

# Research Articles



# Fear in Children's Literature: Stories as Emotionally Enabling Experiences

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**Abstract** *This paper explores the representations of the theme of fear in children's literature. The relevance of delving into the same emanates from the understanding that the psycho-social relevance of literature cannot be dismissed. Fear, when understood particularly from the developmental stage of childhood, is a multi-faceted emotion/experience. Variety of situations, differing on the basis of contexts, contribute to the fears and insecurities that a child may encounter. In this paper we have attempted to highlight how reading/listening to stories can contribute as enabling encounters in dealing with challenging life situations. The analysis includes a selection of stories that revolve around the theme of overcoming fear and coming to terms with emotionally exacting situations.*

"Fear is a wonderful thing, in small doses."(Neil Gaiman)

Stories are an important medium to understand the world around us. The sheer expansiveness of the representational universe is ever-expanding and only limited by the flight of imagination and fancy. Storying in itself is an intrinsic part of our being and we explore our inner world and outer worlds through the prism of narratives. These may range from a child telling about an incident at school to a significant other or a teenager describing to her/his friend about how he/she went about looking for a perfect dress for the farewell party. Intrinsic to these instances is the idea that these examples include sequentially classified descriptions, with hints of dialogues, characters playing around and an omnipresent authorial presence telling us about the tale/instance.

Another important consideration is that literature has the propensity of emotive engagement which adds to its significance manifold from a mental well-being perspective. To emphasise on this idea, it may not be an over-ambitious argument to add

that literature provides a common ground for us as readers to explore our 'selves'. Reading a novel, poem, or story is novel for us in terms of how we tend to situate the 'I' within and beyond the narrative context of what we are reading. This very quality makes reading encounters as individualised and unique.

This necessitates looking at the stories from a perspective which involves delving into how they can be psychologically enabling for readers. It draws from an understanding that when we read literary works we often tend to relate with them by identifications or dismissals of situation or characters, contingent on the dynamism of the text and the context. Judgments and approvals are indicative of states of mind and life trajectories of readers. This brings to fore that stories can be identified as canvases with vignettes of a spectrum of emotions that the readers and texts generate cohesively during the reading process. Acknowledging the same concomitantly recognises that children's literature captures and evokes myriad emotions on account of the fact that



it deals with numerous issues related to children's lives.

Many of these issues, such as death of a parent, sibling rivalry, separation from a loved one, betrayal of trust and resultant guilt might be psychological realities for some children. For others, however, children's literature provides a vicarious experience of the good, the bad and the ugly that the world has to offer. Couched in folktales and animal tales with anthropomorphic characters (familiar trope used for emotional distancing) or fairytales with elements of magic, these issues in children's literature capture and evoke the innermost desires, feelings and fears which the child maybe unable to or afraid to recognise. The added advantage is that in most cases, children's literature provides a resolution to the issues and allows them to cope with their feelings through the medium of stories.

This paper is centered on the premise that fear as an affective response has several dimensions and may not be characterised only as a response to a potentially threatening situation for a child. A more nuanced argument would be that fear as an emotion is manifested in several life situations; everyday instances which may trigger emotional anxieties and prove to be challenging. Thus, the endeavour in this paper was to choose particularly those titles which encapsulate vignettes from the experiential universe of a primary school child. These storylines present characters and situations which a child may have experienced or can identify with and might have a cathartic impact on the reader.

Stories have been chosen as a medium to delve into the theme as they capture and concretise the effervescent quality of these apparently simple life events through sensitive portrayals. Keeping this in perspective, we have attempted an individual analysis of the stories with certain key guiding elements emerging from the central theme of the paper. These include delving into elements such as whose perspective the story has been written with; purposefulness of the text with respect to dilemmas faced by the characters; response to a fear-inducing situation; role of the caregiver; and

role of the story in promoting a non partisan and enabling view.

