

Fostering Secular Values in Children: A Study of *Sorry, Best Friend!***Dr. Najmul Hasan**

Assistant Professor

Department of English, DAV PG College

Varanasi, India

nazmul.bhu90@gmail.com**Abstract**

India is a land of a multicultural society, and the exercise of secular values in such a society is fundamental to its growth and development. The intervention to cultivate these values should start from an early age, and children's literature serves as an effective medium for this purpose. *Sorry, Best Friend!*, edited by Githa Hariharan and Shama Futehally, is a collection of stories that promotes the ideals of secularism, tolerance, and cultural coexistence. The narratives portray friendships across religious and social boundaries, encouraging young readers to overcome prejudice and appreciate diversity. By presenting communal harmony through the innocent perspective of children, the collection demonstrates that hatred is a learned behaviour. In contrast, empathy, respect, and mutual understanding can be nurtured through education and meaningful human relationships. The paper aims to discuss secularism in the Indian context and examines how the selected stories from the text *Sorry, Best Friend!* advocate secular values by challenging stereotypes and fostering an inclusive worldview. It also highlights the significance of the text in promoting communal harmony and preparing young readers to become responsible citizens in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: Secularism, Children's Literature, Cultural Pluralism, Communal Harmony, Indian Philosophy

India is a civilisation of remarkable diversity, characterised by the coexistence of multiple religions, languages, cultures, and traditions. It is the birthplace of four major world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—which originated on its soil and subsequently spread across different parts of the world. Later, the advent of Islam and Christianity on this soil further expanded and strengthened India's religious and cultural plurality. Each new encounter has contributed significantly to its unique cultural identity and rich philosophical heritage. The Vedic concept of '*Dharma Nirapekshata*', meaning the neutrality or impartiality of the state towards all religions, closely resembles the modern idea of secularism. It emphasises that governance should ensure equal respect, justice, and protection for followers of every faith. The harmonious coexistence of multiple faiths and linguistic communities has led to the development of a composite national culture in India, wherein differences are not merely tolerated but often celebrated. This tradition of inclusiveness forms the foundation of the Indian concept of secularism, which is based on the principle of '*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*' (equal respect for all religions). It seeks to ensure religious freedom, promote interfaith harmony, and uphold the dignity of all religious communities without privileging or discriminating against any particular faith.

The spirit of secularism was further strengthened and enriched during the Indian freedom movement, despite the British colonial policy of divide and rule. Mahatma Gandhi emphasised religious tolerance and moral unity among different faiths. He was a champion of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal respect for all religions). In an article published in *Harijan* on 31 August 1947, he stated, “The state is bound to be wholly secular” (qtd. in Chandra, 116). Gandhi also believed that the fundamental ethics are common to all religions. It was partly to emphasise this commonality that he changed his earlier formulation, ‘God is Truth,’ to ‘Truth is God.’ Furthermore, he asserted that “Religion is the personal affair of each individual; it must not be mixed up with politics or national affairs” (qtd. in Chandra, 118). Secularism, non-violence, and self-rule were the fundamental pillars of Gandhi’s life and ideology. Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned a secular democratic state committed to scientific temper and pluralism; B. R. Ambedkar upheld constitutional safeguards for religious liberty and social justice; and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan viewed secularism as a spirit of mutual respect and understanding among religions. Their contributions helped shape the secular ethos enshrined in the Constitution of India. The Indian national movement was deeply committed to representative democracy, civil liberties, and secularism. Secularism was considered a fundamental principle of independent India. It meant the separation of religion from politics and the state, equal respect for all religions, non-discrimination on religious grounds, and active opposition to communalism. Bipin Chandra writes:

Basically, Secularism has come to mean separation of religion from politics, economy, education and large areas of social relations and culture and treatment of religion as a private or personal affair. To talk of any Indian definition of secularism which would deny this is to deny secularism. (Chandra, 115)

Secularism has played a distinctive role as an ideological force in India, uniting people across religious and cultural differences in the struggle against colonial rule and becoming an integral component of the nation-building process. Simultaneously, the rise of communalism as a divisive socio-political force reinforced the significance of secularism. This secular vision was consistently upheld by leaders of the freedom struggle, and remained a guiding principle until India achieved independence. This commitment helped shape India as a democratic and pluralistic nation that respects all faiths equally. Although the national movement failed to prevent communalism and the Partition, its secular legacy endured. Despite the communal violence of 1946–47, independent India established secularism as a fundamental principle of its Constitution, state, and society. Nehru envisioned India as a secular, non-sectarian state that neither promoted nor opposed any religion. This Nehruvian model of secularism remained the dominant state ideology until the mid-1970s. A major turning point came in 1975 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency, suspending civil liberties, censoring the press, and concentrating executive power in her hands. According to Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya, the Emergency marked a shift from Nehruvian to post-Nehruvian politics, as it weakened democratic institutions and undermined the legitimacy of secularism. He notes:

