

Children's Literature in Hindi

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The first question that was posited to me as a researcher was, "What is children's literature?" This was followed by "Is it any different from literature for us? What is the purpose of children's literature? Why do we want our kids to read literature, at all? Is it a tool meant to drill rules and structure of grammar (in a context, so to say), or teach moral values? But what about the engagement, the journey that one goes through while reading a text? And more importantly, do we have enough children's literature that truly qualifies as authentic?"

With the help of this article, I will try to answer some of these questions, especially from the perspective of children's literature in Hindi. For the convenience of the reader, I have divided this article into three main sections:

- What is children's literature?
- The need for children's literature
- Selection of children's literature

My intent is not to generalize, but to simply call the attention of fellow researchers, colleagues and students and teachers to this most pertinent cause.

What is Children's Literature?

Children's literature is not inherently different from any other literary work. It is like any other literary work written for aesthetic reasons, except that it is written with the child in the mind. It is of prime importance that one keeps in mind the age, psychological needs, socio-cultural background and interests of the child while writing in this genre. Furthermore, it is even

more important that literature should be an authentic text, written for enjoyment and communication. (Hiebert, 1994) To summarize, children's literature is then literature which is predominantly written keeping in mind the child and his/her needs (Joshi, 2008; Kumar, 1992, 1986).

However, simple as it may seem, this definition requires deliberation. As a part of my M.Phil. research work entitled "A Study of Sixth Grade Children's Response to Literature", I interviewed 7 publishers in the field of children's literature in Delhi to understand this term better. Three of them were government owned apex agencies, which have been vested with the responsibility of publishing quality literature for children. One of the questions for all my interviewees was, "What is your understanding of children's literature?" All the interviewees answered similarly along the lines, "It needs to be appropriate." I was very impressed with their answer, until I asked them to explain what they meant by the word "appropriate". The answers ranged from a simple, "*Bachche ke hissab se naitik mulya ka sabak hona chahiye*" (It should teach moral values as per the child's age); "*Bachchon ko kya pata unke liye kya sahi hai aur kya galat, toh unke achche ke liye hona chahiye.*" (Children don't know what is good and what is bad for them, so it should be for their betterment).

Most of the respondents reaffirmed this thought of treating children's literature as a tool to imbibe the right moral values; they considered the child to be completely clueless about his/her best

interests. On further probing, the interviewees suggested that, "Children's literature should be attractive with colorful illustrations and good paper quality." Interestingly, not a single interviewee spoke about the content of the stories.

Since, my study required me to collect data with regard to the availability of children's literature in Hindi, I made enquiries accordingly from my interviewees. Most of the interviewees were not able to share much information about children's literature in Hindi. They emphasized that the reason behind this situation is that there is a dearth of readers of Hindi literature. Another participant further elaborated this point and said, "...not much is available... there is a major lack of sources and funds and no reach out at all. Hindi stories are mostly didactic and mythological in nature so no interest of our students... also since the presentation is the selling point... these Hindi books don't have interesting presentations and illustrations. Mostly the paper is yellow... Very unattractive... doesn't excite the child at all..."

The question now: is there now a dearth of readers because there is a lack of availability of text or vice-versa? This is a vicious circle where eventually the readers suffer. This calls for serious introspection. Does it suffice to have good paper quality, and vibrant and colourful illustrations? Is it not important that the content of the story be given equal or more credence? Let us look at the second section of my paper to understand why children's literature is important.

The Need for Children's Literature

Literature in all its avatars provides its readers with a plethora of experiences, which define the infinite possibilities of human behaviour. It helps the child in developing a personality, and the ability to think in new ways (Kumar, 1992, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1938). Literary works are in

fact portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in a society. They depict the different facets of a common man's life. The reader not only lives vicariously through the many characters in a story, but also learns to develop new perspectives to explore his/her surroundings. A lot of times, the texts imitates society and the reader can step into different characters, enter into different time zones, and feel what it is to be a part of different social-psychological-economic worlds. For example, a person reading Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* may be transported into the post-independence era; through the story, he/she can understand the plight of the men, women and children caught up in the catastrophe of the partition. Similarly, a person reading Premchand's *Nirmala* can feel the agony of the exploited in rural India.

