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POST AGE PICTUREBOOK PEDAGOGY AND THE INDIAN SCHOOL LIBRARY

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Abstract. This study examines Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy as an alternative to age-specific and text-centered approaches to children’s literature. It argues that picture books are not limited to early readers but can serve as complex pedagogical texts for learners of different ages, linguistic abilities, and social backgrounds. Through the lenses of Postmodernism, Posthumanism, and Poststructuralism, the study explores how contemporary Indian and international picture books develop aesthetic appreciation, emotional engagement, visual literacy, and critical thinking. Based on classroom and library experiences in India, Kenya, and Kazakhstan, the paper shows that picture books can challenge fixed classroom hierarchies, encourage multiple interpretations, and give learners greater agency in meaning-making.

Keywords: picture books, Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy, visual literacy, critical literacy, Indian school libraries, learner agency, Postmodernism, Posthumanism, Poststructuralism.

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Annotatsiya. Mazkur tadqiqotda Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy, ya’ni yosh chegaralariga bog’lanmagan rasmlar pedagogikasi bolalar adabiyotiga nisbatan an’anaviy yoshga asoslangan va matn markazli yondashuvlarga muqobil yo’nalish sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda rasmlar kitoblari faqat ilk o’qish bosqichidagi bolalar uchun emas, balki turli yosh, til ko’nikmasi va ijtimoiy tajribaga ega o’quvchilar uchun ham murakkab pedagogik matn sifatida xizmat qilishi asoslanadi. Postmodernizm, postgumanizm va poststrukturalizm nuqtayi nazaridan zamonaviy hind va xorijiy rasmlar kitoblarning estetik idrok, emotsional munosabat, vizual savodxonlik hamda tanqidiy tafakkurni rivojlantirishdagi imkoniyatlari yoritiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: rasmi kitoblar, yosh chegarasisiz pedagogika, vizual savodxonlik, tanqidiy savodxonlik, hind maktab kutubxonalari, o‘quvchi faolligi, postmodernizm, postgumanizm, poststrukturalizm.

Introduction. This study aims to challenge developmentalist, age-specific models of children’s literature that assume that picturebooks are only for early readers and to position them as multilayered, complex texts are capable of addressing groups that are far more diverse in terms of readers’ ages, genders, ethnicities, cultural or social backgrounds and individual experiences than conventionally perceived. Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy decentres the normative and defies traditional age boundaries for reading experiences.

The approach recognises that picture books can stimulate deep introspective and contemplative conversations among children of all ages and thus establishes that they have extensive, profound pedagogical impact that conventional reading practices and conformist curricula struggle to achieve. Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy realizes this end simply by going beyond the question of who reads these books, and transgressing into how they are read, interpreted, and used in educational settings. In bringing to fore picture books that explore mature themes and act as tools for exploring dominant narratives, power structures, concepts of agency, autonomy and identity, this approach then resists egocentrism, creates space for multiplicity of perspective and invites and appreciates varied interpretations.

The great indian paradox. While the National Education Policy (2020) has displayed a need and therefore a space for the visual in the Indian classroom, much of our education is still focused on words and the greatest emphasis continues to remain on verbal and not so much on visual or critical literacy.

Picture books remain a reality only for a very small community of middle class, public school attending, city children in what is known as a pre-primary/play school age, but a far larger section of children remain unaware of how visual elements can influence cognition and reflection. Even in cities, in public schools, a widespread-belief-turned-classroom-practice is that as soon as a child learns to read, they must be accorded the task of reading ‘real’ books.

There is a deep seated anxiety about and a directly proportional sense of accomplishment related to how many words a child can read per minute. A direct outcome of this mindset is reflected in an educational ecosystem that sees no purpose in introducing picture books to children in secondary and senior secondary classes.

In being a country where 248 million students are served by the school education system (2023-24), with 50% of the total children enrolled in government schools, it is highly likely that the first books that most of these children ever have access to, will be their school textbooks. This makes for a rather bleak scenario, considering our school textbooks continue to use illustrations to support the written word instead of presenting images as focal points of learning on their own and this only in younger classes. The situation changes further at the secondary and senior secondary levels when books come to be all text and no image except for the rare diagram or pictorial representation of data in the form of graphs, pie charts and so on. Learning depends entirely on the written word.

Predominance of such textbooks could be rooted in the belief that the primary purpose of books is to educate and not to entertain, and that words work best to serve the purpose.