Since 1975, this model [of Nehruvian majoritarianism] has arguably been displaced, both in state policy and in national politics ... Emergency rule undermined the existing structures of popular democracy from which secularism derived its nominal legitimacy. (qtd. in Srivastava, 8)

The rise of Janta Party, the 1984 riots, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid marked the emergence of a new political paradigm in India. The proponents of this shift criticised the state’s

earlier secular policies, particularly its approach toward the Muslim minority, as a form of minority appeasement. Nehruvian secularism was accused of sidelining Hindu culture and religion from public life, leading to renewed debates about the nature of secularism and national identity in India.

In contemporary India, secularism remains a vital principle for maintaining national unity amidst diversity. Secularism has emerged as a fundamental pillar of the modern nation-state, particularly in India and other multi-religious and democratic societies worldwide. It serves as a framework for accommodating religious and cultural differences while fostering democratic values, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. A theoretical definition of 'secularism' in a political context by Donald E. Smith reads:

The secular state is a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion. (qtd. in Srivastava, 18)

Secularism, over time, has broadened in meaning beyond the notion of a political ideology to be imposed or enforced by the state. Rather, secularism is increasingly understood as a humane and ethical practice grounded in mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and equal dignity for all. It encompasses not only religious freedom and equal respect for all faiths but also the protection of human rights, adherence to the rule of law and international norms, respect for national sovereignty, democratic governance, and other universal values. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, secularism should be understood not as a fixed or rigid doctrine but as an ongoing ethical practice of reason, accountability, and peaceful coexistence that enables diverse communities to live together with mutual respect and democratic responsibility. She writes:

Our world shows us that secularism is not an episteme. It is a faith in reason in itself and for itself, protected by abstract external structures—the flimsiest possible arrangement to reflect the human condition. Under the circumstances, I invite you to think of secularism as an active and persistent practice, as an accountability of keeping the structures of agency clear of belief as faith. Secularism is too rarefied, too existentially impoverished to take on the thickness of a language. It is a mechanism to avoid violence that must be learned as mere reasonableness. It is thin as an ID card, not thick as 'identity' (qtd. in Srivastava, 15).

The selected text, *Sorry, Best Friend!*, set against the backdrop of the 1984 riots and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, is deeply engaged with the idea of secularism. It is a collection of ten committed secular stories written for young readers, each promoting the values of cultural pluralism, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. Through its narratives, the text seeks to cultivate a worldview founded on tolerance, empathy, and the acceptance of the *other*, thereby encouraging children to appreciate diversity and reject prejudice. As a genre, children's literature is inherently didactic, and a sensitive writer effectively balances entertainment with moral instruction, enabling young readers to internalise ethical values in an engaging and meaningful manner. Ideology in children's literature is more obvious than in adults. Peter Simatei points out:

This has to do with the object of Children's Literature for it is generally agreed that writing for children inevitably involves an attempt to inculcate in them norms

and ethical practices which the writer assumes are upheld by the society as its essential premises of cultural formation. (qtd in Pandurang, 30)

Hariharan and Futehally clearly state their intention to work around two fundamental concepts that are integral to human rights and secularism, namely 'diversity' and 'pluralism'. Both ideas can develop when there is a recognition and tolerance of diverse cultural and social practices, and when all groups within a society are allowed to retain their unique cultural identity, while simultaneously respecting the right of other groups to coexist side by side. The editors explain in the book:

All of us have friends and neighbours who are different from us in some way or the other. They may look a little different, speak languages we do not know or eat food we don't. Some people pray to different gods, some do not pray at all. It is as if each of us is a piece of the very large (and sometimes confusing) jigsaw puzzle that is India (3).

The idea suggests that they firmly believe a narrative must function to remind and heal the reader. The reminder made the reader conscious not to repeat history. They further highlight:

What happens when we forget that all of us are part of the same puzzle? Very quickly, as if we were never one, we break into a hundred pieces. People are hurt, homes are destroyed, and trust is broken forever. This happened in Delhi in 1984, in Ayodhya in 1992, and every year we hear of yet another outrage against Dalits in the villages or bastis of our country. Let's make sure that none of this ever happens again. As the stories in this book, whether humorous, fantastic or sad, remind us, 'each of us has a place in this strange, funny world of ours' (3).

