

## The Excluded Child: A Critical Analysis of Select Indian Picturebooks

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### Abstract

This paper will critically analyse marginalisation in select Indian picturebooks published in English. Marginalisation is a topic that is hard to navigate in the adult scrutiny of children's literature publication. *My Name is Gulab*, and *Kali and the Rat Snake* will be considered as the main texts for critical analysis of marginalisation based on caste. Visual narratives and textual analysis will be used in this study. The child protagonists, Gulab and Kali were marginalised due to caste. The discrimination they faced in the schools, a place meant to be a safe space for children, led them to question their own identity and the occupations of their parents. Kali used his knowledge about snakes to save the whole class from the snake. He used his expertise of being born in a tribal community to catch the snake, an identity which he tried to run away from. Gulab used her innovation and made a machine that can replace human beings used in cleaning the sewage. This paper will try to dissect the texts to determine whether they contradict or uphold prevailing beliefs, providing a platform for varied and alternative perspectives on identity and children in India.

**Keywords:** children's literature, picturebooks, childhood, marginalisation

### Introduction

Marginalisation due to caste, class, gender, disability, religion, and cultural differences has been explored in children's literature of India. The visual and textual narratives within picturebooks engage with deeper social issues such as gender inequality, poverty, caste discrimination, disability, and cultural exclusion. The majority of children portrayed in literature and media are middle-class, urban, and upper-caste. However, over the last two decades, writers, scholars and illustrators have consciously worked towards diversifying children's literature to include voices and experiences from the margins. To analyse

marginalisation based on caste in picturebooks, *My Name is Gulab* and *Kali and the Rat Snake* will be considered. Gulab asserts her identity and dignity despite social prejudice. She did not stoop down when she was bullied for being the daughter of a sewage cleaner. The illustrations complement the text by using earthy tones and everyday imagery to reflect the protagonist's lived environment and emotional world. In *Kali and the Rat Snake*, the titular character faces discrimination from his peers because of his father's occupation as a snake-catcher. Kali is a member of the snake-catching community. He is unique and could not blend in the classroom due to his ethnicity. Both texts use child protagonists to foreground experiences of exclusion, thereby creating spaces for dialogue and reflection. Picturebooks that address marginalisation work at the intersection by providing them visibility and narrative agency. When a child from a marginalised community sees themselves represented in a book, it affirms their sense of worth and belonging.

### **Literature Review and Objectives**

In the past few decades, the portrayal of marginalisation in Indian picturebooks has grown to be a prominent topic of artistic and intellectual interest. There has been a gradual transformation that has occurred with writers, illustrators, and publishers seeking to represent India's diverse and complex social realities. This paper examines how marginalisation, based on caste, is portrayed in Indian picturebooks, while engaging with critical theories and existing scholarship that analyse these depictions. The picturebooks will be studied through the lens of marginalisation. In social, political, and cultural hierarchies, marginalisation is the term used to describe the systematic exclusion or devaluation of particular groups. The under-representation or misrepresentation of minority experiences is one way that marginalisation appears in children's literature. These disparities have historically been linked to caste, poverty, gender, and language variety in the Indian environment. Picturebooks, according to visual and narrative theory experts Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, are iconotexts in which words and images interact to create meaning. This multimodal style is particularly well-suited to provide an understandable representation of intricate social realities. The visual narrative can subtly depict power relations—through space, colour, and perspective—while the text articulates emotion and agency. Since picturebooks' visual element enables the

representation of regional, ethnic, and class variation, they have emerged as a particularly useful medium for examining marginalisation in India.

Due to social taboos, caste has not received much attention in children's literature despite being one of the most pervasive types of marginalisation in Indian society. However, recent picturebooks have attempted to confront caste discrimination directly.

The objective of this paper is the critical analysis of marginalisation based on caste experience by children and the effect of this caste based discrimination in children in the Indian picturebooks Sagar Kolwankar's *My Name is Gulab* and Zai Whitaker's *Kali and the Rat Snake*. The paper will focus on both the words and illustrations, which form an integral part of the meaning-making process of picturebooks.

## **Materials and Methods**

The texts that will be considered in this paper are Sagar Kolwankar's *My Name is Gulab* and Zai Whitaker's *Kali and the Rat Snake*. These two books were published within a two-decade span of each other. These two picturebooks were selected for their child protagonists who experienced marginalisation because of their caste. Critical analysis of these with a narrative approach will be used in this paper. The interactions between text and words will be employed too. The perspective that will be considered is the adult reader's perspective, as such, not the implied child reader.

## **Results and Discussion**

The two picturebooks *My Name is Gulab* and *Kali and the Rat Snake* will be critically analysed using the narratological approach in picturebooks. Since picturebooks rely on both the words and images for the meaning-making process, the analysis will focus on both these components. The following analysis is being done from the perspective of the adult reader.

### *My Name is Gulab*

Sagar Kolwankar's *My Name is Gulab* thoughtfully explores caste-based marginalisation in Indian society from the perspective of a little girl. The book, crafted in a child-friendly manner, functions as a narrative of self-affirmation and a critique of social exclusion.

