since adventure stories offer scope for plenty of action, this genre is extremely popular among children. Tucker believes that adventure fiction provides the child with daydreams of independence, and enables identification with the child protagonists, who almost always function effectively without adult intervention or supervision. He quotes Piaget in support of his view:

As the child grows older, his respect for the superiority of the adult diminishes or at least alters in character. The adult ceases to represent unquestioned or even unquestionable Truth and interrogation becomes discussion.²

Surveys among schoolchildren in metropolitan cities in India have shown that children of this age group show a marked preference for adventure stories. For instance, a survey was conducted by the National Centre for Children's Literature (NCCL) in 1996 among public and government schools in Delhi to ascertain "children's interest in books, other than text books and to learn about their reading preferences. The survey also sought to find out the children's awareness of the kind of books available as well as understand their desires for those which are not."³ The age groups selected were 9-11 years and 11-14 years. The primary aim of the survey was to find out the level of awareness among children of books published by the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya. One of the main findings was that both groups of children cited mystery and romance as their first preference in storybooks. The teachers of these schools were also interviewed, and their opinions sought regarding the reading preferences of children. They were of the opinion that children between the ages of 7 and 10 enjoyed reading animal stories, humorous stories and tales about people like themselves, whose experiences they could relate to and identify with. Children between 10 and 12

years, in addition to the above, also enjoyed mystery and adventure stories, horror stories and books based on real-life incidents.

A similar survey was conducted by Prema Srinivasan in 1991-92 among children of the age group 10-15 years.⁴ A questionnaire was given to schoolchildren in Mumbai, Delhi, Jamshedpur, Coimbatore, Yercaud, Bangalore and Kodaikanal in order to survey the reading habits of urban children, who may be presumed to have a certain degree of proficiency in the English language. According to Srinivasan, the results of the survey indicated that "Irrespective of age group or gender difference the majority of children prefer fiction to non-fiction." (134). Moreover, the first preference of all age groups is adventure stories. There appears to be, however, a significant difference in reading preferences among boys and girls. According to the survey, boys seem to prefer adventure stories in greater number, while girls prefer ancient tales and classics retold as well as school stories. In the Indian context, the likelihood of this gender-based difference being culturally determined is strong, but this aspect would require research of a different sort.

In the light of these findings, it seems logical to focus on adventure stories written in Indian English. In order to ascertain current trends and attitudes to children, the books selected are those which have been published between 1995 and 1999. In some exceptional cases (for example, in the case of Ruskin Bond), books published before this period have been discussed, primarily because they

are still being reprinted and read, thereby testifying to their continued appeal. A judicious selection of texts has been attempted from publishers like Children's Book Trust, Harper Collins, Tulika, Scholastic India, Ratnasagar, Vikas Publishing House and Puffin. Since it is beyond the scope of this study to examine all the books available in this genre in detail, and from all aspects, the focus will be on the construction of the child in these books. An examination of the factors that influence the adult's concept of childhood and its needs will reveal the underlying power relations that decide how the child is viewed and constructed.

The socialising function of books

The importance of books in moulding and influencing a child's personality has been stressed by parents, teachers and psychologists to the point that it has become a truism. In the survey by the NCCL mentioned earlier, the feedback given by parents indicated that books were considered to be crucial in directing thoughts sensitively in a positive direction. Among the perceived advantages of books and of the reading habit, parents averred that books inculcated perceptions in the child's mind, helped in the development of relationships and broadened the child's horizons.⁵ Nicholas Tucker has observed that children tend to seek idealised images of themselves in literature, while at the same time nurturing secret sympathies for characters whose behaviour appears more unacceptable and immature. Thus books fulfil two needs of children: the need to

find reflections of themselves in the stories they read and the need to live out their more unacceptable fantasies in a socially approved manner. Tucker notes:

Children, for example, tend to share fantasies of personal omnipotence together with an awareness of their own vulnerability. Accordingly, as we shall see, their favourite literature often reflects their need for security and order, but elsewhere the same or different books can also respond to children's frustration at their own impotence, by offering them compensatory fantasies where powerful or mischievous characters defy authority and break most of the conventional rules.⁶

Given the fact that books have considerable influence on children, it would be interesting to study how child characters are constructed in these books and to see in what ways they relate to, and at times, circumvent adult authority. Stories for children, whether oral or written, have always aimed at socialising the child and preparing her/him to face the adult world. While the Indian tradition of folk tales performed this pedagogic function by employing allegory or more didactic means, contemporary literature seeks to achieve this aim in a more indirect manner. Charles Sarland refers to the pertinent observation made by John Schostak that society's methods of coercion and persuasion have become more subtle, hence the process of socialisation of the child and her/his enculturation is effected more subtly through the literature s/he reads.⁷ Amit Dasgupta, in his essay "Once Upon a Time" discusses the process of

socialisation of the child which enables her/him to link the micro-world with the macro-world.⁸ He refers to Margaret Mead's distinction between the *significant others* who make up the child's micro world and the *generalised others* who people the macro-world. As the process of socialisation gets under way, the significant other is substituted by the generalised other. Dasgupta comments that the values that help the child to become a member of society are disseminated in a user-friendly manner through the medium of children's literature. An analysis of popular texts written for children, along with identification of the gaps and absences in the texts, is likely to reveal the ideology of the author, publisher and society who work in tandem to promote a certain socially approved conception of the ideal child.

Children's fiction in English ---an overview

Contemporary Indian English fiction encompasses a diverse range of themes, including political intrigue (*Footprints in the Sand*⁹, *The Biratpur Adventure*¹⁰), computer piracy (*The Virus Trap*¹¹), search for hidden treasure (*The Fiery Cross*¹²), the plight of underprivileged children (*Kusum*¹³), and science fiction (*The Dream Machine*¹⁴, *Aditya the Underwater Boy*¹⁵). In addition there are the conventional mystery stories such as *Saloni in Goa*¹⁶, *Saloni and the Sitar*¹⁷, *The Mussoorie Mystery*¹⁸, *Adventures Two*¹⁹ and *Holiday Adventures*²⁰, as well as the genre of school stories. The latter continues to be popular among children in India long after it has outgrown its appeal in the West (*Dreamer at the Manor*²¹,

*Changes at the Manor*²²). Woven into these stories are current issues such as environmental concerns, equality of the sexes, the quest for world peace and class inequality. The child characters featured in these books (with the exception of Kusum in the book of the same name) belong to the upper middle class. Their privileged background is generally taken for granted, and their interaction with children from a less privileged class is unproblematic and devoid of tensions. The exception is *Kusum*, which will be discussed at length in a later section.

The marked preference for mystery and adventure stories among children is indicative of the expanding horizons of their imagination. The thrills provided by the adventures of the protagonists in these stories, the quest motif, the sudden twists in the plot, the menacing evil of the villains and the final satisfactory resolution enable the child to explore her/his conflicts and fears and come to terms with the uncertainties of existence.

Construction of the child in contemporary Indian English fiction

One of the primary issues related to the construction of the child is the setting up of an opposition between the processes of individuation and conformity. Indi Rana remarks:

The phases of childhood and adolescence are a process of individuation- of seeing oneself as a clear, separate entity, unshadowed, or at least minimally

shadowed, by parents, peer and society. Individuation is necessary to create healthy, responsible, balanced adults...²³

Children of the age group under consideration are in the process of establishing an identity for themselves, and their literary tastes at this stage reflect their need to feel competent and able to challenge the world on their own terms. There is hence a strong preference for stories with omnipotent protagonists who battle all odds and emerge triumphant. Nicholas Tucker refers to an attitude often developed by children at this stage (which psychologist David Elkind terms 'cognitive conceit'), wherein they begin to believe that, since they are sometimes able to argue things out for themselves, they are therefore equal or even superior to adults when it comes to tackling situations. Hence they enjoy stories where adults are outwitted by children, and where the child protagonists are shown overcoming the most formidable obstacles with little difficulty.²⁴

Many of the adventure stories written by Indian authors display instances of this cognitive conceit. In Cheryl Rao's *The Crest of the Snake's Head*²⁵, four children Nitin, Arjun, Madhavi and Shikha set about trying to resolve the mystery of the connection between an old box that Nitin discovers in Fariah Bagh, and the story of the hidden treasure of the Marathas told to them by an old woman. Nitin suggests to his older brother Arjun that they should seek the help of some adults or the authorities in unravelling the mystery. He is immediately reprimanded by

Arjun and Madhavi, although Shikha sees his point of view. Madhavi is aghast at his suggestion and says:

“Are you crazy? The fun is only beginning and you want to throw it all away!” (43).

Madhavi is excited at the prospect of uncovering a long-hidden secret and does not want the adult world of logic, order and discipline to intrude. Arjun is similarly reluctant to include adults in their adventure, but he is more concerned about the possibility of the old woman's tale being untrue, and the fact that the grown-ups will not take them seriously. Both Madhavi and Arjun manage to convince Shikha and Nitin that the sensible course of action would be to investigate on their own. Nitin agrees, after extracting an assurance that if anything of value is discovered, it would be handed over to the authorities. Ten year old Nitin is portrayed in the book as a slightly insecure child, who is over dependent on his mother for emotional support, due to the absence of his father during his growing years(9).Hence, he is still at a stage when his respect for authority is not diminished, and he tends to turn towards adult support whenever he is faced with a situation fraught with risk and uncertainty.

The adult-child relationship and the attitudes of children towards adults are brought out in the interaction between them in the novel. Like children in the books of Enid Blyton and Franklin Dixon, the child protagonists in *The Crest of the Snake's Head* are reluctant to involve adults or authority figures in their

adventures. They conduct their investigations independently and even manage to hoodwink the criminals with their quick wits. Only when they have actually found the treasure, and rendered one of the criminals helpless, do they involve their parents. This reluctance to allow adults into their world is vindicated by the comments and reactions of adults to their discoveries. When Nitin's parents hear about their adventure, they are astounded, and his mother's first reaction is "Is this a trick, kids? Are you playing the fool?" (78) She is convinced only when Arjun shows her the emerald ring he had taken from the treasure as proof. In another adventure story by the same author (*The House by the River*²⁶), the children Jyotsna, Shabnam, Dilip and Farrah are unable to convince Farrah's father Nazim of the eerie happenings in the old mansion. Only when he is confronted with the death of their adopted puppy does he concede that the happenings in the house were not a figment of the children's imagination. Instead of helping them unravel the mystery, he conveniently leaves them to make their own investigations and goes to consult a friend about his future course of action. The children uncover the cache of guns belonging to a gang of smugglers and predictably, it is the sight of the guns that convinces Nazim (64).

In *Andamans Boy*²⁷ the ten year old hero Arif (a classic example of the poor little rich boy) discovers early in his life that the world of adults is governed by money. He is made aware by the tragic death of his parents and his consequent adoption by his uncle, that affection, loyalty, power and respect are contingent upon wealth. Statements like "People didn't salute unless you had a big stash in

the bank” (6) indicate that Arif has learnt already the value of actual or promised wealth. His observations on adult behaviour are significant in that they provide an insight into the manner in which children perceive the inconsistencies of grown ups. For instance, he is not allowed to ask his uncle and aunt about his other relatives because “Questions were their enemies”(6). He is aware that adults often manipulate children by apparently giving them a choice, but finally ensuring that their will prevails (“Another grown-up trick: they said it was your decision, then proceeded to decide for you”) (63). He also learns to mistrust expressions and tones of voice, because adults often meant the opposite of what they said (“When Chacha sounded gentle and kind you really had to watch it”)(7-8). Arif knows that adult statements should never be taken literally or at face value:

Like Arif’s teachers, Chacha used questions as weapons. Who do you think you are? You think you’re very great? If you tried to answer, you were told not to “answer back”. (12)

These are sentiments and situations which most Indian children will instantly recognise and identify with. Throughout the book, Arif’s questioning of adult behaviour is discouraged and yet ironically, it is Arif who has to discourage the Jarawa from asking awkward questions about the ‘civilised’ world, because he has no answers. The Jarawa’s simple philosophy of life and their utter innocence and lack of deceit bring sharply into focus the scheming world of lies and

avarice that Arif has left behind. Arif is at a loss when he has to explain that his uncle would leave no stone unturned to find him, not out of love for him, but because he is after his money. The concepts of virtual wealth and of paper money being symbolic of real possessions are things which Arif himself has taken for granted all these years, and yet he is forced to re-examine these concepts when he is confronted with the uncomplicated world view of the Jarawa. In a sense, Arif's encounter with the Jarawa replicates a child's interaction with the confusing world of adults, with the important difference that in this case it is Arif who represents the adult civilised world, which is so far removed from that of the Jarawa.

The adult-child relationship

Despite the lack of faith in adults shown by the children in these books, they continue to remain a reference point in the children's lives. The amount of independence given to children in Indian middle class homes is limited compared to most of their Western counterparts, at least as suggested in books written in the West. Kakar has noted that in India, the child's differentiation from the mother is "structurally weaker and comes chronologically later than in the West."²⁸ Moreover, the Indian child is encouraged to live in a magical world for a long time. Thus the privileged child who more often than not forms the subject of these books leads a fairly sheltered life, and is dependent on adult and peer approval in the formation of her/his identity. There is little evidence in the books

reviewed here that children in contemporary literature are in the process of forming an identity unshadowed by parents, peer and society as envisaged by Indi Rana. Even books where the child protagonist is minimally hampered by adult pressures (as in *Andamans Boy* and *Aditya the Underwater Boy*), the subtle but pervasive influence of authority may be detected.

In Anita Saran's *Aditya the Underwater Boy*, a scientist creates a being (significantly, a boy) capable of living under water. Since the story is written in the fantasy mode and set in the future (2030 A.D.), the author is free to portray an idealised fictional world. The underwater world is presented as the antithesis of its terrestrial counterpart. The creatures live in harmony, killing only for food and helping each other in times of need. They are far more advanced in terms of technological knowhow and power, yet this power is depicted as being instinctual rather than learned, and the possessors of this power are strongly guided by a sense of moral rightness. Aditya is set free in this world to learn about it because his scientist father believes that the future of humankind lies below the oceans. Aditya is constructed as a passive recipient of all the knowledge that he is fed with, and he accepts the authority of the creatures who provide him with this knowledge. The dolphin Kea who saves him from the octopus becomes his symbolic mother and she proceeds to show him the wonders of the underwater world. Aditya's mentors underwater are Kea and Cloud Seeker, who introduce him to the secrets of the oceans and educate him about their philosophy of life. Aditya is made aware of the senseless violence and the abuse of power rampant

among humankind when he sees through the eyes of the creatures underwater. Yet his own feelings and perceptions of these issues are not highlighted. He remains a mere creation of his scientist father, and his sole purpose for existence appears to be to bear witness to his father's success in creating a being that can live underwater. In fact, Aditya has been created so that his father can explore the possibilities of colonising the underwater world, since the terrestrial world is being threatened by population explosion. He is little more than the product of a successful experiment. Although his father does try to shield him from being captured by humans and subjected to all kinds of tests, there is no doubt that the scientist is also guilty of having created, like Prospero, a being to mould, and train to fulfil his dreams. The story is ostensibly about the underwater adventures of a boy, but it appears to be more a comment on the adult world.

In *Andamans Boy*, Arif rejects the insensitive and selfish world of so-called civilised society and opts for the primitive but wholesome world of the Jarawa. His identity in Mumbai and all through his wanderings is defined by his parentage: he is the son of a wealthy couple now dead, but his worth and value are decided by the fact that he is to inherit all his parent's wealth when he turns eighteen. He chooses to reject this definition of his identity in terms of monetary value, and embarks on a series of adventures disguised as a keeper of goats, a sadhu boy, and a crocodile keeper. Since he continues to be hounded by his past and the identity created for him by authority figures, he finally escapes from this world by becoming one with the Jarawa tribe. In effect he merely exchanges

one form of circumscription for another, because within the Jarawa tribe, his identity is defined by the elders who decide the code of appropriate behaviour and the kind of activities open to him. While on the one hand, Arif is relieved that he has at last found acceptance for his own sake and not for what he is likely to inherit, there is also his foster mother Kaye's warning to be considered:

"If you do something naughty, my eyes will pierce holes into you, just as they do with Eetha Aleho." (132-133).

Thus Arif's identity continues to be circumscribed by a rigid adult-approved code. He escapes from the authority of relatives, teachers and law enforcers, only to accept tamely the paternalistic inscription of the elders of the Jarawa community. Arif's vulnerability, and his constant search for substitutes for his dead parents leads him through a series of transitory relationships and culminates in his final assimilation into the world of the Jarawa.

Individuation and Conformity

The concept of individuation, of the creation and maintenance of an identity independent of society is an import from the West. Moreover, it is a feature of urban society and more prevalent among the privileged classes. Despite their exposure to current attitudes regarding the relationship of the individual to society, however, the middle and upper classes in India continue to perceive a

tension between traditional role-playing that valorises loyalty to the community, and modern notions of selfhood. This conflict between aspiration and actual social reality is more acute among children belonging to these classes, because their identity is still in the process of being formed. B. K. Ramanujam's comments on the structure of Indian society are of particular relevance in this regard:

...the social structure does not permit the emergence of a cogent adult role as perceived in western societies. Subordinating one's individual needs to the interests of the group....is upheld as a virtue. Thus, self-assertion becomes selfishness, independent decision making is perceived as disobedience. The response from the in-group is tacit disapproval if not outright condemnation. Under such circumstances it is easier to play safe.²⁹

In the light of these observations, some of the issues that need to be interrogated are: How do the children in the novels perceive and deal with this conflict between self-assertion and conformity to the in-group? How do the authors themselves portray and resolve this dissonance? The children depicted in the books under discussion negotiate this contestation of site by excluding adults from their world and by resorting to subterfuge and mild deceit, while the writers prefer to evade the issue by separating the adult and child world altogether. Thus, situations are contrived whereby adults are conveniently absent from or on the periphery of the child's world. On the few occasions when the two worlds intersect, the children negotiate the inflexibility of adult authority by resorting to

half-truths and misleading expressions of contriteness. For instance, in *The Missing Necklace*³⁰, Karan's father forbids him to take his pocket money for the class picnic, suggesting that he save it for a birthday gift for his mother. Karan does not argue with his father or try to make him see his point of view. Instead, he takes advantage of the fact that his father has already left for work and his mother is busy with his younger sister, and smuggles his pocket money to the picnic. He even plans to borrow money from his teacher to buy a gift for his mother, so that his father would be forced to repay and Karan would be able to get his way after all.

Yet at the end of the novel, it is the adult world-view that triumphs. Karan's experience at Kalibangan transforms him into a considerate, quiet and unselfish boy and his parents are quick to notice and comment on the change in his personality. Apart from the perceptions of Karan's parents, there are explicit authorial statements that draw attention to Karan's transformation. Thus Karan's identity formation is dependent on and ultimately shaped by parental approval. The author employs the interesting device of a flashback into a previous birth to effect the transformation of Karan from a selfish, spoilt brat to a gentle and thoughtful child, conscious of his duties as a son and responsibilities as a brother. Thus adult authority is reasserted at the end of the book, albeit in a covert manner.

One of the issues that decides the degree of control over childhood is the level of independence accorded to the child. Since most of the children portrayed in these books come from a privileged background, their freedom and mobility is circumscribed by either the family or the school. Their adventures take place within the world prescribed for them. Thus in *The Mussoorie Mystery* the children are embroiled in a kidnapping case while staging a play at a school, while *The House by the River* sees the children tackling an adventure on their ancestral property. In all these cases, the children are never totally cut off from adult authority and their independence is conditional. In some books, parental figures are substituted by an authority figure who commands the approval of the child protagonists. In *The Mussoorie Mystery* this figure is Mr. Shankar the English and Dramatics teacher, who wins the confidence of his students by his youth and unconventional style of dressing. In *The Fiery Cross* the two girls are accompanied by Albert the chauffeur, who faithfully escorts them on their adventure, and gives in good-naturedly to their bullying. In *The Virus Trap* Anshuman is drawn toward Deepak Kumar on account of their common interest in computers, despite the difference in their ages.

This trend of featuring an authority figure on the side of the child characters appears in some cases to be a deliberate technique. Arup Dutta, a popular children's writer in India, is of the opinion that the presence of a father figure in a story with children as central characters helps to invest the story with credibility:

Because the father-figure always steps into a situation which is beyond the children, he not only saves them from the imaginary peril in the story, but also from becoming super brats. Children, even older ones, have somewhat exaggerated notions of what we adults can perform, so the actions of the father-figure do not in any way infringe on verisimilitude.³¹

In Dutta's own books, the children are always provided with a father figure who serves as a reference point for them in the course of their adventures. In *Footprints in the Sand*, the children Arnab and Paloma make friends with a village boy Bompa. Bompa's grandfather Murrugalli becomes their ally and advisor in their adventures. He is portrayed as being the only adult in the novel who believes in the children and their abilities:

What endeared Grandpa Murrugali to Arnab and Paloma was the respect he got from everyone, even children. He talked to them as equals and listened patiently to their ideas and opinions, unlike most adults who either lent only one ear or ignored them altogether (13).

It is significant that a successful writer of children's books in India believes that adults have an important role to play in children's stories and that children need to be saved from becoming 'super brats'. Moreover, Dutta stresses the need to have at least one adult on the side of the children in the interest of verisimilitude,

implying therefore that even in the fictitious world of the novel, reality has to intrude --the reality of adult control. This view is in direct contrast to Tucker's observation that adults in children's fiction are better off absent or, on the occasions when they are present, exist mainly to be the butt of ridicule and humour.³² The difference in the attitude of an Indian writer for children and a Western critic of children's literature is all too evident here.

The roots of this difference, according to Vrinda Nabar, lie in their conception of individualism:

The importance of individualism in distinguishing between the two world-outlooks, the Western and the Indian, cannot be undermined. In spite of a marginal literary move in the Indian languages towards the Western mood-canon in this respect, both Indian literature and Indian culture have remained largely impervious to its message.³³

Nabar argues further that religious ideologies in India, dominated as they are by mainstream Hinduism, focus on the development of a personality whose individualism is always subservient to that of larger categories such as family, caste and religion.³⁴ Therefore, a mere paradigm shift is not enough to effect change. Herein lies the conflict faced by Indian children of the middle and upper classes: on the one hand, they are bombarded with images of the triumph of individualism in the form of personal success stories while on the other, they are

subtly indoctrinated to subsume their personal interests for the sake of family and nation. The Indian middle class child's construction of identity is therefore heavily dependent on adult intervention which, in turn, is ideologically attuned to the reinforcement of the traditional Indian world-view that emphasises commitment to the family and community before the self.

The final resolution

An important indicator of the level of independence of the child is the risk-taking ability accorded to her/him. The children in the novels under discussion encounter all kinds of villains including bloodthirsty revolutionaries (*The Fiery Cross*, *The Biratpur Adventure*), would-be foreign assassins (*Footprints in the Sand*), disgruntled scientists (*The Dream Machine*) and avaricious relatives (*Andamans Boy*). They are held hostage, pursued by thieves and haunted by ghosts (*The House by the River*). In some cases, they are saved by a sudden twist in the plot, or the timely arrival of adults. In *Kusum*, the three children Arushi, Kusum and Puneet are pursued by Mr. Gupta, who is bitten by a snake minutes before he can discover their hiding place. Thereafter the children's parents find them and bring them home. In *The Real Treasure*³⁵ Ajay is freed from his captivity by his older brother Harish and their uncle Arun. In *Footprints in the Sand*, the children stumble on the plan to assassinate the Prime Minister and provide all the crucial breakthroughs, but the actual action of nabbing the culprits is performed by the police. In *The Biratpur Adventure*, the children who had

been held hostage, are abandoned by the villains when the boat they are on runs aground. Subsequently they trek their way back until they are picked up by the police, who later catch the terrorists on the basis of information given by them. In *The House by the River*, Farrah and Shabnam set about trying to solve the mystery of a ghost haunting their ancestral home. They are assisted by their cousins Dilip and Jyotsna. In the process, they uncover a smuggling racket and unearth a cache of guns. Convinced by the evidence furnished by the children, the authorities finally bring the case to its logical end. In this story the children face imaginary threats in the form of ill omens and ghosts, while the actual threat (the band of smugglers) is tackled by the adults. In *The Mussoorie Mystery*, the children provide the initial clues which set the police on the track of the kidnapers. Thereafter, the resolution is achieved by the joint action of the police and their 'father figure' Mr. Shankar.

A few of the books depict the child protagonists bringing about the resolution of the action entirely on their own, with the adults merely tying up the loose ends in the action. The most dramatic example of this is seen in *The Fiery Cross*, where Aarti actually kills the villain by hurling the sacred cross at him. In *The Crest of the Snake's Head*, Madhavi uses her presence of mind and courageously provides the criminals with a false lead. Then she manages to push one of them and injure him, while the others use the element of surprise to disarm his accomplice, after which they all rush off to get help. In *The Virus Trap*, Anshuman enlists the help of his friends Saurabh and Manas to sabotage their

computer instructor's plans to steal Deepak's software programme. They succeed in exposing their instructor's nefarious plot in the presence of the school authorities, and are commended for their courage and intelligence.

Perhaps the most compelling instance of Elkind's concept of cognitive conceit is seen in Zai Whitaker's *Andaman's Boy*³⁶. This is a novel likely to appeal to its young audience on account of the series of adventures that befall its hero, and the adroit manner in which he outwits the adults he encounters in the course of the plot. In this story, a ten year old boy Arif runs away from his aunt and uncle, boards a train to Chennai and manages to get aboard a ship bound for the Andamans, taking advantage of a case of mistaken identity. He consistently eludes the authorities, using his quick wits to turn every circumstance to his advantage. Ultimately he is adopted by the Jarawa tribe living in the Andamans and becomes a part of their community. Arif encounters a series of potentially threatening situations, which he handles either by resorting to subterfuge, or by playing on the emotions of adults. At the station in Mumbai and aboard the ship, he wins the sympathy of the adults by virtue of the fact that he is a young boy travelling alone. On the train to Chennai a family of four adopt him temporarily, even paying for his ticket. In return, he helps them by filling water at the stations en route and entertaining their children. Aboard the ship, his co-passengers take pity on him and ply him with food. When faced with adults who cannot be emotionally blackmailed, he gets his way by manipulating their greed and ignorance. Although Arif's disillusion with the world of adults is

documented in the course of the novel, there is also an implication that the only way to negotiate with this world is on its own terms. Arif's survival strategies consist of the very lies and deception and doublespeak that he deplores in adults. His final withdrawal into the untouched world of the Jarawa, and his passionate and frantic spurning of any attempt at interaction between their world and the so-called civilised world, is at once an indictment and rejection of civilisation, and an escape into a state of idyllic innocence. The question that remains is whether this refusal to countenance the influence of adults, and their total exclusion from the world of the child is possible. To Arif, the lifestyle of the Jarawa represents an ideal alternative to the money-hungry, autocratic, power-seeking world he comes from. Yet, even within the Jarawa tribe there exists a distinct hierarchy where the elders set the codes of conduct, where women are bound by patriarchal norms and where unquestioning obedience is demanded from children. In fact Arif's initial induction into the Jarawa community is effected by means of deception. When the Jarawa threaten to kill Arif for infringing on their territory, his new friend Eetha Aleho convinces them that Arif was no threat and had saved him from drowning, when actually it was Eetha Aleho who had rescued Arif. Arif becomes an accomplice to this deception by remaining silent:

Arif looked down. His eyes, he felt, would give away the lie. Why had Eetha Aleho lied? Well, not really lied, just reversed their roles (113).

It is evident from the hasty qualification appended to the word 'lied', that Arif has learned well the technique of justifying one's unacceptable actions in the interest of preserving the moral order. The fact that children, regardless of whether they belong to sophisticated societies or tribal communities, are constrained to employ subversive strategies such as deception in order to get their way is indicative of the oppressive and autocratic nature of the social system.

Arif's dependence on himself and his resourcefulness last only as long as he is threatened by the adult 'civilised' world. Once he has been accepted into the Jarawa community, he re-establishes familial ties and accepts their precepts unquestioningly. His longing for a mother figure and a real family is fulfilled within this simple community that accepts him on his own terms. Arif's adjustment and assimilation into the world of the Jarawa is unproblematic and romanticised. The novel does not explore the possibility of tensions arising from the contrast between Arif's lifestyle in a cosmopolitan environment, and his present way of life among the Jarawa community.

Constructing the Ideal Child

Given the fact that the degree of control over children is far greater in Indian society, it follows that the parameters that define aberrant behaviour and the notion of what constitutes ideal behaviour are bound to be rigid. The history of children's literature in India testifies to the fact that children, until recently, were

perceived as passive receptors with no identity apart from their family or community. Kakar observes, for instance, that

In classical Sanskrit literature, children rarely figure as individuals in their own right, with activities, reactions and feelings separate from those of their all-powerful parents.³⁷

The prevalent view of children appears to have been that they needed to be socialised and indoctrinated, so that they would become well-adjusted members of society. Hence the overtly moralistic flavour of traditional literature like the *Panchatantra* and other fables. During the British rule in India, children's literature in English was produced with the specific intent of inculcating in child readers a contempt for native culture on the one hand, and reverence for the institutions, culture and way of life of the British on the other. A distinct didactic tone was hence discernible in the books written during this period. However, contemporary children's literature in India, in response to global trends, seeks to minimise preaching and focuses instead on providing entertaining literature for children. Despite this professed aim, most of the stories that are written for children today continue to display a barely disguised preoccupation with the 'correct' development of character. Since Indian English books for children are targeted at the middle and upper classes of Indian society, it is possible to see the ideology defining these classes at work in the construction of the ideal child,

and the definition of the kind of behaviour that is construed as unacceptable or aberrant.

