

Tales from the Himalayas: Straight from the Heart of Priyanka Pradhan

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Abstract

“Tales from the Himalayas” is a collection of seventeen short stories written by Priyanka Pradhan. She is the recipient of the “Ruskin Bond Promising Writer Award 2019” at the Dehradun Literature Festival. Each tale in the collection is an entertaining, heart-warming, and delightful read. Themes of family, friendship, belonging, and loss are prominent in the pages. The stories depict the rich cultural heritage that resides in the heart of the mountains. This paper attempts to study the characteristic features that define children’s literature using these tales as a retrospect. These stories can be read from the unique point of view of a child. They transport the readers to a psycho-social setting away from the urban land where there are snow leopards, ghosts, and the village monster. Contemporary children’s literature focuses on themes like nature, folk, culinary, moral values, gender, and self-love. The stories prioritize the interaction a child has with his/her parents, grandparents, teacher, and other members of society. They depict the prominent journey each child has to go through in the process of development. A colorful image accompanies each tale to attract young readers. The stories showcase the vibrant cultural heritage embedded in the heart of the mountains. This paper aims to analyze the defining characteristics of children’s literature through the lens of these tales. Presented from a child’s perspective, these stories immerse readers in a psycho-social environment far removed from urban life, featuring elements like snow leopards, ghosts, and the village monster. Modern children’s literature often explores themes such as nature, folklore, culinary traditions, moral values, gender, and self-love.

Keywords: Short fiction, priyanka pradhan, children’s literature, folk, the great himalayan explorer

INTRODUCTION

For time immemorial, stories have been the main form of entertainment. They have the potential to be culturally unique and at the same time express a universal human experience. They represent the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of human life. A story is all about originality, it is a careful combination of content and form. Writers through time have developed the skill to tell stories with a common theme using different writing styles. They have learned how to create captivating characters in real-life settings, in turn, increasing the longevity of their stories.

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Received Date: March 13, 2024

Accepted Date: June 01, 2024

Published Date: June 05, 2024

Citation: Antra Singh, Hampamma G. “Tales from the Himalayas”- Straight from the heart of Priyanka Pradhan. International Journal of Behavioral Sciences. 2024; 1 (1): 19–25p.

Folktales and Oral traditions are culturally specific yet in the Indian context, they have themes of both inclusivity and diversity. These stories teach young children about moral and social conduct by presenting engaging and captivating narratives. From an early age, children are exposed to folk tales and stories that serve as a means of socialization and are used as an apparatus to convey cultural values. [1] The microstructure of a short story facilitates a child to quickly comprehend the narrative and its abstract themes for application in the real world. Short stories enable unique mediation of cultural heritage and values. Children’s stories promote emotional and interpersonal development along

with moral reasoning. This paper focuses on the multidimensional impact of the short stories written by Priyanka Pradhan [2]. It will comprehensively analyze the characters, plot, and narrative techniques employed in the collection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's literature helps a child learn about new cultures and understand complex social concepts. Reading introduces a child to new vocabulary and sentences. It improves grammar and communication skills. In a social context, children can learn how to effectively manage emotions, face challenges, and make decisions as they read about similar characters and situations in their books. Different characters can help children develop empathy and compassion for others. "Children's Literature introduces young readers to different cultures, traditions, and perceptions which promote tolerance, respect, and appreciation for differences". A child becomes more culturally aware and learns to embrace diversity through literature.

Amongst contemporary children's fiction, Ruskin Bond is known as an interpreter of the human mind. [3] His works *Most Beautiful*, *A Job Well Done*, and *Home* have been studied as a part of children's literature using Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of Needs. "Bond's Literature is full of children's images swimming and refreshing themselves in the forest pools, dancing in the rains, smiling with various flowers and exploring the endless vistas of nature". His stories exhibit the relationship between a child and nature. He possesses a rare simplicity in his literary craft. He has viewed children as a primitive, innocent, and desirable audience. Ruskin Bond is also well known for his supernatural tales. He can create an eerie atmosphere without actually scaring his readers. [4] He can transport his readers to the spellbinding landscapes of the Himalayan mountains. To be able to completely immerse themselves into the supernatural tales of Ruskin Bond, the reader needs to put aside their perception of reality. He is proficient in creating tangible and palpable descriptions. Most of his short stories are rooted in realism.