A related concern is that selection of stories was driven by the idea that they offer a possibility of dialogue between the adult/text and the child as a reader or a listener. This pertains not only to how the plot develops but also focuses upon the role of language and illustrations used within the stories, as they too contribute in enhancing the delineation of the theme and make the text amenable to an empathetic response. In the section that follows, we will undertake an analysis of those selected stories for primary school children which exhibit different levels and dimensions of fear, sometimes evoked by everyday life situations and at other times triggered by catastrophic life events.

### Analysis

*Mujhe Koi Nahi Khilata* by David Patiddar presents the anxiety of a little boy who is troubled by the fact that nobody in school is ready to play with him. It is a cause of worry and concern for the little boy and quite disconcerting for him. The story is presented from the point of view of the character. When nobody is ready to play with him, the next few lines read as "Mujhe bahut dukh hua. Mai ek jagah baith kar soch raha tha ki school kyun nahi lag rha... Mai sochta hi reh gaya." He mentions the cause of his worry to his teacher and his mother and the very next day, his classmates invite him to play with them, perhaps because the teacher and mother had already intervened on his behalf. The illustrations represent the dejection and disappointment at not being able to join his classmates through facial expressions, the protagonist positioned at a visibly marked distance from the other characters and through a single, minimised image on a double page. This adds to the experience of loneliness and emotionally disturbed state of mind. The story highlights a significant facet of school experience. It brings to fore the idea that playing together is a social experience which is looked forward to and its absence can sadden a child. It encapsulates the fear of being singled out and distanced, if seen from the point of view of the character.

While the above story captured the fear of being left



out of a social circle of same age peers and playmates, Sam Mc Bratney's, *I am Sorry*, explores the very palpable fear of losing the companionship of a dear friend. It is a story of two unnamed friends, a young boy and a young girl; it signifies that it can be the story of any kid (or adult). The story has been narrated from the perspective of the boy who recounts the fun he has with his friend - playing with toys, playing doctor or playing in the puddles. However, things change when he shouts at his friend and she gets back at him likewise. The two start avoiding each other- "I pretend my friend's not there, and she pretends she doesn't care, but..." - but he does care and says that if she is as sad as him then she would come and say sorry to him and so would he and everything will be fine again. Thus, the story ends on a positive note with a possibility of reconciliation between the two innocent friends.

*I'm Sorry* derives much of its impact from the repetition of sentences which captures the most important feelings and events at different junctures of the story. For example, the boy's feelings in the happier times are "I have a friend I love the best. I think she is nice... and she thinks I'm nice, too." However, the calmness is broken with capitals in a sentence "I SHOUTED at my friend today, and she shouted back at me." Interestingly, in the next instance where the sentence is repeated, it gets reversed as "My friend shouted at me today, and I shouted back at her," signifying the fact that perhaps the onus for separation lies on both and it is immaterial as to who began the quarrel. Moreover, the cause of shouting is not specified as the pain of separation and the consequent fear of not being together ever is more important than what caused the quarrel. The book has powerful illustrations by Jennifer Eachus. For example, the separation and refusal to play with each other gets depicted with an empty swing. The most powerful sentence and the only dialogue in the book "I'm sorry" features only once in the end but provides to the kids a powerful tool to avert the fear of separation and the consequent pain of physical and emotional distancing.

*Gilbert The Great* by Jane Clarke and Charles Fuge

highlights the theme of loss of a friend, a fear inducing and disorienting experience for children and adults. Gilbert, a great white shark, and Raymond, a remora, are buddies and stick around playing and helping each other. Gilbert is crestfallen by the sudden disappearance of Raymond. His mother's attempts to cheer him up are of little help until one day he finds another remora, Rita, who is saddened by the loss of her best friend, Daffily, a great white shark. With the possible hints of sudden absences referring to the possibility of fishing/hunting, this story foregrounds the fear of losing a loved one. While here it is represented through the medium of a friend, Mary Murphy in her book *I like it when...* presents images of attachment and impact of a significant other's presence through a dialogue. It is interesting to note that both the stories use animal characters in order to capture the emotional intensity of being distanced from a friend and expressing affection.