As discussed earlier, the middle and upper classes are faced with a conflict between traditional models of conduct that valorise commitment to the community, and modern notions of individual freedom and selfhood. The present generation of parents has been sensitised to issues such as personal liberty, women's rights, child abuse and gender inequalities. There is hence a concerted effort on the part of parents to give their children more independence, and the opportunity to develop their personalities at their own pace. The proliferation of nuclear families has further enabled this trend to gather momentum. All the families depicted in the books reviewed are without exception, nuclear families, where the interaction with grandparents is restricted to vacations. Even in Arup Dutta's *The Crystal Cave*, which portrays the life of the Nocte tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Changun and Thenyak's grandmother Kamlong lives alone, despite the pleas of her sons *and* daughters that she live with them. However, she continues to be a repository of tribal folklore and tradition, which in this story provides the impetus for the children to embark on their search for the salt spring that could make their tribe self-sufficient and prosperous once more.

Although living in a nuclear family encourages the tendency toward individuation, the tenacious influence of tradition ensures that the child's efforts at

self-definition are severely circumscribed within the norms of society. As Nabar has pointed out:

The importance of the hold of tradition and mythology on the Indian subconscious should not be undermined. In very crucial ways it affects sensibility responses to an extent not experienced in the West.³⁸

As a consequence, the child experiences and perceives major inconsistencies in parental attitudes and responses. In Devika Rangachari's *Company for Manisha*³⁹, Manisha's parents openly commend their friend's daughter Anu's efforts to compromise and adjust to her new environment, while discouraging their own daughter from expressing outrage or resentment at being forced to share her room with a total stranger without prior notice. Manisha, who hitherto has been 'allowed' to get her own way, is suddenly confronted with a situation where she is required to adjust to the presence of another girl in her home, her school and her life. Her attempts at rebellion or dissent are either ignored, or construed as bad behaviour and severely criticised. Consequently, the process of identity formation in her case changes direction, with the stress being placed on conformity to what her parents (and by extension), her society perceives as a paradigm of good behaviour. Manisha's efforts toward individuation are tolerated so long as they do not come into direct conflict with social mores. Once a clash is imminent, traditional values assert themselves and order and harmony are restored. In this book Anu is constructed as the ideal child, who is allowed her

moments of brief rebellion, but who generally consents to being cast in the mould defined by authority figures.

In Cheryl Rao's *The Missing Necklace* Karan is portrayed as a boy who has been incurably spoiled by his wealthy grandparents and is therefore ignorant of the value of money. He spends his pocket money on his classmates, buying them sweets and chips. Yet this act of generosity is construed as being self-serving. This is evident from the tone of the authorial voice that narrates this episode:

Listening to all the thanks made him feel good. Seeing the awe of his less well-to-do classmates when he held the ten-rupee note in his hand was worth it! (89)

Karan's demanding, selfish behaviour is attributed to the fact that he has been given too much freedom in his grandparents' home. Karan's father instructs his wife not to allow him to handle money freely, but his instructions are forgotten "because all the grandchildren were allowed to shop on their own" (87). This is cited as the reason for Karan's spendthrift nature. The implication is that when children are allowed the freedom to take decisions, they tend to go overboard and misuse this liberty. Karan is deliberately depicted as a thoughtless, boastful, impatient child in the first half of the story, in order to highlight the transformation in his character as a result of his esoteric experience.

Certain values and notions typical of the middle class may be discerned in the construction of the legitimized paradigm of the ideal child. The idea that money is a necessary evil and the flaunting of money is vulgar is patently implied in the book. Karan is portrayed as a middle-class child caught between the extremes of too much money in his grandparent's home, and a frugal lifestyle in his own home. Karan's transformation into a thoughtful and caring family member to whom money is unimportant is commented upon and lauded by his parents. Karan's friend Atish notices that after the visit to Kalibangan, Karan "was more keen on their playing together, evenly matched, in some game neither had touched for some time. Being on top and winning was not the first thing in Karan's mind anymore" (150). The stress on education as a means of ensuring economic security (112) and the importance of playing the game in the right spirit (150) are some of the values that are slipped into the story. Another traditional attitude that finds its way into the story pertains to the role-expectations of women. In the account of Karan's previous birth, his mother is depicted as feeling guilty when she doesn't work or when she oversleeps (110). Similarly, in *The Crest of the Snake's Head*, Mrs. Sharma displays signs of guilt that she is leaving her children behind in order to attend her parents' ruby anniversary celebrations. She even offers to cancel her programme, but her husband refuses to let her do so (7). The conditioning of women regarding the roles they are expected to play is evident here.

Cheryl Rao uses the adventures in her stories to bring about a change in the personality and relationships of her characters. In *The Missing Necklace*, Karan becomes a caring, considerate and mature person after his dream of a past birth. In his dream, he is transposed into Kano, an underprivileged child living in the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation. His interaction with Raki, a rich upper class child of that period becomes a reflection of his relationship with his peers in his present birth. His recollection of his life as a poor boy shapes and influences his future interaction with his peers in his present life as Karan. In another story by the same author, *The Crest of the Snake's Head*, Nitin is depicted as an insecure child over-attached to his mother. After his adventure in seeking the lost treasure, he becomes more confident, and the relationship between him and his brother Arjun strengthens into a bond of closeness.

In both the stories, the lure of the fast-paced life and opulent lifestyle offered by metropolitan cities, with their wealth of opportunities and temptations, is set against the quiet serene charm of historic places like Ahmednagar and other remote areas. The children in both stories at first resent their relocation to these places on account of their fathers' transfers (both stories feature fathers in the armed forces). In the course of their adventures, they are made aware of the attractions of these small towns.

The normal child: subjectivity and subversion

Generally speaking, the children depicted in the books under discussion are well-adjusted, socialised and spirited. Apart from passing references to moments of rebellion against disciplinary action, there is no mention of deep-rooted family conflicts or the trauma of growing up in these books. The exception is *Company for Manisha*, which portrays the growing pangs of a young adolescent girl and her efforts to come to terms with a potentially threatening situation. This book is discussed at length in a later chapter. The familial relationships depicted are cast in the conventional mould, with the father being the absolute authority and the mother conforming to the stereotypical image of the housewife devoted to feeding her family. In Subhadra Sengupta's *The Mussoorie Mystery*, however, there is an episode involving a father-son conflict which is resolved in a rather facile manner. Raghav and his brother Keshav belong to a family where their father is away on tour frequently, and hence has minimal contact with his sons. Yet the pressures on them to perform according to his expectations remain strong. When Raghav and his Dramatics Club are invited to stage a play in Mussoorie, his mother and brother are very happy and proud, but his father (who had been away when the announcement was made) is livid, and rails at Raghav for being a failure and disappointing him. After some prompting from his Drama teacher Shankar (who functions in the story as the 'father figure' conceptualised by Arup Dutta⁴⁰), Raghav confides his troubles to

him. Raghav's elder brother Keshav is the prototype of the ideal child, who fulfils parental expectations regardless of the cost in terms of personal growth. Keshav is now a medical student and his father is proud of his academic achievements. Unfair comparisons are made with Raghav who is an average student, but the school's best athlete and actor, with definite leadership potential. Raghav's father discounts these achievements as trivial, and stresses on the need to excel academically and work for a future in medicine or engineering. Shankar empathises with Raghav's predicament and reminisces about his own childhood, when his father used to compare him unfavourably with his older sister "who was like an advertisement of the perfect daughter" (19). Shankar realises that Raghav feels like a performing monkey:

"He is never there when you need him. He never asks you about your life. He only wants medals and prizes he can show off to his friends..." (19)

Shankar adds that his father was disappointed that he chose to become a teacher, which is a poorly paid job, and that he disapproved of Shankar's wearing his hair in a ponytail. It is evident that Shankar chooses to articulate his revolt by dressing flamboyantly and deliberately flouting conventional notions of 'decency'.

Raghav is surprised and relieved to find someone who has experienced the trauma he is going through. He confides his dilemma to Shankar:

"...Dad doesn't want to know, sir. He doesn't want to know what I dream of doing. If I told him I plan to be an actor he'll probably kick me out of the house. Trying to listen to me is just too much trouble. He doesn't have the time." (21)

Shankar advises him to handle this conflict by telling himself that the rest of his family, his friends and his teachers do not consider him a failure. Moreover, it is his life, which he must live in a way that makes him happy. Shankar's advice to Raghav reflects the contradictory pulls of individuation and conformity discussed earlier. On the one hand he tells Raghav that he is entitled to live his life as he pleases, but on the other, he reassures Raghav by telling him that his peers and other authority figures do not consider him a failure. Thus, the child's subjectivity continues to be constructed in terms of acceptance by the in-group or by substitute authority figures. The kind of subversion symbolised in Shankar's support of Raghav is problematic in that Shankar is himself representative of an alternative authority. Hence, the child ultimately ends up referring to one kind of authority or another in order to validate her/his subversion.

Content with this piece of advice, Raghav goes home, and no further mention is made of this incident thereafter. It seems unlikely that a deep-rooted conflict of this nature can be resolved by a single counselling session. However, since the book is basically an adventure story, there is little scope for developing

or exploring these issues at length. It is nevertheless heartening to note that some contemporary Indian authors are realising the need to bring these issues into the open rather than pretending they do not exist. Raghav's dilemma will find a sympathetic echo in many a child reader, because this condition of unrealistic expectations, and undue emphasis on academic excellence and the need to pursue conventionally 'respectable' careers, is typical of the middle and upper classes in India.

The contemporary Indian child is caught in the cross-currents of a society in the grip of material and attitudinal change. The middle class appears to be poised between the legacy of a tradition that devalues material success and stresses a non-competitive, philosophical attitude to life, and the demands of a consumerist, rapidly globalising society that values self-aggrandisement and material prosperity. Consequently, children are exposed to inconsistent patterns of education, wherein aggressiveness and pushy behaviour are looked down upon on the one hand, while the competitive spirit and the need to excel academically and professionally are encouraged on the other. A significant feature of the books under review, which may be related to the above factors, is that a majority of them incorporate, or are directly set in the school-environment. The experiences of the children are framed within the academic set up. While books like *Dreamer at the Manor*, *Changes at the Manor*, *The Virus Trap* and *The Mussoorie Mystery* belong to the genre of the school story and deal exclusively with the experiences of the children at school, others like *Kusum*, *The*

Fiery Cross, *Company for Manisha*, *The Missing Necklace*, *The Crest of the Snake's Head* and *The Dream Machine* feature significant scenes set against the school background. This is perhaps indicative of the important role that regulatory institutions like the school play in the lives of Indian children. Adventure stories in the West (with the exception of those belonging to the genre of school stories) rarely feature the school as a backdrop for the activities of their protagonists. Enid Blyton's Famous Five and Secret Seven series, for example, relate the adventures of the children when they are home on vacation. Even the popular Hardy Boys books contain few, if any, references to the student life of the Hardy brothers.

Control and Closure

One of the ways in which it is possible to ascertain the degree of control exercised in the creation and production of children's literature is by examining whether adult authority is reasserted at the end of the story. Peter Hunt discusses the omnipresent urge to control texts for children and observes that since children as the audience are unskilled readers, the author-reader relationship is an especially unbalanced power relationship.⁴¹ The consequence of this is that texts for children are subject to a degree of control not exercised in peer-texts:

A controlled narrative decreases the possibilities of interaction, and, ultimately, proscribes thought. By reducing the distance between teller and

tale, it makes the narrative contract more specific; when this is placed in tension with the authoritarian mode of the implied narrator, then that contract becomes a very fragile one.⁴²

In many of the texts reviewed, adult authority is unequivocally restored, and the children resume their previous lifestyles unchanged by the events of the story. In *The Biratpur Adventure*, *The Mussoorie Mystery*, *Footprints in the Sand* and *The Hilltop Mystery*, for example, the children unravel the mystery and then closure is effected by the adults who intervene to bring the culprits to justice. In books where a significant transformation in circumstance or personality takes place, the child concerned is usually 'aberrant' to start with, and the change occurs in terms of acquiescence to the legitimized conception of the ideal child. In *Company for Manisha* and *The Missing Necklace*, both Manisha and Karan are constructed as being contrary to perceived notions of well-behaved children. The plot serves to effect a transformation in their personalities so that they conform to the code of adult-approved conduct.

However, there are books which display a certain uneasiness regarding the reassertion of authority, and which portray the triumph of the child against all odds. In *The Fiery Cross*, the heroine Aarti and her friend Rita participate in an adventure that forces them to undergo hardships and confront dangers that their sheltered upbringing has not prepared them for. In the end, Aarti brings the action to its final resolution by killing one of the villains. It seems improbable that

an experience as dramatic as this will be relegated as a fond memory. The author, however, chooses to leave the story at this stage, and does not explore the consequences of Aarti's action in terms of the reaction of her family or the repercussions on her personality. In *Andamans Boy*, the child hero Arif succeeds, by his own resourcefulness and quick wits, in eluding the forces of authority that threaten him. However, his final resettlement among the Jarawa community is problematic: on the one hand, it may be perceived as a choice made by Arif of his own accord, while on the other it could be interpreted as the reassertion of adult authority, albeit of a different nature. The fact remains that children are compelled to chart their courses according to the horizon of choices open to them, and the limits of this horizon are determined by the complex interaction of factors like class, gender and caste.

Child vs. Children

The relationship of the child characters to their siblings and peers is generally depicted as unproblematic and devoid of ruptures. There are few references to tensions among friends or conflicts arising out of differences in personality. One reason for this could be the need for children at this age to belong to a peer group and be accepted among peers. Tucker notes in the course of his observations of Enid Blyton's books:

The closeness of typical Blyton gangs is another popular daydream put into print for young readers, who may sometimes turn to books as a substitute for play with real children. Even if readers have plenty of friends, their own gangs will never form such friendly, positive and cohesive groups as in a Blyton story....There is a general longing for social inclusion during this age....as a member of an idealised gang, without any of the tensions or difficulties of peer-group relationships in real life.⁴³

Even in *Company for Manisha*, which portrays the tensions arising in a peer relationship, the differences in personality between Anu and Manisha are glossed over once the two become friends. They go to the other extreme of becoming inseparable, to the extent that they actually induce personality changes in each other. Manisha becomes more studious and serious about her studies like Anu, and Anu in turn learns to relax and enjoy life like Manisha.

The depiction of sibling relationships in the books under discussion is also conventional. Apart from some good-humoured teasing, relations between siblings are shown to be generally harmonious. This is probably in the interests of plot development, since most of the adventure stories feature the children working as a gang to solve a mystery. In *The Crystal Cave*, eleven year old Changun is a year younger than her brother Thenyak, yet she is depicted as being more mature than him. She refuses to act until she is convinced of the feasibility of the action. She is firm in her views and not easily carried away. Her

character is portrayed in stereotypical terms. Being a girl, she is conditioned to the norms of the family and seeks approval of the elders before embarking on any course of action. For instance, she tells Thenyak:

Even if the salt-spring can be brought back, it's up to our elders to do so. (9)

She is generally resourceful and far-sighted. She suggests that they should carry bamboo tubes filled with water to quench their thirst during the long climb. Once the tubes were empty, they could be used to bring back the salt as proof to the elders that they had found the salt-spring.

When Thenyak suggests that they try to find an alternative route through the jungle, she points out that the jungle is too thick for them to cut their way through. Thenyak does not heed her words of caution, and wears himself out trying to hack out a path until finally he is forced to acknowledge the truth of Changun's observation. In this story, Thenyak is portrayed as the more spontaneous of the two. He is ebullient and always ready to act first and think later, and expresses his emotions openly. Changun is more reticent, given to reacting with facial expressions rather than verbally. In fact there are four occasions in the book when the author Arup Dutta makes the comment "Changun said nothing." (3,5,9,21).

Footprints in the Sand, which is by the same author, depicts a similar sibling relationship. Twelve year old Paloma is a year younger than her brother Arnab, but “she was the more mature of the two” (9). Like Changun, *she* sounds the words of caution and restrains her brother from venturing headlong into a situation. She is susceptible to ‘atmosphere’ and given to working out logical connections between events. Both Arnab and Thenyak do not heed their sisters’ advice initially, but acknowledge that they were right after they have tried out a particular course of action unsuccessfully. The girls are not so venturesome, and their knowledge appears to be more instinctive. Meenakshi Gupta, in a psychological study of the girl child, comments that girl children

...are pressurised to be nurturant, obedient, and responsible. They are discouraged from being aggressive. Interpersonal orientation, compromise and general welfare is expected of daughters.⁴⁴

The characterisation of girl children in Dutta’s books appears to conform to the above observations.

In *The Mussoorie Mystery*, mention is made of the parental pressures faced by Raghav and his brother Keshav, as well as by Shankar their Drama teacher and his sister. In both cases, the siblings are depicted as sticking together and sympathising with each other’s plight, despite the fact that one among them has chosen to conform to parental expectations, and the other is

facing parental disapproval. There is no reference to possible tensions arising from the fact that one of the siblings is clearly a favoured child. Significantly, in both cases, it is the firstborn, whether a boy or a girl who chooses to conform to the expected code of behaviour.

Taboos in texts

There is no mention of sexual awareness among the children in the books under consideration, despite the fact that many of them are adolescents. This is one of the taboos that continues to operate in children's literature in India. It is once again a function of the class which governs the creation, publication and distribution of children's literature in English. Both government policy and the ideology of the publishing industry appear to be unanimously agreed that the Indian child is not yet mature enough to handle sexual issues. In a paper read at a seminar on the topic "Are there taboos in children's literature?", Radhika Menon discusses the continued perpetuation of the myth of childhood innocence, particularly in Indian literature. She quotes Marina Warner's observation that a culture which sets up a nostalgic worship of childhood innocence is likely to be vengeful and punitive when children do not live up to this imagined ideal. Warner indicates that there is a definite association of the myth of the innocent child with children's books. Menon notes that long after other countries have ceased to portray an unreal world of privileged children with perfect families, this sentimentalised depiction of childhood continues in India. Ironically, the urge to

restrict what can be portrayed in children's literature is a manifestation of a vestigial Victorian attitude, which lingers in India. Menon critiques the system and the nexus between publishers, distributors and book-buying institutions like schools and libraries, which do not permit authors to write on these issues. She observes that children's literature in other countries display "a realistic recognition that children can be selfish, devious and manipulative, much like the adults around them. But there is reverence for the potential and actual goodness of children, an understanding of their different ways of seeing, and a sympathy for their needs and their vulnerability." ⁴⁵

Peter Hunt, in his discussion on the levels at which a children's text operates, defines two main levels: the syntagmatic, at which level the writer chooses *how* to express a meaning rather than *what* meaning to express, and the paradigmatic, which refers to the alternatives open to a writer regarding what to express. While the former is concerned with the surface text, the latter involves an analysis of the politics of a text.⁴⁶ In Indian English literature for children, an examination of texts at the paradigmatic level reveals the operation of several complex factors, which restrict the kind of themes that are considered suitable or acceptable to the powerful minority which controls and defines the production of books for children. The most universal and categorical among these restrictions is of course the taboo on references to sexual issues.

The solitary exception to this resolute refusal to incorporate sexual issues in children's literature is the Saloni series by Loveleen Kacker. Aimed at the older category of children, these books feature an attractive teenager named Saloni Seth who manages to get embroiled in various adventures. Saloni's parents have been killed in an air crash. Subsequently Dev Banerjee and his two sisters Piyu and Tiya befriend her. Dev is portrayed as being a firm admirer of Saloni, while she rebuffs his good-humoured attempts to woo her. Their relationship is depicted in a safe, light-hearted, humorous manner.

A major shortcoming perceived in books for children in Indian English by both writers and readers is the lack of humour in these stories. Children of all ages respond readily to humour, although the kind of humour they enjoy may vary with age. The books under consideration do contain occasional comic episodes, but they are generally quite conventional. In *Kusum*, for instance, much of the humour arises from Arushi's overactive imagination, fed as it is on a diet of Western adventure and mystery stories. She spies something shining beneath the cement flooring of a temple and promptly imagines that there is a cache of hidden gold there. On dislodging the slab she discovers it is only a golden coloured toad. (13-14). Similarly, on the train to Delhi, she notices that her co-passenger is wearing a wig and jumps to the conclusion that he is a smuggler (30-34). She notices marks on Kusum's wrists and assumes they have been caused by a vampire (80). The humour in these cases arises from the gap between the unreality of the assumptions made by the character and the actual

situation. In books which are set against the school environment, (*Dreamer at the Manor, The Mussoorie Mystery, Changes at the Manor*), the comic episodes consist mainly of tricks played by the students on each other or on the teachers.

Issues at stake

Although the stories reviewed do draw attention to several subjects that concern the contemporary Indian child, there remain certain crucial issues that need to be problematised in order to make the child reader think and reflect, which is the first step towards change. Since Indian English literature for children is largely the product of a hegemony that defines its readership, there is a marked reluctance on the part of publishers to include 'sensitive' subjects such as caste and class division, child abuse, death, divorce, communal tensions and sexual abuse. Strangely enough, some of these issues are dealt with in short stories. Whether this is indicative of the perception that such issues can only be explored in the short story genre, because the child reader cannot bear very much reality, or whether publishers feel these issues do not merit treatment in a full length novel, is a matter of conjecture. Anne Pellowski, in her discussion of children's books in developing countries, cites the observations of Mabel D. Segun, author and President of the Children's Literature Association of Nigeria. Segun notes that life in developing countries is fast changing, and today's children are facing problems not encountered by their parents. The superimposition of Western culture has further complicated the issue. As a result,

children standing between these two cultures are confused and losing their bearings. The need, therefore, is for realistic stories woven around these problems which would help the children clarify their positions.⁴⁷

In his discussion on the issues involved in producing books for children, Peter Hunt speaks of his dilemma of being “caught between the ideal of freedom (‘all censorship is bad’) and the ideal of responsibility towards children.”⁴⁸ He notes that while adult readers of children's books are concerned about eliminating irreligion or sex or violence in children's books, writers for children are discussing the need to confront, rather than confirm, issues in their works. For it is only by confronting issues in texts that we can hope to deconstruct them and lay bare the ideology and power relations that configure them. In the Indian context, issues that need to be explored include the conflict between tradition and individualism, the growing sexual awareness of adolescents, the biases perpetuated by boundaries of caste and class and the nuances in interfamilial relationships.

Appeal of Indian and Western fiction

While a detailed comparative examination of the respective appeals of Indian and Western children's fiction would be beyond the scope of this study, it may be useful to recollect briefly some opinions of writers and critics of children's literature regarding why children prefer the books they read. In the surveys cited

earlier in this chapter, mention has been made of the preference for adventure stories. Prema Srinivasan's survey further concludes that Enid Blyton, Franklin W. Dixon and Carolyn Keene are the most widely read authors among children.⁴⁹ The survey conducted by NCCL notes that parents have cited Blyton, Keene, Dixon and Roald Dahl as the books preferred by their children.⁵⁰

The appeal of Enid Blyton (despite recent allegations of racism and sexism) has been analysed by critics mainly in terms of the psychological comfort her books provide, even though the world she describes is now an anachronism. Nicholas Tucker, for instance, attributes the continued success of Blyton's books to several factors, some of which are: they pamper to the omnipotent fantasies of the child; they present a socially settled universe which is morally strict and free of adult intervention and most important, they are completely child-centred and display a gratifying belief in the goodness and competence of children.⁵¹ In the Indian context, Enid Blyton's appeal needs to take into account the fact that a colonial hangover still afflicts a substantial section of the middle class today. As Ranjana Sengupta has pointed out, although the world of Blyton affirms British values prevalent in the thirties, many of these attitudes have not changed in India.⁵² She cites some typical features of Blyton's books: the clear class groupings, the upper middle class code, the neatly defined gender roles and the assurance of absolute authority. When children outgrew these books, they turned to Agatha Christie and P.G. Wodehouse, (which set out another fictitious stable well-defined world, where there was a clear distinction between the various

classes), or to American comics like Superman and Phantom, which celebrated the victory of heroes against subversive, anti-American elements. Sengupta comments that all these characters

with apparent innocence, posit a particular consciousness about the state of the world which is all too easily absorbed by children.⁵³

In the light of these observations, it would be pertinent to consider whether there is an insidious ideology operating, which ensures the continued prescription of these books by parents of the upper and middle classes in India. Why are books which portray a state of the world so patently alien to Indian children, both in terms of the culture they describe and the period they are set in, continually being patronised by the contemporary, literate middle class generation of parents? Is there a lurking desire to maintain the class-based social stratification that reaffirms the hegemony of the minority in power? Or is it merely a futile longing for the stable, ordered world that has disintegrated in the wake of political and social upheaval? The popular line of defence which asserts that there is no alternative to these books is no longer valid, given the sheer volume of Indian English books being produced, and the tremendous efforts made by publishing firms to popularise and generate awareness about their books. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a certain failure either in marketing strategy or in overcoming prejudices among the book-buying public, as a result of which Indian English fiction has not become as popular as its Western counterpart.

One of the reasons why books by Blyton and Dixon are popular among children is the exotic and glamorous lifestyle described in them. Paradoxically, while books with an Indian setting facilitate identification with the characters and environment, they are at the same time too close to home to provide much stimulation for the imagination. There is, however, a danger implicit in excessive exposure to Western fiction. As Poile Sengupta has pointed out, the world of these Western authors is not entirely in the realm of fantasy as, for instance, a science fiction story. The reader has a sneaky feeling that there are actually children who live like this even though the adventure itself may be make-believe.

And in the gap between what is imagined and that which is merely unattainable, can lie resentment, disappointment, alienation.⁵⁴

The popularity of Roald Dahl, on the other hand, has been attributed to the subversive elements in his works that attract his child readers. Hall and Coles have concluded from a survey of children's reading preferences in Britain that even today, Blyton and Dahl are voted the most popular authors. They note that despite the fact that Dahl's world (like Blyton's) is child-centred, unlike her, Dahl often portrays the dark side of this world, which is disturbing. They cite Dahl's comment that parents and schoolteachers are the enemy.⁵⁵ It is precisely this anti-establishment attitude of his that makes him so popular among children.

The place of Ruskin Bond

Ruskin Bond is one of the best known writers of children's literature in India. He occupies a unique position in the canon of Indian English writing for children in that he is one of the few authors who straddles the gulf between 'prescribed' and 'popular' texts. His books are prescribed by the CBSE for secondary students, thereby assuring him of a certain amount of visibility and fame. The fact that many of his writings originally appeared in the Sunday and children's section of newspapers, has also contributed to his popularity. Surveys of children's reading preferences and of children's awareness of Indian English authors reveal that Ruskin Bond's books are very popular among children. The continued appeal of his books for the MTV generation, fed on the glossy and sophisticated visuals and consumerist lifestyle depicted in the mass media, needs some explanation. The pastoral idyllic atmosphere of his short stories and novels, the "tender and poetic" style of his writing⁵⁶ and his sketches of a world gone by do not appear to be elements that would attract a child reader of the present generation. Yet many children have confessed to enjoy his gentle humorous delineation of characters like Uncle Ken in *Adventures of Rusty*⁵⁷, and seem to relate to his concern for the dwindling beauty of Nature, particularly in his beloved Mussoorie. Although the world he describes may no longer exist, the experience of growing up that is a common theme in many of his stories, and the

child-centred perceptions of his writings have won him a loyal and ever-expanding following among metropolitan children.

Long before it became fashionable to display a concern for the environment, Bond had been writing about the steady decline of forest cover due to growing industrialisation, and about the ruthless destruction of the natural habitat of the creatures of the jungle. One of the factors which endears him to his child readers is the affectionate humour with which he describes animals and birds. Even the chameleon, which is a creature often feared and despised by adults and children alike, is lovingly portrayed in the story "Henry: A Chameleon".⁵⁸ Bond invests his animal characters with human sentiments and reactions, which makes it easier for children to relate to them and their antics. In his writings, the animals are rarely referred to in the neuter gender: they are 'he' or 'she' and consequently, they take on human personalities. Tucker has discussed at length the appeal of animal stories for children. He observes that

...like children themselves, animals can also be small, vulnerable and inarticulate, as well as open and quite artless in their appetites and needs. For children, gradually learning to hold back some of their spontaneous emotions and generally coming to accept the mantle of socialisation, animals in real life--whether affectionate, greedy, cowardly, aggressive or sensual--still offer a fascinating, even enviable picture of what may sometimes appear as a basically shameless and lusty instinctive life.⁵⁹

Although many of Bond's stories do feature small creatures like the monkey, goat or hornbill, there are also sensitive portrayals of larger animals like tigers and bears. Psychologists will perhaps analyse the appeal of the latter in terms of the illusion of might and grandeur provided by these animals. However, Bond is more concerned about the sense of isolation and alienation experienced by them, as their natural habitat is steadily eroded, and they are pushed further and further into inhospitable terrain in a desperate bid to survive the onslaught of 'civilisation'. The story "Tiger Tiger Burning Bright" ⁶⁰, for instance, traces the desperate attempts of the once lordly tiger to evade the clutches of hunters and villagers, who perceive him as a trophy to be displayed or as a threat to their existence, but are supremely ignorant of the fact that they are responsible for his present condition.

