

A Detailed Analysis of the Differences Between the Picture Books of India and Those of the West

Tamanna Shaik¹, Dr Hari Padma Rani Peddi²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of English Language and Literature, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh

²Research Supervisor, Dept. of English Language and Literature, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract

Picture Books, in all countries, are meant for toddlers and pre-schoolers. They work with the prime motto of inculcating the habit of reading from a very young age. Books in India and the West are quite similar in aspects like imparting values, the length and themes, attractive illustrations, protagonists who are children but there are striking differences too. The differences can be witnessed in the types of animals that appear, the way wild animals are represented, the presence of grandparents, experimentation, themes, settings and cultural aspects. This paper attempts to trace out these differences and analyze them in a detailed manner after having read many books from India and the West. The paper is significant in terms of putting both the Indian and the Western Picture Books together and understanding each other's style. This can help in borrowing and incorporating necessary elements into their respective books. These observations have been made after taking into account 100 picture books from each culture.

Keywords: Picture Books, differences, Indian, western.

Introduction

The objectives of this study are to compare and trace out the differences between picture books in India and those of the West, to make a detailed analysis of the differences in various aspects of picture books, to place picture books from both cultures in the same frame and make a comparative study so that both can learn from each other and give room for incorporation and improvement. The conclusions of this study have been drawn after taking into consideration and reading 100 picture books by Indian writers and from the West.

Reading is a habit that was a popular pastime before the advent of internet or mobile phones. The internet has now outrun the books in fascinating children. Taking the case of children, back then, children were either playing games or listening to stories: listening from their grandparents. The elder children who could read were reading stories by themselves.

Stories play a very influential role in the development of their brains, emotional intelligence and their overall personality. In the Indian context, stories from Panchatantra, Amar Chitra Katha, Chandamama used to hold the imagination of the kids intact. But children seem to have completely lost touch with books as most of their time is being consumed by the electronic gadgets. The high speed internet and the availability of all the things readymade have made children less patient. They lack the patience that is

required to read a book or a story as they expect everything readymade. Then the question arises, how to inculcate the habit of reading in the lives of young readers. Picture Books with their engaging stories and attractive illustrations possess the ability of replacing books with mobile phones in the hands of children. Picture Books or rather Picture Fiction is a sub genre of children's literature that is intended for toddlers, pre-schoolers who are learning to read and younger kids who can independently read by themselves. So, tentatively, Picture Books cover the ages 3-8. Picture Books are shorter and simpler stories with large and colourful illustrations that run for around 16-32 pages.

Picture Books are the new trend in India that the schools are adding up in their curriculum and libraries and the enthusiastic parents are making room for in their homes.

But the West i.e., the European and American countries have been ahead of times in this matter as the Picture Books are not a new trend but have been there for more than a century. A major proponent of Picture Books in the West is Dr. Seuss, whose original name was Theodore Seuss Geisel. Popularising books among children in India is accredited to The National Book Trust and the Children's Book Trust that were established in 1957. They have published many Picture Books since then. Picture Books in India is a latest blooming industry with many independent publishing houses coming up lately. We have Tulika Books, Tara Books, Karadi Tales, Pratham Books, only to name a few, that stand ahead when it comes to publishing Picture Books among other children's books. These books have already made their way into the CBSE curriculum for the primary classes and the books are very popular with the urban young readers and are yet to find place in the rural schools and homes. There are many educational channels and read aloud sessions where these picture Books are discussed in an attractive manner on YouTube, one of the most influential social media platforms. The one who is reading it aloud employs frequent changes of tone and amusing facial expressions accompanied by a loud voice.

The Picture Books in India are used by the teachers and parents not only as a tool of entertainment for the young readers but also to teach them vocabulary, the English language, reading skills and most importantly, values.

Books, all alike, aim towards imparting knowledge. The same goes with children's books but it is embedded with entertainment and imagination. The prime motive of any children's book, whether Indian, European, African or American, is to infuse the habit of reading among them. A very common characteristic of a picture book is the short length of the story. A long story succeeds in losing its readers. Also, children expect actions that evoke emotions like surprise, shock, laughter, awe and suspense. All picture books do this. The most effective way to teach values to kids from their formative years is through Picture books. Teaching values is an important characteristic of any picture book. Any picture book is generally set either in home, school, park or a playground which is a striking similarity in picture books of the west and that of India. In spite of having many similarities, Indian and the western picture books differ in many aspects.

This paper attempts to throw light on the dissimilarities or rather differences that are evident between the Indian Picture Fiction and that of the west.