Ruskin Bond has paid attention to displaying the psychological and emotional needs of children. His work is foundational in the development of young adult and children's literature in India. He is a versatile writer, his short stories, poems, and essays are widely present in the Indian curriculum for children. His short stories attempt to recreate the everyday life experiences and problems of children. Adventure, nature, and animals are some of the recurring themes around which Bond constructs his stories. His stories are unique in their approach as they bring insight into universal themes like culture, modern and traditional values, conservation of the environment, and harmony amongst nature. Writing specifically for children has helped him overcome his loneliness. By writing for children Ruskin Bond gets to relive his childhood that was lost because of his father's death [5,6].

In his first work, "*Room on the Roof*" Ruskin Bond was only 17 when he was able to bring his reader's focus on the crisis of an Anglo-Indian child trying to blend with his surroundings. These versatile attempts at contributing to children's literature have made him the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Shri [7].

Sudha Murty has always been successful in creating likable and versatile characters. These characters motivate children and introduce the modern generation to Indian tradition and culture. In her collection of books like "*How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Write and Other Stories*", she promotes values and ethics among children. [8] All her characters represent the struggles of everyday life. Through her writing style, she has thrivingly created a balance between serious subject matters like gender inequality, disability, and poverty along with humor and sensitivity. Most of her stories deal with family, women, and society. "Her writings avoid over-exaggeration and maintain a conversational tone that creates an immediate connection with the reader" [9].

It is important that writers who discuss similar themes like, gender, horror, and culture be scrutinized under the same umbrella because these themes play a very important role in informing the narratives of

contemporary children's literature. The discussion of this paper presents each short story under a particular category based on the dominant theme yet these aspects can overlap. Using this strategy, individual analysis of a story becomes easier.

DISCUSSION

Gender

"The Bagpiper": In the first tale of the collection, ten-year-old Paru lives with her mother and father in the mountains of Uttarakhand. The story explores the relationship Paru shares with her father. The Bagpiper is a musical instrument with a mouthpiece. Her father is an expert in playing the instrument. After her father, she was the only girl in the entire town to show any interest in playing the musical instrument. She would practice daily. Her father always told her to play the instrument from the bottom of her heart. Her first time performing on the stage, in front of a crowd was a huge failure. She was mocked for not being able to play the instrument. She was motivated to overcome her fear of failure to save the cultural tradition. Her father wasn't getting many opportunities to play the instrument during weddings so, Paru decided to create her songs and play them at one of the weddings. She was successful in reviving the old tradition of the mountains. The story promotes the idea that creativity has no gender and that we must try to overcome fear.

"The Villain": Kisna learns to challenge the beauty standards commonly accepted by all. She is described as dark-skinned and big which is why she wasn't allowed to play the role of Sita in Ram Leela at school. Her elder sister, Kamli helped her overcome thoughts of self-doubt by describing the unconditional love their pet Kallu shared for Krisna. Unconditional love means accepting someone completely as they are, without any judgment. At that point, the physical appearance shouldn't matter. From a very young age, these notions of beauty are internalized by girl children. She stated,

"To him, you are the kindest, nicest soul in the world, and he loves you for being you, exactly the way you are. That means the color of your skin, your height, your weight- everything that makes you unique.

She further explains the scientific reason behind dark skin,

"Everything about you makes you unique, special, and loveable. Your skin is dark because it protects you against the sun, so you can play outside as much as you want. Your skin will stay beautiful even when you are an old lady. It's Mother Nature's gift to you, little one.