A curious feature of Bond's animal stories is that they almost always describe the adventures of a solitary sample of the species who is, more often than not, abandoned in some manner in a helpless state, and has to be rehabilitated by humans. Thus, Harold the hornbill tumbles out of his nest and is rescued from the predatory cat by Grandfather, Henry the chameleon is saved from being stoned to death by ignorant townspeople, Tutu the monkey is bought by Grandfather from a street entertainer because she looked miserable, and Pari the goat is adopted by Mukesh because she follows him home and does not appear capable of looking after herself. It remains a matter of conjecture whether

this characteristic of Bond's writings can be related to the fact that he himself is essentially a loner, and has on more than one occasion made mention of the fact that his mother left him when he was only four years old. Another possible reason for this predilection is offered by Bond himself:

As children we are all individualists; it is only as we grow older that we acquire a certain grey similarity to each other.⁶¹

Bond's stories describe a world seen through the eyes of a child, and are replete with the sense of wonder and awe that the child feels when confronted with the simplest of things. There are frequent and detailed references to food, which is an important part of a child's life. His semi-autobiographical references to his absent mother in "The Room of Many Colours"⁶² and some other stories, along with the yearning for the caring, nurturing love of a mother expressed in "The Woman on Platform 8"⁶³ are likely to find echoes in many a reader's heart. Bond himself dwells on the brief encounter he describes in the latter story in his introduction to the collection, and remarks that although the people who meet at the platform will part again soon, "their lives have been changed in some indefinable way."⁶⁴

Although Ruskin Bond has written several novels, his popularity lies in his short stories, as is evident from the number of reprints commissioned by publishers. Bond himself, in the introductory essay cited earlier, confesses that

he prefers the short story genre because it is most suited to the kind of stories he likes to write, about the crossing of paths of people he has met and lives he has known. His stories are unashamedly autobiographical, and it is perhaps this artlessness and honesty that endears him to his child readers. Besides, the confidential note introduced by his use of the personal pronoun imparts a certain credibility and genuineness to his stories. Bond reflects that his stories appeal to his young readers because they often describe a sense of longing for something or someone just out of reach, which is familiar to them.

Perhaps the enduring charm of Bond's stories lies in their assertion of the dignity and quiet heroism of the characters he describes. His heroes and heroines are ordinary people belonging to villages and small towns, who reaffirm by their conduct and character the value of peaceful co-existence, grace and honesty. Even where the cruelty and vanity of humans is described, the tone is reproachful and sorrowful rather than harshly accusing. His delineation of quixotic characters like the Rani in "The Room of Many Colours" is affectionate, but not mocking, and mirrors in some ways a child's perception of the bewildering adult world. In an age driven by materialism, consumerism and frantic competitiveness, his works offer a retreat and a viable alternative: that of living together in harmony and in peace.

Notes

- ¹ Tucker 9.
- ² Tucker 104.
- ³ NCCL, *Survey* File A-II.
- ⁴ Srinivasan 125-152.
- ⁵ NCCL, *Survey* File A-II.
- ⁶ Tucker 20.
- ⁷ Charles Sarland, *Young People Reading: Culture and Response* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991) 120.
- ⁸ Amit Dasgupta, "Once Upon a Time," *Telling Tales* 2.
- ⁹ Arup Kumar Dutta, *Footprints in the Sand* (Gurgaon: Scholastic India Private Limited, 1999).
- ¹⁰ Mitra Phukan, *The Biratpur Adventure* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1997).
- ¹¹ Ira Saxena, *The Virus Trap* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ¹² A.K.Srikumar, *The Fiery Cross* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1996).
- ¹³ Dipavali Debroy, *Kusum* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1997).
- ¹⁴ Subir Ghosh and Richa Bansal, *The Dream Machine* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1997).

- ¹⁵ Anita Saran, *Aditya the Underwater Boy* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1996).
- ¹⁶ Loveleen Kacker, *Saloni in Goa* (New Delhi: Indus, 1995).
- ¹⁷ Kacker, *Saloni and the Sitars* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 1998).
- ¹⁸ Subhadra Sen Gupta, *The Mussoorie Mystery* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 1997).
- ¹⁹ Cheryl Rao, *Adventures Two* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ²⁰ Rao, *Holiday Adventures* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ²¹ Maya Chandrasekharan, *Dreamer at the Manor* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 1995).
- ²² Chandrasekharan, *Changes at the Manor* (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 1996).
- ²³ Indi Rana, "The Story of Stories of Adventure: Literature for Rural Children," *Telling Tales* 122.
- ²⁴ Tucker 105.
- ²⁵ Cheryl Rao, *Adventures Two* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ²⁶ Rao, *Holiday Adventures* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ²⁷ Zai Whitaker, *Andamans Boy* (Chennai: Tulika, 1998).
- ²⁸ Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World* 104.

- ²⁹ B.K.Ramanujam, "Toward Maturity: Problems of Identity seen in the Indian Clinical Setting," *Identity and Adulthood* 54.
- ³⁰ Cheryl Rao, *Adventures Two* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ³¹ Arup Dutta, "Better adventure stories for children of the higher age-groups," *Writer and Illustrator* vol.9.2 (Jan-Mar 1990): 45.
- ³² Tucker 108, 118.
- ³³ Nabar 30.
- ³⁴ Nabar 31-32.
- ³⁵ Cheryl Rao, *Holiday Adventures* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1998).
- ³⁶ Tucker 105.
- ³⁷ Sudhir Kakar, *Indian Childhood: Cultural Ideals and Social Reality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979) 18.
- ³⁸ Nabar 22.
- ³⁹ Devika Rangachari, *Company for Manisha* (New Delhi: Children's Book Trust, 1999).
- ⁴⁰ Dutta, 45.
- ⁴¹ Hunt 84.
- ⁴² Hunt 116.
- ⁴³ Tucker 111.

- ⁴⁴ Meenakshi Gupta, "The Girl Child: A Psychological Perspective," *The Girl Child in 20th Century Indian Literature*, ed. and intro. Viney Kirpal (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1992) 45.
- ⁴⁵ Radhika Menon, "Are there taboos in children's literature?" Seminar on Children's Literature, National Centre for Children's Literature, International Book Fair, New Delhi, 8 Feb. 2000.
- ⁴⁶ Hunt 67-69.
- ⁴⁷ Anne Pellowski, *Made to Measure: Children's Books in Developing Countries* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980) 41.
- ⁴⁸ Hunt 163.
- ⁴⁹ Srinivasan 141.
- ⁵⁰ NCCL Survey File All.
- ⁵¹ Tucker 105-112.
- ⁵² Ranjana Sengupta, "The Reading Habit," *Telling Tales* 80.
- ⁵³ Ranjana Sengupta 82.
- ⁵⁴ Poile Sengupta 143.
- ⁵⁵ Christine Hall and Martin Coles, *Children's Reading Choices* (London: Routledge, 1999) 51-53.
- ⁵⁶ Feisal Alkazi, "Adapting Children's Literature to the Small Screen," *The Book Review* vol.XIX.11(Nov.1995):15.

⁵⁷ Ruskin Bond, *The Adventures of Rusty* (1991; Delhi: The Students' Stores, 1998).

⁵⁸ Bond, "Henry: A Chameleon," *An Island of Trees* (Delhi: Ratna Sagar, 1992).

⁵⁹ Tucker 100.

⁶⁰ Bond, "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright," *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories* (1989; Calcutta: Penguin Books India, 1991).

⁶¹ Bond, introduction, *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories*, by Bond (1980; Calcutta: Penguin Books India, 1990) 11.

⁶² Bond, "The Room of Many Colours," *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories*.

⁶³ Bond, "The Woman on Platform 8," *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories*.

⁶⁴ Bond 10.

CHAPTER 3

THE PRISONER OF GENDER

THE PRISONER OF GENDER---THE GIRL CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

*There are two lasting bequests we should give our children...one is roots,
the other is wings.¹*

The recent prominence accorded to the girl child in the media, in literature and in social developmental projects suggests that there is at last a concerted effort to bequeath wings to the girl child, who has hitherto always been held down to her roots. Trends indicate that in most progressive social formations, there is now a movement away from "Conventional sex-differentiated socialisation practices [that] tend to encourage the development of roots in girls and to minimize the importance of wings."² Declarations such as the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child (1990-2000), the SAARC Year of the Girl Child (1990) and the International Year of the Girl Child (1991) have ensured that the plight of the girl child in particular has attracted worldwide attention and recognition.

in a country like India, these movements are of greater significance, because India has a hoary tradition of neglect of the girl child. This has been

attributed to a complex interaction of historical, religious and socio-economic factors which nevertheless cannot obscure the fact that the girl child has been a particularly marginalised figure in India. There is no doubt that campaigns launched by government and private agencies have gained for the girl child a visibility that had long been denied. In fact, if government propaganda is to be believed, the girl child has never had it so good. Populist measures such as the launching of literacy campaigns and special schemes for the girl child, coupled with State efforts to induce an awareness of the value of the girl child are ostensibly an indicator of her enhanced status in contemporary India. Yet the daily reportage of unimaginable atrocities inflicted on girl children projects an entirely different picture. This contradiction points to the basic inability of the State machinery to effect attitudinal changes in the social and familial spheres. It is evident that the transformation has to come from within, that the battle has to be fought at the ideological level, while at the same time conditions are created such that the girl child no longer needs to be (dis)regarded as a burden and a curse. Since attitudes towards the girl child are frequently perpetuated through folk and popular culture, these avenues need to be re-examined to effect a meaningful transformation.

The Girl Child in the Indian literary tradition

Historically, the girl child in India has been a marginalised and victimised figure, who was neglected and ignored, or overly protected and circumscribed.

Sudhir Kakar notes that “The Indian tradition is indifferent, if not overtly hostile, to the developmental fate of girls.”³ He quotes from the *Atharvaveda* to support his opinion that the preference for a boy child is as old as Indian society itself. Kakar concludes from a review of ancient Indian texts that children merited little mention in these texts, and wherever they featured, the stress was invariably on the boy child (the only honourable exception being Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*). In an article tracing the changing images of women in Indian literature for children, Manorama Jafa makes a similar observation:

The girl child is seldom the central character of a story, perhaps because the identity of a girl became recognised only when she reached marriageable age.⁴

Jafa notes that even women writers, in their short stories and retellings of folk tales, portrayed the girl child as a weak figure in need of constant care and supervision, a character who was expected to cater to the needs and wishes of fathers, brothers and husbands, regardless of her personal desires and needs. However, she singles out a few exceptional works in literature that focused on the lives and problems of the girl child, such as Tagore’s *Kabuliwala*, Premchand’s *Nirmala* and Dakshina Mitra Majumdar’s “Kiranmala” in his collection *Thakurmar Jhuli*.⁵ Yet, even in stories where the spontaneity and natural ebullience of girl children were portrayed, there were suggestions that these tendencies needed to be curbed in them. For instance, Devika Bose points

out that in some of Tagore's short stories, there are depictions of the playfulness and sense of mischief of little girls. However, it is suggested that their love of freedom and their wildness are attributes more becoming in boys. The final transformation of the girls in most of these stories into obedient and loving wives, indicates that this is perceived as the ultimate destiny of the girl child.⁶ The need to control and protect girl children manifests itself as a nurturant and affectionate gesture, ostensibly designed to promote a sense of security and well-being in them. However, as Jasbir Jain has shown, it is ironically this very circumscription and defining of boundaries that engenders in the girl child a lurking fear of the outside world, and heightens her insecurity.⁷

Studies of literary works indicate that the depiction of the girl child has undergone several changes and manifestations in response to political and social pressures. Viney Kirpal notes that a comparison between texts of the pre-independence period and those written after independence show certain broad differences in outlook and characterisation.⁸ She observes that in the literature of the period before independence, the portraits of girls tended to be traditional. They were depicted as miniature women, and issues such as the transition to womanhood or the period of adolescence were largely unexplored. Despite the fact that their plight as victims of patriarchal oppression was highlighted by the sensitive treatment of themes such as infanticide, marriage to older men and dual moral standards, they continued to be defined in socially accepted roles set out by patriarchal authority. Post-independence literature, on the other hand,

depicts girl children as children rather than miniature adults, and focuses on the role played by socialisation in the construction of gender. It is possible to discern in these texts how “ the growing girl is indoctrinated to contain, withhold, conceal, suppress her real self.”⁹ While most of the portraits in the language literatures continue to be stereotypical, Indian English writing shows the impact of the feminist movement of the West. This impact is limited, insofar as the emancipated girls depicted in the texts generally belong to the privileged classes. Kirpal concludes with the observation:

The emerging portrait of the girl child is not a static one and the depictions mirror a tension between the reformist sensibility and the forces of orthodoxy.¹⁰

The popular conception of the girl child even in literate, progressive societies in India today appears to emphasise her role as care giver and little mother. Vrinda Nabar has discussed the portrayal of the girl child as girl-woman in Tagore's works such as *Didi* and *Post Master*, suggesting that Tagore's portraits are (regrettably) not dated, but incredibly contemporary.¹¹ Despite the fact that the girl child is today regarded as a welcome, even sought after, addition to the family, the rationale offered is the same: that is, she is cherished for her loving and affectionate nature and her willingness to compromise. Besides, the perception of her eventual role as mother and preserver of the domestic domain continues unchanged. It is a significant indicator of the unaltered conception of

the girl child's destiny, that a male 'liberal' writer, discussing the condition of the girl child, makes the following statement:

Her survival is essential for the continuation of the human species... She is denied a right to live and be a mother tomorrow.¹²

Despite his avowed commitment to the girl child, Sherwani continues to slot the girl child into her predetermined role as future mother. Her survival is perceived as essential, not for her own sake, but for the sake of the human race.

Girl children in contemporary literature for children are rarely seen as 'conflictual subjects and sites of conflict.'¹³ Their relationships with the members of their family are generally harmonious and devoid of complications. In the few cases which qualify as exceptions, where the girl child's relation to her family and society are problematised, there is no attempt to perceive the tensions inherent in her quest for self-definition, or the issues that structure her subjectivity. The emphasis in these instances is on the resolution of the perceived conflict in a manner that does not threaten the patriarchal paradigm.

Representation and Reality

In a study of the works of Simone Schwarz-Bart and Anita Desai, Indira Karamcheti quotes Said's views on representation:

...representation, or more particularly the *act* of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves violence of some sort to the *subject* of the representation...¹⁴

In the process of representing girl children in their books, writers of children's literature in India perform a similar act of violence, and the image formed subsequently bears witness to this act, because the girl child as subject is presented not as she *is*, but as the writer *wants* her to be. This is the ideological bias that needs to be uncovered and addressed.

In order to ascertain the manner in which the girl child is perceived by society, an analysis of a few representative texts will be attempted in this dissertation to show how the girl child is being constructed in popular literature for children. Although the mimetic function of literature has long been discredited, there is no doubt that a study of the power relations that underlie the representation of the girl child in literature can provide useful insights into the modes of perception of the authors, and the issues at stake in the construction of the girl child. In a study of the girl child in Hindi literature, Santosh Gupta observes:

The images of human personality that the literature of a society contains are usually regarded as an indication of the society's basic

conceptualisation of human nature. Not only are the ideological and psychological concepts of the society of a given period reflected in the literary images, but there is also in them, an indication of the normative values of the society.¹⁵

The texts selected for analysis are those which have been published between 1995 and 1999, and feature girl children in dominant roles interacting with children of their own or of the opposite sex. The contemporaneity of the texts makes it possible to determine current attitudes to the girl child, and the tensions and power equations that configure parental and societal relations with her. As Peter Hunt has pointed out, "Children's literature cannot escape...from ideology, past or present. Because the text is intended for supposedly 'innocent' readers, it can scarcely be expected to be innocent of itself."¹⁶ Besides, children's books tend to be, in Barthesian terms, more lisible than scriptible, that is, they are closed texts that limit the possibilities of interpretation. Working, therefore, on the premise that trends in children's literature are indicative of the ideology of the author/ publisher, it becomes imperative to unearth what Hunt terms the "sub-text of manipulation"¹⁷ that is designed to influence the child reader. Moreover, there is a need to deconstruct received notions of the value and significance of girlhood as portrayed in the discourse of the selected texts. Catherine Belsey has described the aim of the critical technique of deconstruction thus:

...the object of the critic, then, is to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions...¹⁸

An examination of the texts selected for discussion in terms of the omissions they display with regard to the self-definition of the girl child is likely to reveal the agenda of the authors, publishers and purchasers of children's books, and the ideology they consciously or unconsciously seek to perpetuate. If, as Hunt suggests, literature is "the writing authorized and prioritized by a powerful minority,"¹⁹ then it should be possible to exploit this power to effect change, by identifying the absences in the text and dismantling the existing structures to enable a more meaningful representation of the girl child in literature.

Emancipating the girl child

The rationale underlying the selection of Indian English texts is the assumption that if any attitudinal changes towards the girl child are to be detected, they are most likely to occur in books written in English. As Navin Menon has stated:

English is an important link language and the major chunk of books produced in India are in this language, catering to the urban section of the

society—the people with the buying power (since 40% of the Indian population have poor financial resources, hence restricted literacy and limited readership).²⁰

The growing focus on the girl child and the insights gained by feminist thought may conceivably have percolated into literature written in English to a more significant extent than in other Indian languages. This is because the audience to which English literature is addressed is primarily urban, and therefore more likely to have been influenced by global attitudinal changes. However, it is hypothesised that despite nearly four decades of emancipatory activism and academic efforts, the amelioration in the status of the girl child has been at best marginal, even cosmetic. What needs to be ascertained is *how* the girl child is negotiating her new position in the limelight, and what are the subtle pressures of patriarchy and class relations that continue to constitute her identity, despite her supposed empowerment.

The recent focus on the girl child as a dominant character in books written for children is doubtless laudable, but an examination of the influence of feminism on the depiction of girl children seems warranted. Indian English books are targeted at the middle and upper class urban families. Women belonging to this class have, on account of their education, evolved a certain degree of consciousness regarding their rights and the rights of girl children. Therefore, it may be presumed that the focus on girl children, and the treatment of themes

such as equal rights and opportunities by writers of children's books, may conceivably have some impact on the child reader.

Since authors of English books are likely to have had access to at least some of the Western critical modes of feminist thought, it is possible that these emancipatory ideas will have influenced their outlook and creative works. However, as Vrinda Nabar points out, "the mere use of a language (English), in which there was by then a tradition of feminist revolt, need not assume a difference in approach."²¹ The subtle and tenacious hold of the traditional mindset, even amongst the most liberal of Indian writers, cannot be easily dismissed or undermined.

Nabar opines that in India today, it is the middle class that holds the key to social change. Hence, a sensibility shift is required among the members of this class, and this is possible only when the fallacies of their outlook are identified. She remarks:

The middle class world-view may be interpreted as broadly 'Indian'. It is one which is defined in terms of family and community. Commitment and responsibility to both are an essential part of this view, and both in turn are visualized in the context of tradition. It is a tradition which is broadly negative in its approach to women...It is also a tradition whose hold appeared to cut across class-barriers. Stri-jati, it would appear, had over

the centuries acquired a kind of common denominator which retained the margin-centre dialectic within its unity of experience.²²

In the light of these observations, it appears that if change in outlook and attitudes is to be effected, it is the ideology of the middle-class that needs to be targeted. Moreover, the middle-class today represents an amalgam of Western thought (characterised by its thrust on individualism) and traditional attitudes that stress conformity. At present, it is the conflict and tension between the two outlooks that is in focus, but these may well be construed as the growth pangs of a society coming to terms with a challenge to its centuries-old tradition. There is a distinct possibility that given time and with concerted effort, a world-view may be evolved which incorporates elements of both outlooks, and which is flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions.

In order to determine the influence of emancipatory notions on the representation of the girl child in literature, an examination of texts will be undertaken on the basis of a few key issues, viz.:

- 1) the horizon of choices and alternatives open to girl children in comparison with their male counterparts;
- 2) the degree of autonomy and self-determination accorded to the girl child;
- 3) the level of integration of girls into society and the expectations placed on them;

- 4) The perception of role conflict between the girl child's individual and social selves.

Constituting the girl child

In an article titled "Mothers and Daughters", Neera Sohoni remarks:

As the post-Beijing Conference world becomes kinder, gentler and more committed to issues of gender justice and parity, it is hard to see how capable we are of actually applying those lofty notions to our families, in particular to our daughters...being a daughter today is no cinch. Today's girls must learn not merely to grow up but to thrive in the confusing and contradictory rearing scenario presented by women who are feminists (or supporters of women's rights as human rights) in public but mothers privately.²³

The above comments encapsulate the dilemma of contemporary Indian women, and women writers in particular. While writers of children's books (of either sex) who display in their works a sympathetic concern for the rights of girls and women, may not arbitrarily be designated as feminists, there is no doubt that issues such as gender parity and the rights of girl children are matters that are of special concern to them. The influence of Western feminist thought on Indian academics, writers and intellectuals is difficult to pinpoint, but its presence cannot

be denied. Nabar notes that the feminist movement in the Indian context is embedded in contradictions, which include factors such as economic deprivation, caste, fundamentalism, sectarianism and the sway of superstition.²⁴ However, the awareness that the girl child deserves a better deal has percolated to nearly all classes of society, both rural and urban. The efforts of governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations and social workers have not been entirely in vain. The problem lies in building on this awareness to effect attitudinal changes. As Sohoni points out, the question of finding a balance between liberal modes of thought and conventional attitudes is one that plagues most middle-class women today.

The focus of this study is the constitution of the girl child and the effect of feminist thought on this construction. The term 'feminism' is open to several interpretations depending on one's theoretical standpoint. In the context of the books discussed in this study, feminism focuses on the fact that "to be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female or male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression."²⁵ The implications of such a definition are significant: it suggests that emancipation from oppression is necessary for *both* sexes, and neither the male nor the female paradigm should be considered normative. The study of the level of emancipation of the girl child in these texts, therefore, does not include a comparative evaluation of the freedom given to girls and boys. Manorama Jafa, in an article reviewing the changing images of women in Indian children's

literature, discusses books published on the theme of equality between boys and girls, in response to a competition organised jointly by the Children's Book Trust and UNICEF. She notes that most of the entries featured siblings, and concludes that these stories demonstrated that, "if given the opportunity girls can succeed in doing what boys can; they can play games, climb trees, solve mysteries, and become leaders." ²⁶ In her opinion, such stories break the stereotypical portrayal of girls in domestic or passive roles. Such an attitude appears to be rather reductive, since it implies acquiescence to the practice of evaluating the self in terms of patriarchal norms. By asserting that if girls can do what boys can, they become equal to boys, Jafa concedes that the male sphere of activity and the male intellect is normative and worthy of striving to achieve. There is also the complementary question that begs attention: whether boys are capable of excelling in the skills traditionally imparted to girls. Hence, the texts in this chapter will be analysed, not with a view to ascertaining whether the girl child has succeeded in catching up with her male counterpart, but rather to determine the kind of choices that are made available to the girl child, and how much freedom she has to chart out a course for herself.

Language and articulation

One of the factors complicating this discussion is the fact that the texts are written in English, and articulate issues that concern the girl child in what is still perceived as an alien tongue. The texts discussed in this study are

representations of girl children whose identity is articulated in a language that seeks to minimise their individual differences in terms of linguistic background, and homogenises their experience by placing them within the same class. The adoption of English as the language of communication by the middle class in India has ironically united disparate linguistic communities, by making it possible for them to relate to each other's experiences in a 'neutral' language. Meera Bhatnagar comments that " Strange though it may seem, westernisation of the Indian educational system has been far greater since independence, than during the British rule." ²⁷ The present generation of children belonging to the middle class are completely comfortable with English as a medium of expression. They are also able to relate to books narrating in English the experiences of children like them.

Maureen Devine declares that "language is power and meaning...[it] frames our perceptual possibilities." ²⁸ If the rediscovery and evolution of a feminist discourse has enabled women to empower themselves, then knowledge of English has conferred on children the power of self-articulation. The English language has endowed speakers of it with a preferred status, and the body of literature written in English has given them a representative power that is not as much in evidence in other Indian languages. However, the issue at stake here is not whether the girl child is being adequately represented, but the nature of the identity that finds representation in Indian English books. As A.K. Ramanujan has pointed out, the English language stood for colonial India and the West, "which

also served as a disruptive creative other than [sic] both alienated us from and revealed us (in its terms) to ourselves.”²⁹ The issue that warrants examination is to what extent the identity of the girl child that is being articulated in English is a function of the language constructing that identity, and how much of it is a reflection of the contemporary Indian girl child. In the process of appropriating English to describe the Indian experience, have Indian English writers for children surrendered to the lure of constructing an identity in terms of the “disruptive creative other”?

There are many issues involved in the production of a children’s story in English in India. Firstly, the writer is generally an adult seeking to create the experience of children, so a certain amount of distancing is already in place. Secondly, the language in which this experience is represented is English, while the spirit that is being conveyed is a hybrid one that combines in itself the most disparate elements of tradition and modernity. In some genres of children’s books such as the school story and adventure fiction, the experience is itself a recreation of an alien progenitor. Any writer of stories for children has to take into account these factors and circumvent them in order to create an authentic experience.

Imaging a shadow---the girl child in school stories

In a study of the writing of girl children published in periodicals, Ipshita Chanda makes a pertinent observation:

At the forefront of self-articulation are, ironically, girls who write in an acquired language. What then of those “other” girls, limited by gender, subject and linguistic competence who are excluded from speaking of themselves? And of whom do girls writing in English speak? Of themselves? Or of their reflected self-images of canonical characters in English literature?”³⁰

When Chanda speaks of the fallacies inherent in the self-articulation of girl children in an acquired language, the implication is that the images produced are inauthentic and inaccurate reflections. A cursory examination of school stories written by Maya Chandrasekharan, a teenager, will reveal the ruptures in the construction of girl children in Indian boarding schools. These children appear to be what Chanda terms “reflected self- images of canonical characters in English literature.” Chandrasekharan depicts the world of the boarding school in a faithful reconstruction of the school story popularised by Enid Blyton.

The continued appeal of the school story genre in India, particularly among girls, long after it has outgrown its charm in the West, is a matter worthy

of investigation. The first indication of its popularity lay in the success of the Juneli stories written by Swapna Dutta for publication in serialised form in 1972-73. These stories were later published in book form in 1992.³¹ The fact that a young writer like Chandrasekharan has, between 1993 and 1996, opted to write stories in this tradition points to the popularity of this genre. Several factors may have contributed to this phenomenon. The girl child in India, regardless of her class and background, is still severely circumscribed in the name of protection. The escapist fare provided by the school story serves to fulfil her dreams of independence and liberation from oppressive constraints. Despite the fact that the boarding school is also peopled with authority figures, the plot depicts the girls flouting and subverting adult authority, which adds to the romantic appeal of these books. The boarding school ethos appears attractive to girl readers in India, because it represents a world insulated from the expectations and regulatory mechanisms that govern the family situation. In the school environment rules exist, but they are often broken, chiefly because the girls function as a group, and the safety provided by numbers lessens the fear of repercussions. The sense of power that being part of a peer-group confers is also a heady experience. In many complex ways, therefore, institutions like the boarding school continue to reflect the aspirations of girl children of the middle class in India.

Chandrasekharan's books are open to the same criticisms levelled against Enid Blyton. Her books concern themselves only with the privileged class: some

of the girls' families own farmhouses. In a critique of Enid Blyton's books, Ranjana Sengupta points out that Blyton's stories dealt with the codes of the upper middle class, who were expecting to run an Empire when they grew up:

The homilies on team spirit, on an English Sense of Honour, on the importance of obedience to a clearly defined leadership were entirely appropriate to a generation hoping (vainly, as it turned out) to pick up their solar topees and head for Kenya, Burma and other points East of Suez on reaching adulthood.³²

Chandrasekharan's school stories tend to valorise a particular image of the ideal girl child which incorporates such traits as sportsmanship, respect for discipline, fairness and a sense of placing common good before the self. While these are doubtless commendable qualities to inculcate, the question that arises is, *whose* common good is being taken into account? There are stray references to underprivileged children in the books, but on the whole the stories show a preoccupation with the self-contained, upper middle class world that is assumed to be a microcosm of the world the girls are to encounter when they grow up. Moreover, the books display a disturbing trend that seeks to homogenise the girl children into a pattern of conformity. Both *Dreamer at the Manor* and *Changes at the Manor* begin with portraying girls who are individuated on account of some aspect of their personality. By the end of the books, all the girls' quirks have been

teased out of existence and an assembly line of uniformly hearty, warm and cheerful girls has been produced.

It is evident that old-world British values still exert a powerful influence on child readers in India today, and the canon still reigns supreme in the imagination of Indian children. Many of the references contained in Chandrasekharan's books are no longer relevant and have been largely discarded as obsolete, even in the land of their origin. For instance, phrases such as "going to Coventry" are no longer self-explanatory to the present generation of children, unless they are avid Blyton readers, so these references limit the appeal of the book and restrict their readership to the most determined Blyton fans.

