

THE CREATION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN FIJI*

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My theme is "The Creation of Children's Literature in Fiji". It is not a childish subject. The child, like the king, is never a subject! Literature, however, is: indeed the maturity of a society can often be measured by the quality of its literature, especially its children's literature.

I would like to begin by asking you to think about the kind of society we, especially our children, live in. It is, as virtually everyone glibly tells us, multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-lingual. We share our lives in a very complex social milieu, fraught with prejudices, misunderstandings and shocking ignorance of one another's way of life. Now this is not an uncommon experience in other parts of the world. What is distressing is that many of us realise this, but do not care strongly enough to do anything to help change the situation for the better. In one of the most ancient prayers of India, the Gayatri Mantra, the characteristic note was "Lead me from ignorance into knowledge" — the basic desire in man for enlightenment. That desire seems to be tragically absent in our pursuit of education, which is often equated with skill and efficiency, seldom with the quality of our own life or with a compassionate concern for others.

I realize that many men and women of goodwill and common sense are building bridges between different cultural groups in our country. But it is my firm conviction that a nationally organised beginning must be made with the child. Not only is the child the father of the man, he *is* tomorrow's man himself. We shall be failing in our primary responsibility if as parents, teachers and thinking members of a developing society we do not try to give our children a knowledge, and understanding, an appreciation and an affection of other ways of life within which they will move, wherein the customs and values of others will often affect their world.

Obviously there are problems. Such an objective cannot be achieved overnight. But the real problem is not of time and place; it is really the problem of the mind. Today most battles are won and lost at the psychological level. Australians are discovering the beauty, variety and depth of Aboriginal rock carvings 40,000 years old. An attempt at an imaginative synthesis has produced some great Australian writing and art. It has changed the attitudes

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of migrant Australians towards the original inhabitants. The discovery and understanding of African art and sculpture has likewise affected the course of modern art. The trumpet in the hands of the Black genius of America gave us jazz that expresses the condition of modern man more eloquently than any other style of music. My point is that because of our historical experience, limitations and preoccupations, we have in Fiji given little thought to the enrichment of the indigenous culture by the immigrants and vice versa. I would like to suggest to you that through children's literature we could make a small but very significant beginning.

WHAT CAN LITERATURE OFFER?

Books are no substitute for life. But they do add meaning and variety to living. Because they deal both with the life of the imagination and of daily reality, they often sharpen our sense of what is important in life and help us to go beyond the barbed-wire fences of our own limited environment. Books enlarge our life. We get new insight into our own problems and occasionally into the problems of others which finally turn out to be our own. For instance, we realize, when we read, that our suffering is not unique; that to be a man is to suffer and go beyond that suffering because the spirit of man is unconquerable. The greater the man the more greatly he suffers. This is part of the literary heritage of all countries. It is the essential message of all religions. So we as individuals begin to see the meaning of the wise words in the European tradition: I used to complain because I had no shoes until I saw a man without feet. Or as Gandhi wrote expressing a truth of the Indian tradition: It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone ... the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.

Let me briefly relate this idea to the Indian experience in Fiji. Now the Indenture System was a painful exile to many people. Scores committed suicide, some died of sheer exhaustion. But thanks to the spirit of man, most survived. What made so many live through that terrible experience? One reason, I would suggest, was their knowledge of *The Ramayan*. Not only did they believe that good would eventually win, but they saw in the story of Ram — an innocent prince exiled for 14 years — a parallel to their own existence: that if a prince such as Ram could accept his exile with a sense of obligation, why couldn't they? Five years, ten years, it would be over. Even this, they knew, would pass away. That is why *The Ramayan* was such an important epic to Fiji Indians. Because it gave consolation and hope. Above all, they saw in that great work of literature a small reflection of their own fate and the ideals by which human beings live under most difficult conditions.

This naturally brings me to the oral traditions in Fiji. Both the indigenous and immigrant people have fabulous folklores, myths and legends. The time has come for us to record some of these, to write them first in our mother-tongues; then to translate them into each other's languages and into English so that they become the common heritage of all. Many old people are a reservoir of old tales so exciting and enthralling. I vividly recall one or two old men of my own village who used to tell us fascinating stories as we grazed their cows and goats. Sadly many of these story tellers are dead, but bits of their lives exist in these stories. We could begin by collecting these myths and legends so that the children of our country could read them and see how each community tried to interpret their world to make sense of the mystery called life.