The relationship of friendship, as shown above, has many complexities to be dealt with and attendant fears of lack of attachment, breaking off of friendship and disappearance or death of a friend. The stories that follow precisely deal with these fears. Among the first to be discussed here is Oliver Jeffers' *Lost and Found* that deals with the complex social act of becoming friends with someone unlike yourself.

*Lost and Found* by Oliver Jeffers typifies the theme of friendship and empathy in a remarkably subtle and humorous manner. Unable to find a home for the penguin who lands up at his door one day, the little boy in the story sets out on a voyage to the South Pole as he discovers where penguins live in the book at the library. It is quite a feat that he succeeds in accomplishing after a spate of untiring attempts to find out where his uninvited guest had come from. It is interesting to note that though the boy is at times fed up by the unending interruptions yet there is an untiring zeal to set things right for the penguin. This can be attributed as a compassionate response to an individual who has no place to live. The story takes a complete turn when the boy misses him on his journey back after leaving the





penguin at the South Pole and goes back to find his new-found friend. The transformation in his attitude dawns with the realisation that the maybe the penguin was lonely and not lost as he had surmised and looked sad when he dropped him off on a mighty iceberg. But, to his dismay, the penguin is not there; only to be found later on the very next page floating in an upside down umbrella towards his friend. The story captures the essence of befriending someone, highlighting that making friends may be an arduous accomplishment for a child and may be characterised by hints of doubt and insecurity.

Jeffers' story, *Up and Down*, is symptomatic of the fear young children have of their friends' leaving them in the pursuit of other interests or friends. The book captures the anxiety of being separated as experienced by the protagonists, the young boy and the penguin. The story takes off from *Lost and Found*, a humorous and yet moving tale of finding a friend. The boy and the penguin become best friends and do all the things together such as playing musical instruments, playing table football and so on. However, one day the penguin decided that he wanted to do something alone - fly. He refused to let the boy fly him in his plane and tried everything to fly. When nothing worked, the boy and the penguin went out to seek help at the zoo. The poster for a live cannonball show catches the penguin's attention and he rushes off as he fancies himself flying from the canon. While the penguin is immediately hired, the boy, finding him amiss tries to search for him among other penguins but fails. Both the boy and the penguin miss each other throughout the night and the penguin knits a cap like the one the boy wore to remind himself of him. Luckily, the boy happens to see the poster for his friend's show and rushes there. The penguin, being so close to fulfilling his dream is quite unsure whether he wanted to participate in the act and wishes for his friend to be there. Once shot from the canon, the penguin is terrified and "wished his friend was there to help him." The boy, having reached in time catches the penguin safely and "The friends agreed that there was a reason why his wings didn't work well...because penguins don't like flying." This story is a fine illustration of why

and how the presence of friends can be affirming and reassuring in moments of distress, dilemma and fear. It is not only emotionally relieving but also exemplifies that friends are significant in having a positive self concept and adjust to individual differences.

While friends are important to a child's sense of positive self esteem, family as the first social unit that the child is born into plays a crucial role with regard to the socio-emotional development of the child and the loss of love and care by primary caregivers and siblings or the anticipated guilt of hurting them with one's actions is a major cause of concern for young children which is exemplified in the stories below.

*Sara Aur Uske Nanhe Bhoot* is a Belgian story translated in Hindi. The book is about a young girl who accidentally breaks her mother's necklace in her absence and hides the broken pearls. Afraid of telling the truth, Sara becomes tensed. Upon being asked by her mother of her worries or the necklace which couldn't be traced, Sara lies. The moment Sara lies, a "bhoot" comes out of her mouth and starts floating in the air, singing out loud the fact that Sara broke the necklace but only Sara could hear it. As Sara keeps on denying any knowledge of the necklace or sharing her worries, the number of "bhoots" keep increasing and her guilt keeps increasing. She is unable to feel the warmth of her father's embrace or his kiss. Finally, she is so guilt ridden that upon her mother's asking, she discloses the truth and the "bhoots" disappear. The book ends on a realistic and non preachy note stating that the "bhoots" keep coming now and then because she is unable to share everything. However, she tries her best to not let them increase and come between her and her parents as she loves the warmth of her father's embrace. The book beautifully captures the fear of loss of love of significant others. The guilt of hiding one's wrongdoing and the fear of punishment from the parents exacerbates the tension and guilt in the small child which is manifested in the form of the "bhoot." Without being preachy, the book tells the small children that sharing the truth with the parents will make the guilt go away and all the same it realistically remains