The central thread connecting the stories is the anxiety that the secular fabric of contemporary Indian society is under serious threat of disintegration, as manifested in the 1984 riots, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the communal violence that followed. The editors witnessed the ideological conflict between secularists and right-wing fundamentalists in the early 1990s. This experience compelled them to write for young readers, with the aim of nurturing values of tolerance, coexistence, and positivity, and preventing the repetition of such violent episodes in history.

The first story, "What Happened to the Reptiles", is an allegory of our contemporary culture of intolerance. The narrator Prem lives in a village where "many kinds of people in the village- dark, fair, tall, short. They speak many languages. Some eat meat, some don't. Some pray in a small temple at the edge of the forest. Others pray in the mosque some miles away. Some worship one god, others many. But they all live happily, oh so happily together!"(7-8). These lines positively depict the diversity and plurality of India. However, Prem is soon forced to flee his home as the people of his village become "mad" and begin to hate and commit violence against their neighbours simply because, " far, far away in a place they have never even been to, a temple or mosque has been burnt down" (8). Prem consequently finds himself in the village called Pampubatti, where he was welcomed and visited by villagers. He expresses his surprise to the old man, "I have never seen people like the villagers here! In my village people fight with those who pray to another god. But here-this seems a very strange place" (8-9). The older man narrates the mystical story of Pampubatti and asks Prem to gift this story to your riot-hit villagers whenever he is ready to return. Prem's reply reflected the voice of an innocent heart that had never accepted communal violence. He says, "What I have seen in my village makes me

burn with shame. I never, never want to go back there”(9). According to the legend, a long, long time ago there were only reptiles in the forest of Pambupatti- snakes, crocodiles, turtles, Lizards. Every month, the reptiles had a big meeting presided over by Makara, the biggest crocodile of the forest.

The moody crocodiles issue a diktat ordering the turtles to leave the forest because they are slow, silencing all dissent with the shouts, “No BUTS!” and “No I THINK!” The forest soon starts to stink of rotting fruit, as this is what the tortoise used to eat. A month later, there comes an order for snakes to leave. After their departure, the rats take over the forest, devouring the lizards’ eggs and ushering in a period of devastation and fear. Consequently, lizards were banned, and the Pambupatti is left with Crocodiles, rats and frogs. As time passed, rats became fearless, jumped and turned somersaults on the crocodiles’ backs!. The huge frogs began to eat the baby crocodiles. Against the expectation of the crocodiles, “ It was a terrible time for the crocodiles” (14). Until one day, a squeaky little voice piped up at one of their meetings and said, “We know why the forest has gone crazy, don’t we?” (14). An urgent message was sent, and all the inhabitants agreed to come back to the earlier life of coexistence and tolerance of all creatures. The old man advised Prem to narrate this story to your villagers, and it ends on a very positive note: “some of them may laugh at you or say your stories are not true. But they may remember them one day, and understand that each of us has a place in this strange, funny world of ours” (15).

The story “The Tunnel” also highlights the principles of coexistence and a non-prejudicial attitude toward fellow human beings. Little Ankush is about to set off on a train journey alone, leaving his parents behind. Ankush is unhappy and insecure, and the temptation of toys fails to placate him. Except for Hari Singh, his attendant, the coach contains only “a pile of luggage covered with an old black cloth” (22). As the train entered the tunnel, Ankush’s sobs turned into screams of terror. And then “Ankush saw a kind of magic happening. The Luggage in the corner was moving. It had got up and was coming towards him” (23). That was a woman named Saeeda, who shares the maternal qualities of his mother. “This face looked like Mummy because it talked like Mummy” (23). She comforts the frightened child, who soon overcomes both his fear and any prejudice he might later have developed toward the burqa as a garment associated with a particular community. The story rejects all forms of prejudice and encourages readers to embrace coexistence rather than instilling intolerance toward other religions in children. It is a beautiful story for innocent children who value emotion and affection over hatred and intolerance.