COLONIALIST AFTER-EFFECTS

Because of our colonialist education we have not given much thought to this aspect. We believed that because our people could not read or write English, they were illiterate. That has been the great blasphemy of our generation's education. Anything that was native or your own was second-rate or shameful. It was more important to know the number of sheep in another country, than the tons of sugar cane your father produced. History meant others' history, not your own. People said you didn't have a history. That is why history has gone out of our lives. Culture was something that belonged to others; you belonged to agriculture. The result was that we began to look down upon the life which gave us life. In a predominantly agricultural nation, those who cultivated our very source of livelihood did not become part of the educated consciousness. Children wanted to escape from that life, not to discover it. Our life, our world was not worthy of being written about.

Consider our early alphabet: "A" was for an apple which most of us had never seen; we were familiar with "amrood"; but that wasn't worthy of mention in books. "Z" was for a Zulu - some savage, wild creature in the Dark Continent. He just wasn't a human being - certainly not in our imagination; he was a heathen, a pagan who walked on the broken images of his ancestral gods and goddesses.

After the alphabets came the nursery rhymes: "Ba Ba Black Sheep". We learnt to say "Yes Sir, Yes Sir - Three Bags Full," - all for the others, none for the poor sheep. Only now we are understanding its true meaning. The fairy tales written in Europe told us everything black was evil, But we failed to notice the colour of our own parents' skin. We recited Wordsworth's Daffodils but did not see the beauty of the hibiscus or marigolds which our mothers used daily for puja.

The list is endless and a sad indictment of our education. An attitude of mind was created: the experiences of ordinary men and women, our own environment, our own dreams and nightmares were not worthy of being written in literature. Who would read them? Who would write them? Besides, life around us had nothing to do with literature. A great gulf was created between what we read and studied in school and the life we lived.

My little knowledge of life and literature is that one brings you closer to the other. Good education, good literature does not take you away from life: it deepens your understanding of life. It is not an escape from the realities of life, it is a face to face confrontation. Our illusions are shattered so that we learn to live again. Only bad books, poor education, like poor films, become an escape from life. The needs and sorrows of others mean nothing to us because all our tears have been shed for those false heroes and heroines of the films. Life is too ordinary, too real. Here there are no heroes or heroines; no villains, but only ordinary men and women whom we know too intimately to fool ourselves. But good art will tell you that the truly extraordinary man is the truly ordinary one.

So in children's literature we may begin by creating in the children an awareness and an appreciation of their own human, natural and cultural richness. This is likely to lead them to explore the cultural world of others because here in Fiji we do not dwell in separate worlds. We are trying to live in one world: only artificial walls separate us. Literature, therefore, can become a potent force through which understanding between people is fostered and promoted. Not only do we begin to understand others but, in a situation such as ours, shaped by many outside factors, we need to demolish the stereotypes we have built about others in our minds: we have often a narrow, unsympathetic, and prejudiced view of other communities. How have we acquired these prejudices? How do we analyse these to find out for ourselves if they are based on any facts — or on mere gossip and lack of understanding. In children's literature these prejudices are scrutinised, and a clearer picture of people can be given. At least the mind of a child can be trained to see things through his own eyes, and think thoughts that are his own, born out of his own experience.

A SENSE OF PLACE

Another aspect is how to create in a large majority of our people a sense of place, a sense of belongingness. Here again literature for children can play an important role. We have hardly begun to see our islands with a sense of wonder and reverence that one must possess towards one's mother country. Our environment still appears alien to many people. The sea, the mountains,

the trees, the hills have not acquired for us the reality of art, of myth. Many of us think that only the Ganges is holy, only the Himalayas are noble.

How have we reached these conceptions? It is because they have come to us in our ancient myths and legends, songs and epics. The attempt to mythologise a place in the mind of a people is vital if that place is to become part of our spiritual existence.

One day as I was driving on the fringes of Suva, one of my children suddenly announced in sheer wonder: "Oh look! Every cloud has a golden lining!" Now I'd always thought that every cloud had a silver lining, never a golden one. But the phrase had come to me via England, where the weather and the twilight gave clouds a silver lining. In Fiji, indeed, clouds do have a golden lining. A child had made me see that for the first time. So I began to look at clouds hanging on my horizon somewhat differently.

Thus if we wish to create in our children a sense of a country, a spirit of the place, it has to be explored and written about imaginatively. Once it becomes part of a people's collective imagination, then nothing can take it away. It is a long process, but it is a lasting one. We will never understand our lives on these islands unless we have some idea of the sea that surrounds them. Perhaps a Valmiki of Fiji may one day tell us something of the sea which today is so near, yet so far away, from us.

