

INTERVIEW

Increasingly, there is a homogenization, a dumbing down, and that prevents the child from developing his/her critical sensibility.

Barun Mishra interviews Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya

Barun: First we would like to know about the nature of texts and themes appropriate for children's literature. As you possibly know, the current debate in the academic circles keeps constantly interrogating its feasibility and viability.

Rimli: In order to discuss the theme we could first ask who defines what 'children literature' is. We might begin by saying that whatever children read, or whatever stories that children listen to or are exposed to, through performance, oral narration, visual illustration or films or music or anything—that becomes a constituent element of children's literature at a particular moment. I'm not going into the whole history of the construction of childhood in different cultures.... Secondly, about the themes—the assumption is that there is a body of people or institutions, organizations, who actually determine what is 'ok' for children and therefore influence what theme will get into the circuit. But of course, it doesn't always work like that. Traditionally too, this has been a

matter of debate. Say, when the Brothers Grimm went to collect folk tales, what happened is that in the second volume, the revised edition, they had to delete/edit a lot of what had already been put in the first. So it seems that there was a contradiction between what they thought as an 'authentic' collection of folk tales and what was considered 'suitable' for children literature.

Barun: So it's a very old debate?

Rimli: Yes, now here come very many questions. If you take up the question of violence, then what kind of violence can you have for children? Should you have adult themes, for example? Now we have all sorts of new categories in terms of age and degree of violence! Like, there should be an 'in-between' age or target group. But there is also the other side: we are living in a much harsher world which is not as protected, so you cannot continue with old models. So there is an ethical dimension, which may or may not get translated into the production of moral tracts. And increasingly,

there is a third dimension, not much discussed in India—which is the whole question of what the market decides is suitable for children. It is the market that decides that this or that particular brand of biscuits is going to be made the child's favourite. There is a very conscious decision taken and it is implemented. Because the forces of the market are so strong and pervasive and global, they have a tremendous reach in deciding what is that category called 'children' and why or how product x is suitable for children. So you cannot look at the feasibility and viability of themes in literature for children in isolation. You have to see it in a larger context, that's why I give the examples of soft drinks, biscuits or pizza. One aspect of contemporary globalisation is that it turns everything—poetry or pizza—into a product, before it has had time to be produced, as it were.

Barun: Well, then where do you place the media? How is it affecting children, first at the level of their social life in family and secondly at school?

Rimli: These are actually very large questions. I would confine myself to a couple of statements. Tying up your earlier question with this one, clearly there is a link between the way media works and what children will finally end up reading; i.e. those children who will learn to read or have the time and money to read thereafter! Advertising is not only telling us how we should live, but also I think it is more insidiously presenting itself as life, mediating it through specific sets of images. So it is not just the prescriptive pressure of how one should live, but also a matter of how it works on the child's

sensibility. All literature—and particularly children’s literature—and of course, when I say literature it could include painting, a range of visual and performative arts—all of it actually in the case of children, should nurture something that is growing. What is happening in fact is that all those spaces are being already blocked off, not only by one or the other message, but also by the mode in which the message is presented. So any sensitivity to language and differences in speech and sounds, the nuances of irony and humour—everything is increasingly getting wiped out. There is a homogenization happening. And people who are nativist might argue that this is happening only in case of English; therefore let the children read Hindi, Bangla or any other ‘Indian’ language. My argument would be that in many cases the so-called authentic ‘native’ languages are doing the same thing, much more unconsciously, and therefore much more insidiously. So the danger of media cannot be put in a general way—that everything is wrong there. I think children need to be exposed to all kinds of media, including television, but the content and mode or the way the programmes are built, whether it is advertising or a supposedly non-advertising category like ‘The News’, should create a space for the children to learn. But increasingly, there is a homogenization, a dumbing down, and that prevents the child from developing his/her critical sensibility.

Barun: Could you tell me about the inconsistencies in existing selections of textbooks, both in themes or work done on those pieces of literature?