Physical differences

The visible differences appear in the very quality of the book. Generally, picture books have three types of book orientation. Square, Portrait(vertical) and Landscape(Horizontal) which are commonly used in both India and the West. With regard to the quality, it is quite apparent that the paper material used in

the picture books of the West is of a higher quality. The reasons could be deduced as the popularity of picture books, the advanced printing technologies and the professional standards present there.

Representation of animals

Animal characters very often make their presence in picture books as kids and toddlers in particular are quite drawn towards them. Employing animals as important characters is an effective way to kindle an interest in reading among toddlers. In Indian Picture Books where animals are employed, we usually come across domestic, pet animals or those which are culturally significant or those with softer attitudes such as dogs, cows, elephants and cats. The children are familiar with these animals as these are commonly seen around and heard about in their lives. This is the reason why these animals are frequently found in the Indian Picture Books. The situations in which these animals are involved are lifelike and realistic and there is no strangeness, awe or fear that is associated with these animals or the events in which they are involved.

‘Gajapati Kulapati Kalabaloosh!’ by Ashok Rajagopalan is a book that features a temple elephant that goes to the pond on a sunny day and the funny events that follow. It gives a more realistic picture. The book ‘Rooster Raga’ by Natasha Sharma involves many farm and pet animals like cow, donkey, ducks and a goat with a rooster as the central character. The rooster in the story cannot crow as it is supposed to and takes the help of other animals to learn crowing but eventually realizes that he is different and special from the others and is proud of its unique tunes and learns to accept itself.

Books like ‘The Milk Moustache’ by Vikas Khanna, ‘Monkeys on a Fast’ by Kaushik Viswanath, ‘Where’s That Cat’ by Manjula Padmanabhan involve domestic and pet animals and have characters, events, surroundings, and incidents that are real and possible in nature.

Though we have books like ‘Catch That Crocodile’ by Anushka Ravishankar, ‘Hic!copotamus’ by Geeta Dharmarajan, Anita Vachnarajani’s ‘Nayana and the not so Scary Owl’ that have uncommon animals as central characters, as their titles suggest, it is interesting to note that these animals do not come out of their natural roles and stick to their environments and realistic characteristics. There is nothing wonderful or awe inspiring about the behaviour of these animals.

Swati Shome’s ‘Lion Goes for a Haircut’ attempts to bring the lion out of its natural habitat into the human world but the lion at the end realizes that lions do not belong to the human places and goes back to the forest and shares this scary experience to the other lions. This book also portrays a realistic picture. A lion going for a haircut is unusual but realizing that it does not belong here is quite natural.

Along with the common domestic and pet animals, we see the appearance of wild animals and even the uncommon ones in the Picture Books of the West. The book ‘The Tiger Who Came to Tea’ by Judith Keroc has a well-mannered but hungry tiger as a central character that visits a family to have some tea and eats all the food available in the house. The family is not seen shrieking on seeing the tiger but treats it as any other guest. ‘The Kissing Hand’ by Audrey Penn is about a mother and child raccoon, an animal that is not much considered to be featuring in an Indian book for children. Personification is strikingly evident in all the animals that are employed. We see them behaving, thinking, acting and even feeling just the way humans do.

‘If You Give a Mouse a Cookie’ is one of the books in the ‘If You Give...’ series by Laura Joffe Numeroff. The series consists of various books that include giving a cookie and a brownie to a mouse, taking it to places like school and movie etc. The animal mouse is absolutely normalised whereas in Indian Picture Books, it is treated like a menace or a disgusting creature. ‘Marar Mouse and Other

Stories', written by Savita Ravindra and Pulak Biswas, a CBT publication, treats mouse as a trouble at home. 'Mouse in the House' by Sowmya Rajendran also has a similar setting and theme. 'Mouse and Bear' by Nandini Nayar is a book about the two titular animals, once again, sticking to their general characteristics.

Dinosaurs, unicorns, dragons, mermaids and fairies are excessively popular in the Western culture and so often find place in the Picture Books of the West. 'Tiny T Rex and the Impossible Hug', 'How to Catch a Unicorn', 'Doctosaurus', 'The Dinosaur who Discovered Hamburgers', 'Uni the Unicorn', 'If Your Best Friend is a Mermaid', 'How to Catch a Tooth Fairy', 'Dragons Love Tacos' are some of the examples of books that feature the above said animals.