open to the possibility of small lies being told by children. Philip Guzence's illustrations beautifully capture the little girl's emotions of fear, guilt and despondence for hiding the truth and anger at the "bhoot." The little white wispy "bhoot" with a mischievous look on its face is an endearing creature and on the whole the book is a joyful read.

Written by Sandhya Rao, *Ekki Dokki* is a Marathi moral folktale of two sisters. Ekkeshvali and Dokeshvali, as the names suggest are two little girls with one and two strands of hair respectively. The differential treatment meted out to the two girls is apparent from "Their mother thought there was no one quite so lovely as Dokki. Their father was very busy. He had no time to think." What is significant about this sentence is that it captures the fact that Ekki's mother is emotionally distant from her and the father is indifferent. Constant bullying by her sister makes her run away from home and into the forest. The forest, as we know, is a magical place away from civilization. In most of the fairytales and folktales, forests often are characterised by loss, absence and as spatial locations where characters overcome challenging situations. Very often it involves a personal quest, a journey of self-discovery, fighting off fears and coping with taxing situations. In this case too, the humble and helpful Ekki gives water to a mehndi plant and feeds a cow. In exchange of her kindness, they give her mehndi and milk later in the story. An old woman living in a hut in the forest gives her shikakai soap to wash her single strand of hair and as a result magically, Ekki grows beautiful resplendent hair. Dokki, on the other hand takes the same route to the forest with very different results. Neither does she stop to help the mehndi plant, nor the cow. Dokki barges in the old woman's house and orders her to prepare the bath for her after which she loses both strands of her hair. Rao avoids the predictable normative moral structure of explicitly presenting what is to be 'learnt' from the story and seems to provide a closure by giving it an unsentimental turn. So while Dokki is sad "...but she soon wiped her tears and Ekki and Dokki lived happily ever after with their mother and father." The book captures the possible self image issues and about the lack of parents' and siblings' love while it teaches sensitivity and care towards the

elements around us.

There are also stories which focus on the exploratory nature of children and their attempts at facing and overcoming their fears heads on. One such book is *I am not Afraid* which is a bilingual book for beginning readers. Written by Mini Shrinivasan, it is a pattern based story about a little girl who considers herself a "big girl" and ventures out of the home alone. Illustrations by Rayika Sen in dark blue, green and black colours punctuated with the white and red create a dark, eerie and suspenseful atmosphere. The little girl investigates the lights and shadows and the sounds around her. In a pattern that follows she wonders things like "It is so dark! Is someone there? Who is it?" and "And that sound! Creak creakcreak! What is it?" only to declare "Oh, it is only the cat. I am not afraid"; "Only my sister drawing water from the well! I am not afraid." The placement of questions on the right hand side page and the answer on the next make the book a real page turner. Sen's illustrations show the girl examining her surroundings with a look of trepidation, wonderment and fear only to declare "I am not afraid!" at each step and finally "I am not afraid of anything!" This short story beautifully captures the idea that despite fear in their hearts, young children have a deep seated desire to be "big" and to explore their surroundings. It encourages the children to overcome their fears of unknown sights and sounds and to not to be afraid of anything.

Uptil now, we have focussed upon books which have dealt with everyday fear inducing situations for young children which has had a positive outcome or atleast the possibility of one. Now we will focus upon two stories which deal with the weighty issue of the loss of a loved one and the consequent attempts of the young to deal with and surmount the pain of the loss.