Rimli: Here, I can give you two different kinds of examples. One is when you create a textbook you have to look for a variety. Then there are plenty of ‘given’

objectives, like introducing the child to her/his heritage and the past, creating links between the past and the present, and so on. Perhaps the government too puts forward its own agenda of creating an ideal citizen! So my first response is to say that **the textbook is a kind of impossible wish list. Everything that we ourselves are not and shall never be, we want the children to be.** We want the choice of the lessons in the book, the literary pieces and the themes, everything, to reflect that ideal. We really should not proceed with this completely unrealistic map as it were, but look at clusters of issues and then choose texts that address these issues. In some cases, we don’t really need to look for an issue, but may wish to select a poem or story because it may provide us with a space to imagine in a very powerful way, or because it uses language in a superb way, or because it bristles with interesting questions. Of course, there has to be a degree of political awareness and responsibility towards the text. But I am saying you cannot merely choose a text because you have identified XYZ slots in advance and then you try to fill in the blanks.

Suppose, for example, textbook writers have to represent ‘the tribal’. In one instance, a piece by Verrier Elwin on ‘The Gonds’ was chosen. There was an attempt here to fit the slot for the ‘other’, the non-mainstream Indian, etcetera. In this case, Elwin’s piece itself is not bad, but the representation may not be appropriate for several reasons. One, because it is very dated. Second, the choice does not take into account the question of mediation, or how the writing of history has moved on. And finally, the exercises which follow the text enable only one kind of reading. Therefore, it is not only how you choose your ‘literary piece’, but how you frame it and contextualise

it, and finally what the child is expected to do with it that matters. Therein lies the real framework. For example, you can choose a wonderful poem by Tagore—which is in fact what they did in one of the West Bengal Primers. That poem (a choda) has so many local variations that it could be debated whether the poem is actually Tagore’s or not! Anyway, Tagore gives it a certain version. However, when I visited schools I saw that kids were made to learn it by heart, quite mechanically, without any scope of enjoying the rhyme or the sounds or the words. Some children were enjoying the rhyme, the images, and generally having fun with it, but that was despite the textbook and the teacher!

I’m giving you yet another example from Assam, of Bodo which is now officially a recognized state language, and there are new Bodo textbooks. One person I met had the job of writing the Bodo textbooks. What he did was to put in all of his poems into the textbook and, frankly, they were quite bad—they were not really poems. But, quite apart from these ‘non-poems’ as it were, I heard from various other people many wonderful poems in Bodo, but they never found their way into the textbook, possibly because they were not considered ‘literary’ enough, whereas this gentleman was considered a published poet.

Therefore, your question is absolutely critical, and in response to it I can only tell you what should not be done; firstly, not to create a list and then seek to simply to find representative texts, irrespective of caste, creed or colour. Somehow when you slot things you make them dead pieces. Secondly, one should not take a wonderful text and destroy it by ‘textbooking’ it. Because classroom transaction is a very different thing altogether;

one has to be extremely attentive towards how to emphasize the text in the classroom, how it can come alive for and through the child. An equal amount of thought and planning and teacher training and everything else has to go into that process. And third (and the final!) never fix the text and 'exercises' with finality. You have to constantly keep shifting things around, so in order to have ten texts you should have thirty alternative texts to play or work with.

Barun: Do You mean that one should have a framework to develop a textbook as a finished product?

Rimli: No, never as a 'finished' product! I see the texts in a textbook in a provisional form, with which the process of learning and teaching begins.

Barun: What according to you should be the appropriate amount of fantasy and realism?

Rimli: Between what is called realism and fantasy, we see an in-between space, which is fluid and shifting. It is important of course, to make sure that the child is able to grapple with all those different stages of what is actually around him/her at any given point of time, and what makes life worth living or struggling for. And at the same time, also choose something that should enable the child to imagine something other than what exists as her everyday world. To me both these capacities are equally important. Besides there are fantastic moments in the everyday world....

Barun: Another thing that is quite connected with this theme of fantasy and realism is 'value education'. There is an academic debate to check or redefine place of fantasy in school textbooks so that there is a fair amount of balance between fantasy and

'value education'. Well, it can be checked there, but could it be checked at the level of family where stereotypes of fantasy and fairy tales prevail as it were, and will this also not result in some kind of conflict or contradiction?

