

UNIT 1 APPROPRIATE THEMES

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1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

When you finish reading the Unit, you will know that writing for children offers a wide scope, being still comparatively uncultivated. Though imported children's books are of high quality they are lacking in Indianness.

The old Indian classics are rich in material that can be exploited for writing children's stories. Nevertheless children's literature is still scant in our country.

By the end of this Unit you should be able to

- select suitable themes for children's stories in accordance with their age group;
- identify some essential features of the writing for children, the language and technique to be adopted for such writing, and the use to be made of illustrations in it;
- introduce moral and contemporary values into your stories.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Writing for children forms a special branch of literature. Its requirements and qualities are different from adult literature, in the same way as a child is different in his attitudes and responses from a grown-up person. The child is far more sensitive, impressionable, perhaps also more imaginative, in the sense that he can lose himself more easily in a dream world of his own creation. In this Unit we tell you about things you should know and keep in mind if you wish to enter the field of writing for children. We talk about themes as well as techniques to be adopted in writing for children.

1.2 ANCIENT INDIAN CLASSICS ARE A RICH SOURCE OF MATERIAL

The genesis of story-writing for children lies in our long tradition of folk tales, the **katha**, and the stories told by wandering story-tellers and by grandmothers in our homes. Drawing on classics like the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**, the **Panchatantra**, the **Kathasaritsagara**, and the folklore of different regions, modern creative writing for children could have been very rich. But as it is, it happens to be rather scanty.

1.3 CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN INDIA TODAY

The influence of the tradition of oral story-telling on contemporary authors has caused them to put too much stress on moral teaching or on hero-worship.

In Bengal, Satyajit Ray, the famous film-maker, has produced delightful films based on his own stories and those of his father. Many among the eminent Bengali writers have written delightful stories for children also. Beyond that, writing for children at present is largely limited to the children's page in the Sunday editions of many leading newspapers, and to the children's magazines which are published all over the country.

1.3.1 Imported children's books

With the widespread use of English in schools and colleges, and greater affluence and Westernisation in cities, imported children's books have generally been the models for Indian writers. Often, these are the only books available to children. The result has been a kind of addiction to this type of literature which, however good and well-written, exciting or absorbing, does not give Indian children their native background and cultural atmosphere.

1.3.2 Why children's literature has not flourished in India

Three major factors prevent the growth of children's books in India:

- a) the reluctance of many parents to consider children's books an essential item of family expenditure;
- b) the absence of well-stocked and well-frequented libraries for children in areas where they live;
- c) the reluctance of publishers to invest in non-profitable book-production.

Consequently, the only literature for children, produced in India, consists of comics, some children's magazines, and books for the very young, teaching the alphabet and the numbers, etc. There are very few books for the age-groups 6 to 10 and 10 to 15. Recently a fairly large number of inexpensive paperbacks in Hindi, and in a few of the regional languages, have been published. But their cheap production, poor paper quality and unexciting illustrations prove that there is very little money in this kind of writing, either for the writer or for the artist.

1.4 SUITABLE THEMES FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

We give below suitable themes for various age groups. This is because children's needs and interests vary according to age.

Age-groups:

- a) 2 to 3 years : Picture books with a minimum of text.
- b) 4 to 6 years : Short stories in simple language, animal stories, and real life stories that can be read to children; fantasies, fairy tales.
- c) 7 to 10 years : This is the most eager age group, which likes both to listen to stories read out to them, and to read the stories themselves. Suitable subjects: adventure, school, exploration and travel, animals, fantasy, space odysseys, machines which behave like human beings, etc.
- d) 10 to 15 years : At this age children become voracious readers. Suitable subjects: human interest stories: serials, with a set of characters and their adventures, in which the child participates imaginatively, stories about heroic personalities, real adventures, mountaineering, history, tribals, sea-faring, dacoits, bandits, police; stories of children's courage, self-reliance, initiative.

The main requirements for each category are as follows:

- a) Books for small children need lively and colourful illustrations and very little text in large letters. Stories should be about familiar things, people, or animals.