She also complimented how having a big, robust, and strong body could help her win a wrestling match. Krisna would scrub her face repeatedly after coming from school in an attempt to change her appearance but once she understood the importance of self-acceptance and self-love, she learned to use her so-called weaknesses as her strength and decided to take part in Ram Leela as the fiercest villain, Ravan. Krisna was able to prove her abilities as a versatile actor on stage. The name of the protagonist is unisex. This approach enhances the storytelling as we find out that she will be playing the role of Ravan. The story is a comment on the Indian society which is very much obsessed with a brighter complexion.

"Haria's Kitchen": Haria, who lived in Almora with his parents was taken to the city by his aunt and uncle. In the city, Haria explored his culinary skills because in his school everything was new and different. Haria always felt lonely and misunderstood. Cooking was his way of coping with the stress. Haria was forced to do all household chores by his aunt and uncle. As a ten-year-old, Haria was able to cook a small portion of rice, his favorite raita, and kali (yam dish made with spinach). The descriptions of the preparation of the food are very sensory. They appeal to the visual and olfactory senses of a child as they are reminded of their mother cooking in the kitchen. The act of cooking represents Haria missing his hometown. Through his cooking, he was able to win over his bully and make new friends in the school. He was encouraged by his classmates and headmaster. Through a humorous sequence of events,

Haria was able to overcome his challenges. Priyanka Pradhan through this story wants to break the gender stereotype that cooking is a women's job.

Horror and Superstition

"Daak Ghar": The tale is filled with elements of horror possibly inspired by the short story titled "A Face in the Dark" by Ruskin Bond. They create a similar eerie atmosphere in their description. The post offices in the town that were once used by British officials during colonial rule were now left unattended. There is one such post office situated in the town of Mukteshwar and was believed to be a haunted place. Renu and Hari were siblings and their friends Aru and Manu lived in an orphanage and decided to visit the place at night because one of the travelers had spent a terrifying night in the forest. These kids had no guardian taking care of them and protecting them. As they were roaming through the night, they heard high-pitched screeches and came across human bones scattered all around. The haunted bungalow appeared only on full moon nights and was invisible by day.

"The bungalow was eerily quiet as if even the spirits were away that night. A stray owl hooted in the distance. The damp walls emitted a foul smell, and they could hear frogs croaking in the dank corners of the house.

They walked through deodar trees in a storm, thunder and lightning. They stepped on dried leaves that made rustling sounds. The writer describes the shrill screeches coming from a part-human and part-animal creature that could cause nightmares. The kids were able to come back to their orphanage in the morning safely but they were forced to visit the bungalow again in the night. They were warned by the postmaster that they must not go to the bungalow again. The two kids, Renu and Hari lost their father's watch in the forest, it was the last memory of their deceased parents. In the end, it turns out, that it was the postman and his wife who had illegally occupied the land. The story describes how notions of fear can be transmitted from adults to children.

"The Village Monster": The tale is a commentary on how superstitions are formed. The notion of a ghoul or a ghost existing in the village is encouraged by the people in the panchayat including the priest. The priest wanted to conduct an anti-ghost ritual and stated the town may be cursed. It is discussed that there was a toe-less monster lurking in the neighborhood. The writing style gives an impression of a horror story but as it turns out the toe-less monster was a young deer, a fawn. It was the protagonist, a young boy who discovers the truth.

"The long-lost Friends": In contrast to these previous tales, in this particular story deceased friends, Bisnu and Kanta come to visit their best friend as ghosts. The story is set in a remote village near Pindari glacier. The story is pastoral and filled with nostalgia. The protagonist is in search of a lost map of the forgotten river. He comes back from the city, unaware of the flood that caused a lot of devastation. He describes that there were no birds in the pink sky. He states,

"Much to my dismay, the once beautiful pathway was covered in gravel and rocks-there were no green shrubs in sight, much less my favorite yellow berries.