Through the integration of text and graphics, Kolwankar constructs a multifaceted narrative that enables readers, particularly the youth, to interact with themes of identity, dignity, and equality in an empathic and suitable manner for their age.

Gulab confronts the biases and injustices linked to her caste, the job of her father and overall her existence. The text exposes the systematic prejudices ingrained in the daily existence of the lower caste people. Gulab's father is a sewage cleaner, a job usually connected to the lower castes. Job, caste and marginalisation are intertwined and embedded in the picturebook. Gulab's experiences of exclusion as a child of the lower caste community, being treated differently, are part of the larger form of discrimination of the lower caste. For Gulab, school is a space where she has to fight for her own identity. She is identified as the daughter of the manual scavenger, the smelly, stinky Gulab. Kolwankar illustrates, from a child's perspective, how caste discrimination is sustained not just by adults but also by children who assimilate social hierarchies from their environment.

#### Innovation as Gulab's Solution to Marginalisation

Gulab used her creative and innovative ideas to invent a machine that will replace the manual scavengers which her father is a part. She questioned the hierarchy of people in society. The parents have to accept the fate of being born into the lower caste and cleaning sewage. Gulab tried to find a solution to solve the problem. Large machines are used to clean the drains and sewers, but still, the lower caste communities are assigned the task of cleaning the dirt. The machine may not be the ultimate solution to all the discrimination in Gulab's small world in the school. It is the people in the society, the classmates who compared the machine with Gulab's father, who need to change. Throughout the picturebook, Sagar Kolwankar illustrated Gulab's father to be gloomy and most of the time covered in dirt. He is the representative of the older generation who were brave enough to survive the marginalisation by accepting the hierarchy of society. Gulab, on the other hand, speaks up, shouts back, and uses her creativity to fight back against the discrimination for being born in the lower caste. There is a light of hope in the new generation, the generation that tries to change not only themselves but the people around them.

#### Clash of the Castes in *My Name is Gulab*

Gulab represents the lower caste in the small world of her school. The tussle between Gulab and the other students can be analysed as the clash between the lower caste communities and the upper caste communities. Changes in the form of the innovative machine are contributed by the lower caste, while the upper caste remains nonchalant. There are responses to the works of the lower caste communities, but no one from the upper caste communities took the trouble to reduce the marginalisation of Gulab. This picturebook elaborates on the discrimination of the lower caste communities and the possible solution for the problems—contributions from the lower caste.

This is where the status of the lower caste people remains at the receiving end of the upper caste people. The upper caste people hired Gulap's father for cleaning the sewage; instead of using the 'big machines', they use him. That was the only work assigned for people like him, the only way to earn a living for his family.

#### *Kali and the Rat Snake* as a Discourse of Marginalisation

Zai Whitaker's *Kali and the Rat Snake* explores topics of caste, prejudice, and belonging from a child's viewpoint. Although it seems to be a straightforward narrative of a boy and his formidable pet, it conceals a nuanced and significant critique of marginalisation and the social systems that influence Indian society. *Kali and the Rat Snake* combines an engaging narrative with vivid graphics, encouraging readers to contemplate social exclusion, identity, and the transformational nature of empathy. In India, children's literature abounds in representations of urban, middle-class, upper caste families. There is a lot of support and interest from scholars, authors and illustrators to include diverse childhoods, communities and marginalised identities in Children's Literature.

#### Resistance and the Reconstruction of Identity

Kali was never the same after going to school. He wished his father's job were anything other than a snake catcher, an occupation that links him to the lower caste. He refrains from retaliation or seeking affirmation; rather, he exemplifies his worth via deeds. This corresponds with the principles of Dalit and Adivasi literature, which underscores the importance of dignity in labour, resilience, and self-affirmation. The picturebook undermines prevailing narratives of "civilising the marginalised". Kali needs no alteration or integration into the mainstream; instead, it is the mainstream that must broaden its comprehension of

what constitutes value and intelligence. The transformation occurs not in Kali, but in his learners.

## Conclusion

The qualitative findings after the critical analysis of the two picturebooks *My Name is Gulab* and *Kali and the Rat Snake*, will be the depictions of the caste based marginalisation. The authors and illustrator employed a collaborative effort between the words and illustrations used in the text. Caste is a taboo and a sensitive topic to be introduced to children. The child protagonists Kali and Gulab become victors in their own accord while facing intense marginalisation because of their caste. Sagar Kolwankar, in *My Name is Gulab*, through the story of Gulab, pitched the idea of social changes with efforts from the mistreatments and deplorable conditions of the working environment of Gulab's father. The juxtaposition of the thin, dirt-covered man and the clean, healthy upper caste people represents the social hierarchy in the caste prevalent Indian society. Gulab and the younger generation are the harbinger of hope and social changes.

In the picturebook *Kali and the Rat Snake*, Kali embraces his ethnicity and the tradition of his forefathers at the end of the text. The children of these lower caste tribes are exposed to discrimination daily, which the other children outside of these communities are alien to. This picturebook brings the focus on the diverse childhood in India and the need to understand the diversity in society. In both the texts, the illustrations and the texts did justice to the representation of the lower caste community, which will rule out the assumptions of only catering to the needs of the upper caste.

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