Women and the girl child

An important indicator of the degree to which feminist ideas have influenced the construction of the girl child in the selected texts is the portrayal of adult women, and the role envisaged for them by the authors. The mother tends to be the role model for children of both sexes in their early years, and for girl children right through their childhood and adolescence. Hence, it is necessary to ascertain what her position is in the domestic sphere, how far she has succeeded in emerging into the public sphere and how she negotiates and resists patriarchal definition. In her keynote address at a seminar on women creative writers, Meenakshi Mukherjee made the following comment:

Even in prosperous and enlightened households where men define their self-images in terms of individual enterprise and achievement, women are seen only in terms of their familial roles.³³

Similarly, in a research project that sought to identify sex-bias in language materials, Indira Kulshreshtha concluded that in prescribed textbooks of the mother tongue, women were depicted in traditional stereotyped roles such as serving, cooking and taking care of children. Textbooks in English popularised the image of women as symbols of love and affection rather than as persons who were “self-reliant, self-directed and self-propelled.”³⁴

Regrettably, contemporary popular fiction for children in India displays the same stereotyping of women in passive or extensional roles. The mothers of children in these stories continue to be defined in terms of domestic space. In a discussion of Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Between Two Worlds*, Indira Karamcheti notes that the female characters in the book are in stasis, that is, they do not move spatially.³⁵ This is true of the stories under consideration as well. Even in cases where the adult women are relocated (as in *The Fiery Cross*, *Footprints in the Sand* and *The Biratpur Adventure*), the women continue to be identified by the passive roles they play. A significant majority of the women portrayed in the selected texts are depicted as housewives. While this in itself is no disqualification, it is disturbing to note that these women appear to have little say

in matters beyond their domestic sphere. Even within their own domain, they are often over ruled by their husbands. Most disconcertingly, on the few occasions when they assert themselves, it is only to reaffirm the codes of behaviour delineated by patriarchy, thereby indicating the extent to which these codes have been internalised by them. It is this total and unquestioning acquiescence to the patriarchal paradigm that Nabar contests. She discusses the need to create a fundamental awareness of the "patterns of unequal prescription" underlying the man-woman relationship in India, and speaks of the necessity of "consciousness erasing" to enable the constitution of more balanced relations between the sexes.³⁶

Mothers as role models---an overview

In *Company for Manisha*, Manisha's mother is disturbed on seeing the reactions of her daughter to the arrival of Anu. Although she tries to be gentle and comforting in her dealings with Manisha, at no time does she openly express empathy with her, or try to see the matter from her viewpoint. She unquestioningly accepts her husband's declaration that Manisha is merely behaving like a spoiled child and needs to be taught a lesson. Her husband sternly instructs her to leave Manisha alone and let matters sort themselves out, and she complies without protest. She is depicted as putting her family before herself to the extent that, when she falls ill before Manisha's birthday, she is overcome by guilt that she will be unable to organise a birthday party for her. Her

final comment on Manisha's eventual transformation into a 'well-behaved' child is " You came to your senses" (113), which in itself is a significant indicator of the extent to which she has internalised patriarchal codes of acceptable conduct. She refers to her husband whenever matters at home get too difficult for her to handle, and allows him to direct the tenor of her interaction with her daughter.

In *The Fiery Cross*, Aarti's mother is similarly portrayed as a mere shadow of her husband. She is never referred to by her first name. Even her husband addresses her as 'Aarti's mother'. While this is a common practice even today in many parts of India, it is one which has more or less been eschewed by urban educated Indians. Aarti's father is a diplomat who belongs to the elite in terms of social class. The fact that the author chooses to make a character of this background address his wife in such conventional terms, is a disturbing sign that women still continue to be identified and recognised only in relation to their families. Aarti's mother asserts herself only on occasions when she has to define the codes of conduct suitable for her daughter. She decides that it is not safe for Aarti to travel around the island on her own, thus reiterating a patriarchal norm ostensibly designed to 'protect' the girl child. Her sense of moral outrage at the fact that their chauffeur Albert is not legally married to his partner, and the consequent declaration that he is a bad influence on Aarti, are mocked at by Aarti and her father, but this is again an indication of the complete internalisation of patriarchal codes. She appears incapable of taking independent decisions, even on matters of child-rearing, which is generally defined as a woman's

exclusive domain. Her first actions on arriving at Seychelles are learning to cook local Creole delicacies and learning the local language, so that she is not cheated while shopping. Her identity continues to be linked with her husband and child, and she remains firmly circumscribed within the sphere designated for her by patriarchy.

In *Footprints in the Sand*, the children's mother is an artist who lives in a holiday cottage with her two children while her husband is away at work. Although she is depicted as capable of holding her own in a crisis situation, she tends to defer decision making till her husband is at hand. For instance, when Arnab and Paloma want to go boating with Grandpa Murrugalli, she tells them to wait for their father's next visit to consult him. She is unwilling to take a decision and the responsibility that it entails, preferring to have her husband deal with the children's disappointment if he refuses permission.

Vrinda Nabar describes the quintessential image of the mother in India thus:

She is imprinted on the children's consciousness as sublime sufferer, selfless slave, tireless worker for her family's comfort and happiness.³⁷

In most of the books under consideration, the mothers are shown framed within the domestic space allotted to them. Their chief concerns are feeding the family and catering to their demands. In *The Crest of the Snake's Head*, Madhavi's mother is shown as a committed slave to her children's whims. She turns out a

veritable feast of home-made snacks for Madhavi and her friends. The latter express wholeheartedly their appreciation for these snacks, and compare them favourably with ready to eat stuff from the market. Later, Madhavi's mother mentions to her that she is tired and would like to rest before making hot samosas for her son who is due to return shortly. There is no indictment, implicit or otherwise, of a system which deems it mandatory for a woman to cater ceaselessly to the unending demands of her family. On the contrary, by expressing appreciation of the virtues of homemade food and of their maker, the impression is reinforced that the true salvation for a woman lies in feeding her family good, wholesome meals. In the same story, Arjun's mother is depicted as being assailed by guilt pangs because she has to leave her two children in the care of their father, so that she can attend her parents' ruby anniversary celebrations. Her husband dismisses her misgivings and encourages her to go, but there is a disturbing rationale offered---she must go because her younger son Nitin is too attached to her and needs to be made a 'man'. The implication is that a woman tends to make her son effeminate by her nurturing nature, and the child can only become independent when he is physically beyond the reach of her clinging presence. Here independence is perceived as a manly virtue, as opposed to the dependence implied in the mother-child bond. Therefore, an excess of motherly influence is considered undesirable, because the mother is likely to transfer her sense of dependence to her child.

Even in the rare instances where women are depicted as having an identity apart from their domestic one, their portrayal is problematic. In *Kusum*, most of the women in the neighbourhood are career women. Yet, no mention is made of the nature of their jobs, neither are there any scenes depicting them interacting in their work environment. Only Mrs. Gupta's profession is specified-- she works in a bank. Raveena's aunt makes a brief appearance as a lawyer and Mira Kohli is described as a social worker. Their efforts to free Kusum from the clutches of her employers are ultimately ineffectual on account of the system, and this detracts from their depiction as purposeful women who can make a difference and inaugurate a process of change. As Sangari and Vaid point out, the mere emergence of women into the public sphere is no indication of their emancipation:

For middle class women it [the differential construction of the public sphere] signals their partial emergence into a different kind of economic sphere (into which they will carry the constraints of conduct inculcated by the private sphere).³⁸

The career women portrayed in the books under discussion are seen as going in for 'soft' options in their careers such as teaching and jobs in the service sector, which do not encroach upon traditional male preserves. They are singularly unimpressive as role models of self-determination and independence for the girl child.

Certain stereotypes pertaining to women continue to be perpetuated in the texts under discussion. For instance, in *Company for Manisha*, the character of Mamta *bu*a typifies the image of the waspish, frustrated spinster. Mamta is Manisha's unmarried aunt, a businesswoman who is outspoken and forthright in her views. Her brother makes allowances for her sharp tongue and her bluntness by asserting that she has led a lonely life and is hence to be excused. The implication is quite evident: single women living alone are prone to be eccentric, and non-conformist behaviour is dismissed as being aberrant and not worthy of notice. Since a woman like Mamta cannot be defined in terms of patriarchal paradigms, her presence becomes a source of discomfort, and her family feels constrained to offer justification for her behaviour. Meenakshi Mukherje quotes from *House for Mr. Biswas* to describe the general condition of women in Indian society:

[for these women] ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow.³⁹

In such a society, any woman who is unmarried as a matter of choice is looked down upon or derided as being unsuitable for marriage. By portraying Mamta as a shrewish, unpleasant woman and equating 'living alone' with 'loneliness', the author validates society's conception of single women as people who are unable

to form and sustain lasting relationships, and hence deserving of sympathy and pity.

Perhaps the only reasonably non-typical depiction of a woman is perceptible in *The Hilltop Mystery*.⁴⁰ The children's grandmother is depicted as a matriarch running her house and estate with competence and efficiency. Although she displays certain typical traits associated with grandmotherly behaviour (she complains that the children are too thin; she is always feeding people who visit), she is also fiercely independent in spirit and an indomitable fighter. She handles a crisis like the forest fire with speed and competence, and shows herself to be a woman of conviction. Unlike the traditional protective image of grandmothers, she does not mollycoddle the children, but grants them a great deal of freedom. She vests confidence in their ability to solve the mystery of Pranav's disappearance, and actually plays a crucial role in the climax of the story. She bristles at any derogatory reference to her age with its implications of helplessness, and presents the complete antithesis of the popular conception of grandmothers as retiring, physically weak individuals, steeped in superstition and prayer.

The influence of feminism on the delineation of women characters in the texts under discussion is practically non-existent. Uma Parameswaran observes:

Feminism seeks to retrieve the sense of self, of female as subject, of women as controllers rather than controlled. In this paradigm, writers portray characters who instinctively or consciously shrug off the traditional role and expectations of their gender, and control their personal space.⁴¹

Firstly, there is no personal space defined by the women characters: they continue to occupy the space set out for them by a patriarchal society. Secondly, they do not reveal themselves to be in control of their lives, because they allow themselves to be patterned according to social expectations of their gender. Finally, the control that they do exhibit is designed to indoctrinate the next generation of girl children into replicating the existing patterns of domination in society.

As discussed earlier, an examination of children's books in terms of their sub-text, and the omissions and slippages concealed in them, can be construed as a significant commentary on the ideological bias of the authors and publishers. One such interesting instance of the latter is the almost complete omission of any reference to women in *Aditya the Underwater Boy*. This is a book written in the tradition of futuristic science fiction stories. Aditya is a boy created solely from the cells of the geneticist Professor Sen. Aditya is genetically modified so that he can survive under water for indefinite periods. This bypassing of the role of women in procreation becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it frees women from their traditionally assigned identity as carriers of the

human race, and makes it possible for them to define their personalities on their own terms. On the other, it signifies an erasure, an implication that women are now dispensable commodities, since their procreative functions have been artificially replicated. The resonance of books like this warrants investigation, particularly in an age that is just beginning to perceive the awesome scientific and ethical implications of cloning techniques.

Despite the fact that Aditya is literally a motherless boy, (or perhaps because of it), there is a definite maternal presence in the story. Woman in this book is mythicised and deified in the persona of such characters as Kea the dolphin, the high priestess of Atlanta, and Ganadja, the ancestral mother of the human race. These female characters constitute what Uma Parameswaran calls "the exalted Other,"⁴² in that they are celebrated and revered as the fountainhead of instinctual wisdom, and are renowned for their healing powers and compassion. Kea the dolphin's first appearance in the story shows her rescuing Aditya from the clutches of an octopus and thereafter, she appoints herself as his guardian, protecting him from future dangers. Kea is often called upon by the shamans to use her healing powers, and Aditya mentions that she would make a wonderful teacher. The high priestess of Atlanta is depicted as a graceful old woman with the magical power to awaken the third eye, thereby implying that it is only the female principle that has access to hidden knowledge and the secret world that lurks within us. Ganadja the dolphin mother is portrayed as being wise, cautious and curious. She is desolate when her husband is killed

by the sharks, and remains rootless until she gives birth to a son. Then she appears to rediscover a sense of purpose in her life. Her existence seems to be bereft of meaning in the absence of the male principle, and she finally finds fulfilment only when she is reunited with her husband in human form.

The only creature remotely resembling a girl child in this story is Una. She is a cyborg, a human being with artificial limbs and organs. Cyborgs replace their human body parts with resilient artificial ones so that they can prolong life. Una is in many ways representative of the girl child in India today: she mentions that she did not choose to be a cyborg but was forced to do so; she nurtures a secret garden with an entrance small enough to prevent adults from discovering it; she loves fairy tales, despite her parents' dictum that she should only read serious and realistic books. In other words, she is the subjugated Other who is physically in the control of adults and deprived of choices, but devises means to subvert authority and assert herself.

The objectification of the girl child results in a perception of her as the Other, thereby effecting a certain distancing from her and a consolidation of power over her. Uma Parameswaran comments that "The Other is usually seen as object- inferior, controllable and invariably controlled."⁴³ Una is depicted as a misfit in the artificial world of the cyborgs, where synthetic means are employed to prolong life, while the 'life' that Una longs for is associated with warmth and

sensuousness. She is still a child of nature in a world that has abjured all that is natural.

The story constructs oppositions that illustrate preconceived notions of the male and female principles. Oppositions are set up between magical/ scientific and irrational/rational. By identifying Kea with all that is magical and defying logical explanation, the female principle is endowed with a nebulous aura and mystique that places woman beyond the material, and hence denies her a meaningful identity in the 'real' world.

Conclusion

The portrayal of women in the selected texts conforms to the stereotypical conception of them as primarily confined to and identified in terms of the domestic sphere. Regardless of the class to which they belong, "the one common denominator linking these women together is their more or less unquestioned acceptance of their role as male/ husband/ father- defined. They exist in relation to a particular male principle."⁴⁴ As a result, the girl children in the books under consideration are conditioned to pattern their behaviour in accordance with patriarchal dictates. There is no evidence or indication that the women in these books experience any discontent regarding their assigned roles, nor is there a questioning of the role-play expected of them. They appear to be

content functioning within the space allotted to them, and this in itself is a disturbing signal.

In a discussion of Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti", Spivak comments that Mahasweta confronts the severe truth, "that one of the bases in women's subalternity (and indeed in unequal gendering on other levels of society) is internalized constraints seen as responsibility, and therefore the very basis of gender-ethics." Spivak comments further that "internalized gendering perceived as ethical choice is the hardest roadblock for women the world over. The recognition of male exploitation must be supplemented with this acknowledgement."⁴⁵ The lack of awareness of the inherent inequality in the gender-based division of roles among the women depicted in the texts ensures that, when the girl children in the stories question patriarchal dictates, there are no answers forthcoming. So complete is the internalisation of gendering, that the adult women in these books actively participate in the process of reproducing the politics of domination, and thereby perpetuate the mores prescribed by a male-oriented society.

In the following section, a content analysis of four select texts will be made to examine how the girl child is being constructed in contemporary Indian English literature for children. The texts have been chosen on the basis of enhanced visibility of girl children and their depiction in dominant roles. As mentioned earlier, the texts will be discussed in terms of the choices made available to the

girl protagonists, and the influence of patriarchy that can still be discerned in their construction. The books selected for discussion are *Kusum*, *Company for Manisha*, *The Fiery Cross* and *The Hilltop Mystery*.

Notes

- ¹ Carter Hodding Jr., qtd. in Meenakshi Gupta, "The Girl Child: A Psychological Perspective," *The Girl Child* 44.
- ² Meenakshi Gupta 44.
- ³ Sudhir Kakar, *Indian Childhood: Cultural Ideals and Social Reality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979) 18.
- ⁴ Manorama Jafa, "From Goddess to Prime Minister: Changing Images of Women in Indian Children's Literature," *Bookbird* vol.34.1 (Spring 1996): 8.
- ⁵ Jafa 10.
- ⁶ Devika Bose, "The Girl Child in Early Twentieth Century Bengali Literature: Nursery Rhymes, Doggerels and Fiction Considered," *The Girl Child* 143.
- ⁷ Jasbir Jain, "The Marginalisation of the Girl Child: A Narrative Perspective," *The Girl Child* 83.
- ⁸ Viney Kirpal, introduction, *The Girl Child* ix.
- ⁹ Kirpal xi.
- ¹⁰ Kirpal ix.
- ¹¹ Nabar 63,73.
- ¹² Azim Sherwani, *The Girl Child in Crisis* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1998) 123.
- ¹³ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: gender, culture and postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 136.

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⁴¹ Uma Parameswaran, "Girl Children in Rushdie's Fiction," *The Girl Child* 269.

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KUSUM

A major focus in this study is the portrayal of the girl child in contemporary Indian English fiction. For this purpose, a selection of texts with girl children as major characters has been made. One of these is *Kusum* by Dipavali Debroy. This short novel revolves around the eponymous heroine who belongs to the working class. It is one of the few books in the category under consideration, with a girl child from the underprivileged class as a central character. Although the action in the story is woven around the travails of twelve year old Kusum, it is seen through the eyes of Arushi, a girl belonging to the affluent class.

Arushi meets Kusum while visiting her uncle in Burdwan. Kusum is the daughter of Moni, who works as a maid in Arushi's uncle's house. Their first meeting is in the mango grove bordering the house. A little later, Kusum 'saves' Arushi when she is rooted in fear at the sight of a grass snake slithering over her foot. This act of rescue sets the terms for their subsequent friendship, and is echoed in the rescue act Arushi effects at the end of the novel when she 'liberates' Kusum from her oppressive employers.

In the course of her stay in Burdwan, Arushi befriends Kusum and persuades her mother to take Kusum back to Delhi with them, to be employed as a maid in their neighbour's house. The incentive offered is that Kusum will be

able to contribute to the meagre family income, since her father is injured and unable to earn a wage. Kusum accompanies Arushi and her mother to Delhi, where a whole new world opens up for her. She is fascinated by the luxurious trappings of the air-conditioned coach of the train, her first car ride and the bustling life of Delhi. Even Arushi's castoff clothes delight her innocent heart.

Kusum's travails begin while working as a maid in Mrs. Gupta's house. From the beginning, Mrs. Gupta is depicted as the 'villain' of the story. She is on the lookout for a cheap maid who will be satisfied with minimum wages and castoff clothes. Kusum is overworked and ill treated in her new home, often even physically assaulted for minor mistakes, until finally she is completely confined to the house. Once Arushi becomes aware of this, she resolves to take action.

With the help and advice of her friend Raveena, Arushi approaches Neela Jain, a lawyer, and Mira Kohli, a social worker, to free Kusum from her enforced confinement. A police officer is deputed to conduct an enquiry into the allegation that Kusum was being forcibly confined. The Guptas are confronted with the accusation of injury and wrongful confinement of a minor. Kusum is called to testify, but inexplicably refuses to implicate her employers. Even the neighbours (including Arushi's parents) refrain from indicting the Guptas. The enquiry has to be withdrawn on the grounds of lack of evidence, despite appeals by Jain and Kohli. Arushi is shocked at this abrupt turnabout, and confused and hurt at Kusum's spurning of her attempt to help her. Later Kusum confesses to Arushi

that she did not testify because she wanted to help her family with her income. Her mother had lost one of her jobs and was working hard to make ends meet, while her father needed hospitalisation. Kusum felt that it was her duty to do her bit, regardless of the price she was paying in terms of maltreatment.

In the aftermath of the police enquiry, the Guptas' ill-treatment of Kusum is intensified. Arushi witnesses one such incident and is unable to bear it any longer. She helps Kusum to escape from her room, but they are pursued by Mr. Gupta. Arushi's friend Puneet accompanies them in their flight to the Deer Park. In a rather melodramatic finale, Mr. Gupta is bitten by a snake while chasing the children to their hideout in an abandoned mausoleum. Subsequently, the neighbours arrive on the scene and rescue the children. Later, Kusum's family decides to migrate from Burdwan to Delhi. Her father accepts an offer from a fellow villager to join him as a partner in his sweetmeat shop. The story ends with the prospect of a family reunion, and a semblance of assured economic security.

The portrayal of Kusum in this story is a sensitive depiction of the underprivileged girl child in India today, in comparison with her more privileged counterpart. Both Kusum and Arushi are constituted by the power relations underlying gender, class and patriarchy. Yet, their disparate positioning in terms of class determines the course each one's life will take. The novel raises issues that concern the contemporary girl child in India. For instance, how does Kusum negotiate with her pre-defined role as miniature woman? In what ways do factors

like class and education influence the status of the girl child? What is the role of tradition and patriarchy in determining the parameters within which the girl child is compelled to function? How does the girl child deal with issues such as sexuality, early marriage and responsibility towards the family and the self? What is the nature of the interaction between girl children and society?

Kusum as girl-woman

In a discussion on the marginalisation of the girl child in India, Jasbir Jain comments:

Women, it seems, are never young. They step straight into adulthood and are expected to be responsible and wise. Childhood in this society is a preparation for an adult role which may be thrust prematurely upon young girls...¹

This observation is particularly relevant with reference to the underprivileged girl child. Girl children in the economically deprived sections of society are hardly given the opportunity to enjoy the carefree phase of childhood. They are treated as miniature women, and are expected to shoulder the burden of tending to the family. The case of Kusum is no different. Kusum's education is discontinued because she is 'needed' at home to look after her injured father and younger

siblings, and to attend to household chores, while her mother works to provide for the family.

Sudhir Kakar, in his study of Indian childhood, contrasts the traditional Indian view that is protective, nurturant and indulgent towards children, and the Western world-view that concentrates on socialising and grooming the child towards her/his ultimate role in adulthood. However, he acknowledges that the Indian attitude to children refers mainly to boys, and girls and children belonging to the lower castes have largely been excluded from the formulations of this tradition.²

Late childhood marks the beginning of an Indian girl's deliberate training in how to be a *good woman*, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles. She learns that the 'virtues' of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in the various household tasks.³

In the case of underprivileged girl children, the process of socialisation and apprenticeship to the duties of housekeeping and childcare, which will be their eventual lot as women, begins early in childhood. Kusum is groomed to take on the mantle of the household from a very early age. She is not given the chance to be a child, but takes on responsibility and matures early. She slips unquestioningly into the 'feminine' role delineated for her. Kusum's mother Moni

hands over the responsibility of the household to her, and it is taken for granted that she will accede to the demands made on her:

Someone has got to be in the house, cook and clean and look after Tusu, Aju, Biju and their father----now that he is ill and I have started working longer hours. (17)

There is a poignant irony in the assumption that twelve-year-old Kusum is considered capable of looking after her ailing father, her younger siblings *as well* as Aju, who is fourteen. This casting of a young girl into the mould of the little mother has been documented in Tagore's depiction of Ratan in *The Postmaster*, and several other stories by other writers, where the maternal qualities of compassion, tenderness and care in girl-children are highlighted.

Kusum does not question the role defined for her by the norms of patriarchy. She matures from being a girl child to a miniature woman, and adapts herself to the demands made on her without demur. When her father comments that he is trying to get Kusum married, Arushi is outraged and protests that it is illegal, since Kusum is a minor. Kusum also voices her protest, but she knows it will not be heeded. The attitude to the underprivileged child is evident here--- as long as she is young and in her father's house, she is expected to justify her existence by attending to housekeeping chores, or working as a domestic help. Once she has attained marriageable age, she becomes a burden to be disposed

of at the earliest. The situation is typical of the girl child whose invisibility is an inescapable component of her personality, and whose absence is sought more than her presence. As far as Kusum's father is concerned, a daughter has to be married off once" her productive phase is over and her reproductive phase has begun." ⁴ In her world of limited choices, Kusum cannot refuse to function within the space set out for her, but she nevertheless attempts to exercise a modicum of agency. She remarks to Arushi that she may eventually marry the youth chosen by her father because it would help the family.

Kusum's shift to Delhi and her supposedly enhanced status as a wage-earner in Delhi does not bring about any change in her horizon of choices, or in her role as miniature woman. In fact, the contrast between her and Arushi highlights the fact that girlhood is a privilege, a function of one's economic status. Childhood, with its attendant associations of a carefree existence and freedom from responsibility, is a concept alien to children belonging to the underprivileged sections of society. These children learn to shoulder adult responsibilities early in life. This is particularly true of girl children. In India, centuries of conditioning have engendered discriminatory attitudes towards girl children in all socio-economic strata. Vrinda Nabar, commenting on the complete internalisation of gender roles among siblings of the working class, remarks on the girl child's firm conviction:

...that her role as a girl (i.e. a gender-based one) was unconditionally defined whereas her brother's (as boy-man) depended on what he wanted

to do. He had the choice, the potential and the power to change...the power to change, where conceded, is...commonly perceived as a male prerogative.⁵

Kusum's schooling is discontinued despite her eagerness to learn, while her brothers drop out of school, disregarding the opportunities provided to them. Yet Kusum is not given this prerogative in their place. Her offer to take over her father's profession is scoffed at because it is unseemly and would threaten her marriage prospects. There is, however, no reproach expressed at Aju's inability to maintain his father's stall. Aju gives up the effort to keep the stall going because he was "bored" and preferred working in a tea stall (20). The discrimination is self-evident: Aju, being a boy, can *choose* to better his prospects or squander his life, but Kusum can only function within the parameters delineated for her. She is 'allowed' to contribute to the family income only by performing tasks that are consonant with her image of the miniature woman, i.e. cooking, cleaning and other domestic chores.

Even in these conditions, Kusum attempts to exercise an option by choosing to endure physical and mental abuse in her workplace in order to ensure that her family benefits:

"What is a slap now and then, when *boudi* is sending home money every month, and *Bapi* is having his treatment, Tusu her new frock, and Aju and Biju more to eat?" (119)

This is a typical instance of the girl child's commitment to her family, which is the result of years of internalisation of gender roles: Kusum weighs the advantages accruing to her family members, against the damage to her self-esteem and physical wellbeing. This habit of placing the family before the self is deeply ingrained in all Indian women, and girl children imbibe these attitudes consciously and subconsciously by observing their mothers endure hardships for the sake of the family.

After her dramatic rescue from the Guptas' residence by Arushi and her reunion with her father, Kusum is temporarily reprieved. She is, however, aware that there will be no substantial change in her condition:

"I don't have much to go back to in Burdwan. There, too, it will be washing and sweeping and scrubbing in other people's houses- and then perhaps marriage and cooking, like Ma does, again at other people's houses. I have been through all that." (158)

Kusum sees her future mirrored in her mother's present. Her role as little woman remains defined, whether for a wage or as part of her 'duties', and the joys of childhood are still denied to her.

Education and empowerment

The limitations of campaigns for literacy and initiatives for primary education are exposed, when Kusum's mother comments that she cannot afford to send her daughter to school, or go herself, because the necessity of generating income overrides the supposed benefits of education. Azim Sherwani refers to statistics indicating that nearly half the girls who enrol for formal education in Class I, drop out before reaching Class II. He opines that this is because girl children are burdened with domestic responsibilities from an early age. Moreover, parents view the education of girls as wasteful expenditure, since she is ultimately to be married off, and therefore cannot be of any monetary benefit to the family.⁶ Efforts by the State and by non-governmental organisations to counter this prejudice by offering free primary education, have run into a different obstacle.

Girl children are denied access to education in economically weaker households because they are required to attend to domestic chores. Kusum's mother Moni points out that sending Kusum to a free school involves a financial drain indirectly:

You need money to be able to send them there for sitting and doing nothing. I don't have that. I can't spare Kusum to be out of the house for long stretches of time. Someone has got to be in the house, cook and

clean and look after Tusu, Aju, Biju and their father-----now that he is ill and I have started working longer hours. (17)

Thus, the tangible benefits accruing from Kusum's housework are valued more than the long term, intangible benefits of education.

Household tasks performed by women within the domestic sphere are not valued in monetary terms. They are considered to be the 'duty' of the female members of the family. The assignation of value in economic terms to domestic work has been a long-standing demand of feminists. In a study of gender, welfare and labour in the developing world, Olga Nieuwenhuys highlights the difference in emphasis between neo-classical and feminist theories regarding the economic structuring of the domestic sphere. She notes that both Marxist and neo-classical economic theories on the household "work from the assumption of the household as a wholly co-operative, altruistic unit and fail to recognize the importance of conflict and inequality." Feminists, on the other hand, focus on the "conflict and bargaining power within the family". The neo-classical approach acknowledges that women and children are disadvantaged in the labour market, and are relegated to performing the less rewarding tasks at home. However, feminists are more concerned about "the structural constraints of inequality and conflict and [they] have identified patriarchy as the system that places women and children in different social and economic positions to men." ⁷ Ironically, the work performed by Kusum and her mother in other people's homes draws a

wage, but the same tasks done in their own household are not assigned any economic value. Despite the fact that Moni (Kusum's mother) is the main wage-earner, her position in the family in terms of decision-making power does not alter, and she remains subservient to her husband.

In the Indian context, the internalisation of gender roles as being pre-ordained and incontrovertible further complicates the issue and neutralises the constructive role of conflict. The hold of tradition is equally strong on women of all classes. As Vrinda Nabar comments, "To most Indian women, a conviction of gender-sexual injustice amounts to a kind of faith almost."⁸ Among women of the underprivileged classes, there is very often no awareness of any injustice, and multiple oppression is stoically borne without questioning the system.

The question of education as empowerment recurs several times in the course of the novel. At the outset, the efforts of literacy campaigns are critiqued in Moni's comment that their family has neither the time, nor the financial self-sufficiency to be able to 'afford' education. She is, however, proud of the fact that Kusum has managed to learn how to read and write. Moni's two sons have dropped out of school, while Kusum genuinely wants to study. Yet, there is no attempt is made to provide her with the opportunities her brothers have disregarded. The implication is clear: Kusum's brothers can afford *not* to go to school, while Kusum cannot be spared to get herself an education.

Later in the novel, the nascent fear among the privileged class, that education engenders power, surfaces in Mr. Gupta's anecdote about how they lost a good maid because his father taught her to read and write. The maid answered an advertisement for an attendant at a social welfare organisation and "left us high and dry"(71). Education is thus perceived as a potential threat to the smug, stable, well-ordered world of the privileged classes, securely based on strictly defined hierarchies. On the other hand, Arushi is able to embark on a course of action to free Kusum, mainly because her access to information makes her aware of children's rights, and instils in her a sense of fairness and justice.

Yet there are suggestions in the novel that education and literacy may ultimately prove ineffectual as long as economic imbalances remain and attitudinal changes are wanting. There is an implicit indictment of the legal process in the ineffectual intervention of Neela Jain the lawyer and Mira Kohli the social worker to ensure justice for Kusum. Despite the presence of women professionals like Jain and Kohli and the substantial percentage of working women in the neighbourhood, (almost all the women, including Arushi's and Raveena's mother, are employed), it is left to Arushi to bring about a resolution in the novel. This may well be construed as a plot device, in keeping with the current trend in children's books to grant the protagonists the power to guide the action in their lives. Nevertheless, there is an implied critique of the system that does not permit the rescue of Kusum by supposedly empowered women like Jain and Kohli.