Not only may we, through literature, make our own people see their land with new eyes and vision, but we have the power to make others see us, as well. One of the great challenges of our generation is how to become part of the educated consciousness of the Pacific; a living image where we share our problems and possibilities with others. Many of our neighbours just do not have any idea of our existence. They come and they see only the shining tip of one island. It is important that we create in these people some perception of our world. After all, we have some idea of other countries. How have we acquired this? Through literature, art, films. These are all potent means of creating self-awareness as well as universal awareness.

A COMMON CULTURE

From here we may move to the interaction of common cultural values. What do we already share, what need we to share? The customs, the ceremonies of innocence in our daily lives: birth, marriage, and death. How many of us have any idea of how to behave, how to respond to some of these situations in other cultures? Where do you begin to teach them? Surely children's literature could tell us much about each other. For literature can teach us not only about ourselves, revealing to us those experiences which are most important to us,

but also about others — their cultures, traditions, feelings, experiences, festivals which become the sum-total of the experience of all men. It helps us to see our responsibilities to others. Above all, it gives us deep enjoyment of life in its manifold forms.

In a country where race is bandied about as one unchangeable fact of life, it is necessary to seek other realities that transcend racial barriers. A man jumps to save a drowning child. Does he pause to think of the race of the child? Does not that human act show us that there are other deeper realities that prompt us into action. Children's literature can create in us a knowledge of those underlying bonds that link us in one chain of being. Anyone who has read a good children's book knows how universal is the appeal.

A LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

But let me come to a more practical and immediate aspect of this theme. There is no doubt that the English language is important to most of us, because of our geographical position, our history, our economic and trade relations, our own educational aspirations, our position in the world. Now one masters one's mother-tongue by the time one is five years old. It is a fascinating and remarkable human achievement. How does a human child achieve this? He is exposed to his language from his birth. He presumably has the genetic capacity to internalise the language that is spoken around him.

If we wish to teach our children a second language then we ought to imitate the same kind of linguistic environment. In the South Pacific, unfortunately, we cannot do this. Still, our students have to sit for examinations meant for children whose mother-tongue is English. So the least we can do is to create that environment in part by having the right kind of books for our children. At least as long as they are engrossed in that imaginative world they are learning the language emotionally as well as through their intellect.

Most of our pupils have very little exposure to English outside their classroom. Recent advances in linguistics make it clear that children learn a language in a variety of ways. Those who are exposed to a wide variety of words and language patterns master it most rapidly. In other words they need a rich stock of suitable reading material to read and to listen to. Thus, even from a most practical point of view, we need think most urgently about what we give our children to read and listen to. Much of what they read now — if they read at all — is trash; but what alternative choices do they have? None. The time has come for us to think rather urgently on this matter from several points of view.

WAYS AND MEANS

I have, so far, tried to justify the need for creating children's literature in Fiji. Let me now suggest how we can generate interest in it and what are the areas worthy of our exploration. We can begin by creating literature about the children's religious worlds. Every religion, in my opinion, is the highest form of the imaginative quest of man. It is an order of reality with literary overtones. The stories of *The Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat*, the *Bible*, to mention only a few holy books, are indeed the richest mines of tales: fabulous and fantastic, actual and spiritual, inspiring and illuminating. Indeed, there is developing in Fiji an urge for religious instruction in schools. In my view that is not the best way to approach the problem. But, if you inculcate in children a religious view of life through children's literature, you have found a subtle and enduring way of achieving your goal: that is, a creation of an illuminated conscience in people: where moral values are sharply focussed in real-life situations.

The stories need to be written in the simple language of the children. And so do the ceremonies, the rites and rituals, and an interpretation in simple terms of the sublime philosophy behind them. In this way the children learn not only about their own religions, but also about others. At least they will learn to respect their various belief-systems. That is a very large step in a society divided by narrow religious-racial walls, a society in which often a selfish and shallow view of religion has done a great deal of harm to religion as a whole.

FOLK LORE

Another area rich for the cultivation is the folk tales of our culture and country. The immigrant people here have brought many myths from their world, the indigenous people have their own rich oral literature. The people everywhere, whether they had a written language or not, have attempted to give permanence amidst change to the agonies and ecstasies of their fellow men in art forms. This is true of the rock carvings of the Aborigines, of the legends of the native Fijians, of the tales of the *Panchatantra* of the immigrant Indians. and of the stories of Europeans. Man, in all civilisations, has wrestled with very similar problems. How do we make these the common property of all our children? We can do this by writing about them first in our own language, then translating them into other languages. Many old people in our society carry in their minds the glowing embers of great tales. Can we save the fire from their ashes to ignite the imagination of the younger generation?