- b) Stories on familiar or fanciful subjects, with numbers and letters attractively printed, with lively colourful illustrations, are dear to the hearts of children at this age. This age group enjoys reading but also likes to be read to.
- c) Stories must be absorbing enough to hold the child’s attention. Adventure, excitement, humour of a slapstick variety, interesting and dangerous situations which make the child want to know what happens next, have universal appeal. Suspense is part of the technique of good creative writing. Pathos can stimulate a child’s compassion, sensitivity and concern for others. History, geography, general knowledge, and science can be introduced into stories unobtrusively. This is a very useful way of giving a child greater thirst for knowledge. The fact that the world of wonder is very close to a child is often ignored by the adults.
- d) Books published in India for this age group, are very few, still these children read voraciously if they have access to good reading material. It is here that Western writers have recognised the distinction between writing for boys and girls. There is nothing comparable in Indian writing for the young teenager.

Some possible subjects are listed below:

- homely stories with identifiable characters in regional settings;
- adventures associated with sea, mountain and air which can introduce history and geography;
- fantasy which can be as much geared to magic as to modern science; encounters with holy men, their cults and powers.

The range of subjects in India is almost unlimited.

Activity 1

- i) Why hasn’t children’s literature developed adequately in India? (50 words)
- ii) Identify some suitable themes for children’s stories. (50 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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1.5 THE QUESTION OF ‘VALUES’ IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Traditionally, our value systems have stood for obedience, respect for elders, and for truth. In modern times, these values have somewhat weakened. Therefore a new set of values has to be introduced, more in keeping with the times.

To begin with, values must relate not only to the family, but to the school and society as well. Obedience, while important, must be linked to loyalty to family, school friends, and elders in a comprehensive social set up. In other words, stories can teach the importance of good manners, compassion for others, helpfulness and self-reliance. A story about a boy or a girl, who mars a social event (e.g. a party/picnic, etc.) because of lack of team spirit, can teach a lesson without appearing to do so. Further, a child likes to associate himself or herself with a character who does exciting and even dangerous things and finally succeeds.

For modern Indian society, stories that grip the imagination of the young are a national need. This is because they can serve as models of behaviour for our children. Such stories must be capable of creating characters and episodes that thrill the child and make him want to emulate the protagonist in the story. Such stories, when translated into the medium of the film or the TV, can have a powerful impact on young minds.

1.6 SOME ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF CHILDREN'S STORIES

Somerset Maugham advised writers to ensure that they had a **beginning, a middle and an end** to their story.

A story must have a main plot; but a long story can have even two or more sub-plots. Scenes and characters should be vivid and recognisable. When children are able to identify themselves with the main character or characters in a story, it grips them. Pure fantasy delights children. They can take in their stride all sorts of characters—demons, giants and ogres, fairies, heavenly beings, or space-age heroes of our times. All such characters lead them into the realm of the miraculous.

Sequence of stories with a common theme or characters

A group of stories can form a sequence if linked together by a common theme or characters. 'The Digt of the Moon', for example, is such a sequence. Here, each tale is an account of the adventures of a Prince who is challenged to answer a question by the Princess whose hand he seeks.

Stories around real events

Stories can be constructed around well-known events, actual or historical, such as a burglary, a dacoity, a fire, an earthquake, a hurricane, an air crash, a kidnapping, a riot, an encounter with animals, tribals or the police, etc. In such stories a single child or several children can be shown to play a dominant role.

Stories of pathos, and courage in suffering

Children are very responsive to pathos and tragedy. Therefore, concern for others can be generated in a child if one writes simple stories about the poor, the handicapped or the exploited. The courage and gallantry of a disadvantaged child can be very moving for young readers who respond instinctively to justice and suffering.

Activity 2

- i) What are the moral values that should be reflected in children's stories? (70 words)
- ii) Recount what you consider are the essential features of a story for children. (70 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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1.7 LANGUAGE AND TECHNIQUE IN CHILDREN'S STORIES

Authors of children's stories or books should refrain from producing 'literature' with involved language—a lofty style which may be more suitable for adult readers will turn children away. Simple language, direct action and natural dialogue in the familiar idiom of childhood are, therefore, the hallmarks of good writing for children.

1.7.1 Using simple words

In respect of language, the golden rule is to use a short rather than a long word. Examples: **explain** rather than **elucidate**, **excellent** rather than **meritorious**; **good** rather than **noble** or **praiseworthy**; **died** rather than **went to his heavenly abode**, or **passed away**; **clothes** rather than **costume**, and so on.