The novel places two girl children Arushi and Kusum in opposition, and attempts to highlight the pitiable condition of the latter by positing a contrast between her and Arushi. Arushi is a privileged girl child with access to opportunities that Kusum can never dream of. She has, to a certain extent, the potential and the power to change. Unlike Kusum, she is not weighed down by financial constraints and generations of conditioning, hence she refuses to be a passive witness to Kusum's exploitation, and plays an active role in rescuing Kusum from captivity. After meeting Kusum, she becomes aware of the privileges she has always taken for granted. The lecture by the social worker Mira Kohli at her school educates her on children's civil and economic rights. Even as she questions the discrimination against Kusum perpetrated by people of her class, she is gradually made aware of the class differences between both of them. Her attempt to nurture their friendship despite these disparities is discouraged by the adults in her social circle. The following exchange between Arushi and her father highlights the ambivalent attitude of the privileged classes. Arushi protests that the Guptas were torturing Kusum, to which her father replies:

“And what is that to you? Why should you get involved in that? Attend to your own things. Make the best of the chances we are giving you. Study hard, get good grades, play, take up any hobby you like, develop your talents, have a good time with your friends, enjoy yourself...”

Arushi questions this attitude:

“How can I, Daddy?...All those things---Kusum has the same right to them, doesn't she? They said so at school. But she is cooking and cleaning, and being bullied to death, and you tell me to turn a blind eye to that and think only of myself! “ (120)

The novel suggests that education can sensitise privileged children to the plight of others less fortunate, and imbue children of all classes with the power to change by making them aware of their rights. Arushi articulates the unvoiced hopes and fears of Kusum, and makes use of her newly learned awareness of children's rights to try and give Kusum her due. Her resistance to the oppressions perpetrated by the forces of class and patriarchy is reminiscent of Spivak's formulation of the “organic intellectual”:

When the subaltern “speaks” in order to be heard and gets into the structure of responsible (responding and being responded to) resistance, he or she is or is on the way to becoming an organic intellectual.⁹

Arushi becomes the spokesperson for Kusum's subalternity and voices her opposition to class discrimination and oppression. Her dogged resistance is

responsible for her father's eventual acknowledgement of their complicity in the injustice meted out to Kusum and other children of her class:

"The whole thing is wrong. People like the Guptas, wanting to keep children as domestic servants; people like us, getting them such children to work; and people like you, letting your children go out to work---all of us are responsible. All of us are party to the same offence: depriving a child of its rights. We are all responsible for the present state of affairs." (157)

Despite Arushi's ostensibly unselfish efforts to extricate Kusum from her plight, her location as a privileged girl child inflects her intervention with class tensions. Arushi is implicated in this scenario of exploitation, inasmuch as she is responsible for Kusum's shift to Delhi as a domestic.

It is indicative of the author's agenda that she grants agency to a socially and economically privileged girl child, while denying agency to her less privileged counterpart. Arushi's rescue of Kusum is rationalised by the former ruefully as the result of too much reading—she wished to emulate her fictional heroines and perform a dramatic rescue. However, there appears to be an implicit suggestion between the lines that the underprivileged girl child is in need of intervention, if only by her more privileged counterpart, to negotiate a position of visibility for herself, and to set her on the path toward constitution of her independent identity. By taking upon herself the onus of speaking for Kusum, Arushi structures the

former's experience and mediates it through her own. She participates in the knowledge/power nexus by representing Kusum to herself and to the world.

Class discrimination and hierarchy

A related issue that warrants examination, is the effect of empowerment of the privileged classes on the economically weaker sections of society. Due to the increase in the percentage of middle class working women and the availability of abundant cheap labour, the exploitation of the underprivileged girl child has increased. Working women employ minors to perform domestic chores at minimum wages, and grinding poverty forces the children and their families to accede to these terms, which they often consider to be liberal in comparison with their current condition. The contrasting attitudes of employer and employee are evident in the following excerpts. Mrs. Gupta, the prospective employer, seeks a young girl to work for her because girls are safer to employ:

“They are cheaper as well. A few hundred rupees, and our cast-away clothes, besides the food, of course.” (5)

In response to this offer, Kusum's mother is overwhelmed:

“Food and Rs.200 a month!” Moni exclaimed, as though she could not believe her ears...” Of course, she will do all the work.” (23)

While education and changing societal attitudes to working women in the privileged classes have empowered them to a certain extent, their counterparts in the underprivileged classes continue to be oppressed, and actively participate in the perpetuation of oppression consciously or unconsciously. This is an instance where class barriers overwhelm the commonality of gender. Despite being a woman and therefore vulnerable to similar patriarchal pressures, Moni is situated at the opposite pole in relation to women like Mrs. Gupta and Arushi's mother. Moni stands at the intersection of class and gender, oppressed on both counts. As Sangari and Vaid have pointed out, "women of the exploited classes may indeed have closer group interests with men of their own classes than with women belonging to the dominant classes." ¹⁰

The novel problematises issues such as the place of the underprivileged child within an urban, affluent setup. Kusum comes to Delhi prepared to accept whatever is in store for her. She is content to live on the leftovers of other people. Arushi's mother's attitude towards Kusum is ambivalent, mirroring the discomfort the privileged class feels when confronted with the need to find a place for a member of the lower class within its social order. Kusum herself has internalised the unwritten boundaries that divide the classes. She tactfully refuses to sit at the same table with Arushi, even when expressly invited to do so by her, preferring to sit on the floor and eat in the kitchen after the family has eaten. To this Arushi's mother comments significantly, "Sensible girl" (38). When Arushi questions this attitude, she receives no satisfactory answers. On the other hand, Arushi's

mother brings Kusum with her in the air-conditioned coach. She defends her decision to do so to an indignant Mrs. Gupta, saying that she could not possibly have let Kusum travel alone for the first time in her life in an unreserved second class compartment, since the crowd there was bound to be rowdy and unruly. Further, she does not object to Arushi making Kusum a playmate, and on several occasions shows sympathy and consideration for her.

The attitude of Arushi's parents to Kusum's situation is typical of the urban educated middle and upper classes, who profess sympathy for and pay lip service to the plight of social inferiors, yet refrain from committing themselves to any firm course of action to ameliorate their condition. When Arushi sets out on her first attempt to free Kusum, her father forbids her from interfering in other people's affairs. Arushi's mother endorses this view, explaining to her, "you needn't bother about all the injustice and inequality in the world. You are still a child," to which Arushi replies "That is just the point!" (121). She wants to know why she is being granted the right to education and leisure, while Kusum is denied even the basic right to freedom, but there are no answers forthcoming. Cowed by her father's implied threat of resorting to violence, she retreats from the situation, confused and troubled.

The barriers of class are shown to be more evident in the interaction of the adults in the novel with Kusum rather than among the children. Arushi's acceptance of Kusum as a friend and playmate is depicted as unproblematic.

Hence, she evinces discomfort when Kusum is labelled a 'maid', and is amazed when her mother asks Kusum to eat in the kitchen. Arushi's friend Raveena, however, immediately places Kusum in her class and refuses to play with her or include her in their group (44, 68). Puneet is initially unsure about how to relate to Kusum, but he gradually accepts her, and towards the end of the story, confirms his acceptance by celebrating the ritual of *bhai duj* with her and assisting her to escape. Later in the novel, Raveena is moved by Arushi's narration of Kusum's ill-treatment by the Guptas, and she helps Arushi seek legal recourse (122).

The women in the neighbourhood identify Kusum only in terms of her role as a willing and efficient worker. Some of them do make an attempt to ascertain whether Kusum was being abused by her employers, but let the matter rest when Kusum refuses to implicate the Guptas, despite evidence to the contrary (108-109). However, at the first hint of trouble, the privileged class closes ranks and stands united against a possible threat to its stability. The police enquiry into allegations of child abuse brings into the open uncomfortable issues such as the ethical aspect involved in the deployment of children as household domestics, and the legal implications of this act. Reluctant to countenance the slightest threat to their position of power, the same neighbours who had earlier expressed sympathy for Kusum, now refuse to give evidence regarding ill treatment by the Guptas. Some of them profess a neutral stance, while others actually express solidarity with the Guptas (133). These women are shown in the very first scene of the novel as arguing in favour of the benefits of employing young girls from

outside Delhi as maids, hence their complicity in perpetuating class discrimination and exploitation is undeniable.

Kusum realises the futility of trying to escape from her situation because, for people of her class, it is a recurring one. She reminds Arushi that the same Mrs. Nagarajan who had offered her a job with a higher salary, now refuses to implicate the Guptas before the police. She tells Arushi "They are all the same" (139). Unlike Arushi, Kusum has recognised that the barriers of class are not easily breached.

Kusum belongs to a class that has been conditioned to be subservient to people placed higher in the socio-economic order. Even within their own class, Kusum and her family face exploitation on account of their penury and straitened circumstances. Kusum's father loses his 'place' on the pavement where he had his stall because he is cheated by his friend. He is forced to consider marrying Kusum off, because otherwise he would face censure within his community, but he is unable to do so since they cannot offer enough dowry. The operation of an intricate network of factors like caste and class ensures that people like Kusum and her family are subjected to multiple oppression, forcing them to consider alternatives like migration to cities and child labour.

The changing faces of oppression

The kind of oppression Moni faces is qualitatively and quantitatively different from that faced by middle class women. Moni is compelled to work and take on additional jobs in order to compensate for her non-earning husband. Yet her status as a wage-earner (indeed, as the breadwinner of the family) does not grant her any privileges. She continues to be dependent on her husband to take major decisions such as the prospect of Kusum's employment in Delhi, and her marriage. On the other end of the class scale, women like Mrs. Gupta and Arushi's mother have been able to negotiate a place for themselves by virtue of their status as working women. They enjoy an enhanced status and certain privileges. Vrinda Nabar notes that "the socio-cultural reality of work as a double-edged symbol: of freedom, or the lack of it" is frequently ignored in discussions on women and employment. She cites bell hook's observation that, to the black woman who has always done what is traditionally considered 'man's work,' the leisured lifestyle of the white woman symbolized freedom from oppression. Nabar comments further:

This may well be the way the rural woman...also views the value of work. The question for these women would not be whether one can choose to work but whether one can choose not to. The women employed as 'household domestics'...are equally oppressed by their absence of

choices. To them, work is not liberating but a daily reminder of their economic and class oppression.¹¹

It is evident from the above observations that earning a wage does not automatically confer status on a woman. The conditions under which women go out to work, and the compulsions that underlie their working, as well as the degree of choice granted to the woman regarding her career, determine whether she is oppressed.

Nabar points out that according to bell hooks, there is a fine distinction between *being oppressed* and *exploitation and discrimination*.¹² Being oppressed signifies an absence of choices. The underprivileged and marginalised communities may in this sense be perceived as being oppressed, because they are denied the option to chart the course of their lives. Kusum as a girl child is oppressed on account of the limited choices open to her. As a child, she is denied her right to education and leisure, and is forced to work beyond her capacity to support her family. As a gendered subject, she is denied agency, personal mobility and control over her life. She is forced to accept her father's decision regarding her marriage. Her views and reservations on this issue are ignored or overruled. She is completely within the control of her parents, and has no say in the course her life will take. Her shift to Delhi is dictated by economic considerations on the part of her family. Her opinion is not sought, and the only

concession made to her regarding this relocation is that she will at last get enough to eat.

Kusum is triply marginalised – she is a child, a girl and she is poor. Her exploitation takes place on all these levels. She is made to perform chores unsuitable for a child of her age, she is underpaid and overworked, and her employees do not hesitate to intimidate her or assault her physically, knowing she cannot retaliate. Indira Kulshreshtha points out that although the Indian Constitution provides for equal rights for the girl child and supposedly protects her from exploitation, the child of the so-called 'weaker sex' ends up performing the most hazardous and unacknowledged tasks.¹³ Kusum's move from Burdwan to Delhi ensures a marginal improvement of her position, in that she graduates from being a dependent, to a wage – earner. Yet her income is not really her own---although she voluntarily has it sent to her family, her status as a wage earner does not bring with it the enhancement of position and independence that is commonly believed to accompany economic self – sufficiency. Conversely, her situation becomes akin to bonded labour, as she steels herself to endure all hardship for the sake of her income.

Kusum's only active attempt to gain a semblance of control over her life is seen in her abortive bid to escape from Gupta Nivas. Apart from this single act, her resistance is largely passive, as is seen in her refusal to indict the Guptas when she is called upon to testify against them. This is perhaps in consonance

with the horizon of choices open to her as an underprivileged, gendered child subject. Throughout the novel, things happen to Kusum: she does not make them happen. It is Arushi, another girl child (albeit more privileged) who engineers the action of the novel. *She* suggests that Kusum be taken to Delhi to work for the Guptas, *she* voices her protests against Kusum's maltreatment and finally it is she who actually succeeds in freeing Kusum from her enforced confinement.

Although Kusum is oppressed by her absence of choices, she tries to negotiate a modicum of agency for herself within this constricting framework. She tells Arushi that she will probably agree to marry the youth chosen by her father, despite her personal reservations, because it would 'help' her family. Since she is denied the opportunity to actively supplement the family finances in Burdwan by managing her father's stall, she decides to accede to a marriage alliance, as it would relieve her parents of the burden of supporting her. She is not consulted about the prospect of taking a job in Delhi, but once the decision has been made for her, she works with a will and endures maltreatment for the sake of her family. Her resistance is paradoxically articulated in her silence and her refusal to indict her employers. In the crucial scene of the police enquiry, Kusum is given the opportunity of testifying against her employers and thereby securing a release for herself. It is a tempting alternative, and Kusum is assured of the support of Arushi, Raveena and authority figures like the lawyer, social worker and the police. Yet she makes perhaps the only and most difficult choice of her life and

refuses to indict her employers. Kusum's choice is doubtless inflected with what Spivak calls "internalized constraints seen as responsibility."¹⁴ The choices she makes are by default, and the only power available to her is that of adopting the line of least resistance, yet the very fact that she wrests the opportunity to make her choices suggests a certain resilience of spirit. Indira Karamcheti notes that despite the fact that Third World women are colonized by geography as well as by gender, there is still scope for resistance within the patriarchal framework that constricts them:

We need not reach the grim conclusion that resistance is impossible; rather, we need to be aware of the limited and limiting terms within which resistance can be spoken.¹⁵

Individuation and autonomy

The invisibility of girl children in traditional and pre-independence literature has been discussed earlier. The portraits of girl children in contemporary literature suggest that there is a concerted effort to recuperate the lost childhood of the girl child. This is again a class-inflected concept in that it is more often than not the privileged girl child who gains visibility. Unlike most other books written for children, *Kusum* features a deprived girl child in a prominent role. Yet the depiction of Kusum as a hapless, passive subject, and the continued focus on

her definition as miniature woman, suggests that the underprivileged girl child has a long way to go before her childhood can be restored to her.

An examination of the construction of the girl child as portrayed in this book, in terms of the degree of autonomy she possesses, and the horizon of choices available to her, reveals that in the final analysis, both Arushi and Kusum remain circumscribed within patriarchal control. While Kusum's identity is completely subsumed and she is defined only in terms of her social self, Arushi's portrait is more individuated. B. K. Ramanujam points out that adolescence was not traditionally regarded as a distinct developmental phase in India:

In the village society, after one has emerged from childhood, one passes through adolescence learning the skills of adult responsibilities. It is not a privileged position in our socio-cultural setting. Even in the urban lower-middle and middle classes, the constant emphasis is to learn and become competent to share the burden of family maintenance as soon as possible...it is understandable that since a culture does not recognize adolescence as a distinct phase, no provision is made to facilitate the resolution of such conflicts.¹⁶

Kusum belongs to a family based in a mofussil town of West Bengal. The complex networking of the exigencies of class, and the compulsions of caste and patriarchy, ensure that there is no scope for the development of an individuated

self, particularly for the girl child. Since Arushi belongs to the privileged class and has the benefit of an education that is based on Western principles of individual growth, she is able to articulate issues that concern her, and express her views on them. With the help of her friends Raveena and Puneet, she initiates a course of action to free Kusum. When her efforts to rescue Kusum by legal means fail, she resorts to more daring and adventurous methods to liberate her. Arushi's privileged background suggests that it is likely that she will be granted more freedom in charting the future course of her life. Yet, despite being a more favoured girl child in terms of economic and emotional security, Arushi is marginally better off than Kusum in terms of having control over her life. She can only pose questions, to which answers and solutions are not forthcoming. When she persists in her attempts to rescue Kusum, she is threatened by her father, and has to resort to clandestine means to carry out her plans. The failure of Arushi's attempts to mobilise neighbourhood support for Kusum, and her ultimately ineffectual interrogation of class discrimination indicate that, for all her privileges and supposed empowerment, Arushi remains firmly constrained within adult control.

The process of identity formation of both girls is similarly imbued with the differential power dynamics arising from their disparate locations within the class structure. Sudhir Kakar defines identity thus:

Identity...is meant to convey the process of synthesis between inner life and outer social reality as well as the feeling of personal continuity and consistency within oneself. It refers to the sense of having a stake in oneself, and at the same time in some kind of confirming community.¹⁷

Kakar's definition suggests that the formation of identity in children is dependent on the harmonious interaction between the individual and society. He opines that a discussion of identity in India must necessarily include the legacy of traditional customs, values and beliefs that work subtly to shape Indian identity. Since social and cultural expectations are different in the case of boys and girls, their identity formation is linked with these factors.

Girl children in Indian society are constrained by pressures to conform, and fulfil parental expectations. The conflict between individuation and conformity is more pronounced in Arushi's case because of her urban, literate background. Kusum's sense of identity is constructed in terms of her relation to her family, and the individual self has no place in this structure. Kakar notes that "the feminine role in India also crystallizes a woman's connections to others, her embeddedness in a multitude of familial relationships."¹⁸ This embeddedness ensures that whatever choices Kusum makes are for the wellbeing of her family. Arushi's identity formation, on the other hand, is fraught with multiple fissures because she has to overcome parental and patriarchal pressures before she can construct her own legitimate identity. She is in a position to interrogate received

notions of class structure, and she articulates her resistance to gender and class discrimination. It is her sense of having what Kakar terms "a stake in oneself" that spurs her to resort to subversive means to rescue Kusum from exploitation. Her courage in her convictions gives her the strength to pursue the course of action that she considers correct.

There is little perception of role conflict in Kusum on account of her acceptance of her subordinate positioning in the family structure. The story, however, portrays Arushi's conflict between her role as an obedient daughter and her sense of outrage and loyalty to her friend. In the final analysis, Arushi's identity remains defined in terms of the class to which she belongs. The author orchestrates a 'satisfactory' solution to Kusum's situation without disrupting class hierarchies, and a confrontation between Arushi's personal views and those of the "confirming community", of which she is a part, is avoided.

Kusum and sexuality

In a discussion on the sexuality of the girl child, Jasbir Jain observes:

...the presence of a girl is felt when it is forced on the male consciousness, particularly when she attracts attention from the male world...It is then that her presence forces decisions on others even if she herself is not in a position to decide. The girl child is invisible, or rendered

invisible because of the potential threat posed by her sexuality. Finally, when this is no longer possible, it is sought to relate her identity to her sex and the relationships she establishes or fails to establish. At no stage---whether as a child or as a woman---is she allowed to be free of this or be a person for whatever her worth.¹⁹

There are two scenes in *Kusum* that refer to her impending womanhood, both of which link this awareness of her potential sexuality to the idea of marriage. In the first, Kusum's father conveys his anxiety to Arushi's mother about getting Kusum married. He dismisses Arushi's protests about the illegality of child marriage, as being a concern he can ill afford. The manner in which he describes a failed marriage proposal for Kusum suggests that she is viewed as a commodity to be sold to the best bidder:

"Actually, some months back, a party had come to see her. The boy had fancied her, too! He wanted a cycle as dowry, and I didn't have the money for that." (21).

Kusum's father is eager to dispose of her at the earliest opportunity, before her sexuality becomes a threat to his family honour. There is scant concern for the fact that Kusum herself may not be mentally and emotionally ready for marriage, even though her body is beginning the process of becoming sexually mature. Neither is her preference taken into account regarding her future partner. Her

reluctance to get married is interpreted as being choosy in a situation that offers few choices: "She talks as if there is a long line of people waiting to snap her up in marriage." (21). The fact that a prospective bridegroom should have actually "fancied" Kusum is considered an unexpected bonus.

Once Kusum has forced the awareness of her existence upon the consciousness of the male members in her family and community, she is perceived only in terms of her availability as a prospective wife. She has now moved from being a girl child to a bride-in-waiting, and will now be viewed in the context of the 'match' she is able or unable to make. Her identity, as Jain notes above, is solely constructed in terms of her gender. From the beginning, Kusum is imbued with a sense of the 'other'. She is a temporary resident in her father's home, awaiting marriage, which is to be her destiny. Even here, her brothers are the preferred offspring, which further reinforces her sense of alienation. Yet she is unable to think of a life apart from and beyond her family, because they are the framework against which her identity is defined.

The scene immediately following the one described above involves an encounter with the youth who "fancied" Kusum. He whistles at her as he passes, and Kusum's younger sister Tusu giggles at the gesture. In a society that customarily devalues womanhood and disregards girl children, eve-teasing and sexual advances are accepted as normal, even by the victims. As mentioned earlier, Kusum has now been branded as an object worthy of male attention, so

she has perforce to put up with the attention that comes her way, unwelcome though it may be, until she is 'claimed' by a suitor. It is perhaps the insistent pressures of the community, along with financial necessity, that impel Kusum's parents to send her to Delhi as a domestic help. As long as she remains in the neighbourhood as an unmarried girl, her sexuality will be a threat to the honour of her family. Kusum's father refuses to let her take over his job of selling masala *murhi*, even though she declares that she is capable and confident of doing a better job of it, because of the possibility that no one would marry her.

Viney Kirpal argues that the girl child in Indian society is considered the repository of the family honour, and since marriage is the legitimate avenue for sexual satisfaction, the anxiety to get daughters married manifests itself as soon as they are on the verge of attaining womanhood. In fact, girls and women are often perceived by males as contested territories. Kirpal concludes "In the politics of sex and honour, it is the female person who gets victimised."²⁰

The necessity of supplementing the family income compels Kusum's family to accept the offer of a job for her in Delhi. The nature of the enquiries Moni makes about Kusum's prospective employers indicates that she is not as worried about the workload that Kusum will have, as by the question of her honour and chastity:

"*Didi*, you have a daughter of your own. You understand, don't you, what it is to have a daughter? Is this a family you know?" (23-24)

Since this is children's literature, the emphasis on family honour and the fear of sexual impropriety are not spelled out, but the connotations are clear. Kusum's vulnerability as a sexual object is more worrying than the denial of her rights as a child, and the fact that she will be overworked.

It is interesting to note that there are no references to marriage as an eventuality with regard to the other girl children Arushi and Raveena. These are children of the privileged class, and the fact that their parents are educated, ensures that they are not considered a burden to be disposed of at the earliest. They are relatively sheltered from the implications of impinging womanhood.

The pervasiveness of patriarchy

Vrinda Nabar assails the prevailing Indian patriarchal world-view, which arbitrarily assumes that women need separate codes for their protection:

...it was hardly ever conceded that the different social purdahs behind which women were confined only served to make them helpless, impotent, and unable to cope with the larger social realities. Along this complex

route they were placed in a position of weakness wherein it was natural to see them as needing protection.²¹

Nabar argues further that these very codes that ensured protection became instruments with which women were exploited and oppressed. This oppression by patriarchal norms was particularly in evidence among the deprived classes, where moral codes tended to be more rigid. Kusum becomes a victim of the patriarchal system that dictates the course of her life. In the village, her father controls her present and her future. He refuses to let her take over his stall on the pretext that it would mar her marriage prospects. He decides that she is to be married off at the first opportunity. Nabar points out that when a father knowingly gets his daughter married off against her wishes, it implies that his daughter and her happiness are dispensable as long as he has performed his duty.²² All this is done ostensibly to preserve her chastity and protect her, yet Kusum's father does not hesitate to send her to Delhi to work, where she would be exposed to the very dangers he is protecting her from. At the end of the novel, despite the promise of education and its attendant implications of freedom, there is no indication that Kusum will be given any degree of control over her life.

The influence of patriarchy in governing man-woman relations is particularly evident among the working classes. Kannabiran and K. Lalitha point out that in most societies, there has been a clear demarcation of the public domain, which includes areas such as war, production and politics, and the

private domain, that includes family, domestic labour, reproduction and sexuality. While men move between the two domains easily, women are largely confined to the latter. Although peasant women do participate in the process of production, their contribution is habitually marginalised and devalued. Moreover, "even the woman who is a wage-labourer has, with few exceptions, internalized and accepted the sexual division of labour. They have always culturally and ideologically accepted the power and control of their men however powerless or oppressed the latter may be outside the home." ²³

In *Kusum*, the constraining influence of patriarchal control is clearly visible in the power configurations in Kusum's family. Despite being a non-earning member, physically powerless and exploited by the musclemen of his locality, Moni's husband continues to occupy a position of power in his household. All decisions are taken by him, whether it is Kusum's prospects of marriage, or her move to Delhi. The influence of centuries of conditioning and the ideological hold exercised by patriarchy is evident here.

Among the privileged classes, there is more participation by women in the process of decision making, but men continue to wield power in subtle ways. Sangari and Vaid discuss two broad distinctions in the social movements that were launched in colonial India: the 'modernizing' of patriarchal modes of regulating women and the 'democratizing' of gender relations at home and in the workplace. The latter kind of movement seeks to transform the ideologies of a

specific political formation, for instance, the sexual division of labour in the production process. They opine that movements by working class women belonged to this category. Modernizing movements (such as social reform and nationalist movements) provide a more 'liberal' space for middle class women. While democratizing movements aim to alter class relations and to a certain extent, level gender relations, modernizing movements "seek to partially level gender relations either without attacking class inequality or by positively affirming it." ²⁴

In *Kusum*, the middle class women occupy the liberal space provided for them by the patriarchal modes of regulation, while at the same time reaffirming class inequalities. This is evident in the opening conversation between Arushi's mother and the women of the neighbourhood. All of them lament the scarcity of reliable domestic help, and agree that employing a young girl as a maid is the cheapest and safest alternative. Later in the story, when the police enquiry is being conducted, they align themselves with the Guptas who belong to their class, despite the overwhelming evidence of child abuse. Thus, the oppression of the working class continues and the class hierarchy is reaffirmed.

Despite her access to liberal education, even Arushi is circumscribed by patriarchal controls and class barriers. She is thwarted in her attempts to maintain a bonding with Kusum, her social inferior, and is unable to protect her from the exploitation and harassment she is subjected to in her new job. Arushi's

father is the typical patriarch, whose word is final in all matters. When Arushi's protests become too insistent (and therefore, threatening), he exercises his absolute authority by forbidding her to get involved in Kusum's plight. This ultimatum leaves Arushi with no alternative other than subversion. The influence of patriarchy is also evident in the mother-daughter relationships in the story. Both Kusum and Arushi share a close and loving relationship with their mothers. Kakar sees this "culturally sanctioned maternal indulgence of daughters" as a remarkable and universal feature in Indian society, noting that " a daughter's training at her mother's hands is normally leavened with a good deal of compassion." ²⁵ Moni is overcome by emotion at the thought of sending her daughter to Delhi, and says:

"She is a good girl, our Kusum. Always a smile on her face. Never answers back, however much you scold. Never says 'I can't', whatever you ask her to do. Yet, such is her luck..." (24-25)

Moni consoles herself with the reassurance that at least Kusum will get enough to eat. The 'virtues' of Kusum listed above indicate the extent to which women in India have internalized the norms of patriarchy. Kusum is commended by her mother for being obedient and submissive, always willing to work and never articulating her protest. Kakar observes that girls tend to conform to prescribed patterns of behaviour, because the love and approval of their mothers is conditional upon such conformity:

Little wonder that for an Indian girl rebellion against the constraints of impinging womanhood, with its circumscription of identity, becomes "impossible."²⁶

Arushi's mother is similarly protective and caring about her daughter, but she expects her to conform to their notions of acceptable conduct. When her husband sternly forbids Arushi from interfering in matters concerning Kusum and the Guptas, she endorses his opinion and gently tries to convince Arushi to give up her ideas of rescuing Kusum. There is no attempt to view the situation from Arushi's point of view, and her protests are ignored or silenced. Despite her location as an educated, liberal, contemporary woman, Arushi's mother's attitude is coloured by patriarchy in insidious ways. In a review of *Kusum*, Anupa Lal makes the following observation:

Arushi's mother disapproves of Kusum's wearing frocks, however long, in Delhi and even within the house, in front of Mr. Gupta. Where then is the girl child safe?²⁷

This kind of attempt to deny the girl child her freedom in terms of dress masquerades as a protective gesture. The fact that the author of *Kusum* has chosen to make mention of this aspect of the vulnerability of the girl child is itself an encouraging sign. It is also, however, an implicit acceptance of the fact that

men will be men, and sexual exploitation is a given reality that all members of the female sex have to face and avoid wherever possible. There is no effort to confront the issue and challenge the inevitability of the situation. Once again, this vulnerability of the girl child to sexual exploitation is class-inflected. When Arushi protests to her mother that *she* wears frocks in front of Mr. Gupta, she receives the terse reply “That is quite different” (26).

Kusum herself has internalized societal codes of propriety and her family’s conception of honour. When Arushi reproaches her for not testifying before the police, she replies:

If they get to hear at home that I have got mixed up with the police, they will die of shame. They will never be able to show their faces in Burdwan. And *Bapi* will never be able to marry me off, or even Tusu (139).