SCIENCE FICTION

It has been said often that our world is becoming increasingly technological and scientific. We are governed by forces over which we have no control; worse still, we are making no attempt to understand them. Whole books are written on these matters. But fiction can help here too. Long before space ships became a reality, Jules Verne had created them in his imagination. Through science fiction, the stirring of imagination and the cultivation of a scientific attitude can be encouraged in our children from school days. There is, in children's literature, great scope for such fiction where the world of science, technology, economy are seen in human terms, not as sinister alien forces. Because behind all these are human beings affecting THE LIVES OF MILLIONS. It will no longer be enough to seek solace from the past because the present and the future are different and pose different challenges. Perhaps we can give to our children some intimations of the future through this kind of literature.

SENSE OF FUN

Then there is the world of humour, wit and satire. We must encourage in our children a sense of humour: the capacity to laugh at themselves and with others. Most of us can laugh at others, but only a people sure of themselves can laugh at themselves and with others. Through children's literature we can teach our children to satirise those pompous and pious people amongst us who are constantly using race and religion as a means to divide and dupe us. They bellow like bulls and we continue to treat them like sacred cows.

The world of humour is an enjoyable area that needs to be made into children's literature in cartoons, limericks, stories and novels. One of the great educational values of literature is the simple sense of enjoyment, of pleasure in reading things for sheer fun. Examinations, education, cultural values often prevent us from seeing that literature, especially children's literature, can be for simple pleasure like flying a kite or playing "gullidanda" or golf! We have begun to take ourselves too seriously. It is as if the sun won't rise, if something should happen to us. I think we as teachers and parents ought to give back to our children the sense of fun in being a child.

WORLD OF YESTERDAY

Another important area for the creation of children's literature is the personal experience of an individual's childhood: the remembrance of things past. Our children have no idea of *our* world of childhood and adolescence. If they

are to understand the experiences that shaped us then we ought to tell them about these precious occasions. There has been so much in our lives: our grandparents, our parents, our neighbours, the koro across the river, the first school, the temple, the first pair of shoes, the first radio or bike, the passing of the first exam, the first love letter received, the first prize won, the first death in the family, the first marriage, the first son going abroad, these for our generation were momentous events. In writing children's literature about these aspects, this quest for lost memories, will not only clarify our own lives because our growth is rooted in that reality, it will also involve our children in our lives and inform the direction of their own. If we can write about these events sensitively, we will help our children to identify themselves with us; because where there is no bridge of the imagination, the generation gap widens.

Who hasn't felt with the poet

The Rainbow comes and goes
And lovely is the rose
...
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair
...
But yet I know, wherever I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

The writing of children's literature is an attempt to capture that vanished glory and make our children share that with the freshness of a dream. Increasingly it will be necessary for us to give our children those inner resources by which they will learn to bear their frustrations, to accept their unfulfilled dreams because their world is getting tougher. We adults use religion for comfort and consolation when affected by life's disappointments and disillusionment. What do our children have? Religion is too impersonal for them because death is a distant drum. They hear only the beatings of their hearts which tell them of life — this life, not an after-life. They will then need, books — books of literature — to read and by an extension of imagination they may establish life-lines to ours. Otherwise the tide of teenage would drown them. And there's very little they can clutch on to: films and Kungfu movies, comics, just won't be enough. And as they grow through the experiences of others in the literature they read, they may realise that:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;

In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thought that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In the years that bring the philosophic mind.

It is tempting to conclude on this high note of philosophy. But let me do it with a few practical suggestions. First, organisations such as Jaycees have begun creating the necessary awareness in people for the urgent need of children's literature in Fiji. This could be taken up by other voluntary organisations. It is important that children's literature be given priority in tertiary institutions: teachers' training colleges and the university. I am not aware of any course, or even a list of books, on this subject in institutions where our teachers are being trained. If we feel that it is important for our children and our society, then the Government must take leadership. I do not believe that all good things should be done by governments, but this is a major task which needs national initiatives and incentives. It is necessary both for the vernaculars as well as for English. A National Book Development Council could do a lot for the production of books in this country with a special provision for children's books. Books produced in other countries are immorally expensive for most of our children. In many developing countries book publishing is recognised as an essential social service and given priority in national development plans. That is perhaps a long term goal and there are many facets of book production and distribution that need to be thoroughly discussed.

For the moment we need a National Trust for Children's Books. We could begin on a small scale: children encouraged to read, library services in urban and rural areas, writers given grants to write in their mother tongue and translate works into other languages, and a whole host of activities connected with children's books. It is a major undertaking, but like all great achievements of man, the beginning is always modest but genuine. So is the growth of man himself — he begins with the child. I leave you to draw your own conclusions.