A story therefore has the potential to influence our understanding of an individual or society through its characters or events. Each one of us has at some point or the other read something that has struck a chord within us, which has sometimes helped us understand ourselves, or someone else better. The text provides the readers with an extension of life itself because it tells stories of human events and the human condition, and not simply facts (Rasinki & Padak, 1990).

Literature challenges the norm and ignites the mind of the reader to critically view various possible perspectives. Rosenblatt, in her seminal study 'Literature as Exploration' (1938, 1976) talks about the responsibility literature has (as against the analytic approach of social sciences) in providing immediacy to an otherwise alien experience. She insists that reading and teaching literature is "not just for them to have, but it's for them to be, something that they're emotionally involved in and for them to be able to think about rationally, to be able to handle their emotions" (Rosenblatt, in an interview, 1999).

One can therefore say that literature contributes immensely to the development of the society

and the individual. Hence, it is of utmost importance to deliberate on this category of children's literature vis-à-vis the literature that is available and that is needed.

Selection of Children's Literature

Having established the importance of children's literature, let us look at the criteria that guides the selection of literature for children.

The objective of reading literature has always been a point of debate amongst the academic fraternity. A certain section of the fraternity believes that the objective of stories is to instil moral values. This has been highlighted in the earlier sections of this article as well. As a result, apart from a few prominent names, most of the Hindi literature for children is either based on ancient texts or is full of moralistic underpinnings. Another thing to note is that the stories that feature regularly in most Hindi textbooks across India are classified as children's literature because the protagonist is a child. This premise in itself is problematic and incomplete. For example, Premchand's *Eidgaah* is a very popular text amongst many publishers and appears in many textbooks. This story is mostly taught in Grades 4-6. This is a story of a young boy Hamid, who buys a pair of tongs (*chimta*) for his grandmother, instead of toys or sweets for himself. Even though the protagonist is a young boy, the language, content and presentation of the story is quite intense and intricate. This story should not be categorized under the umbrella of children's literature. Similarly, another such story where a kid reflects about the profession of his mother who he suspects to be a sex-worker, should not be classified as children's literature just because the story has been narrated from the child's point of view.

The selection of the story should therefore be done keeping in mind the age, emotional, socio-economic needs, and most importantly, the

interests of the child. Instead of adopting an adult's assumptions of what a child might need, one needs to understand the child's need and interests. Let's understand this with the help of an example. A child who is just beginning formal schooling with Grade 1, steps out of his familiar, safe and secure home environment or play school and enters a completely new set-up, with new faces, new subjects and new teachers. To ease the process of familiarization and build the comfort level of the child, one could share stories that the child can relate to, instead of reading stories which either focus on phonics or some such unfamiliar topics. This is not to negate the importance of such stories, but simply to assert the fact that literature is not a tool to teach values or structures of grammar; its role goes above and beyond.

A grade 4-5 child is constantly negotiating between being a child or an adult. He is told, "You are a child, this is not suitable for you; and you have grown up now, this does not suit you". The child is left to wonder where he/she belongs. This results in Erickson's "Identity Vs. Role Confusion" state. In such a case, a story which talks of strong progressive characters, or which focuses on identity and character building will definitely help and interest the child. It is important that children are exposed to and immersed in a variety of genres.

It's also very pertinent to understand that stories do not encourage or build any stereotypes. Children should be encouraged to develop a critical stance and not accept anything blindly. For example, stories which portray women as weak, defenceless and dependent, and their only ambition being to marry prince charming should be taken with a pinch of salt. Or a story where all men are shown as typical chauvinists should also be questioned and not be accepted as it is. Such critical analysis, especially by young impressionable minds, lends itself to strengthening the very edifice of a progressive society.

One also needs to be very careful that the stories selected for children should not only be of different genres, but should also represent all sections of the society. This representation should not be made only at a superficial level, where just the names are different. True and authentic representation of all sections of the society is very crucial to make the students actually engage with literature. Children should mostly be able to identify with, or relate to the story at some point. The language of the story also plays a major role in making the child more comfortable.

Conclusion

Instead of treating literature as a tool to merely instil values, one needs to critically analyse and understand the true potential of literature. Learning a language and learning through a language are the two most important pillars of any system of education.

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