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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Voices of Childhood: A Study of Representation of Children in Indian Literature with Special Reference to the Works of Deepa Agarwal

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13684215>

Article History: Submitted-02/08/2024, Revised-17/08/2024, Accepted-24/08/2024, Published-31/08/2024.

Abstract:

The representation of children in literature through characters, storytelling, symbolism, humor, interactive dialogues, and other techniques fosters a sense of relatability. It helps children feel seen, heard, and validated, profoundly impacting their understanding of themselves and their identity. This, in turn, shapes their relationships with the world, its diversity, and the customs and norms of their society. Studies have proved that exposure to diverse situations and characters in literature can foster understanding, acceptance, and empathy among children.

Representation of children in their literature is paramount, not only for the all-round growth of our young generation but also to boost readership in the currently stagnant market of Indian Children's literature, which has been obsessed with didactic preaching ever since it became a genre. Deepa Agarwal is a renowned Indian children's author. She is popularly known for her art of creating rich, simple, yet multi-faceted child characters in her works. Through her varied narrative techniques, she provides an authentic voice for children in her books. By focusing on real experiences, emotions, and perspectives, she effectively represents children through her characterization and storytelling. This paper aims to understand and showcase the nuanced and realistic depiction of children, the complexities of childhood, and the children's perspective through a narrative analysis of Deepa Agarwal's select works.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Relatability, Self-identity, Acceptance, Real-life Experiences, Complexities.

Introduction

Reading literature is the best way of developing perspective and knowledge of the world around us, especially for children, as it is a highly crucial way for them to understand the world before exploring it practically. In India, reading for pleasure is often something we are trying to instill in children, whereas ideally, it should develop as a natural habit. Shashi Tharoor emphasized, *“Of late, I have met too many children who have never read a book for pleasure or entertainment, but only for a classroom assignment. This is a terrible loss. And failing to convey the joy of reading is probably the biggest mistake that successive generations of parents and teachers have allowed themselves to make,”* (Tharoor, speech)

To cultivate a genuine interest in reading—a goal shared by both parents and teachers—it is crucial to cater to the needs and preferences of young readers. Just like adults, children are more likely to engage with material they can relate to. Effective representation of children in literature is essential for fostering reading habits and broadening perspectives. Books that feature relatable narratives, straightforward storytelling techniques, authentic and diverse characters, interactive language, captivating illustrations, and humor are more likely to appeal to children and encourage them to read for pleasure. As it is understood:

“The more children read stories, the more they begin to interpret books based on their background knowledge and to share their own ideas and opinions with others. Thus, children develop literacy based on their personal response to literature in the context of their life experiences rather than memorizing isolated letters and words and learning other basic reading skills.” (Yoo, Seung-Yoeun, 1997)

Deepa Agarwal is a well-known Indian children’s literature author is popular amongst children readers because of her engaging and educative narratives, diverse characters, and exciting themes. She has established herself as a leading voice in Indian Children’s literature, winning numerous awards and accolades for her art. Her stories often revolve around the themes of identity, and implore cultural and social issues. The simple language is easily comprehensible by young readers and provides them with a realistic picture of the world and childhood in India. The characterization deeply explores the complexities of life; and probable problems that children might face while growing up and navigating the world. This paper aims to explore how incorporating relatable themes and giving a voice to child readers in fictional books can enhance readership among children. It will examine how these approaches not only

benefit children—who are the future of the nation—but also contribute to the growth of a genre that is still in its early stages.

Need for Representation of Voices of Children in Their Literature

“Representation in children's literature is essential for fostering empathy, understanding, and a sense of identity among young readers. By reflecting the diverse world we live in and providing children with characters they can relate to, children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping their worldview and promoting inclusivity. As community providers, educators, and parents/caregivers, it is our responsibility to ensure that children have access to literature that celebrates diversity and empowers them to embrace their identities fully. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive society where every child feels valued and represented.” (Parez Daniel, 2024)

In today's world, young readers are less receptive to didactic methods of learning and prefer to explore, discover, and understand things in a more organic manner. Deepa Agarwal has grasped this concept effectively, which is why she enjoys significant popularity and enormous readership among children. The easy language, the diverse characterization, and the interesting practical themes represent the experiences of children in her works, motivating and teaching children towards a positive approach and a problem-solving ideology. She encourages them towards inclusivity, empathy, and harmony with her stories and characters.

