

Reading ‘Head Curry’ and thinking diversity

Ajaa

It is said that Literature is a mirror of its society. But is it really always mirroring everything in our society? One can say that Literature is rather shaped by dominant views of that society. The power and privilege to write it and publish it may also be just being in a few hands. Literature for children is also shaped in the same society. Shaped by the unequal world we live in where not all voices find their place or are represented appropriately. Except for small efforts, one can still count literature for children which appropriately and sufficiently represents different childhoods and living worlds.

Anweshi Research Centre For Women in Hyderabad did attempt, and made a good attempt towards this representation with ‘Different Tales’ supported by Parag, Tata Trusts¹. In the set of books that came out ‘Head Curry’ written by Mohammed KhadeerBabu was particularly striking for me. In reviewing it Deepa Srinivas writes, ‘This story is woven around his childhood memory of the cooking of the ram’s head at his home, considered a delicacy in his region and community. It describes a pleasure rarely represented in children’s literature which is located firmly within the normative vegetarian culture.’ (Editor, 2017.)

Head Curry was later published in Hindi by Eklavya by the title **सिर का सालन**. It’s a beautifully written story in which the author is recalling a childhood memory of the Sunday meal which was just so special to him, his family and to the region. The difference is that it is a non-vegetarian meal.

In my work with Librarians and teachers I found this book was particularly difficult for many to read or rather digest for its content. Such uninhibited detailing of the cooking of Ram’s head. When I read it for the first time I felt uncomfortable for a minute or two. I had never read something like this. Because such stories do not really exist or are not found so often. In children’s books you can find several books about vegetables and fruits but rarely any on non-veg. A rare one I read was ‘Our Non-veg cow’ by Mahashweta Devi several years

¹Parag Initiative of the Tata Trusts supports the development of and access to good quality story books for children in Indian languages, support school and community libraries so that children have free access to books and an open and vibrant environment that supports reading for pleasure. Parag also works to nurture the children’s literature sector through awards, professional courses and linking various stakeholders together through events for teachers, librarians and facilitators. Visit www.paragreads.in

earlier published by Seagull and later illustrated and published by Tulika Books under the title 'Our Incredible Cow'. Though it was more about the cow but unique that the cow had a taste for non-vegetarian food because it happened to eat the banana leaves on which the family had their meals. But food is often a tiny part of the plot. 'Kali and the Rat Snake' by Zai Whitaker and published by Tulika gives a small mention of Kali's food – ant chutney, which he hides away in the story. Or Mahashweta Devi's The Why Why Girl also mentions 'eating snakes'. But Head Curry actually opens up the pot, for each of your senses to feel it, as the curry is prepared.

The experience of reading and un-layering this book with students of Library Educator's Course² offered by Parag Initiative of the Tata Trusts, was mixed. Adults can have a strong resistance towards what they are not used to. So the vegetarians in the group could not get beyond a few pages, those who did were appalled and the rest enjoyed the mouth-watering story. It would be important to note here that when this group of educators would go ahead to select a book for their children, they would be influenced by what they felt or not, about a particular book and the selection would thus be made from the perspective of the educator. This includes numerous assumptions, cultural contexts and understanding about the world as a teacher/educator/practitioner. And so it becomes all the more important for a 'Head Curry' to exist and be shared.

I took the story to children in a community library³ in Mumbai. I remember being nervous about it. We had many fun stories since the past few sessions and though Head Curry can be fun, may not be so for all. The Read Aloud was carefully planned with other librarians. It was a different and an important book that we were going to share and the planning process was as intricate as the cooking of Head Curry itself. I am sharing here the experience of reading this book with two groups of children in the community library.

Head Curry was translated in Hindi by Sushil Joshi and woven with beautiful Urdu. Children's books at times are so simplified that the beauty of language is lost. सिर का सालन

²Library Educators Course is a 7-month professional development course for Teachers, Librarians, educators offered by Parag. To learn more about the course visit: <https://paragreads.in/parag-nurtures/library-educators-course>

³The sessions were held at Roshan Library Programme of Sahyog (an initiative of Chehak Trust, Narayan Nagar, Ghatkopar, Mumbai).

defies that. It brings a wonderful mix of local and urdu words which are effortlessly part of the story. In our Read aloud of Head Curry, we started the story reading with a pre-activity, post a game for warm-up, we divided children into four teams. Each team was part of a quiz where they were given some select words from the story (we identified words which could be new to them). They had to talk to each other and with given hints guess the meaning for the word. We had marked eight such words and children could guess six of them with some help. We also located Ongole on the India map before we began. We discussed if everyone had a special favorite meal and indeed everyone had 'one'.