Rimli: Can I complicate your question further? See, what is properly called 'value education' often ends up being didactic. It has a different face altogether. We assume that we—as teachers, writers, syllabus-makers—know what is 'value education', while you 'poor child' do not know anything; so let us tell you how life should be lived—that's the approach!

Certainly, at one level children know less than we do. In some ways he or she is not in a position to scrutinize what we offer them. But, simply because he/she may be more uninhibited and less educated, children are actually in a position to be acutely aware of the gaps between what we preach and what we practise. It is most evident in the actual praxis of education, but is also present in the home. Children learn very fast how to negotiate this gap—that what one learns and what one does—are two different things. Whether in school or at home this is what the child actually learns by his experience. Doing away with stereotypes at the representational level is useful, only upto a point.

Another aspect of value education is the exposure to 'reality'. In the west, for example, drug overdose, death by AIDS, pornography, child prostitution, divorce etc are seen as the problems of the real world that children will have to negotiate. It is believed that literature, particularly the one considered appropriate or necessary for teenagers, should address all these issues. All artists at all times have done this to a greater

or lesser extent; but what I find new, is a conscious programmatic approach. It is not didacticism of the traditional kind. Nevertheless, it has a kind of value, or components of 'value education' in it, which may not be always be the best thing for children's literature.

About fairytales and stereotypes: West Bengal had recently banned ghost stories and witches (as encouraging superstition) but fairy tales were allowed (as presumably being 'good' imagination). (I don't know if the ban is in place.) It is simply not a question of what to delete, erase or ban, but rather a question of how much do you respect the child? In what ways is a text of children's literature going to be mediated? Perhaps we do not pay enough attention to the fact that, whether it is written literature or visual or whatever, it does not happen in a vacuum—it always comes with a context. That is what I think is perhaps the most important thing there for 'value education'. Children finally absorb what they experience as being a 'value' (or of value?).

Barun: Tell me something about a "Eurocentric" text and is there, if there is any, attempt to check it or Indianise a text?

Rimli: A huge question! It leads me to the example of Bengali literature. It is said about Bangla literature that it is probably the 'richest' in terms of children literature. I derive this opinion from others; they show a whole range of list of authors and books about children literature to make this point. However, it can also be seen differently. In one of the Yearly Reviews (2004) brought out by the Dept of English we published the translation of an article by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay. He examines a whole corpus of adventure fiction in Bengali which comes out from early 20th century onwards. But

it is totally Eurocentric in some of the basic subject positions; for example, the whole understanding and representation of 'Africa'. So, if you say 'Bangla literature', then could I automatically say there a literature written in Bengali by Bengali writers addressing or concerned with a Bengali audience and therefore, automatically, it is not Eurocentric? Clearly not.

Secondly, coming closer to the present, and based on my work with different publishers and groups producing literature for children, we find a very conscious attempt at producing bilingual texts, maybe in English or in any other Indian language, or have translations from these languages into English. It seems to me that while it is difficult to always identify Eurocentrism, what may be harder to do is to actually

produce the 'other'. Bringing out the folk tales in traditional paper (hand made) is wonderful, but is it necessarily more 'authentic'/ devoid of Eurocentrism? It's an open question. On the other hand, there are places within India where your next-door neighbour might appear very much more alien or exotic to you than things 'English' / 'Europe'/ American or whatever. I think there are attempts to negotiate this complexity in India and some signs are heartening, but it is not always done in a very conscious way. Another easy option seems to be to settle for something that seems obviously Indian (such as 'retelling' of the Ramayana) without even problematising the process. To a great extent we depend on actual interaction between what was earlier called 'vernacular' languages and English. And here

too, it is more important to think in terms of how to negotiate the current configuration of market forces.

'Indianising' will inevitably mean changing with the times, but in response to events around our everyday life our political trajectories, things spoken and unspoken, thought of or not, memories, strands from the past and our desires for the future which is not closed...all this in the context of new forms of globalisation.

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