*Goodbye Siti*, by Jumaini Ariff, primarily centres on the theme of loss, guilt and responsibility from the perspective of a child. The story begins where Ariff, asks his parents to buy a goldfish for him. He is quite happy and takes good care by feeding the fish everyday. But soon the interest wanes away and one day in a tiring hurry to go and play with his friend, Ariff happens to feed the goldfish, Siti,

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excessively, and it dies. The young boy is guilt ridden and saddened by his act and regrets even more when he sees Qiyah, his sister, upset. The fear of being scolded or punished prevents him from revealing anything to his parents. But he is rattled by the incident and continues to be miserable. He even has a dream where Siti is blaming him for being irresponsible. He bursts out crying and reveals it to his parents. It is relevant to consider here that the response to the situation from the parents is not driven by an orientation of punishing the child but by the objective of inculcating a sense of responsible action. Asking him to clean the fish tank and deferring the possibility of having another pet can be seen as an affirmation of the same. This is significant from another perspective that by disallowing another pet being brought immediately the parents are not resorting to a facile solution to death. Death as a disturbing experience is encountered here and is not shrouded in unsubstantial and vague explanations which children are often subjected to. The death of a pet may be an unequivocally disconcerting experience, but by situating the experience of death in a relatively distanced sphere than of a significant other or a caregiver, the author tries to mellow down the harshness of the situation.

While *Goodbye Siti*, distances the experience of death by making the loss of a pet central to the story another of Jeffers story deals with the issue directly yet sensitively, couching the disturbing loss and consequent pain in symbolisms of an empty chair and a heart in a bottle.

*The Heart and the Bottle* deals with weighty and complex themes of love and loss which most children's stories side step. The book is about a little girl whose heart is filled with wonderment and curiosities about the world around her. Misfortune strikes in the form of the loss of an elderly loved one which results in the symbolic act of locking her heart away in a bottle and hanging it around her neck. Though at first she feels this act would secure her from misfortunes and that she did right by keeping her heart safe, however, soon she realises that her life wasn't same as she stopped being curious or taking note of the things around her and the bottle became heavier and "awkward"

by the day. She realises her loss when she meets a girl younger than her, with the same exploratory zest that she once had. She decides to get her heart back from the bottle. However, she doesn't succeed in breaking the bottle until the younger girl uncorks the bottle and the heart is put back in its place. The girl goes back to living her life with zeal, once again enamoured by the wonders of the world. The metaphor of 'heart in a bottle' is indicative of the difficulty and angst of responding to loss. The imagery of bottling up emotions is painfully beautiful as it the response to loss. The book encapsulates the pain felt by young children on the loss of a loved one and the consequent fear of attaching themselves to anyone or anything for the fear of facing a loss again. However, the book also emphasises that despite the loss, ultimately there is hope, a driving force. The illustrations of the book capture the poignancy of loss and one particular illustration that stands out is where the girl runs off to show her drawing to her loved one but finds an empty chair instead. As the days pass, she sits before the chair mulling over, perhaps in wait, watching the shadows lengthen and pass over the empty chair.

### Conclusion

In the preceding section we have attempted to take only those books which highlight how fears and insecurities, unique to a developmental phase, find resonance in the stories for children. Incorporating them in the repertoire of print exposures for primary school students can be a mode of dealing with dilemmas that are often not verbalized. They can function as a mode of addressing concerns that are often brushed aside but want attention as they are of relevance and significance if viewed from a well-being perspective. Such texts may help in coping with situations and sharing experiences which may be ambiguous for a child. Listening or reading to such stories offer the possibility of exploring concerns that are important for children, in an open-ended manner. Eder (2010) in her study *Life Lessons through Storytelling* supports the idea that the interactive spaces generated are not only significant for developing self knowledge but also social and communal knowledge (Eder, 2010, ix). Eades (2006) refers to this empowering role of



stories in terms of the "social and emotional competence", that is, to "recognize one's own emotions and those of others and to manage and respond to emotions appropriately." (Eades, 2006, 119) Quite often, emotions/emotional responses that are difficult to handle explicitly are ignored and dealt with in a superficial manner. Etching out the thematic thrusts of the various stories in this paper was an endeavour to re-emphasise that these uncharted territories within the classroom etc. can be addressed through the creative medium of stories.

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