It is believed by great authors like Katherine Paterson in her book *The Spying Hearts* (1989) *“Our task as teachers and writers, artists and parents, is to nourish the imagination—our own and that of the children entrusted to our care,”*

“It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imaginations—something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own.”

Realistic Narrative Technique

The narrative technique of any work holds the power to entertain and educate the reader simultaneously. Deepa Agarwal employs a variety of techniques in her works to represent the voices of Indian children. While Western works of fiction, which are widely read by children, are popular, they often fail to address the needs and experiences of a child growing up in the distinct socio-cultural context of a country like India. Indian children's literature is at an

embryonic stage currently, to make it famous all across the globe and also to propagate Indian culture. To endorse the life and struggles specific to Indian children on the world platform, representing them in literature is the ideal way decoded by Deepa Agarwal. She uses vivid descriptors, simple language, and dialogues and with it brings her characters to life. She incorporates the Indian culture too in her work providing a captivating experience.

She has worked on developing an armchair traveling experience to the majestic Indian land for her readers by giving them creative and descriptive Indian landscapes with vivid pictures. In one of her books “Caravan to Tibet”, she describes the adventures of a young Boy Debu, in search of his father, Bauju, who was lost in a blizzard crossing the Kungri Bingri pass towards Tibet. The local lifestyle of the craftsman community of the nomadic Shaukas, who traveled during winters from Quithi to Munsiyari. Deepa Agarwal skilfully takes us to the landscape and lifestyle of the Kumaon region people.

'The thud of hooves hammered at Debu's ear, the swishing of whips, the shrill exclamations of the boys goading their sleds on. Slowly, steadily, they left one horse behind, then another, then another.' (Aggarwal Deepa, 2007)

The story is a travel adventure and thus it leaves no stone unturned in generating the reader's excitement. It is full of emotions, adventure, and thrills. Debu's journey resonates deeply with young readers, capturing the essence of Indian emotions, the profound bonds of family, the picturesque landscapes of the Himalayas, and the arduous quest of a poor young boy searching for his lost father.

Another book by Deepa Agarwal is an example of the life in India from the point of view of children and young readers. Her book “Kashmir, Kashmir” reflects the life of young children living in the most scenic yet disturbed area in India. The daily life, dreams, and ambitions of the characters are intricately shaped by the situations and challenges they face in the region.

“a beautiful collection of short stories that must be read by young adults as well as adults. They capture the essence of what it means to live amidst difficult times albeit on what they call heaven on earth. It provides a nuanced and fresh perspective on the young adults in Kashmir, who have their hearts filled with hope and dreams, just like youngsters everywhere else.” (Shah, Dhanistha, 2022)

This kind of narrative expresses the ideas and practical perspectives of Indian children, showcasing their lives in vivid detail. The mystic fragrance of saffron, the apple orchards, the Shikara boats on Dal Lake, the stone pelting, and the local stories and adventures are all intricately woven together by Agarwal in her beautiful collection of stories.

Diverse and Powerful Characterization

Deepa Agarwal began her writing journey as a freelancer and later started writing for a magazine called “Target”, where she got much appreciation the first book she wrote “Ashok’s New Friends” had an extremely interesting theme of equality between boys and girls. It reflects on the male and female characters breaking gender stereotypes. About Ashok’s encounter with his new friends, the boy who likes cooking and his sister who is skilled at Karate. Her story “Anita and the Ghost of Shadows” showcases the protagonist Anita, who fights and destroys the evil king of Shadows and rescues her parents. The portrayal of strong female characters is something common in the writings of Agarwal. She wants to focus on gender equality and brings out the idea to the conventional Indian society that a girl can achieve equally daring tasks as boys.