The reiteration of the death-before-dishonour theme, which is one of the mainstays of the patriarchal mode of regulation of women, acquires a rather bizarre tone in this context. Kusum avers that she would prefer to be tortured and abused indefinitely than get ‘mixed up’ with the police, who are authorised to extricate her from her plight. There is, apparently, no dishonour attached to being ill-treated by one’s employers, but speaking out against oppression, or seeking legal recourse to secure one’s rights, is construed as bringing everlasting shame to one’s family. The punishment for this dishonour is, predictably, the one thing

that every Indian girl child is indoctrinated to dread: a future without the hope of marriage.

Conclusion

The question that lingers at the end of the novel is---how far has the girl child travelled in her quest for identity and self-realisation? Kusum has maturity thrust upon her as a result of her trial by fire *vis-à-vis* her traumatic experience in her employer's house. She progresses from being a dependent female member of the household to a (seemingly) independent wage-earner, but at a bitter price. Yet in the final analysis, she is only a commodity to be sold, either to a husband or an employer. The lure of regular meals and decent clothing makes her parents agree to send her to Delhi. Here, her sense of self-worth and value are steadily eroded at the hands of her employers.

Although the book does not explore the implications of, and tensions implicit in, Arushi's role in bringing Kusum to Delhi, there are suggestions that Arushi is indirectly responsible for Kusum's plight. The book raises uncomfortable questions regarding the genuineness of the so-called altruism of the privileged class, and whether intervention by members of this class is really useful or necessary. Nandini Chandra observes that children belonging to the privileged class "exhibit a sympathetic cognisance of the less-privileged 'other', [yet] this sympathy is totally diluted by the imperative...to seduce this 'other' into its charmed fold too, if only very briefly."²⁸ Arushi's friendship with Kusum is fraught

with class tensions from the outset, and the gulf between the two girls is highlighted when they come to Delhi. Despite parental opposition and the disapproval of the Guptas, Arushi tries to maintain her friendship with Kusum. However, at the end of the novel, class hierarchies are reasserted, as Kusum departs with her family to make a life for herself in an environment commensurate with her class, and Arushi returns to her privileged world.

In *Kusum*, a resolution is achieved by geographical displacement of the character from her native milieu to an urban environment. Kusum is displaced from her roots and soon divested of her idealised fantasies about life in the city. Yet the rural alternative is no idyll either. Kusum is aware that the future awaiting her in Burdwan is not substantially different from her mother's present fate. As she comments to Arushi at the end of the novel:

"I don't have much to go back to in Burdwan. There, too, it will be washing and sweeping and scrubbing in other people's houses- and then perhaps marriage and cooking, like Ma does, again at other people's houses. I have been through all that." (158)

The sheer inevitability of the fate of the underprivileged girl child, her helpless resignation to a predetermined future devoid of choices, and the lack of control over the fruits of her labour are evident in the above lines. Hence, Kusum's father's suggestion that the entire family migrate to Delhi in search of new

opportunities and a better deal in life seems viable. There is a latent promise that the children will be given an education, which in turn may ensure a secure and meaningful future for them.

Kusum is not an adventure story in the conventional sense, because it does not incorporate stock devices like exotic locales, larger-than-life villains and exciting rewards such as hidden treasure. It is a story written more in the tradition of realism, yet it does “open the child’s eyes to the heroic possibilities of everyday living.”²⁹ In the final analysis, *Kusum* is a sincere attempt to create among child readers a consciousness of the abuse of children’s rights, and an awareness of the levels of exploitation within the domestic sphere.

Notes

- ¹ Jasbir Jain, "The Marginalisation of the Girl Child: A Narrative Perspective," *The Girl Child* 79.
- ² Kakar, *The Inner World* 210, 207.
- ³ Kakar *The Inner World* 62.
- ⁴ G.J.V. Prasad, "The Girl Child in Recent Tamil Fiction: Women Beware Women," *The Girl Child* 163.
- ⁵ Nabar 61.
- ⁶ Azim Sherwani, *The Girl Child in Crisis* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1998) 107.
- ⁷ Olga Nieuwenhuys, *Children's Lifeworlds: gender, welfare and labour in the developing world* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 21-23.
- ⁸ Nabar 36.
- ⁹ Spivak, preface, *Imaginary Maps* xxvi.
- ¹⁰ Sangari and Vaid 23.
- ¹¹ Nabar 10.
- ¹² Nabar 37.
- ¹³ Indira Kulshreshtha 14.
- ¹⁴ Spivak xxvii.
- ¹⁵ Indira Karamcheti, "The Geographics of Marginality" 131.
- ¹⁶ B.K. Ramanujam, "Toward Maturity" 49.

¹⁷ Kakar *The Inner World* 2.

¹⁸ Kakar 62.

¹⁹ Jasbir Jain 88.

²⁰ Viney Kirpal, "The Girl Child in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*," *The Girl Child* 236-237.

²¹ Nabar 83.

²² Nabar 163.

²³ Vasantha Kannabiran and K. Lalitha, "That Magic Time: Women in the Telengana People's Struggle," *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993) 185.

²⁴ Sangari and Vaid, 19.

²⁵ Kakar, *The Inner World* 63.

²⁶ Kakar 63.

²⁷ Anupa Lal, "Neglected Flowers," rev. of *Kusum*, by Dipavali Debroy, *The Book Review* vol. XXII.11 (Nov. 1998): 31.

²⁸ Nandini Chandra, "Constructing a 'National Popular': The Hindu India in Amar Chitra Katha (1970-1991)," unpub. diss. Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1996, 115.

²⁹ Mary Hill Arbuthnot, qtd. in Prema Srinivasan, *Children's Fiction in English in India* 20.

✓ *COMPANY FOR MANISHA*

This book explores the conflicts and compromises arising in the attempts by two adolescent girls to adjust to each others' personalities and behaviour. The story portrays the breaking in of the adolescent spirit and maps the growth of the protagonist Manisha into maturity. The catalyst for this growth is the appearance of Anu, a family friend whose temporary stay with the family creates a crisis situation, the resolution of which forms the plot of the book.

Manisha, a student of Class VIII, is the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Kaushal. The story opens with Manisha being informed by her parents of the impending arrival of a house guest. Mrs. Kaushal's friend Renu Malik and her husband were leaving for Singapore, where Mr. Malik had been transferred. She had requested Mrs. Kaushal to take in their daughter Anu temporarily, until they could organise a school for her there. The Kaushals had agreed, and Anu was to arrive the following day. Manisha is taken by surprise at this unexpected announcement and reacts with outrage and disbelief. She protests against not having been taken into confidence or consulted about this decision, but her father reprimands her sharply. Thereafter she registers her protest by behaving in an uncooperative manner and spurning her parents' attempts to make up to her. She reacts to Anu's arrival by being deliberately rude and ignoring her as far as possible. Her parents try to gloss over this initially and later take Anu into their confidence,

reassuring her that Manisha's attitude is a temporary phase. The problem is compounded when Manisha learns that Anu is to be admitted to her school. She complains about not having being informed earlier, and reacts in an unreasonable manner. Anu later makes an attempt to clear the air with Manisha by sympathising with her situation, and assuring her that they could make the best of it by ensuring minimal interaction with each other. Manisha is inwardly surprised at Anu's "level-headed assessment of the situation" (26), but responds with indifference to this proffered olive branch.

Anu's attempts to settle down in her new home and new school are marred only by Manisha's unfriendly behaviour. Manisha resents the interest and friendly overtures made to Anu by her friends, and takes Anu to task for apparently trying to share her friends, in addition to her life and home. Unable to handle this unwelcome intrusion into her life and resenting this transgression of her personal space, Manisha begins to needle Anu in school. When Anu is nominated prefect in school, Manisha deliberately flouts her orders in an attempt to put her in her place and undermine her authority. She does not succeed, and earns instead the ire of her classmates. Isolated thus on account of her behaviour, and painfully aware of the disapproval of parents, friends and peers alike, Manisha begins the arduous journey into maturity and adulthood. She learns to claim responsibility for her actions, and becomes more self-aware and conscious of the ramifications of her behaviour. However, her hesitant attempts

to build bridges are ignored by Anu, who cannot bring herself to trust Manisha's moods and hence warily maintains her distance.

The climax takes place when Anu organises a surprise birthday party for Manisha, since Mrs. Kaushal is indisposed. Despite her troubled relationship with Manisha, Anu decides to organise the party, because she feels it would be a nice way of thanking Manisha's mother for her hospitality and loving care. Manisha is delighted and gratified that she is to have a party after all, but unaware that it has been organised by Anu. At the end of the party Manisha comes to know about Anu's contribution to the entire affair. She is shocked and overcome with guilt and remorse for her hurtful behaviour. She resolves to make an honest attempt to own responsibility for her actions and change her attitude. When Anu returns home that night, she opens out her heart and expresses her sense of shame and remorse. Anu graciously accepts her apologies and the two girls soon become close friends. Just as they begin to enjoy their newly established relationship, Anu's parents send for her to join them in Singapore. Manisha is shattered and petulant that she is to lose her new friend so soon. Anu reasons with her and Manisha learns to cope with her sense of loss. Her recently acquired maturity now manifests itself in her relationships with her peers and seniors in school. She is not afraid to publicly acknowledge the folly of her past actions, and this frankness and honesty earns her the respect of her friends and schoolmates.

Meanwhile there are unsettling changes in Anu's household. Her father has been offered a better job in Hong Kong, and since this job involved extensive travelling, Anu's parents are worried that her academic career would suffer. Mrs. Kaushal offers to take Anu in again, and Manisha is ecstatic about this new development. The book ends with the promised return of Anu to Manisha's home.

Preferred and resistant readings

A semiotic study of the book reveals interesting views regarding the construction of the child and the author's perception regarding what constitutes the ideal child. In order to comprehend the text in its entirety, it becomes imperative to resist authorial manipulation. Roland Barthes, in his discussion on interpretation of texts, notes that the writer advocates a certain preferred reading of the text, which is consonant with his/her artistic vision:

...the author, it is believed, has certain rights over the reader, he constrains him to a certain *meaning* of the work, and this meaning is of course the right one, the real meaning: whence a critical morality of the right meaning (and of its defect, "misreading"): we try to establish *what the author meant*, and not at all *what the reader understands*.¹

In this novel, the preferred reading is likely to coincide with the author's intentions, which in this case appear to be that of presenting Anu as the socialised and acceptable other of Manisha. However, a resistant reading will be attempted in this discussion in order to uncover the motives underlying the author's construction of the child.

The two major characters are a study in contrast and appear to be deliberately created to be foils for each other. They are conceived as a set of binary opposites, and it is clear from the outset that the power relations are loaded in favour of Anu. From the beginning, Manisha is projected as being a spoilt child. There are explicit comments to this effect by the characters. For instance, Manisha's father allays his wife's fears regarding possible unpleasantness between Manisha and Anu with the remark:

"Give both of them a chance. Manisha is quite spoilt. Anu's company would be good for her." (5)

Manisha's mother appears to echo these sentiments, although she does not verbalise them. The other characters in the novel also precondition the reader to view Manisha in a certain light by their comments. Anu's friend Alka's first remark about Manisha is: "We know her vaguely. She is supposed to be cheeky, from what I have heard." (30)

Even Manisha's own friend Ritu, instead of sympathising with her, or trying to understand her sense of confusion and hurt at having to adjust so abruptly to a new situation, merely berates her for being silly and exhorts her to "Stop acting like the tragedy queen" (36). Nilofer, the head girl of the school, says of Manisha:

"...she is usually obedient, but answers back at times and can be quite defiant." (65)

Apart from the observations of the characters, there are instances where authorial intrusion is obvious, the aim being to reinforce the prevailing opinion of Manisha. When Manisha watches a distraught Anu being comforted by Mrs. Kaushal, she is overcome by remorse at her own thoughtlessness. Then follows the statement:

Suddenly she saw herself as seen by others---mean, thoughtless, selfish and inconsiderate. (76)

Peter Hunt notes that a primary distinguishing feature of texts for children is the element of control: "The concept that adults must necessarily control texts for children is very strong."² In *Company for Manisha*, the author attempts to control the reactions of her child audience and channel them to coincide with her own interpretation of the protagonist's character. Although the novel is written in the conventional story form with multiple viewpoints, all opinions seem to merge

when the issue is an appraisal of Manisha's personality. Whether it is her parents, peers or her seniors in school, the general consensus appears to be that Manisha is a spoilt brat. Manisha's parents acknowledge that their continued yielding to Manisha's demands was responsible for her 'tantrums', yet they make no attempt to resolve the situation in a manner that respects her feelings on several contentious issues. Whenever Manisha raises an objection, their reaction is to first try to make her yield with persuasion and, failing that, they turn authoritarian and demand unquestioning obedience. Manisha responds to this attitude by withdrawing into her own world, or sulkily complying with their dictates. Kakar notes that "high-handed attempts to regulate behaviour through threat or punishment, such as personal rejection or humiliation, are likely to lead to open defiance or devious evasion on the part of the subordinate." ³ Manisha initially reacts to the authoritarian attitude of her parents with defiance, but when she finds that her attempts to resist the demand for compliance are unsuccessful, and that her own friends are also turning against her, she consciously sets out to reshape her personality in accordance with social dictates.

In contrast, the characterisation of Anu is offered as the legitimised construction of the socialised child. The very first observation made about her is that she is "a nice girl" (6). This impression is sought to be reinforced either explicitly or by implication in the course of the book by the various characters. Anu's class teacher observes:

"She is eager to learn, never shirks work and participates actively in class." (54).

There is evidence that even the author endorses the view that Anu is the ideal child. In a passage describing her first day as a prefect, the author comments:

Since she was pleasant and friendly, the girls warmed to her and usually obeyed her (69).

In order to further underscore the difference between the two girls, and thereby reinscribe the prototype of the ideal child, Manisha and Anu are time and again placed in similar situations, and their reactions contrasted. Both of them have major decisions foisted on them without regard to their opinions on these matters. Anu's parents decide to send her to Delhi to live with the Kaushals despite her protests, while Manisha has a room mate thrust on her without notice, and with scant regard for her objections. Yet Anu submits after a token protest which is promptly overruled, while Manisha is forced to resort to employing tactics like non-cooperation, blatant rudeness and open defiance to register her protest. Her behaviour is constantly rebuked until she gives in and conforms to the decreed acceptable norms of good behaviour. Anu's rapid adjustment to her changed circumstances is held up as an example by her father to Manisha:

“Think of the problems she has to face. She is away from her parents. She has to adjust to a totally new place, new school, new friends. It is to her credit that she has adjusted so well ! “ (62).

In contrast, Manisha’s rebellious reaction to this intrusion of her personal space is dismissed as a mere temper tantrum, and her sulks and sullen silence are construed as aberrant behaviour. In both cases however, the balance of power is firmly tilted in favour of the adults: *they* decide what kind of behaviour is acceptable, and those children who internalise these norms are suitably rewarded by express approval.

The child as reader

Literature for children is frequently criticised on account of the degree of control it exhibits in terms of preconditioning the reader’s responses. Peter Hunt points out that most texts for children tend to be closed, thus limiting the possibilities of interpretation. He suggests that texts should be critically examined from the point of view of the potential they display for interaction and for possible meanings. Since children are ‘unskilled’ readers, the author-reader relationship is necessarily an unbalanced power relationship. The text “*prescribes* what the reader *must* be, and indeed, because there is both an authoritarian and an educational element involved, what the reader *can*

be...Very often there seems to be a deliberate attempt to limit the child's interaction with the text." ⁴ *Company for Manisha* does not offer many possibilities for interpretation. It is clear from the beginning of the novel where the author's sympathies lie, and the suggestion that Manisha is culpable is reinforced by almost all the characters in the book. The child reader is therefore predisposed to respond in the manner envisaged by the writer.

Hunt acknowledges that the role of the reader is fluid, thereby making it difficult to predict the precise effect a text will have on the reader. Yet, there is a strong likelihood that readers with a similar socio-cultural profile will respond to texts in similar ways. "The reader will make individual meanings from texts, but there is certainly a point at which societal norms will control perception." ⁵ This is particularly true of children, who are developing readers, lacking the experience and maturity to make independent judgements. In a book like *Company for Manisha*, the code of conduct ratified by authority figures like Manisha's parents and schoolteachers, as well as by her peers, is likely to be internalised unquestioningly. Consequently, there is no scope for the child reader to interrogate social attitudes or read against the grain.

The reinscription of power

In a discussion of the politics of representation, Sharmila Rege argues that although novels are regarded as portraits of social conditions, these portraits tend to be selective and constructed:

Texts are themselves shaped by conventions and traditions of writing and most importantly by the cultural hegemony of the ruling elite.⁶

In children's literature, this hegemony ensures the revalidation of certain culturally approved patterns of behaviour in many subtle ways, including identification with characters who represent the legitimised concept of ideal children. The ideology underlying what is construed as socially acceptable behaviour appears to be a throwback to the colonial construct of good conduct. This is particularly evident in the interactions in the New Delhi Convent School, where Manisha and Anu study. The chief virtue of this school appears to be its emphasis on discipline, which is to be upheld at all costs. Anu is rewarded for her socially correct behaviour by being appointed prefect, although she is a new entrant to the school. Manisha's attempts to defy Anu's authority in school are swiftly denounced by her peers and penalised by her seniors. She is even threatened with expulsion. The prefect Alka remarks:

"I, for one, am really disgusted with you, Manisha. I didn't think that any *decent girl* could behave like this" (emphasis added). (74)

The codes of decency are clearly defined in this scene. Decency consists in obeying authority unquestioningly. There is no room for dissent within this structure. As long as Manisha resists this ideology, she continues to be viewed as “cheeky”, “irritating and brash” and “defiant”. Once she buckles to societal pressure and ‘reforms’ herself she is rewarded with popularity and the bestowal of responsibility. She is made monitor on the day of the teachers’ picnic, and she discharges her responsibility in the best traditions of the school. The head girl comments on Manisha’s transformation and mentions the possibility that she would be made prefect the following year. Thus, the tradition of enforcing discipline and ensuring the production of another generation of socialised, disciplined children, is to be perpetuated by the very person who defied the code of conduct imposed by the school, and who questioned the authority and validity of its enforcers. Children who have internalised the norms of behaviour decreed as appropriate, and who have accepted the hierarchical structuring of relationships, are rewarded by giving them the opportunity to participate in the process of reiterating these social structures

In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser notes that the family and the school are two prominent apparatuses through which the State perpetuates its ideology. He opines that “Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to ‘discipline’ not only their shepherds, but also their flocks. The same is true of the Family.”⁷

According to him, the dominant ideological State apparatus in mature capitalist social formations is the educational ideological apparatus. The school indoctrinates the mass of children to perform the role chalked out for it in society, whether it is “the role of the agent of exploitation (ability to give the workers orders and speak to them: ‘human relations’)” or “the agent of repression (ability to give orders and enforce obedience ‘without discussion’).”⁸ In this novel, the conversion of a potential dissenter against the system, and her subsequent appropriation and induction into the dominant ideology is achieved very subtly by both family and school, through selective use of the strategies of reward and punishment. In fact, it is not only figures of authority like parents or the school that prevail upon Manisha to conform: Manisha is equally constrained by peer pressure to repress her striving for individual identity and accede to the norms of society. Her friends berate her for her unsocial conduct and show their disapproval by withdrawing their support. The internalisation of roles, as well as absorption of the dominant ideology, is evident in the unequivocal manner in which Manisha's friends denounce her behaviour towards Anu, without giving her the opportunity to articulate her point of view (75-76).

The emphasis on compliance with a group value system is more in evidence in the Indian socio-cultural milieu. B. K. Ramanujam makes the following observation: “In a society where assertion of individuality is not a cherished value, but conformity to a group value system in order to maintain

group identity is the ideal, the process of identity formation, perhaps, is different.”⁹

Manisha's efforts to assert herself by opposing the intrusion of Anu into her life and personal space are discouraged as being unsocial and selfish, because they pose a threat to the stability and harmony of the family, which is the primary social unit.

Along with the construction of childhood as a period of apprenticeship, which is to train the child for her ultimate role as a useful and obedient member of society, the novel throws up interesting issues in its construction of socially approved behaviour, which is considered a prerequisite for adulthood. Manisha and Anu are two girls in their early teens, who are poised to enter the adult world. However their perceptions of this world are different, and hence the manner of their entry into this world also differs. Manisha perceives the adult world as one which conspires to shut her out of its decision making processes. She protests against her parents' decision to foist a roommate on her without consulting her or even informing her in advance. She rebels against the *fait accompli* presented to her, and reacts by being deliberately uncooperative in order to register her protest. Her logical reaction “You could have told me first” is sharply rebuked by her father who says “Mummy does not need your permission for that” (4). Thereafter, all of Manisha's attempts to assert her individuality and demand a voice of her own are perceived as aberrant.

Sudhir Kakar observes that in India, the traditional social formation stresses allegiance to community values, and this conformity is ensured by employing ritual, family ceremony, psychological pressure and social sanction:

From the beginning, participation and acceptance in this world [of childhood] entail strict observance of a traditionally elaborated hierarchical social order and the subordination of individual preferences and ambitions to the welfare of the extended family...¹⁰

Despite the fact that Manisha is a valued and cherished member of the household, her subordinate status as a child is brought into focus by making adult approval contingent upon her behaving in a manner considered socially appropriate.

Unlike Manisha, Anu sees the adult world as one whose workings might be incomprehensible, but whose authority and power have to be respected. Therefore, she acquiesces (after an initial protest) to her parents' wish to send her to live with the Kaushals. She is able to sympathise with Manisha initially, because she envisions herself reacting in a similar manner if faced with such a predicament. However, as Anu treads on the path to adulthood, she moves further and further away from an empathetic understanding with Manisha. The two are able to meet on an equal footing again only when Manisha has

accomplished the tortuous climb into adult approved behaviour, when she has moulded her personality into "the patterned female self delineated by patriarchy." ¹¹

Identity formation in Indian society

In an essay examining the dialectic of girlhood, Vimala Rao notes:

The growth of a girl's character in Indian society is seen mainly in relation to her attitude towards her family and her duty towards it.....Coming into sharp conflict with this sense of family duty, however, is the girl's burgeoning feeling of self-identity. It is in the course of this conflict that the full identity of the girl is formed. The successful formation of this identity depends upon the delicate balance that the girl maintains between submission and revolt.¹²

Rao comments further that growth into maturity and selfhood is quite often tested in family situations in the course of confrontation with adults. Manisha's attempts to carve an identity for herself are thwarted by parental and social pressure to conform to patriarchal paradigms. Unable to achieve the "delicate balance" between submission and revolt, she capitulates and re-forms her identity in accordance with social expectations. The process of identity formation is particularly crucial in adolescence, when the conflict between

individuation and conformity is at its peak. B. K. Ramanujam quotes the views of psychologist Erik H. Erikson regarding this process: "...identity formation comes in a decisive crisis in youth---a crisis alleviated or aggravated by different societies in different ways." ¹³ Ramanujam points out that in the context of Indian society, which is in a state of transition, the terms 'alleviated' and 'aggravated' acquire additional significance. In the flux of adolescence, the growing child is forced to forge an identity that either conforms to societal paradigms, or is in direct opposition to social dictates. In the novel under discussion, Manisha, after an initial phase of rebellion, develops her identity in accordance with social expectations.

Meenakshi Gupta traces the tacit acceptance of conventional sex-differentiated roles by girl children to the patterns of socialisation adopted by the family and society. She observes that daughters "are pressurised to be nurturant, obedient, and responsible. They are discouraged from being aggressive. Interpersonal orientation, compromise and general welfare is expected of daughters." ¹⁴ In this respect, Anu proves herself to be the ideal daughter figure, because she adjusts to her altered circumstances with minimal conflicts and makes compromises whenever the situation demands. In contrast, Manisha's aggressive response to Anu's arrival is implicitly and explicitly criticised as being unacceptable and unseemly in a daughter.

Manisha's entry into the world of socially sanctioned behavior is mediated by her awareness that one's real emotions need to be concealed. The turning point in her journey towards adulthood is her realisation that Anu had organised her surprise birthday party. Here again she is victimised by her exclusion from information. Her right to knowledge is flouted, but since the consequences have been pleasurable from Manisha's point of view (she has had her birthday party after all), she is forced to rethink her situation. Her first reaction on learning the truth is "Why didn't you tell me?"(89), after which she makes a deliberate attempt to dissemble in front of her parents:

She opened her mouth to say something more and then decided against it.

She pretended to yawn (emphasis added). (90)

Subsequently, Manisha learns quickly the lessons of duplicity and concealment, and begins her journey into self-awareness and maturity. She hides her tears from her parents and sits down to analyse her past conduct. She is overcome by guilt and remorse:

Anu did all this for me when I have been so rotten to her...Why did I do all those awful things? Why did I insult her so often? Did she act mean? No...If only I had one more chance...I would try and make up for everything. (90)

Implicit in the construction of the socialised child is an ambivalent attitude to what is perceived as Truth. Manisha's open protests and honest expressions of disapproval and defiance are swiftly and sternly repressed as being anti social. In contrast, Anu's attempts to reassure her parents and the Kaushals with half truths, and sometimes with outright untruths, are valorized on account of their intentions being honourable. Manisha spills ink on Anu's new uniform, but Anu takes the blame on herself, (thereby protecting Manisha), and is given credit for doing so (53). She refuses to admit to her parents and to the Kaushals that she is having problems in her relationship with Manisha, and even actively seeks Manisha's complicity in perpetuating the impression that all is well between them (26). In this world governed by old fashioned Enid Blyton-like values, taking responsibility for others' misdeeds is construed as a sign of maturity. Manisha initially attempts to subvert this notion by scoffing at Anu's attempt to cover up for her: "Do you think you are extra noble or something?" (53) However, she finally accepts and internalises this code of conduct. Thus, when she is entrusted with a position of authority as monitor, she covers up for Smita with a lie, and is rewarded with instant acceptance and popularity (122). Manisha learns that acceptance and approval within the social sphere is contingent, not only on being responsible for one's own actions, but also on taking the blame for others.

Manisha's growth into maturity occurs after a process of defamiliarisation with what she had hitherto considered her milieu. At the beginning of the novel,

Manisha is in her natural element, secure in the knowledge that she is loved by family and friends. It is Anu who is the intruder into this well ordered world. As the story progresses, however, Anu gradually begins to fit into her new environment, displacing Manisha in the process. The very sources of Manisha's strength turn against her, until she is isolated and completely alone. When Anu reprimands Manisha in school for talking in the corridors, Manisha replies:

“You don't know anything about this school. You arrive from Mumbai and then strut about pretending you own this place. You don't belong here!” (72)

Yet she discovers that ironically it is she who does not belong in this adult-regulated world, which has no place for persons attempting to assert their independence or articulating an identity of their own. Consequently, she is frequently compelled to physically remove herself from situations that threaten to overwhelm her fragile autonomy. Her refusal to compromise is interpreted as being selfish and spoiled, and she is accepted and welcomed into the social sphere only when she has successfully obliterated all traces of defiance and dissent. Even this difficult transformation is attributed to Anu's benign influence on Manisha (125).

Manisha now internalises the codes of good behaviour to the extent that she views her earlier self as being a “horrible rude thing” (123). In contrast, Anu

is conformity personified. She chooses to live within the confines of the world chalked out for her and the author's approval of this is implicit in the book. Thus Anu represents the legitimised construction of the ideal child, who is able to reorganise her behaviour according to changes in circumstances. In this context, it would be pertinent to note Piaget's views regarding the egocentrism of children. Susan Sugarman notes :

According to Piaget, the ability to appreciate other points of view and to separate self from reality was necessary for an "objective" conception of the world as well as for logical thinking, successful communication and the development of morality.¹⁵

In Piaget's opinion, children were not able to adequately distinguish between self and world and did not, therefore, take into account other people's points of view. In the light of this observation, Manisha's initial behaviour may be construed as childish/childlike (although the tone of the book seems to prefer the pejorative suggestions of the former term) while her later 'reformed' personality is a result of her successful attempt to separate self from reality, which consequently enhances her social communication skills.

Isolation and integration

The novel provides interesting perspectives on issues such as isolation and social connectedness. The importance of integration with society is

stressed throughout the book. Anca Vlasopolos sees this as being characteristic of women writers who feature women characters in their writing.

She notes:

Feminist psychoanalytic theory, which posits that a woman's survival is much more dependent on social connectedness than a man's, seems to find validation, if not in women's lives, at least in the models of women's lives created by women authors : the female hero's success or failure rests on her ability to acknowledge, or create, and sustain relations with other women, who function as sister / mother figures. In other words, exceptionality, singularity, and isolation, which mark the male hero and authenticate his quest to set the boundaries of his autonomy.....become for women the markers not of heroism but of victimization and loss of autonomy. ¹⁶

The identities of the girl children in the texts under discussion are constituted, if not by their fictional mothers, then definitely by their women creators (with the exception of *The Fiery Cross*, whose author is male. The difference in perception between men and women writers is discussed elsewhere). The values stressed in the formation of these identities focus on maintaining optimum social contact and functioning within the existing social formation. In *Company for Manisha*, three of the main characters (Anu, her friend Alka and Manisha) are only children. The former two appear well attuned to their social

milieu, while Manisha is victimised as long as she tries to retain her independent identity. Her plaintive cry "But I am different!" (21) remains unheeded. Once she abjures this cry, and establishes female bonding with her "sister figure" Anu, her identity is legitimised.