V. Geetha and Divya Vijayakumar write – “Unlike children’s books in Anglo America, books published in English in India, before and after independence, did not always feature

illustrations, art or indeed any sort of visual material. A visual would feature on the cover and some books carried line drawings, which was scattered through the book rather sumnerly, or half tone illustrations but these latter were mostly frontispieces.”

The fact that Indian classrooms remain unaware of or indifferent to the opportunities of metacognitive reflection that a Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy affords its readers and are yet to integrate these books at any of the four stages of curriculum – foundational, preparatory, middle or secondary levels, is disturbingly excluding. That a large number of school libraries perpetuate the ageist stereotype concerning picture books and thus consider them unfit for senior learners, only adds to a continued ‘othering’ of children who are intimidated by conventional, text heavy books. A 2021 UNICEF report about children with disabilities worldwide brings to light that one in ten children in the world faces a disability. With an estimated 2.04 million children with disabilities in India, it is time to recognise diversity of childhoods and bridge this gap through the integration of Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy in mainstream education.

EVOLUTION OF PICTURE BOOKS AND ITS AFFORDANCES IN THE INDIAN LIBRARIES. The last decade has witnessed what might be called a marked change in how Indian children’s literature is evolving. Picture books are being reconceptualised through Postmodernism, Posthumanism, and Poststructuralism. In a never-seen-before number of books that do this, today, illustrations, form and design in contemporary young-adult books take centrestage and serve as powerful devices to address complex and varied ideologies.

Postmodern picturebooks often feature non-linear narratives, metafiction, intertextuality and fragmented identities, encouraging the reader to question the narrative and the truth of it and to engage with text/image interplay in informed ways.

I often bring to class Nicholas Allan’s Picasso’s Trousers and Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan’s Prince with a Paintbrush: The Story of Raja Ravi Varma to introduce senior secondary visual arts students to the idea of visual intertextuality. On the surface, the former seems like a funny account of a wilful young man who doesn’t take advice and does what he wants. I read this to Indian and African children and to Kazakh teachers and I noticed that the initial reaction consistently remained one of delight but also horror for how Picasso transgresses every rule, every boundary that was set for him. I see how it might be especially difficult for community based cultures such as Asian and African regions to accept literature that suggests embracing individuality, since they have long-thrived on ideas of collective identity and filial piety, but that is all the more reason why children in these cultures should have access to literature such as this. Both of these books, for instance, give their readers a glimpse into the works of these great artists, while simultaneously conveying to the young adult readers that defying expectations to embrace individuality in the interest of creative pursuit is a worthy cause. In learning why Picasso’s portraits are asymmetrical, in talking about expressive deformation in art, I see my students questioning the creative process in their own curriculum and education system that inspires them to only recreate what is pleasing to the eye.

Srinivasan’s book acquaints learners with European Realism and is also a powerful narrative of how Raja Ravi Varma fused a foreign technique with Indian aesthetics and thus “marked a turning point in Indian art”. This often leads them to discuss and bring to class their own art that was inspired by a technique they saw or an experience they went through and share how it led them to create something that felt original, their own. Our libraries must embrace texts such as these, in the interest of creating a generation that thinks, questions and arrives on conclusions rooted in critical inquiry, logic and real understanding.

Existing in complete contrast with children’s literature that intended to create obedient, silent recipients of instruction, a wildly popular picture book in my classes is Kamla Bhasin’s

Girls Want Azadi (Illustrated by Shrujana Shridhar).

Girls Want Azadi is a warcry against the universal, but in case of this book, particularly Indian expectation of passivity from girls. ‘Azadi’ is the Urdu word for liberty, freedom from the shackles that are far deeper than just physical and have bound women for hundreds of years if not longer. In the book, pictures do almost all the talking. The cover page shows a group of girls whose hands are raised and mouths open as if they are shouting and rebelling against something. Inside, we see girls playing outdoors, laughing and talking loudly, dancing, getting angry, choosing their friends, studying, doing jobs - all choices that young girls are increasingly discouraged to make for themselves. The words only add to the pictures to say that girls want freedom from eve-teasing, from being considered lesser than the male child in the family, from being killed in the womb, from malnutrition. The words assert that girls now want the freedom, liberty and equality promised to them in the constitution and the rights which are theirs to exercise but seldom claimed due to prevalent social power dynamics. Debates about how they are not oppressed often open the session post reading.

However, activities such as drawing a list of decisions they can make for themselves invite reflection. Girls across classes see their male classmates drawing lists much longer than their own, and that leads them to question the bubble of superficial equality that they live in. In welcoming books that invite learners and teachers to engage in these activities, libraries and curriculum become the cornerstone of deep impact in real nation building.