The story “The Lights Changed” centers on a brief interaction between a young newspaper seller and the adult narrator, a student whose class background is revealed through his use of English. Both share a common name, Samir, and the child establishes a sense of bonding across religion, age, and class. He tells his new acquaintance: “So now you are Samir ek, and I am Samir do” (18). The younger Samir’s mother is in Meerut. The riots in Meerut snatch his smile away, and his religion is also revealed to the narrator. He says, “There is trouble in Meerut, he said. Many Muslims are being killed there in the riots”. After that day, he was never seen at the crossing and ‘no newspaper, in English or Hindi, can tell me where my Samir do has gone” (19). The story suggests that communal riots destroy peace and disrupt lives, affecting not only adults but also children, families, and entire communities, making everyone a victim.

In the story “The New Lion-Makers”, the author encourages young readers to question modern political ideas, authority, and power, inspiring them to think critically instead of

accepting everything without questioning. The young Nishad reads the story “The Lion-Makers” from *The Panchatantra*, in which three learned men bring a fierce lion back to life without any safeguards or consideration of the long-term consequences of their actions. The revived lion eventually kills them. Nishad is deeply troubled by the story and keeps wondering why the three men ignored their friend's warning and asks, “Why didn’t the three men leave the dead lion alone?”(30). In the later part of the story, Nishad has a dream in which the lion-makers become real people and begin arguing over a long-standing stone pillar. He hears one of them say:

This pillar should not be here. Our leader has done so much for all of you, and we want to put his statue right here in the middle of town. Who knows why this pillar was put here? And anyway, it was built by someone from a town a hundred miles away, hundreds of years ago. (31)

Soon, the shouting intensifies, and the faces of the people grow increasingly angry. “Break it down!” the shopkeeper suddenly shouts along with the crowd. Townspeople who have always lived peacefully beside one another begin to argue, fight, and turn against each other over an old stone pillar that has stood in the middle of the town for as long as anyone can remember. Nishad wakes up, relieved to realise that it was only a dream. Through this story, the author reminds readers that reviving and debating conflicts of the past can lead only to chaos and social unrest in the present. The dream narrative serves as an eye-opener for adult readers, suggesting that social harmony and a secular outlook are essential for building a peaceful society.

The story “Rishab’s Rama” offers two contrasting representations of the same faith. It demonstrates how different interpretations of a single religion can either shape or distort innocent minds and influence their future. Rishab witnesses a religious procession: “There was a huge cardboard Rama with a bow and arrow. There were people with loudspeakers on a lorry. And everyone was shouting, ‘Jai Shriram! Help us to defeat our enemies’” (57). In contrast, his grandmother presents Rama as *Karuna-Samudra*. She explains, “Karuna is like pity”—a gentle and kind feeling for all living beings. That very night, she narrates the story of the yak with a beautiful tail. Rama initially decides to obtain the yak’s tail for Sita; “the yak’s large, trusting eyes, and its defenceless neck” (57) prevent him from harming the innocent creature.

The grandmother’s Rama is filled with tenderness and compassion. Confused by these contrasting images, Rishab asks, “This face looks different from the cardboard one. Are they two different Ramas?” (58). His grandmother reminds him of the song that expresses *prema bhakti* (devotion through love). She further emphasises, “Rama lives in your heart, not on cardboard or in some building. And a prayer—or a song of love—does not need loudspeakers” (58). Through this contrast, the story highlights the values of kindness and compassion that lie at the heart of religion. It suggests that people should not become fanatics or claim their religion to be superior to others. Instead, they should embrace the true essence of *dharma*, which is *issarva dharma sambhava*—the equal respect for all religions.

Aditya asks his mother, “If I want Khaleel to come back, which God should I pray to—our Ganapati or Khaleel’s Allah?”(40). His mother gives a deeply positive and secular reply that is especially suited to children's literature: “You can pray to whoever you like—Khaleel will come back because God belongs to all children” (40). In the story “The Winning Team”, Aditya’s best friend, Khaleel, and his family become victims of a communal riot. Unaware of the situation, Aditya searches for Khaleel everywhere. Three days later, after his mother allows him to go out, he rushes to the row of chawls beside the temple in search of his friend, only to discover that the

houses in the lane where Khaleel lived have been reduced to rubble. Khaleel never returns to school. Aditya is deeply shocked when he hears from his classmate Sujata, “All the Musalmans are dead—I heard Papa tell Mummy. And so many people have run away from the city and gone to other places” (38). Aditya’s sadness invites the concern of his parents. Consequently, they resolve to restore normalcy by lending money to RazakaMian so that he can rebuild his home and return with his family. The story concludes with the reunion of the two young friends, symbolising hope, compassion, and communal harmony. It captures the true secular spirit of India, where, irrespective of religion or caste, neighbours stand by one another in times of crisis.