Anthropomorphism is an often recurring theme in Children's Literature. An interesting point to note is that the wild animals that appear in the Picture Books of the West are sans wildness. They behave like humans with all the human like behaviour and etiquette, be it manners, kindness, sulking etc. The book 'The Tiger Who Came to Tea' by Judith Keroc which was earlier mentioned is an example of a book with a wild animal having a character. 'Library Lion' a book by Michelle Knudsen and illustrated by Kevin Hawkes has a lion as the central character in the story. A lion who loves stories visits a library for a story reading session. It is a tame and a lovable lion who plays by the library rules. Soon, the library staff and the kids begin a liking towards the otherwise ferocious animal. The above mentioned books have wild animals that are absolutely harmless and that display softer emotions and attributes.

Experimentation

It is a known theory that children love variety and routine bores them. In order to cater to this need, picture books employ experimentation. While experimentation is judiciously used by both the Indian and the western picture book writers, we come across more of it across the west. Experimentation is evident in terms of plot structure, narrative strategies, climax and even themes. Writers of picture books try to write in different styles lest the conventional style of writing bores the young reader. And this is not just a recent trend but can be seen even in the writings of Dr. Seuss, who started writing during 1930s. His book 'The Shape of me and other Stuff' published in 1973 is a picture book without a story or a plot. The book simply says that every single thing has a definite shape or rather a shadow. The illustrations are black and do not have any colour in order to highlight the shape. A point to note is the way the words are narrated. The sentences are not prosaic but they end in rhyme giving it the appearance of a song.

“You know.....
It makes a fellow think
The shape of you
The shape of me
The shape of everything I see
A bug, a balloon, a bed, a bike
No shapes are ever quite alike
...
...
...
The shape of lips
The shape of ships
The shape of water when it drips

Pineapples, noses and grapes

Everything comes in different shapes” [Seuss]

Similar is the case with ‘The Hiccupotamus’ by Aaron Zenz. It is about a hippopotamus that gets continuous hiccups. The words are innovative, funnily rhyming in order to captivate the attention of the children.

“There was a hippopotamus

Who hiccupped quite-a-lotamus

...

...

They tried to find a therapy –

Some cure which they could sharepy,

A what or why or whereapy

To stop this long nightmareapy” [zenz]

In the story, ‘Stuck’ by Oliver Jeffers, a problem is discussed but the solution is left to the readers. A boy’s kite gets stuck in a tree. He makes many attempts to get it out. Strangely, all the things he throws into the tree get stuck. In a strange fashion, he throws even large things which are too strange to be true. Things like neighbour’s car, a blue whale, a large ship etc. get stuck into the tree during his attempts of removing his kite. His attempts succeed and the kite falls off, eventually, but the problem of removing all the other things lingers. The boy thinks of an idea about how to get the things out of the tree at the end of the book but the idea is not revealed and is left for the young readers to imagine. This way of ending a book without a proper climax can make the readers think and generate ideas for the given problem encouraging them to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills.

‘If You Give a Mouse a Cookie’ written in 1985 is a circular tale. The story starts with the boy Oliver giving a cookie to the mouse and then it asks for milk to dip the cookie in. The book moves forward with the mouse asking for things and the boy providing them. The book ends with the mouse asking for milk once again and thus making it a circular tale.

Orthographic Experimentation

There is a lot of experimentation in the orthography used in the picture books. The authors use letters in various styles and sizes. For instance, the word ‘long’ is written with an ‘l’ that is as long as half the page. The words, ‘water’, ‘shore’ are written in a wavy shape. These kind of orthographic experimentation can be found both in Indian as well as the Western picture books.

Pictorial Experimentation

The illustrations or pictures we come upon in the picture books are different in both the cultures. The Western picture books seem to be much advanced in this domain. The book ‘Milo and the Magical Stones’ has a glittering and shining gold magical stone. The picture of the magical stone is made of a different material that shines and glitters and the shade of the colour changes when the book is moved. Indian picture books generally employ spot illustrations, which means a single colourful picture on a white background. The sentences can be seen written on the white background. We find fully spread illustrations in the western picture books. For instance, if the scene is set in a room with blue walls, the characters would be placed at the bottom or one side of the page and the sentences would be written on

the blue wall. The illustrations in the Western picture books are more realistic and relatable while in the Indian picture books, they are cartoonish, ethnic and like caricatures.