A year back the four friends, Rana, Gobind, Bisnu, and Kanta along with the protagonist had explored the forest and found the enchanted river. The map to the river was placed under a banyan tree. Through his uncle, the protagonist finds out that the tree is haunted. Ultimately, the protagonist is only left with a Champa lower and a pale blue button. The story also discusses the importance of childhood friends.

Stories based on real-life people

"The Great Himalayan Explorer": Three students were punished for wandering off alone instead of coming to school on time. As they started talking, their headmaster explained how Nain Singh Rawat was the greatest Himalayan explorer ever known. He was the first man in the world to explore Tibet on foot. The kids termed him "The incredible Himalayan spy-explorer". The headmaster also tells them

that Nain Singh Rawat served as a headmaster of the same school [10]. This information inspired the students. The story depicts the bond a teacher and a student share. The headmaster in the story acts as a positive role model for the children. He gives punishment but at the same time is a very loving teacher.

“Chipko!”: It describes the events of the Chipko Movement that was initiated by Gaura Devi in the village of Reni in Garhwal, Uttarakhand (1974). The government wanted to cut down 2,500 trees to create buildings, factories, hotels, and shops. Gaura Devi was supported by twenty-seven women as they hugged the trees for three days and three nights non-stop to prevent the contractors from cutting down the trees. In the end, the Prime Minister at that time announced a 10-year ban on cutting trees in the entire region. The ideas of nature conservation are best described by the song Gaura’s mother used to sing to her when she was eight. The song narrates the importance of protecting the soil, water, and forests. The main aim of the story was to inspire children to take up the responsibility of nature conservation.

Family

“Mischievous Teeth”: It is a humorous tale where 20 sets of brothers and sisters lose their teeth whenever trouble others. Their grandfather Bubu gets to relive his childhood whenever he sees his grandchildren committing mischief but, he understands that the kids need to learn to take responsibility for their actions. In this story, losing teeth is a sign of growing up and acting more responsibly. There is an instance where the writer explains the four types of teeth- Incisors, Canines, Premolars, and Molars. It can be said that the story focuses on happy learning.

“Postcard”: It explores the relationship between a grandson and his Bubu. The tale is reminiscent of the deteriorating effects of Alzheimer’s. The young boy used to roam around the narrow lanes of Mussoorie sitting behind his bubu on a black bicycle. As he notices the behavioral changes in his grandfather, Chotu decides to create one happy memory with him. He is mentally preparing himself for the days to come when his grandfather may not remember who he is.

Both mother and father play a very important role in a child’s life. He is emotionally and physically dependent on both parents. A child’s perception of love is based on the relationship his/her parents share. A child notices how his/her mother and father respect each other.

“The Biggest Gift”: In Satoli, Kumaon lived little Suja with her parents. Her father used to sell fruits in the market. Every day, her mother would pack a lunchbox for her father with his favorite sweet and her father would pick a bunch of her favorite flowers on his way home. Everything changed drastically when they gained a fortune. Her father sold apricots in the market and bought a nose ring made of pure gold for his wife. As they became financially stable her mother kept wanting for a bigger and heavier nose ring. She would go around the town in an attempt to make other ladies jealous. Slowly her mother stopped packing lunchboxes for her father and the father stopped bringing flowers. In the end, the weight of the nose rings she wore every day tore the soft skin of her nose. Both the parents developed a mutual understanding giving the story a happy ending. The mother understood how greed and jealousy can take away love.

“Kafal”: The fruit kafal is a variety of sweet-sour berries, a fruit native to the state of Uttarakhand, India. In the story, the berries symbolize the good yet painful memory of the little princess, Phool Kumari. A year ago, she lost her mother to an illness and completely stopped laughing. She stopped eating her favorite berries because it reminded her of her mother. She last ate the berries the day she lost her mother. The king couldn’t bear to see his daughter in mourning, so he organized a contest to make his daughter laugh. He wanted to turn a sad memory into a happy one. Phool Kumari started laughing when her friend Gopi dressed up as a goat with a humongous tummy. It reminded Phool Kumari of the clumsy goat called Rampu, whose stories her mother used to tell her during the Hil Jatra festival.