The story “Doll” is set against the background of the 1984 Sikh riots that take place after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Tejinder Singh is a young boy who sells peanuts at the railway station. He suddenly sees a murderous mob on the hunt for members of the Sikh community. He flees, unable to comprehend why he is being pursued: “Why were these people his enemies? He had never even seen them before! (61). He manages to hide himself in a dark cattle-truck with buffalo. He sees, “It was dark. But why did the sky look so red behind the station wall? And then he saw the plumes of smoke rising from that great red patch. And more smoke, and more” (61). When he reaches home, there is only a pile of ashes where his hut had once stood. Tijender notices, “something was gleaming among the ashes; he picked it up and wiped the ash away. It was a bangle he had given his mother. He had saved up his lunch money, paisa by paisa, and bought it for her” (62). He breaks down and cries in despair. Guddi, Sethji’s daughter, comes and hands him the doll that her father had given her to comfort her after her mother’s death. Sethji adopts the child, becoming a saviour in those terrible and troubled times. This again reflects the true spirit of Indian society, where people with humane and secular values come forward to help victims without regard to caste, creed, or religion. This story, along with those discussed above, demonstrates how children are compelled to grapple with the bleak realities of a world in which innocence cannot remain untouched by the tentacles of communal violence. Some of these narratives are situated within complex historical and political contexts that a child may not fully comprehend without the guidance of an adult.

The story “Sorry, Best Friend!” portrays the innocent friendship between two children belonging to different social classes and religious backgrounds. Sonu’s mother is a working woman, so he has to stay alone during his vacations. One day, their maid brings her young daughter, Rahiman, with her. Soon, Sonu befriends the shy Rahiman, inviting her into his room to share his toys and books. Their growing friendship transcends the barriers of class and religion, highlighting the purity and innocence of childhood. A misunderstanding arises when Sonu sees his mother giving money to Rahiman. He is deeply hurt and mistakenly believes that Rahiman became his friend only because his mother had paid her to do so. Sonu’s behaviour suddenly changes, and he begins to ignore Rahiman. His attitude changes only when his mother takes him to Rahiman’s poverty-stricken home, where he realises that the money was given to help Rahiman go to school. His mother explains the need to address differences at the root itself because “when people start hating each other—it is just like poison” (53).

The last story of the collection is titled “Dunderheads against Blunderheads”, written in a humorous tone—the story is set in 1965, at the time of war with Pakistan. A renowned ornithologist, Dr Salim (Salim Mamoo), with his binoculars, was on a bird watch with a group of children. They see a Pakistani war plane and crouch down. A policeman arrives on the scene and demands to know Salim Mamoo’s name. When he hears it is Ali, he accuses him of being a spy. But he soon realises that he is Dr Salim Ali, the bird man of India, and all ends well. A very

grave and significant observation comes when Salim says, “From the beginning it has been nothing but a stupid fight over names” (67). Most of the fight starts with names. Different religious names make the subject a victim of others’ hate.

In conclusion, although the target readers are children, each story presents an adult concern or anxiety from a child’s perspective. Young readers aged eight and above are considered capable of engaging critically with stories that challenge established notions and prejudices. These narratives guide them towards respecting the ‘other’ and thereby foster a culture of human rights, empathy, and social harmony. The stories also show that growing children cannot be shielded from the realities of life, however disturbing they may be. Some stories centre on acts of violence or disruption arising from class and communal hegemonies. At the same time, most writers of children’s fiction share the belief that literature for children should help them distinguish between right and wrong and between justice and injustice and should conclude with a sense of hope, reconciliation, and moral affirmation. Clark emphasises: “It has become almost a cliché that a story for children must end happily, but this is not always possible or desirable . . . some stories cannot end with a children’s book; it is important that any underlying fears or mystery be resolved so that the story finishes on a note of hope” (qtd. in Pandurang 36). The same idea is evident in this collection, particularly in stories such as “The Winning Team,” “Doll,” and “Sorry, Best Friend!” which end on a note of hope. When a problem is beyond what a child can realistically be expected to handle, secular adults intervene and help bring about a plausible and acceptable resolution. Since the spirit of secularism cannot be acquired magically through mere wishing, it must be nurtured through continuous learning from early childhood. There can be no better audience than children for fostering these values. Shama Futehally and Githa Hariharan have been successful in promoting the ideals of secularism through their writings.

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