Deepa Agarwal has brought up a lot of stories revolving around powerful female characters, however, her limitless craft has led her to create characters who are not only realistic but also empowering, they treat the Indian children with a perspective of friendship, gender equality, and inclusivity in the society. In her short story “Fire” from her story collection “Not Just Girls”, she introduces the friendship between Puja, a middle-class girl, and Paruli, the daughter of a house helper. She brings across the compulsions and hardships of the life of Paruli who lies to avoid punishment; a situation that is hard to comprehend by Puja, this exposes the young children to the perspective on the hardships in the lives of ‘Have-nots’. Through this, they not only become grateful for their blessings but also develop empathy toward those who are less fortunate around them.

In another story, “The Odd Weekend”, that follows from her collection ‘Everyday Tales’, she narrates the experience of the centre character Mitu, who reluctantly visits a slum with her Aunt, and then feels overwhelmed with the warmth, the love and the hospitality of the people there. This further broadens the children’s perspectives, teaching them love and empathy toward others, regardless of class or caste. Something that a young reader in the diverse land of India should be absorbed with.

The Reality, Life, Learning, and Empowering

Deepa Agarwal, the children and young adult writer has written over fifty books, each of her books revolves around the rich tapestry of Indian culture, Indian life, the day-to-day issues, the rich heritage and history, and the Indian folktales. She uses simple reader-friendly language, interactive narration, and witty dialogues full of subtle knowledge. Her books cover interesting attractive images that attract young readers. The characters in her books are inspired by the real children around her. She narrates these stories by reliving her own childhood memories, recreating the authentic emotions she experienced, as well as those felt by the children she observed in real life.

The characters in her books were rooted in reality, and she added her creative touch to each character to make it impressive and memorable in the minds of young readers. For instance, the character of NurJahan in her famous book is a blend of Indian history along with her understanding of the emotions that a young teenage girl could experience. As she tells in one of her interviews with *The Sunflower Seeds* Deepa Agarwal says, “*In The Teenage Diary of Nur Jehan, apart from researching the historical details, I built her character on the basis of the kind of personality she was as an adult.*”

“*For The Begum, I researched the freedom movement but also read several of Begum Ra’ana Liaquat Ali Khan’s interviews and talked to people who had known personally to get a sense of the kind of person she was.*” (Agarwal Deepa, 2023)

The background that holds the character is well researched and extremely informative to the readers who travel through the history and past of India during their reads. This narrative technique is a great way to teach the culture, history, and society of India organically to the readers. Not just this the protagonist reflects the diversity in characters adapted by the author in each of her books. She chose women born in the Kumaon region in India, with her Indian experiences around the Brahmin community where she grew up as a Christian, but who later on became not just the wife of Pakistan’s first prime minister but also a leading example of women empowerment in Pakistan. This level of character diversification is evident throughout Agarwal’s works.

Deepa Agarwal retells Indian folktales in a way that not only appeals to children but also conveys important moral values. To make these stories reader-friendly, especially for young audiences, she consistently opts for a contemporary narrative style—one that mirrors the voices and experiences of real children. She uses dialogue in modern children's language,

reflecting their world rather than imposing a heavy-handed moral interpretation. Agarwal believes that a clear and subtle suggestion within the story is more effective in maintaining the reader's interest than overt moralizing.

Conclusion

Reading a book is one of the best ways to understand the world around us. A book has the potential to shape the minds of its readers, especially young ones who may not yet have practical experiences of various situations or people. Through reading, they can gain insights and prepare themselves for the world they will encounter. It helps them to develop a positive sense of self, for others. When children read didactic books, that teach them about the idealistic ways of existing and only the preferred values and characters, they develop an understanding of just the social expectations. Each individual is born with a different and unique personality and each has a purpose to explore and live in the world. It is essential thus for children to understand reality, situations, nature, and history to develop a natural acceptance and behavior. Authors like Deepa Agarwal have understood the gaps in the readership in children's literature. Her works focus on the targeted morals and values. However, they are traced by the readers through the understanding of the narratology, dialogues, and characters. She provides mirrors of the society in her books, she traces the history for them, builds characters with intersecting identities, and situations with social significance, and thus her stories conclude with the targeted initiative of building the interpretative skills and understanding of the world in the readers, who see themselves in her stories.

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