Presence of grandmothers

Another striking difference clearly visible in the Picture Books is the presence of grandparents. As joint families are a significant aspect of Indian society, grandparents make their presence frequently in the Indian Picture Books. Many Indian Picture Books extract the essence of the roles of grandparents to the full extent. An interesting fact is that grandmothers outrun grandfathers in this area as we see more number of grandmothers featuring in books when compared to grandfathers. ‘Ammachi’s Amazing Machines’ by Rajiv Eipe, ‘My Paati’s Saris’ by Jyoti Rajan Gopal, ‘My Dadima Wears a Saree’ by Kashmira Sheth, ‘My Grandmother Can’t Cook’ by Indu Balachandran, ‘Ammachi’s Glasses’ by Priya Kurian, ‘Where Three Oceans Meet’ by Rajani Larocca are Picture Books with grandmothers as either central or significant characters.

In Indian context, children share a deep affinity with their grandmothers as they take up the responsibility of rearing the child like feeding, playing and cleaning while the mothers are busy either with the domestic chores or with their professions. Also, storytelling is an effective way that naturally connects a child to their grandmothers. Apart from grandmothers and grandfathers, uncles, aunts and cousins also show up in Indian Picture Fiction but it is not the case with the Western Picture Books. Grandparents and other relatives do not feature in their books as much as they do in Indian stories. Cousins appear here and there but uncles and aunts are very rare.

Thematic differences

Picture Books in the West are written with diverse themes such as disability, gender, LGBT, trying to fit in and community. They are intended mostly towards character development and personality enrichment. Individuality or self esteem often find place. It is not that these major themes are absent in Indian Picture Books but when compared, these are not the prominent themes. The dominant themes that surface in Indian Picture Books are elements of Indian culture and lifestyle. We have Picture Books that talk about things related to culture like saris, bindi, dal, roti, marketplace, Indian weddings, festivals etc. Sandhya Rao’s ‘Mala’s Silver Anklets’, ‘Bindu’s Bindis’ by Supriya Kelkar, ‘Bilal Cooks Daal’ by Aisha Saeed, ‘A Gift for Amma: Market Day in India’ by Meera Sriram are just a few to mention with a cultural setting. Festivals like Holi and Diwali are also popular themes in many Indian Picture Books.

Type of values represented

The kind of values that are represented in the picture books are different in both cultures. As values are products of their own cultures, they vary. Individuality, equality, self-esteem, friendship are the dominant values that most number of picture books of the West teach. Indian picture books showcase values that are imbibed in our culture. Many Indian picture books have kids that express love towards their mothers by giving them gifts. Showing affection towards their family, respecting our elders, culture and mythology are the values that are represented in the Indian picture books. Innocent childhood experiences like following the ants, catching the rain keep recurring in Indian picture books. It showcases the importance given to childhood and the fun that is present there. Self-esteem also finds place. Environmental aspects like rain, trees, river, sea appear quite frequently in Indian Picture books.

“Tiger on a Tree” by Anushka Ravishankar depicts a caught tiger which is let loose in the forest. “Let's Catch the Rain!” by Bijal Vachharajani portrays the innocent childhood fun.

Representation of LGBT

LGBT is no longer a taboo subject. To one's surprise, these days, it is discussed even with the kids. Many books focus on helping kids identify and accept themselves, not to shy away from expressing themselves. This phenomenon is present more in the Western books. It has to be acknowledged that it is not entirely absent in Indian Picture books but comparatively, lesser. ‘I Am Jazz’ by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings is about a transgender girl and her journey about becoming herself. ‘This Day in June’ by Gayle E. Pitman is about pride parades. ‘My Shadow is Pink’ by Scott Stuart, ‘Heather has Two Mommies’ by Leslea Newman and Laura Cornell, ‘Uncle Bobby’s Wedding’ are books with similar themes. Indian writers have also attempted books with this theme but one is very unlikely to come across as many Indian books as one can find in the West. ‘The Boy and the Bindi’ by Vivek Shraya, ‘Guthli has Wings’ by Kanak Shashi are some of such books.

This paper has attempted to bring forth the conspicuous differences that are strikingly evident in the picture books of India and that of the West. Both differ in the way animals are portrayed, the type of animals that appear, the presence of grandparents and other relatives, experimentation, difference in themes, the type of values that are represented.

In conclusion, the essay highlights the evolving landscape of children's literature, specifically focusing on the differences between Indian and Western Picture Books. The essay throws light on the emergence of Picture Books as a valuable tool to instill the habit of reading and impart important values to young readers. It underscores the cultural distinctions between Indian and Western Picture Books, emphasizing how these books are not only sources of entertainment but also instruments of education and cultural preservation.

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