A feature common to all the four books under consideration is that they depict girl children in pairs: Arushi and Kusum in *Kusum*, Anu and Manisha, Alka and Ritu in *Company for Manisha*, Aarti and Rita in *The Fiery Cross* and Shilpi and Meghna in *The Hilltop Mystery*. In *Kusum* the pairing serves to highlight the class distinctions between the two girl characters. In *The Hilltop Mystery*, the focus is on the differences between Indian children bred in India and those reared abroad, as portrayed in the personalities of Shilpi and Meghna. In *Company for Manisha*, Anu and Manisha are initially depicted as opposing characters. Anu is also paired with Alka later in the book to emphasise her social integration. Ritu, who is instrumental in Manisha's eventual conversion, serves as a foil for Manisha. Once Manisha has rejoined the fold, so to speak, the children form a "gay foursome" (97). This concept of a sisterhood is further reinforced in the all-girls school that the children attend. Hence, Manisha is adjudged by her ability to "create, and sustain" relations with her peers and family members.

The notion that social integration is an essential component of the development of a child's personality is ratified by psychologists, educationists

and practitioners of children's literature. Gabrielle Maunder observes that one of the conditions attached to the state of childhood, as represented in books, is that of sociability. "Isolation is regarded as being an unnatural state for children" and the ideal family in children's books is described as a circle of mutually supportive people.¹⁷ This observation is borne out by the fact that children's books generally feature child characters in groups, where the emphasis is on peer interaction and collective action. In the Indian context, Kakar makes a similar comment on the value of socialisation in Indian society. He notes that the dominant cultural tradition in the West ascribes value to independence and individual initiative. Consequently, a person's behaviour in relationships in the West approaches the isolation pole of the fusion-isolation continuum. In India, on the other hand, the behaviour of an individual approaches the fusion pole, because of the value attached to mutual dependence in traditional Indian culture. This attitude governs child-rearing practices in India. Kakar notes that "In the Indian culture, threats of abandonment and isolation are deemed the most effective methods of socialisation."¹⁸

In *Company for Manisha*, the protagonist Manisha finds herself being increasingly isolated as long as she displays through her behaviour that Anu's presence is unwelcome. Her parents ignore her outbursts and try to make up for her ungraciousness by giving Anu more attention (48, 61), and her friends dismiss her protests as unreasonable and selfish (36, 58, 61,76). When Manisha finds herself isolated on account of her unsocial behaviour, she

capitulates and sets out to consciously mould herself into the legitimised construct of the ideal child:

Suddenly she saw herself as seen by others---mean, thoughtless, selfish and inconsiderate.

She knew that she must apologize to Anu for her behaviour and start again with a clean slate. (76).

Kakar sees in stable societies a definite “psycho-social reciprocity between the institutions that govern and organize adult lives and the culture’s characteristic modalities of child-rearing.”¹⁹ He notes that since Indian society is patterned on a hierarchical structure, the child is viewed as a subordinate whose compliance is mandatory, and whose behaviour is regulated by a complex manipulation of her/his need for acceptance and approval:

...if a child is praised and loved for compliance and submission, and subtly or blatantly punished for independence, he cannot easily withdraw from the orbit of family authority during childhood, nor subsequently learn to deal with authority other than submissively.²⁰

The process of socialisation is thus accomplished by positively reinforcing acceptable patterns of behaviour and responding to unsocialised conduct by isolating the perpetrator.

Parents as role models

Manisha's father is the only male character in the book. Mr. Kaushal is without question the typical patriarch. His power in the household is absolute. In his relations with Manisha, he vacillates between indulgence and stern authority. However, he interacts with Anu on a more adult basis, having long discussions with her on various issues. Indi Rana remarks on the inconsistent child-rearing practices of Indian culture:

...there is in our culture, a sentimental swill about childhood, an overindulgence of children for the first few years, followed by a rigid, unconsidered socialisation for traditionally delineated roles.²¹

Manisha's mother is cast in the stereotypical mould of the middle class housewife, who is forever feeding her family and who always puts family before self. She alternates between treating Manisha like a child, and trying to accommodate her burgeoning awareness of her young adult status. She is unable to handle Manisha's quest for autonomy and is immensely relieved when Manisha is finally 'socialised'. Her reaction to Manisha's capitulation is, typically: "You came to your senses" (113). She is representative of the middle class woman who has internalised patriarchal mores completely. She accepts unquestioningly the subservient role allotted to her, and she is instrumental in

perpetuating the concept of sex-differentiated role-typing in the process of rearing her child.

Ipshita Chanda observes that adults tend to “demarcate thresholds of expectations”²² within which girl children are meant to fit. Manisha’s parents expect her to conform to their preconceived notions of good conduct. These notions include denial of one’s very real negative feelings such as jealousy or envy, refusal to acknowledge the primacy of individual rights and maintenance of a façade of wellbeing regardless of inner conflicts. Anu moulds herself to fit these expectations and is hence rewarded with explicit approval. Manisha, on the other hand, is constantly rebuked for her refusal to comply with parental dictates, until she finally succumbs and shapes her personality to conform to the prototype of the ideal child.

The predominance of female characters in the book doubtless enhances their visibility, but the scope of the book is limited on this account. The absence of boy children of a comparable age group, whose interaction with the girls could have been illuminating, further limits the book. The appeal of this book for a child reader probably lies in its delineation of a situation which is easily identifiable, or at least comparable to what children commonly encounter in their daily lives. Molly Hunter acknowledges that contemporary children’s literature in the West features themes once considered taboo in children’s literature such as racial prejudice, social deprivation and drug abuse. She suggests that these

themes be dealt with in an imaginative manner so as to raise the level of understanding of the child reader. According to her, the writer's success in presenting highly charged emotional experiences in literary terms "rests on the ability to create an emotional frame of reference to which the children in general can relate."²³ By externalising the growing child's feelings of rejection and inability to compromise with new situations, *Company for Manisha* recreates a commonly identifiable condition of childhood. As Nicholas Tucker has observed, "Young people, stranded between childhood and adulthood, are often confused about their personal identity and group loyalties."²⁴ The author has attempted to present a girl child's reaction to, and resolution of, a personal conflict within the accepted dictates of society.

The conflict between individuation and conformity as depicted in the story is particularly relevant to the contemporary urban middle class child in India. Traditionally, the phase of adolescence has not been accorded much importance in Indian child-rearing practices. B. K. Ramanujam points out that "adolescence as a distinct developmental phase is an artifact in India". In his opinion, it is a purely urban concept that has been influenced by the media. Hence, the conflicts that arise in the minds of adolescents appear to be irreconcilable on account of the fact that they have no precedent. Ramanujam concludes "it is understandable that since a culture does not recognize adolescence as a distinct phase, no provision is made to facilitate the resolution of such conflicts."²⁵ While it is debatable that adolescence is entirely a media-

inspired concept, as Ramanujam suggests, there is no doubt that it has been a neglected sphere in terms of literary representation. The conflicts that an adolescent encounters in the process of socialisation were traditionally not articulated, but their existence cannot be arbitrarily dismissed. These conflicts find expression in contemporary literature, thereby providing children with situations that they can relate to, and whose resolution can fulfil certain needs within them. Tucker notes that "children like to find idealised reflections of their own good self-images in literature, yet they may also sympathise with other characters who stand in for some of their own less mature or acceptable feelings or fantasies." ²⁶ *Company for Manisha* depicts both the unsocialised, egocentric child and her socially approved other, Consequently, it performs the dual role of indulging the concealed fantasies of child readers, while at the same time allowing them to identify with the dominant construct of the ideal child.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, "Writing Reading," trans. Richard Howard, *The Rustle of Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 30.

² Hunt 41.

³ Kakar, *The Inner World* 119.

⁴ Hunt 81-84.

⁵ Hunt 170.

⁶ Sharmila Rege, "The Politics of Gender Socialisation: The Example of *Bekasi ka Mazaar*," *The Girl Child* 90.

⁷ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 155-156.

⁸ Althusser 155-156.

⁹ B. K. Ramanujam, "Toward Maturity," *Identity and Adulthood* 49.

¹⁰ Kakar, *The Inner World* 126.

¹¹ Anca Vlasopolos, "Staking Claims for No Territory: The Sea as Woman's Space," *Reconfigured Spheres* 77.

¹² Vimala Rao, "Submission and Revolt: The Dialectic of Girlhood in Markandaya's *Two Virgins* and Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*," *The Girl Child* 118-119.

¹³ Ramanujam 38.

- ¹⁴ Meenakshi Gupta, "The Girl Child: A Psychological Perspective," *The Girl Child* 45.
- ¹⁵ Susan Sugarman, *Piaget's Construction of the Child's Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 5.
- ¹⁶ Vlasopolos 74.
- ¹⁷ Gabrielle Maunder, "Some Classic Children's Fiction," *How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books and Get Them Published*, eds. Bicknell and Trotman (London: Macdonald and Co., 1988) 41.
- ¹⁸ Kakar 88.
- ¹⁹ Kakar 119.
- ²⁰ Kakar 119-120.
- ²¹ Indi Rana, "The Story of Stories of Adventure: Literature for Rural Children," *Telling Tales* 125.
- ²² Ipshita Chanda, "Hearing Voices Once Our Own: Writing of Girl Children Considered," *The Girl Child* 64.
- ²³ Molly Hunter, *Talent is not Enough* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 19-20.
- ²⁴ Nicholas Tucker, *The Child and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 174.
- ²⁵ Ramanujam 49.
- ²⁶ Nicholas Tucker 20.

THE FIERY CROSS

The book is an attempt to rectify the imbalance in the genre of adventure fiction, which has always featured male characters as protagonists, with girls playing a supportive or decorative role in the plot. Srikumar's *The Fiery Cross* has two teenaged girls as protagonists who embark on an exciting adventure, assisted by a chauffeur and a maverick treasure hunter. An analysis of the subtext underlying the story reveals interesting assumptions.

The story is set in the picturesque Seychelles islands. Aarti, the daughter of a diplomat, is transported to an exotic new world when her father is posted to Seychelles. She settles down in her new home and befriends in her boredom Albert Maurel, the Creole chauffeur at the Indian Office. Albert is Aarti's main source of information on her arrival in Seychelles. Once she joins school, Aarti finds a new friend in Rita Seesagar, whose parents are of Indian origin. While on a visit to the house of Albert's friend Victor, the girls become aware of secret plans for a coup to overthrow the present government. On the way home, they come across Ray Watkins, an eccentric treasure hunter who has devoted his life and fortune to a fruitless search for hidden treasure at Seychelles. Aarti and Rita, accompanied by their loyal chauffeur, decide to assist Ray in his hunt for the treasure. After a series of adventures, the foursome discover the lost treasure, only to have it snatched away by a bunch of anti-government rebels who had

been hiding in the same island. In a dramatic climax, Aarti kills the rebel leader and the four adventurers succeed in retrieving the treasure.

The book is a laudable attempt to render girl children visible in popular adventure fiction. However, the author has preferred to depict upper class characters in his novel. Thus the bias against depiction of less privileged characters in dominant roles continues to be perpetrated. Both Aarti and Rita belong to fairly affluent families: Aarti's father is a senior diplomat in the Foreign Service, and Rita's father is a successful merchant and exporter well known all over the island. On account of this, the two girls are relatively independent and assured of a certain degree of freedom and mobility. They are allowed to travel all over the island chaperoned by Albert. Rita's father even gives in to their pleas and permits them to spend a night on Silhouette Island under Albert's care.

The story opens with Aarti reading a book, and soon after she remarks that her friends call her a bookworm. There is a suggestion that Aarti's love for adventure stems from her passion for reading. A similar fascination for adventure stories is seen in Arushi, a character in the novel *Kusum*. However, Arushi's sense of adventure leads her into rather comical situations as she reads non-existent meanings into innocuous happenings. Her real adventure is restricted to the domestic sphere, viz: that of rescuing Kusum from her oppressive employers. Aarti's adventure, on the other hand is practically copybook: it has an exotic locale, real villains, real treasure and a suitably dramatic and gruesome ending.

The book has a prologue written in the best tradition of historical adventure stories, which serves as a source of information regarding the genesis of the lost treasure. The prologue is grippingly written and holds the interest of the reader. Thereafter, the tale is narrated by Aarti herself. Since the events in the story are seen through the eyes of Aarti, it would be interesting to trace the world as seen by a girl child and, by extension, to see how the author views his girl characters.

A.K.Srikumar is one of the few male authors who has ventured to portray girl characters as protagonists. It is therefore of special interest to see how the male gaze perceives girl children. Viney Kirpal notes that the portrait of girl children in post-independence literature exhibits some characteristics that distinguish them from their pre-independence counterparts:

Girls in Indian English literary pieces are progressive and not role-typed. These are girls who have been brought up in the freer atmosphere of educated, middle class nuclear families. They are closer to their fathers than to their mothers (in pre-independence literature, it is the other way round). The fathers encourage them and sometimes also spoil them. The girls have been trained to think, feel and aspire like individuals.¹

In *The Fiery Cross*, both Aarti and Rita are shown to have greater interaction with their fathers. However, the tenor of the interaction is set by the parent. Neither girl is treated as a free-thinking individual entitled to her views and free to decide her course of action. Aarti is from the beginning enclosed within the space defined as 'child' and functions efficiently in it. Throughout the book, Aarti is always referred to as "my child", "little girl", "little Aarti" and similar prefixes, suggesting that she is more of a baby to be humoured than a person in her own right. The attitude of Aarti's father is one of good-humoured indulgence. He grants her wishes with the air of one pandering to the whims of a beloved pet. Aarti is herself subconsciously aware of this and contrives to get her way by exploiting this attitude. This is seen in her first interaction with her father in the opening section of the novel:

"Oh, Papa!" I put my arm around his neck, pouting. "Don't be so mysterious, Papa!" (19)

On several occasions, Aarti makes use of her pouting, wheedling and bouts of sulking to persuade her father to accede to her wishes. She is intelligent enough to spot an opportunity to use feminine wiles to get her way. For example, she bides her time, waiting for an opportunity to get her father to agree to let her visit Albert's house. One day, when her father asks her how she is enjoying life in Seychelles, she pouts and refuses to reply. On further coaxing by her father, she

decides to exploit the situation:

I saw my chance. I sniffed, casting a hurt glance at Papa.

“Oh, no! Is my little girl still unhappy?”

“Oh, Papa! Can't I get out of this bungalow for a while?” (25)

Aarti is aware that her parents will object to her visiting Albert's house on her own, so she settles for permission to tour the island with Albert and then goes to his house. Later, she informs her mother who is, predictably, outraged, but can do nothing. Here again, father and daughter gang up together against the mother and no mention is made of Aarti's subterfuge.

Aarti is quick to assess what kind of appearance will gain the approval of the adults around her and she effortlessly (and guiltlessly) adopts this appearance to further her own ends. In her first meeting with her class teacher Mr. Andrade, she says:

“I will not create any trouble for you, Sir!” I reassured him, *trying to look suitably chastened* (emphasis added). (35)

Later, she recounts:

“I put on my most innocent look. Apparently, it worked, for the teacher shook his head and returned to the blackboard.” (35)

This tendency of the girl child to make her presence felt and carve a space for herself by resorting to feminine wiles, overt submissiveness, covert subversive tactics, temper tantrums, sulking and wheedling seems to be characteristic of the girl characters in most of contemporary Indian English literature. Vrinda Nabar, in her discussion on the conditioning of the girl child, recalls a pertinent observation by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* : "Referring to the so-called feminine attributes often observed even in very young girls, she had argued that these were the result of relentless indoctrination from the early years rather than evidence of a mysterious, predetermined push towards ' passivity, coquetry, maternity' ." Nabar comments further that "The concerns of feminism make it obvious that this indoctrination still operates in almost all cultures." ²

The overwhelming influence of social mores that compels the girl child to conform is evident in the novels under consideration. In *Company for Manisha*, the protagonist Manisha tries in vain to get her parents to understand the reason for her objection to having a roommate foisted on her without prior notice. Her parents overrule her objections and ignore her display of annoyance, putting it down as a mere temper tantrum. As a result, Manisha resorts to childish behaviour in order to register her protest, which tends to be self-defeating, as her parents treat her even more like a badly behaved brat. Finally, Manisha is pressurised into conforming to the accepted paradigm of the ideal child. In *Dreamer at the Manor* by Maya Chandrasekharan, the girls in the boarding

school are depicted in non-typical terms. This novel by a young writer (Chandrasekharan was a teenager when this book was written) portrays girls as assertive, independent and capable of achieving their goals through their own efforts. Despite such positive characterisation, however, the operation of the dominant ideology ensures that any attempt by the schoolgirls to be deviant is swiftly squashed by the majority. The prevailing social 'rules' have been so completely internalised by the writer, that she upholds the values and codes of conduct handed down to her, without interrogating their relevance in the present context. It is an indication of the tenacious hold of traditional notions of conformity that even a young contemporary writer like Chandrasekharan depicts in her books girl children being trained to replicate structures of authority.

The purpose in both the novels remains the same: to reinforce what is considered acceptable behaviour by punishing any action that threatens to subvert the order. The question that arises here is who or what decides which kind of behaviour is normative and therefore worthy of emulation. It appears that the Western code of behaviour (in this case, the code prescribed by Enid Blyton in her books) still continues to govern Indian authors as is seen in their representation of acceptable social conduct. The contrast between the girls in *Dreamer at the Manor* and girl children like Arushi (in *Kusum*) and Aarti in *The Fiery Cross* raises the question whether girls brought up at home under the loving gaze of doting fathers are perceived to be incapable of open self-assertion, and hence resort to employing tactics like wheedling and sulking to

attain their goals. Is the contemporary Indian girl child doomed to employ this particular brand of subversiveness to achieve her aim? It appears that a male writer like Srikumar prefers to view the girl child as endearing and charming, but essentially immature. This tendency to regard girl children as dolls and playthings to be coddled and petted, but not taken seriously, appears to be a disturbing trend surfacing in contemporary works of fiction. Nabar notes that "In spite of superficial advances, the conventional image of the Indian girl-child is that of a metaphorical Janus: two-faced, literally speaking, little girl as sugar-and-spice on the one hand and little girl-woman as general dogsbody on the other." ³ The portrayal of characters like Arushi (in *Kusum*) and Aarti in *The Fiery Cross* embody the former image while a character like Kusum typifies the latter.

A close reading of *The Fiery Cross* reveals subtle but disquieting undertones of racism and class separatism. Aarti's father Mr. Ram Sahai is very conscious of his position as a diplomat of the Indian High Commission. He is careful to distance himself from the local population and at the first sign of political trouble, he is quick to clarify his position as a disinterested outsider :

" Relax, Aarti's mother !" said Papa. "This has nothing to do with us. We are strangers, foreigners. Let us wait and see." (69)

He makes no attempt to integrate himself with the local populace. There is no mention of him interacting with any Creole except Albert. A distinct

superciliousness is detectable in his attitude towards the Seychellois. For instance, Mrs. Sahai expresses outrage that Aarti had visited Albert's house, on the grounds that he was not legally married to the mother of his children. She fears it would be a bad influence on her child to mix with such people. To this Mr. Sahai replies:

"That is the way they live. We must get used to the customs of the natives, Aarti's mother. After all, this is not our land..." (31).

Even his wife (who throughout the novel is always referred to as Mrs. Sahai or Aarti's mother, as if she has no identity apart from these), mentions that she has begun to learn the local language so that she is able to do her own shopping "without getting taken for a ride" (58). The attitude appears to be that the locals are always on the lookout to cheat foreigners. The rationale behind learning the local language is suspect. Mrs. Sahai has no intention of learning about the culture and customs of the local people: she is merely concerned about not being cheated.

The illustrations appear to reinforce the subtly drawn class barriers. The first illustration featuring Aarti shows her visiting Albert's family. Aarti occupies the space in the foreground, dominating it. She is seated on a chair and standing before her are the Maurel family in a straight line. A table distances Aarti from the

Creole family, and her posture seems to suggest that she is conducting an inquisition of sorts, rather than chatting informally like an invited guest.

The book reinscribes several stereotypes such as the traditional role played by women. Both Aarti's and Rita's mothers are housewives cast in the stereotypical mould. Nowhere in the novel are the first names of these two women mentioned. It appears as if their identity continues to be defined by their husbands' status and position. Their sole concerns are cooking and feeding the family. Their entire existence is circumscribed within the ambit of home and family. Within minutes of meeting Aarti, Rita's mother hustles her and Rita to the dining table for a delicious meal. The first time the two women meet, Aarti's mother's immediate concern is that she is not equipped to deal with the unexpected guests:

"Oh? I am not even prepared," complained Mother. "I would have got a proper meal ready, if I had known we were having guests...and Aarti's friend's parents at that!"

Rita's mother reassures her and replies:

"Come along, I have so much to talk about to you. Let us leave the menfolk to themselves." (41)

The perpetuation of traditional concepts such as the division of the sexes in a social setting tends to limit the appeal of the book. Indira Kulshreshtha notes in her survey of textbooks in English that the popular image of women as symbols of love and affection is pervasive in these texts. Women are rarely portrayed as “self-reliant, self-directed and self-propelled. Women as projected in these books are incapable of taking decisions.”⁴ This image of the Indian woman unfortunately continues to be portrayed even in popular literature for children.

Aarti herself appears to have internalised these categories. This is evident in her mode of expression. For instance, after the above exchange, there is a comment by Aarti:

“So while Papa and Mr. Seeksagar talked shop and the women chatted, we slipped away.” (41)

One is forced to wonder whether this is the character's mindset or the author's. In the book, the father is always the supplier of information, while the mother decides on the code of appropriate behaviour for Aarti. During their first few days in Seychelles, Aarti is bored and chafes at the restrictions on her movement:

“My mother had decided that it was not safe enough for a girl my age to be gallivanting about.” (23)

Aarti implicitly accepts this dictum to the extent that she does not even question the use of the phrase 'gallivanting about', which has rather frivolous implications. She has also unconsciously imbibed her parents' class consciousness. This finds expression in comments like: "Despite their humble origins, Rita's ancestors had done well for themselves" (36). Aarti describes Rita's mother as a "bluff, enthusiastic woman" (41), a phrase that seems to imply that her class lacks elegance and dignity.

Both girls have internalised the gender roles prescribed by their families and society in general. When they are on Silhouette Island hunting for the treasure, they set up camp and Watkins the treasure hunter tells the girls to make the beds while he cooks. Rita responds by offering to cook, saying "We *ought* to be doing that" (emphasis added) (113). There is an implicit acceptance here of the prescribed role of women.

Aarti's mother adjusts to her new location quickly and slips effortlessly into her predetermined role---she strikes up a friendship with her counterpart, occupies her domestic space happily and displays typically bourgeois concerns about 'respectability' in her anxiety about Aarti interacting with a man from a lower class, who is not legally married to his partner (30-31). She leaves the decision-making to her husband, and refers all matters requiring adjudication to him. As a role model for her daughter, she leaves much to be desired.

The adventure in this story takes place on an island. Many adventure books for children use an island setting because of certain advantages. An island supplies the right amount of mystique and thrill necessary to create the atmosphere suitable for an adventure story. On a subtler level, it is an isolated world, set apart from the norms of society, where rules of class and probability do not apply, and where individual and social roles can be differently defined without fear of spillover into normal society. Hence, Rita and Aarti are able to embark on a treasure hunt with a chauffeur and a self-professed treasure seeker, and Aarti succeeds in killing the villain, such things being possible only within an island setting or one remote from the pale of normal life.

The construction of girl children in *The Fiery Cross* is replete with contradictions. On the one hand, the author has tried to effect a margin-to-centre movement by creating two girl characters as protagonists. The girls are shown to be wanted, loved and cared for by their families. They display intelligence, fortitude, courage and presence of mind in the course of their adventures. They attempt to manipulate and circumvent the restrictions imposed on them to fulfil their love of adventure. However, the fact remains that the girls continue to be bound within the space demarcated for them. The horizon of choices open to them still remains limited to what is decreed appropriate according to patriarchal norms. Their efforts to negotiate a position for themselves within their prescribed space are indicative of the tensions between the forces of power and resistance

in this relationship of the girls to absolute patriarchal authority. Although the girls are ostensibly endowed with agency to alter their circumstances, the very fact that they are forced to employ clandestine means to achieve their aims testifies to the ultimate hollowness of their empowerment. A further limitation of the book is the lack of male characters of the age group of the protagonists. A clearer perception of the author's agenda would have been forthcoming if a comparison could be made between his portrayal of male and female characters, given the same circumstances. In conclusion, the book is to be commended for its attempt to make the girl child visible in literature for children and for trying to grant the girl child her rightful place in the sun.

Notes

¹ Viney Kirpal, introduction, *The Girl Child* x.

² Nabar 61.

³ Nabar 95.

⁴ Kulshreshtha 22.

THE HILLTOP MYSTERY

This story is set in a hill town in India. Shilpi and her brother Jayant come to their Nani's (grandmother's) house to spend their vacation. They meet their cousin Meghna there. The three of them stumble into an adventure set off by the mysterious disappearance of an artist called Pranav, who was a frequent visitor to their grandmother's house. A series of events follow their arrival: three strangers, claiming to have come from Delhi visit Nani, to persuade her to sell her house to them, so that they can build a hotel on its premises. Then there is a forest fire, which appears to be an act of arson, and Pranav's painting suddenly disappears from their house. The children begin to investigate possible connections between these events and Pranav's disappearance. They search Pranav's cottage and discover that it has been ransacked and all his paintings are missing. Subsequently, they learn that someone has been buying up Pranav's paintings ---their neighbour Mr. Rautela mentions that one of the strangers, Vinod Kumar, had also offered him a handsome sum for a painting that Pranav had gifted him, but he had declined to sell it.

The children begin to make enquiries and discover that the fire had indeed been deliberately set off by a village boy, Puran. He confesses that the painting in Nani's house had been stolen by his uncle at the behest of a stranger from Delhi. The children realise that Vinod Kumar is at the root of the entire affair, and

search his hotel room for clues without success. Just when they begin to feel they are at a dead end, they come across a newspaper cutting proclaiming that an artist called Gaurav Batra is allegedly in possession of some stolen diamonds, and is presently absconding. Shilpi recognises the photograph in the cutting as Pranav's and they try to puzzle out the connection between this theft and Pranav's paintings. Meghna comes up with the idea that perhaps the paintings contain a clue regarding the place where the diamonds are hidden, which is why Vinod Kumar had been trying to collect all of Pranav's paintings. The children conclude that Pranav is probably hiding somewhere to avoid arrest.

At this point, Jayant recalls that Pranav used to love trekking and often visited an old hermit at Jageshwar. The children decide to look for Pranav there and, after taking their grandmother's permission, they set off for Jageshwar. They find Pranav at the hermit's cave, and hear from him about his accidental involvement in the jewellery theft case. He tells them that the clue to the whereabouts of the diamonds is in the painting, and asks them to find the jewels and hand them over to the police. He goes back into hiding as another man comes to the cave enquiring about Pranav and the children are left to work out the clues for themselves.

The three children are initially at a loss how to set about finding the diamonds, because the painting containing the clues has been stolen. Then Meghna remembers that she had taken a photograph of the painting soon after

she had arrived. They get the photograph printed and, with the help of their grandmother, they work out the clues in it to ascertain the place where the diamonds were hidden. Although Nani forbids them to get to work and dig out the treasure, they steal out at night and succeed in unearthing the box of diamonds. Just then a man appears and snatches the box from them. After a long chase, Jayant and Shilpi manage to catch up with the man and overpower him, while Meghna retrieves the box. At this point Nani steps in with help from the house, and the man is locked up and handed over to the police the following day. Thereafter the police follow up the case and complete the formality of arresting the culprits. Pranav serves a brief jail term for being an unknowing accomplice to the crime and subsequently returns to his cottage to paint.

The book is an adventure story set in the conventional mould: there is a theft, an unaccountable disappearance, a bunch of adult villains to outwit and bring to justice, and a group of child protagonists who solve the mystery. Adult intervention in the form of the children's grandmother is minimal and mostly on their side. As with most stories in this genre, the setting is exotic in the sense that it is different from the environment to which the children are accustomed. Since the story is based in a hill town, the author uses the opportunity to focus on the need to conserve and preserve the environment. The reference to city people disrupting the solitude and ecological balance of hill areas by their commercial ventures, and the graphic description of the devastation caused by the forest fire, serve to sensitise the child reader in a non-didactic manner on the dangers of

crass commercialisation and the need to preserve the natural habitat. As Shilpi, one of the protagonists observes, " Things are changing here, too, and not in a very nice way." (28).

The story features three children, two of whom are girls. Shilpi and Meghna are thirteen, while Shilpi's brother Jayant is eleven. The interaction between the children, as well as the role each of them play in the adventure, provides interesting insights into the way childhood is constructed in this story. The focus on the two girl children and the difference in temperament and attitude between them reveals the influence of adult control on the development of the personality of the children. Meghna is Shilpi's cousin who has lived in America until recently. Her parents had been posted abroad for a long time and they had returned a month ago. They had sent her to live with her grandmother while they were trying to settle down. Meghna is portrayed as a nervous, slightly insecure child who is still trying to come to terms with the different lifestyle she is exposed to in India. The book mocks at the common Indian tendency to valorise the West and revere all things foreign. Meghna is trained by her mother to be suspicious of all foodstuffs, excepting what is cooked at home. She is forbidden to eat anything raw or junk food from the market, and is told to avoid milk and dairy products. She tells her cousins:

"It's germs, you know. Mom says the place will be crawling with germs.

'You have to take care of yourself, honey' she said, 'You don't want to fall sick.' " (14).

The attitude of Indians towards their homeland after a prolonged stay in the West is glimpsed here. There is complete identification with the adopted nation and the homeland is transformed into the Other, as is evident from Meghna's mother's reference to India as "the place". The phobic obsession with cleanliness and hygiene, and the popular misconception that everything Indian is automatically dirty and redolent of sickness is depicted here.