Children love characters that mimic local accent and speech. The buffoon, a bumbling teacher, an absent-minded official or grandfather, a fat policeman, a greedy merchant, a stupid man or woman, a boastful boy—all these are comic characters that delight children. However, as a writer, you should be careful not to endorse such existing social prejudices as making fun of the mentally retarded, or otherwise handicapped, or such stereotypes as the Bania, the backward child, the mother-in-law or the untouchable. If such characters are brought into the story you should try to make the handicapped human and dignified, like anyone else.

1.7.2 Avoiding clichés

Since the teaching of English in many schools tends to popularise stock phrases, writers of children's stories should avoid them 'like the plague'. Examples of such phrases are: 'cope up with the problems'; 'down the memory lane'; 'nears and dears'; 'the village belle'; 'pay one's respects'; 'a dastardly act'; 'fulsome praise'; 'sleep like a log'; 'pure as driven snow'; 'sweet as sugar', etc. These stereo phrases should be avoided unless they are used in a dialogue to reflect the way some people talk.

1.8 ROLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Children's books must be illustrated, and this applies to all categories. We must remember that the earliest known writings in the world were pictographs. An illustration is something instantly recognisable. It brings children promptly to the written word. In the case of the first age group (2 to 3 years), books should be all pictures with some letters and numbers introduced in an imaginative way.

Books for the next age group, about 6 to 8, must also be colourfully illustrated. But artists who try to be too innovative or abstract turn the children away from the text. Done properly, symbolic illustrations can appeal to readers. A child is both imaginative and practical, and is quite capable of accepting fantasy illustrations. In fact, he regards the fantastic as part of his own dream world.

No wonder, there is now an increasing slant towards fantasy in the children's literature produced in America. To some extent, it is also true of Swedish children's literature which is based on old folk tales of goblins, sprites, gremlins and other mythical characters. They are now joined by a new generation of space creatures, and the characters of such popular animated cartoons as *Sesame Street* and the *Muppets*. Children can also relate to ugly but endearing characters, a fact brought out admirably in the film *ET*.

Books for the older—both pre-teenage and teenage boys and girls—use fewer illustrations. But a good picture can add to the interest of a story, whatever be the level of the audience.

1.11 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- i)
 - a) Most parents are unwilling to spend money on buying children's books.
 - b) Publishers are often reluctant to invest in children's books. Commercial reasons.
 - c) There are few children's libraries.
 - d) The tradition of writing for children doesn't exist in India.
- ii) Suitable themes for different age groups:
 - a) Very young children—plenty of pictures, minimum text
 - b) 4 to 6 years—animal stories, fantasies
 - c) Older children—stories of adventures, explorations, travel, space fantasies
 - d) 10 to 15 years—stories of heroic or historical personalities, real adventures; serials, stories of children's courage and cleverness, tales from mountaineering, travel, sea-faring etc.

Activity 2

- i)
 - a) Traditional values like saving or helping those in trouble (including animals), truthfulness, punishing or defying the wicked, obedience, respect for elders (parents, teachers, etc.) loyalty to family or a friend.
 - b) New social values like independence, ambition, patriotism, national spirit, social integration, etc.

- ii) It should : (a) be well constructed, (b) be simple and vivid in language, (c) have interesting and vivid characters, (d) arouse curiosity and thrill the reader, (e) avoid adult phrases and adult point of view and keep in mind the psychology of the child, (f) avoid glorifying violence, (g) be on the side of goodness and compassion.

Activity 3

Hints

(i) and (ii). I enjoyed singing and acting the Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes I learnt in K.G. and Preparatory School. The fairy tales I read as a child delight me even today. The books I remember best are **Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, Ivanhoe, Lorna Doone, Scarlet Pimpernel, A Tale of Two Cities, David Copperfield, The Last of the Mohicans** and a host of others. Besides learning about the Western World at an impressionable age, I developed a love for the English language and an 'ear' for it.

(iii) **Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare** was given to me by an older student at school. Since then, reading and trying to comprehend Shakespeare's plays has been a source of permanent enjoyment for me. It has particularly awakened my interest in the theatre.