Folk Tales

A few stories of Priyanka Pradhan are inspired by the structure of a folk tale. The main focus of Indian folk tales has been to teach about social and moral conduct. Such concepts are very abstract and difficult for a child to understand as they vary depending on the social context. In that case, stories can be the best medium to help the child understand the code of conduct required by society. In these stories, the protagonist interacts with the wild.

“The Snow Leopard”: The snow leopard is a majestic animal that lives high up in the snowy mountain peaks. The grandmother who is more than a hundred years old described it as a “beast with white and ash-grey coats and black swirls for spots. The tale describes how a young girl from a nomadic tribe overcame her fear and saved a snow leopard. She was the daughter of the chief of the tribe and risked breaking the curfew rule to save a snow leopard whose paw was stuck between two large boulders. At the end of the story, the same snow leopard reciprocates the act of kindness shown by the girl.

“The Spring Song”: A young boy interacts with a parakeet that helps him find his way back home. The boy looked tired, his ankles were swollen and his knees were bruised. The parakeet decided to engage him in riddles as he showed him the way. The parakeet engaged him in riddles based on a song titled “Bedu Pakho”, the most famous song of Kumaon as he navigated the boy towards Kali-nadi, the black river. The story connects nature with culture. The main motto of the story is to share that nature can be an escape from the hardships of daily life. Priyanka Pradhan uses the technique of anthropomorphism as she gives human-like qualities to a parakeet. These techniques are very common in folk tales.

“A Night in the Dark Forest”: Bhula talks to a sage from Dharchula who is about to spend a night in the dark forest. The sage is in search of answers to all the problems in life. According to the legend of Kumaon, whoever ventured into the dark forest, either returned a changed person or never returned. So, Bhula was a little worried about the sage. In the dark forest, the sage meditated as mosquitoes, snake and a tiger decided to disrupt him. He escapes death multiple times. The sage wanted to find out how all evil in the world could be put to an end. The story ended with a conclusive answer that evil cannot be conquered, one can only conquer their mind. Bhula saw the sage undergo a physical transformation symbolising how the knowledge of truth can change our understanding of the world.

Cultural Heritage

“Holi”: Priyanka Pradhan gives us new information on the Holi festival by describing the tradition of Choliya dancers in the tiny village of Kausani. These are male dancers who perform during weddings and other occasions. They twirl in the air holding swords. About a thousand years ago, the Kumaoni soldiers called Khasas would dance at weddings to protect the bride and groom from evil spirits and demons. In this story, the Choliya dancers take the tradition forward by helping a bunch of kids capture four bandits trying to rob the village. The Choliya dancers encircled the bandits and scared them with their swords.

“Pilgrimage”: Gehni was traveling from Dehradun to Rishikesh with her parents. She doesn’t understand why her parents are taking her on a pilgrimage. In Rishikesh, she came across a young boy named Paras. The young boy was from a well-to-do family. Paras, instead of staying with his parents decides to help a mute and deaf old sweeper clean the steps of the temple. Paras’ parents were very much offended as they saw what their son was doing. As Gehni witnesses the events, she learns the importance of keeping her surroundings clean and respecting everyone. She understood the true meaning of compassion and devotion.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Priyanka Pradhan as an emerging contemporary children’s fiction creator can be placed on the same pedestal as writers like Sudha Murty and Ruskin Bond. This is because she has been successful in presenting a plethora of motifs using cultural, emotional, and geographical references. She has created a whole new universe for her audience to explore. As the title of this paper suggests, each

tale written by Priyanka Pradhan has hatched from the depths of her heart. The title is inspired by the first story in the collection, “The Bagpiper”. Like Paru, Priyanka Pradhan has composed her chronicle setting in motion the tradition of great storytelling.

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