Jayant and Shilpi are amazed at Meghna's attitude, and the former openly mocks her superior air by hinting that she had already 'polluted' herself by unknowingly eating raw cucumbers in the raita at lunch. Meghna is, predictably, aghast and sets about purifying her system with the remedies her mother has thoughtfully provided (14-15). Jayant also makes fun of Meghna's horror of wild animals and monkeys (another popular stereotypical image of India in the West) by frightening her with tales of panthers and an occasional man-eater frequenting their orchards. Shilpi is more diplomatic, and merely comments that Meghna is likely to miss out on a lot of enjoyable things because of the restrictions imposed on her. Due to the influence of her mother, Meghna is meticulous to a fault, and likes her life to be well-ordered and organised. She is gullible and prone to panic and over-reaction, a tendency which may be attributed to the overpowering effect of parental control.

Jayant is depicted as an impulsive, mischievous, active child always ready for action. He is poised between childhood and adolescence and displays in his

behaviour some of the features of both phases. The story is narrated from Shilpi's point of view, so the perceptions of Jayant's behaviour are accordingly coloured by her attitude to her brother. At the beginning of the story, there is mention made of Jayant's contrary nature ("He could never resist an opportunity to differ") (1). A little later, he slips and falls while racing with his sister and Shilpi expects him to "sulk and blame her" as he usually did. (3). However, she is surprised when he laughs off his accident and is sporting about it. Food is an important part of Jayant's life and he displays a lusty appetite for eating all kinds of food. Little wonder, then, that he is comically dismayed to hear that Meghna is not allowed to eat samosas and jalebis and fresh raw fruit from the orchards. His love for food is part of the 'natural' image created by the author as a foil to the artificial and sanitised image of the West personified in Meghna.

Shilpi is portrayed as a fun-loving, high-spirited girl who is nevertheless cautious, and weighs the consequences of her actions before performing them. Like her brother Jayant, she is prone to impulsive behaviour, but on account of being older, (and perhaps because she is a girl), she manages to control her impulses. When Meghna recounts to them her list of forbidden things, Shilpi is tempted to force her to flout some of the rules. However, she controls herself, knowing that her grandmother would have to face the complications if Meghna fell ill. She is more tolerant and understanding and tries to rationalise and defend Meghna's attitude to events rather than condemning her outright. For instance, when a forest fire suddenly begins to engulf the hillside, Jayant and Shilpi

immediately get to work and help the men to fight the fire, while Meghna suggests that they run for their lives. After the fire has been put out, Nani enquires about Meghna. Shilpi replies tactfully "I think she decided to stay behind" while Jayant bluntly declares "She got scared" (31-32). Shilpi promptly defends Meghna by saying that she had never seen a forest fire before, so her reaction is understandable. In the course of their adventure, there are several occasions when Shilpi decides to withhold information from their grandmother, either out of concern for her, or because she does not want adult involvement in their investigations. This tendency to exclude adults from the world of the child, and the use of deception and subterfuge to avoid confrontation with adults has been discussed earlier as a means employed by children to negotiate the inflexibility of adult authority.

The three children are given more or less equal roles to play in the unravelling of the mystery. Even in the scenes involving pursuit of the villains in the story, Shilpi is depicted as playing an active part in apprehending them (93, 111). Shilpi and Meghna try to work out logical connections by discussing the matter between themselves, while Jayant is more keen on launching immediately into action. He tends to be more forthright in his reactions and opinions, while the two girls are cautious and do not display their inmost thoughts easily to adults. Jayant's sense of loyalty is not easily dislodged: he refuses to believe that Pranav is a criminal, and is certain that there is an explanation for his disappearance. Shilpi has a more open mind and although she does not want to

believe the evidence either, she is willing to consider the possibility. The difference in their attitudes is indicative of the insights gained from experience and maturity: Shilpi, who is older, has learnt to accept that people are not always what they seem, and that there may be more than one facet to a person's character. Jayant is still at the stage where he thinks in unidimensional terms.

The story presents facets of the East-West divide which, when explored, offer revealing insights into the ideology of the author. A set of binary oppositions appears to have been constructed typifying the Indian and Western outlook. The differences between the Indian children Shilpi and Jayant and their American-bred cousin Meghna provide the parameters of this opposition: thus, there are contrasts depicted on the lines of untidiness versus neatness; natural versus artificial, and imprecision versus precision. Shilpi is shown to be dismayed to see how perfectly and neatly Meghna had arranged the room they were to share because she herself "had the appalling habit of never being able to put anything back in its place" (6). Shilpi recalls an incident on an earlier visit, when both she and Meghna had got wet in the rain and merrily splashed about in all the puddles. Meghna's mother Meera had been livid because her beautiful party dress had been ruined and had accused Shilpi of corrupting Meghna. There are other instances in the story where Meghna's obsession with order and neatness are highlighted.

The natural/artificial opposition is portrayed in several ways. Both Jayant and Shilpi enjoy plucking and eating apricots and apples from the trees, and feasting on Indian snacks like samosas, jalebis and chaat from the market. Meghna, on the other hand, follows a set of restrictions imposed by her mother “with an air of importance, as if having all these things forbidden to her made her special in some way” (14). She has been strictly instructed to abjure raw vegetables and fruit, milk and dairy products and bazaar food. Even the mere thought of having eaten raw cucumber unknowingly is enough to make her feel sick immediately, and she rushes to remedy the oversight by taking precautionary measures. In many ways, this attitude is reminiscent of the colonial reaction to the ‘natives’ and to the heat and dust and flies in India.

The spontaneous, impulsive behaviour of Shilpi and Jayant is set against Meghna’s measured reactions. As soon as Shilpi and Jayant arrive at their grandmother’s house, they race along the sloping path to the house until Jayant slips and falls. This incident is recorded by Meghna on her video camera because she plans to maintain a photo diary of her trip. Subsequently, she proceeds to drive her cousins crazy by insisting on recording all kinds of situations and thinking up captions for each of them. On a trip to their favourite haunt, Meghna slows them down by stopping to photograph the scenery en route and making them pose for her camera. Shilpi is exasperated at this habit and objects to Meghna photographing the argument between her and Jayant, commenting that Meghna ought to ask their permission before photographing

them. Meghna apologises and defends her actions by saying that it would have looked more natural if she recorded without the knowledge of her subjects, and it would be great fun to watch it later (26-27). This urge to recreate the natural by artificial means, and the impulse to record everything for future reference suggests a need to control and preserve unchanged what is by nature, transient and variable. Shilpi's 'natural' enjoyment of the scenic beauty visible from their favourite rock is marred by Meghna's constant exhortations to pose for the camera, or her requests to photograph her in various contrived postures. Meghna's forays with the camera further distance her from the happenings in the story, and serve to emphasise her otherness. The difference in attitudes is seen in the incident of the forest fire. Meghna panics on seeing the fire because there is no fire brigade, no water or telephone: in other words, no possibility of external help. The children, on the other hand, promptly get to work, helping the adults to put out the fire by smothering the flames with mud. The helplessness of Meghna in the face of a natural calamity is contrasted with her cousins' self-reliance and ability to make use of available resources in handling the situation.

Meghna's meticulousness and love for precision are highlighted in the children's visit to Pranav's house. The children discover that the house has been ransacked and all his paintings are missing. While Shilpi and Jayant scout around for clues to his disappearance, Meghna sets to work putting Pranav's things in order and cleaning up the house (49).

In constructing these opposing characteristics and relating them to the differing environments of the characters, a certain homogeneity of culture has been assumed. Since the target audience consists of children, an essentialist approach is necessitated, as they are not yet at the stage when they will appreciate fine distinctions and complex characterisation. Hence a national identity independent of regional variations is constructed and set against an opposing formation. Meghna is described as speaking with a “distinct Yankee accent” (5), and the term Yankee is conflated with American regardless of its historical connotations. This opposition is further problematised by the fact that Meghna is not an American child, but an Indian girl brought up in America. Hence she is not representative of the American national character, but rather of the typical attitudes that Western people harbour towards India. Similarly, Shilpi and Jayant, who are from Delhi, have ‘Indian’ tastes and habits attributed to them, although there are doubtless many Indians who would not exhibit these preferences and characteristics.

In a significant comment on the attitudes and outlook of Indians residing in the West, the author depicts Meghna as being totally within the control of her mother. She has a list of *do's and don't's* in her room to remind her of the kind of lifestyle and behaviour she is expected to follow. She faithfully obeys all her mother's strictures regarding food habits, repeating what has been told to her:

“ One must follow rules, Mom said, or one gets into real bad trouble.” (14).

Although Meghna, like her cousins, has been sent on her own to stay with her grandmother, her independence is circumscribed by the rigid code set out by her mother (interestingly, there is no mention made of the role of the children's fathers in this story). Shilpi and Jayant, on the other hand, appear to be accustomed to greater independence and freedom of movement. When Shilpi seeks Nani's permission to go to Jageshwar to look for Pranav, her grandmother is at first hesitant. Then she comments, "Well, you've been there before and you came up by yourselves this time. If your parents can trust you to travel alone, surely I can too" (83). One of the reasons why Shilpi and Jayant have been granted more independence is that they are on familiar territory, whereas to Meghna everything is relatively unknown. Apart from this, however, there are definite indications that the degree of adult control is far more in the case of Meghna than her cousins. Shilpi recalls an instance when she and Meghna had messed up their clothes by playing in the rain:

...Meera *mausi* had been wild. She had accused Shilpi of being a bad influence and even scolded Shilpi's mother, who was her cousin, for not controlling her better! (5-6)

The obsession with appearance and the need to conform to a strictly laid out code are characteristics of Meghna's mother, which may be attributed to their long stay in America. It is possible that exposure to the 'liberal' society there has

paradoxically intensified the need to control, while adopting the lifestyle and attitudes of the people of that country has made her internalise the norms by which Indian people and lifestyles are judged. As a result of this excessive control, Meghna is insecure, nervous and easily scared. Moreover, she is quick to disclaim responsibility when confronted with evidence of misdemeanour, as is evident in the scene when her mother berates her for spoiling her clothes:

“ She made me do it, Mummy...I didn't want to! She forced me.” (14-15).

The author effects an inversion of power relations in this text, making the Indian bred children adventurous, daring and courageous, while their American bred cousin is hesitant and fearful. Shilpi and Jayant are depicted as being in a position of power and totally at home in their surroundings. The very aspects of Indian life that are considered repellent in the West (the so-called lack of hygiene, the unhealthy junk food, the absence of basic amenities) are celebrated or valorised as being natural, or conducive to cultivating a certain resourcefulness in dealing with the environment.

As in other books for children in this genre, the children in this book are also shown as negotiating adult authority by resorting to subterfuge and withholding information, thereby ensuring that adults remain excluded from their world. There are several instances in the story when Shilpi refrains from telling her grandmother something because she would worry and be anxious (52, 55,

63). Later, as the mystery deepens, she begins to withhold information because she is afraid Nani would forbid them from investigating further (77). In the context of the story, this attitude appears a trifle puzzling because Nani's character has been depicted as quite unlike a typical adult in children's books. She is generally non-interfering and encourages the children to explore and go out on their own. She even reposes faith in the children's investigative abilities by sending them to Jageshwar on their own with the remark "You children better find Pranav! (83)" The only time Nani restricts them is when they have worked out the location of the jewels. Even then, she merely seeks a little time to plan out their future course of action, since the matter involves stolen goods, and the legal aspects needed to be considered. When Jayant objects to this, Nani turns authoritarian and asserts firmly "No buts...This is not something to be done in a hurry" (102). Perhaps it is the finality in her tone that spurs the children to defy her and seek out the treasure on their own. Moreover, they are afraid that the villains would also have worked out the meaning of the clues in the painting and already dug up the jewels. This impatience with the adult tendency to defer action and do things according to the book is typical of children. Shilpi, for once, allows herself to be swayed by Jayant's impetuosity and agrees to steal out to dig up the jewels when everyone is asleep.

As mentioned earlier, the role of the father in this story is practically non-existent. Unlike the other books featuring girl children in leading parts, the influence of the father as an authority figure is absent in this story. However, the

influence of patriarchal inscription is clearly seen in the characterisation of Meghna. Although Meghna's mother is cited as being the controlling force in her life, the strictures that circumscribe her independence, and the attitude that presumes that a child needs to be rigidly kept in check are undoubtedly the legacy of patriarchy.

The adult figure in a position of authority in this story is the children's grandmother. She is depicted as a curious mixture of the typical and the unconventional. She conforms to the stereotype of the doting grandmother by constantly feeding the children and complaining that her daughter does not feed Shilpi properly. Yet she is sprightly and active and always in a hurry. She values her independence, and enjoys playing host to young people who are activists, artists, or just persons with interesting and firm views on various issues. Shilpi recalls an occasion when her mother had objected to this constant influx of people, claiming that many of them were shady, and others merely came to enjoy the pakoras churned out by Vimla the maid. Nani had firmly replied that she enjoyed their company and was quite capable of dealing with any shady characters (8-9). She is very popular among young people in the area because she genuinely shows interest in their activities. Besides, "*Nani* held very strong views on everything and tended to get quite worked up" (8). Although she is hospitable and approachable, she does not allow herself to be coerced into selling her house, and summarily dismisses Vinod Kumar's persuasive attempts

to make her sell. She reacts vigorously to suggestions made by the latter that she is too old to manage such a large property.

As mentioned earlier, Nani is depicted in the story as a supportive figure for the children. She gives them the key to Pranav's house, believing they may succeed in finding some clue to his disappearance. In a reversal of roles, it is the children who suggest at the outset that Nani should report the theft of her painting to the police, while she refuses, saying " I've never had anything to do with them. I don't want to start now" (39-40). It is only when the children bring the news that Pranav's house has been ransacked, and their neighbour Mr. Rautela informs Nani that Vinod Kumar had been trying to persuade him to sell Pranav's painting, that she reluctantly agrees to call the police. By this time, however, Shilpi's curiosity has been aroused and she "wanted to unravel the mystery herself rather than hand it all tamely over to the police" (63).

From this point onwards, Nani comes to symbolise adult authority for the children, an authority that must be subverted, avoided or persuaded to accede to their demands, depending on the circumstances. Accordingly, the children begin to withhold information from Nani (77), convince her to let them go to Jageshwar (82-83) and flout her instructions to let the matter rest until proper plans are made (102). On her part, however, Nani continues to treat them as responsible children by allowing them to travel on their own to Jageshwar, and expressing the hope that they would succeed in finding Pranav. She cautions them to be

careful and at the same time exhorts them to find the diamonds, thereby indicating that she has faith in their capability (96). When the children are puzzling out the clues in the painting, Nani comes to their aid with ideas of her own. Even when she discovers that the children had deliberately deceived and disobeyed her, she is quite sporting and not very harsh with them. In this story, Nani appears to have been constructed in the mould of the 'father figure' conceptualised by Arup Dutta, i.e. an adult who is on the side of the children, and who supports or guides them in the course of their adventures.¹ However, the fact that the children continue to employ subversive tactics and deceive their grandmother indicates that there is still a lot of ground to be covered in this relationship for children to feel secure enough to repose their trust in adults.

The Hilltop Mystery is an adventure story set in an Indian milieu. It represents an honest attempt by an Indian English writer to create entertaining, enjoyable literature for contemporary Indian children. The elements of mystery and suspense are skilfully woven into the plot, and the realistic depiction of characters enables easy identification. The situations described in the story blend credibility with improbability, thereby fulfilling simultaneously the need of the child reader to believe in the world created in the story, as well as the need to explore the limits of imagination.

Notes

¹ Arup Dutta, " Better adventure stories for children of the higher age-groups,"
Writer and Illustrator vol.9.2 (Jan-Mar 1990): 45.

REVALUATION

As the preceding sections indicate, the girl child has come a long way from her virtual invisibility in Indian English literature. Current attitudes to the girl child include acknowledgement of her right to live, to enjoy the same status and opportunities as her male counterpart and her right to education, justice and emotional security. The portrayal of girl children in literature for children reflects some of these attitudes, which is a positive trend. However, the studied silence maintained on some issues, and the steadfast refusal to deal with them in literature, indicates that there is still much to be achieved.

The taboo on references to the sexuality of the girl child points to a denial of a basic aspect of the girl child's personality. Indian girl children are already burdened with secrecy in regard to their developing bodies and sexual instincts. They often turn to literature for a representation or resolution of their emotional conflicts, or to escape from the constraints governing their lifestyle. The absence of stories that deal with the issue of sexuality in a responsible and rational manner and without prurience, ensures that girl children continue to feel uncomfortable about their bodies, and remain astonishingly ignorant about how to handle relationships with the opposite sex. As Ipshita Chanda has pointed out, the malaise afflicting writing about girl children is that although they allow her "to talk of herself from a young age, she is prevented from talking of things that are actually happening to her."¹ As a result, she is unable to come to terms with the

bodily changes she undergoes, and this affects the wholesome development of her personality.

Another significant omission in the stories examined is the reference to marriage as the perceived destiny of the girl child. In India, marriage is considered as the essential and ultimate goal of the girl child, without which her parents' duties remain incomplete, and she herself is regarded as unfulfilled. This is particularly true of rural society and of the underprivileged sections of society. The girl child in India, regardless of the class to which she belongs, is made aware of her impending marriage through rhymes and doggerels recited in her childhood, folk tales and fables and the constant references to marriage by elders in the family. It is therefore rather curious to observe that with the exception of *Kusum* (which contains references to the still prevalent practice of child marriage and dowry) and *Company for Manisha* (which features a scene of Ritu's sister getting married), none of the other books refer to this issue.

The absence of such references may be construed as a laudable trend, since it indicates that the girl child is finally freed from the pressure to make marriage her destiny. On the other hand, it also points to a certain unreal blinkering, and refusal to discuss an issue that is a significant part of the Indian girl child's consciousness. Marriage continues to be a reality in every Indian girl child's life even today, although certain concessions regarding the age of marriage and the choice of partner are granted, at least to children in the

privileged classes. Instead of denying the existence of issues like marriage and sexuality, a more realistic attitude would be to problematise these aspects of a girl child's process of growing up.

The above discussion seems to argue for a certain didacticism in writing for children. Although it must be acknowledged that literature for children must be written primarily to entertain, it is almost impossible to ensure that no ideology is allowed to colour children's stories. Moreover, the function of literature in allowing children to live out their fantasies, or work out their conflicts has been acknowledged by psychologists, educationists and parents. For instance, Tucker discusses "ways in which literature sometimes appears to reflect and relieve various common unconscious or only semiconscious fears and desires" ²and analyses the wish-fulfilment aspect of literature. While the socialising function of literature is undeniable, the conditioning of impressionable minds with a view to perpetuating certain attitudes is what needs to be challenged and exposed. In the words of Viney Kirpal:

Roles, no doubt, are an inalienable aspect of social living and relationships but it is the abuse of socialisation in conditioning the girl child so that she acquiesces to patriarchal paradigms that makes it questionable.³

Hence, it is not the deliberate injection of issues that concern the girl child that is required in literature, but rather the contestation and confrontation of popular and traditional attitudes and perceptions that perpetuate the subordinate status of the girl child and of women.

The existence of stereotypes regarding the depiction of women, and the still limited horizon of choices available to the girl child indicate that changes in the status of the girl child in India have been at best cosmetic. Roy and Sinha, speaking of the “uneasy emancipation” achieved by Muslim women in their study, make the following observation:

...neither jettisoning outward symbols of bondage, nor increased access to educational and employment opportunities will break the stigma of stereotyping and traditional role-playing that seems to be the Indian woman's lot.⁴

The emancipatory rhetoric and wave of liberalism with regard to the girl child appear to be merely a veneer, and much remains to be achieved in transforming deeply ingrained attitudes to girl children. Moreover, in any debate on emancipation, there are class considerations which blur the picture. For a working class girl child, emancipation constitutes freedom from hunger, penury, hard labour and the pressure of marriage. For a privileged girl child whose financial security is assured, emancipation consists of freeing her mind and spirit.

As Nabar has pointed out, it is the absence of choices that is oppressive⁵, and the need is for the girl child to be able to choose her future course of action, to make her destiny, rather than mould herself to fit the destiny chalked out for her. The texts selected for discussion reflect an emerging portrait of the contemporary girl child that is encouraging in its willingness to grant her a space of her own, and a voice in which to articulate her needs. However, there is also the need to withdraw the structuring adult voices that seek to shape her expression and mould her thinking to conform to predetermined paradigms. In the words of Vrinda Nabar:

...individual gestures remain powerless as long as they are not backed by community support. The personal may be political under certain given conditions but it would need to be politicized in a very fundamental sense before conservative structures are affected in others.⁶

Notes

¹ Chanda, "Hearing Voices Once Our Own," *The Girl Child* 75.

² Tucker 3.

³ Kirpal, introduction, *The Girl Child* .xi.

⁴ Anjali Roy and Manasi Sinha, "Growing up in a Zenana: Sunlight on a Broken Column," *The Girl Child* 213.

⁵ Nabar 10.

⁶ Nabar 62.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

A survey of the current scenario indicates that contemporary Indian English children's literature appears finally to be coming of age. The profusion of books for children of all ages by Indian writers in English testifies to the recognition of children as a lucrative potential market by the publishing industry. Children in India are today the targets of the media, particularly in the fields of advertising and mass communication. The enhanced purchasing power of the middle and upper classes of society, coupled with growing consumerist attitudes, have made them the prime audience towards whom most campaigns are addressed. Socio-economic factors such as the increased percentage of working mothers, the evolution of nuclear families and the exposure to Western lifestyles via television have interacted in complex ways, the result of which is an increased focus on the needs and demands of children. Little wonder then that publishers have capitalised on these trends by producing and marketing children's literature in English on a large scale.

The most significant developments in the field of children's literature in India occurred after Independence. The establishment of organisations like the Children's Book Trust in 1957, and the launching of the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya series for children by the National Book Trust in 1969 ensured that special

attention was given to the production of books that specifically catered to the child's needs. Declarations such as the International Year of the Child in 1979, SAARC Year of the Girl Child in 1990 and the International Year of the Girl child in 1991 have focused world attention on the needs and rights of children. These declarations have translated into concerted efforts by Indian publishing houses such as Harper Collins, Penguin, Vikas Publishers, NBT, CBT and Tulika to provide entertaining and meaningful literature for children. The establishment of the National Centre for Children's Literature in 1993 testifies to government commitment to the cause of children. Set up as a separate wing of the National Book Trust, the NCCL is devoted to the development of balanced literature for children in all languages, the promotion of reading among children and initiation of research in children's literature. The Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), established in 1981, is similarly engaged in promoting the production of creative literature for children.

Although it is heartening to note the recent spurt of attention accorded to children's literature in India, it is necessary to review the developments in this field. Ironically, many of the Indian writers who have established a reputation in writing for children in English are critical of the current state of children's literature in India. Poile Sengupta, a prolific writer of books for children, points out that even today, writing for children is considered an easy task, suitable as a leisure activity for women. She critiques publishers for discouraging the growth of innovative and imaginative literature by laying down guidelines to which writers

are expected to conform.¹ Moreover, publishing houses display a marked preference for publishing supplementary readers and educational literature rather than fiction. This is because the market for the former is larger and sales are guaranteed, whereas “children grow alarmingly quickly, and their tastes change.”² Nilima Sinha confesses that she was constrained as a writer of stories for children because publishers were willing to accept only stories that were patterned on the mystery/adventure formula. In her opinion, the modern child needs stories that provide emotional satisfaction and guidance in these conflicting times.³ Deepa Agarwal laments the paucity of works in Indian English literature for children that may be considered classics, and is critical of the continuing trend of publishing regurgitated folk tales and pale imitations of precolonial models. She holds publishers responsible for the failure of children’s literature in India to grow and develop in a meaningful manner, accusing them of being wary of experimentation and innovation. In her opinion, authors are also to blame for not overcoming their ingrained mindset and traditional attitudes:

Our post colonial children’s literature is post colonial only in name. We have not been able to develop any genres of our own, any styles which define national identity and culture in contemporary terms and are still churning out stories on the bland Enid Blyton model.⁴

Agarwal critiques the fictional depiction of unreal characters and situations in children’s literature that do not represent the contemporary Indian child. Unable

to identify with these characters, Indian children turn to Western writers who capture evocatively the growing pains and experiences of today's children. This criticism seems to imply that Indian children who read books written in English belong to a particular undifferentiated class that identifies more with Western children and the Western ethos. Moreover, the assumption that a multi-cultural country like India can produce a 'national' identity-defining style is problematic. The labelling of a genre or style as national would assume a homogeneity of culture that is non-existent in India, and would preclude acknowledgement of the diversity of experience that constitutes the cultural make-up of India.

The indictment of publishers by writers of children's books is countered by the formers' contention that it is parents and other adults who buy books for children who decide the nature of demand. Preeti Gill declares that children are rarely allowed to choose their books. The decision to buy a book is vested in the adult, who takes factors such as pricing and content into consideration before selecting a book. Gill comments:

In India knowledge is revered for itself and therefore we find that culture or value oriented books to build character are preferred by parents as against 'fun books' which are just wacky and funny but don't necessarily tell the child to imbibe the right values.⁵

Vijaya Ghose points out that the demands of an oppressive academic curriculum and the pressure to perform well in school set severe constraints upon leisure reading. Parents discourage children from buying books that entertain, and coerce them to select books that can be of use to them academically.⁶

The above discussion suggests that there are specific areas in the publication and distribution of children's literature which need attention. The chief among these is the price factor. It is a common complaint among the book buying public in India that indigenously produced books are not as visually appealing as foreign ones. Publishers counter this allegation by claiming that quality illustrations and attractive packaging push up costs prohibitively, thus discouraging the consumer from buying such books. The attitude of parents and adults towards children's books needs to change. It is a commonly perceived fact that parents, who would not hesitate to buy expensive toys, clothes and junk food for their children, balk at buying a well produced expensive book.

It seems paradoxical that a country that gave the world its oldest children's tales in the form of the *Panchatantra* and *Kathasaritsagara* should still be awaiting world recognition. Gita Wolf outlines three factors that have contributed to the current status of children's literature in India. Firstly, Indian literature for children was basically an oral tradition that was adapted for children, and did not conceive of a child's world different from that of adults. This lack of an appropriate idiom has resulted in the production of poorly crafted tales that are

not sufficiently child-centred. Secondly, the insistence on didacticism detracts from the appeal of most children's books. Finally, the devaluation of children's books and the role they play in the development of a child, makes the children's books market extremely price-sensitive. Wolf suggests strategies such as dual pricing (of hardcover and paperback editions), subsidizing and sponsorship by corporate houses, increasing print runs by publishing the same book in different languages and motivating parents and educators to buy books.⁷

Apart from developing strategies to market Indian books for children, there is a need to review the contents of these books so as to make them appealing for the contemporary Indian child. The preceding chapters have shown the tensions and inconsistencies inherent in the construction of the child in contemporary children's literature. Writers need to focus on issues that directly concern the child in the process of growing up, in a manner that captures her/his imagination. The anxiety to be politically 'correct' often mars the appeal of a book, since children by nature are suspicious of any attempt at sermonising. Shohini Ghosh comments:

The pleasures of reading and identification with characters are never proscribed strictly by physical and material identities. It is shaped by a complex process of dialogue and negotiation involving both our conscious and subconscious selves. Therefore, while political 'correctness' is a

desirable quality, it does not guarantee the most riveting of narratives. In short, politics must mesh skillfully with the craft of powerful storytelling.⁸

An analysis of the depiction of child characters in contemporary Indian English literature for children in the foregoing chapters has shown the operation of an ideology that seeks to perpetuate and revalidate certain middle-class values and attitudes. The development of a body of coherent criticism in the field of children's literature in India will ensure the continual interrogation of such trends, and make meaningful contributions to the growth of this genre by providing fresh perspectives. Recent trends indicate that publishers are becoming aware of the need to address audiences other than the middle and upper classes of urban society. They are also acknowledging the relevance of issues such as drug addiction, divorce, death, communal tensions and gender inequities by publishing stories written on these themes. Radhika Menon summarises the position of publishers in India today:

As publishers with a commitment to good writing we must defend and celebrate a writer's freedom to challenge the prevailing complacencies of our age. More importantly, we must give children the choice to read a range of books from the traditional and conventional to the more challenging and unconventional if we are to make them responsible readers...The focus now should be...to produce children's books that assimilate the deep understanding of children's literature in the West and

the strengths of our own storytelling instincts; books that strengthen and foster an understanding of cultural, ethnic, racial and sexual identities.⁹

By providing attractive alternatives to foreign books in an Indian context and catering to the emotional and imaginative demands of today's children, it should be possible to create a niche market for Indian English books for children.

Notes

¹ Poile Sengupta, *Telling Tales* 141-142.

² Sengupta 144.

³ Nilima Sinha, "My Experience as a Writer of Children's Books," *Writer and Illustrator* vol.12.3 (Apr-Jun 1993): 15-16.

⁴ Deepa Agarwal, "Fifty Years of Children's Books," *The Book Review* vol. XXI.11 (Nov 1997): 26.

⁵ Preeti Gill, "Children's Books: The Publisher's Viewpoint," *The Book Review* vol.XVII.11 (Nov 1993): 25.

⁶ Vijaya Ghose, "The Dilemma of Children's Books," *The Book Review* vol. XV.6 (Nov-Dec 1991):3.

⁷ Gita Wolf, "The Scope of Children's Publishing in India," *The Book Review* vol.XIX.11 (Nov 1995): 11.

⁸ Shohini Ghosh, rev. of *Andaman's Boy*, by Zai Whitaker, *The Book Review* vol.XXIII.11 (Nov 1999): 17.

⁹ Radhika Menon, "Are there taboos in children's literature? " NCCL.

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