All children who were present on the first day this was read aloud were non-vegetarians. The area they stayed in had familiar meat shops as the one in the book. As we read, it emerged that Sunday indeed held a special place for most families. While in home chores it was mostly the mothers who cooked (as in the story) and the daughters who helped but somehow children wanted to highlight that fathers also cooked given some situations. And as one child narrated, other also had something to tell. There was comfort and delight and mouth-watering reactions. Almost every child present was familiar with the process of cooking meat and what it entails. In post activity, they wrote recipes special to their homes with careful detailing and we had several recipes - fish eggs, daalsalan, mutton biryani etc.

The second time the book was Read Aloud, was with a mixed group, of non-vegetarian and vegetarian children. Once the story reached the point of preparing the head for cooking, there were some unpleasant faces in the room. We asked why it felt unpleasant? Children responded saying that it sounded gross, dirty, as some of them don't eat meat. Another friend who had read the story with children had shared similar experience of dissent. Here however, children calmed down as some of their friends were non-vegetarians and sighted that it's a choice after all. As librarians we can only hope that it was not a token statement and that these young adults would grow up to still believe in respecting choices – especially in times when choices are being checked upon in refrigerators and there is killing about it. We went through the same exercise of writing our recipes and this time we had some samosas, some chat and some biryani along with head curry! It was unsettling at first but we sailed through it in our own way and perhaps when these children grow up, they would navigate and negotiate through the world around, in their own way. We have no control over it and can we? We can only make sure that stories in a library are not just of one kind.

Nicole Overton, a team member of 'We need Diverse Books', a non-profit in the US writes, 'The word diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. Diversity is understanding that each individual is unique and recognizing our individual differences in regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religion and political beliefs. It's about moving past just being tolerant and embracing and celebrating the richness of each individual.' (Overton, 2016). Let's also count on the differences of food, of clothes, of our way of life into this, which are important markers of our identity.

There is a power structure which drives the market and decides the publishing and selection of books. Teachers, parents, librarians, school managements and authors are all part of that system. So selecting the right themes and publishing books is often not enough. It becomes important to talk about these books with children. In opening up discussions around such books in the Library Educator's Course or in trainings with teachers, we have experienced the conditioning which creates resistance to these books and ideas, the ignorance that overlooks such themes and considers them heavy for children. Stories of injustice, deprivation or stories which break a societal myth are often kept away from children. And the argument is - Will children understand? Why should children read this unsettling stuff? Who will answer the questions? Isn't experience of Literature supposed to be delightful? Perhaps these are our own fears and prejudices that certain themes seem unworthy of finding a space on shelves and some do. We forget that the text is merely a part of the reading, we forget that the reader brings her own interpretations which are subject to many experiences of her own world, which may be limited and may also be in many ways different.

The objective of diversity and representation, respect and validation through books needs to be explicitly put across. The seeds can be sown in childhood through stories which are inclusive of different childhoods. A reading session can be followed by objective discussions and dialogues. We must trust that our children can engage rationally with such literature. As Paulo Freire says 'Reading the world precedes reading the word'. (Freire and Macedo, 1987) Our children are aware and capable of accepting and exploring views and counter views, we only need to open the windows for them through books.

References:

Devi, M. (n.d.). *The Why Why Girl*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

Editor, A. (2017). *Language and Lifeworlds*. [online] [Anveshi.org.in](http://www.anveshi.org.in). Available at: <http://www.anveshi.org.in/language-and-lifeworlds/> [Accessed 7 Sep. 2017].

Freire P., Macedo D., (1987), Literacy: reading the word and the world (pp 20-24). London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group

Khadeer Babu, M. (2009). **The Head Curry**. Hyderabad: Mango, D C Books.

Missourian (2016). Increasing Diversity in Children's Books, Still a challenge. [online] Available at: https://www.columbiamissourian.com/news/k12_education/increasing-diversity-in-children-s-books-stilla-challenge/article_6cafb600-ed49-11e5-92b8-8bbea608e339.html [Accessed 8 Sep. 2017].

Overton, N. (2016). Libraries need diverse books. Public Libraries Online, pp.1-5.

Whitaker, Z., (2005). Kali and the Rat snake. Chennai: Tulika Publishers.

- **Ajaa**