Post humanism critiques human-centered thinking, emphasizes upon other-than-human worlds (animals, mythical creatures such as monsters, dragons, giants and so on) and encourages ethical thinking about non-human lives. Animal narratives have a long history in children’s literature, especially in the Indian context, with Panchtantra and Jataka tales still occupying the larger part of most school library shelves. However, this literature is Posthuman in the most superficial of ways. These animal characters do speak a human language but they do not use it to question human dominion. Instead, they convince, even deceive the reader into conforming to the social, moral norms created by humans, thus continuing the age old institution of humans as superior to other species. These stories do not overthrow human protagonists. Instead they have animal protagonists speaking the words that ideal, imitable human protagonists would.

During the Nineteenth century, western literature began to use newly discovered animals such as giraffes, kangaroos and platypuses to tell stories, thus inspiring a sense of wonder in the readers not only about these and other undiscovered animals, but also about unfamiliar, fantastic creatures. Children’s literature increasingly integrated existing mythical creatures and created new ones such as web footed marsh wiggles and wigglets (The Giant Surprise by Hiawyn Oram, illustrated by Tudor Humphries) and The Gruffalo (The Gruffalo books by Julia Donaldson).

Franklin’s flying bookshop by Jen Campbell features a dragon who loves reading but has nobody to tell a story to, because whenever he goes to the village, it’s empty until he finds a fearless friend in a little girl who loves stories just as much and helps Franklin set up a bookshop and tell the stories he has wanted to tell. While the villagers’ perception of a fearsome dragon is challenged in the narrative, it takes a human girl to voice it for the dragon.

While the Posthuman potential of a majority of picture books might be limited when seen from this lens, it is undebatable that in introducing the concept of something beyond human existence and supremacy, they do provide the first experience of the posthuman to the Post- age reader of picture books. Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan’s Parvati the Elephant’s Very Important Day and Fly, Little Fish by Lavanya Karthik, Satwik Gade and Ashwathy P.S. are recent Indian picture books that, in their inclusion of non-human entities, become windows into the ever-evolving world of Posthumanism.

The Poststructuralist lens establishes meaning in picture books (that may sometimes be entirely wordless) as fluid and constructed and thus persuades students to deconstruct language and images. The approach also promotes awareness of power, ideology, and identity in texts. Exploring the themes of mischief and mayhem, Canato Jimo's *Snip* and inspired by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and created by Kavita Singh Kale's *Amma* are recent Indian Picture books that posit the view that books, which continue to be defined as "a written work that is published as printed pages" can be completely wordless and thus invite a plurality of narratives from the reader. Stories told as these challenge the orthodox passive role of the reader as a recipient of knowledge and ask for a greater engagement and involvement on their part to co-construct meaning.

Another picture book that often becomes part of my storytelling and picture book reading sessions is Mini Shrinivasan's *I Didn't Understand*. A touching, yet powerful in how it dismantles conventional theories about childhood and disabilities, *I Didn't Understand* is the story of Manna, a young girl who has Down's syndrome. The title might at first lead the naïve reader into believing that it is Manna who doesn't understand the world around her.

However, as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that it is the world around Manna that is unprepared to understand her because she is different from what is established as a normal child. Poststructuralist theory problematizes the notion of a stable, knowable subject. In picturebook pedagogy, this means recognizing the constructedness of childhood itself, and the ideological functions of children's literature (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994).

In their insightful work about how disability is perceived and presented in textbooks, Donya Mosleh and Barbara E. Gibson write "Post Structural critical disability studies (CDS) maintains that disability is constituted by language and particular ways of knowing. This perspective does not deny that experiences of disability are 'real,' nor does it discount the materiality of impairments. Rather, it suggests that impairments are not the sole mediators of disabled lives. As relational concepts, disability and impairments are mediated by a variety of different forces which intersect and influence one-another. These forces—social, political, economic, cultural and historical—vary across time and space. Thus, disability is a concept which changes meaning over time and sociomaterial locations. As a central tenet of this paper, we will argue that ability/disability and consequently, normal/abnormal are oppositional categories which reflect dominant ideas about a 'good'/normal life in ways that disavow a positive disabled sensibility." They talk about the obsession of medical science and social structures with the establishment of the 'normal' child and that children who deviate from these established developmental norms or fail to meet normative milestones, were labelled 'abnormal', a word that later came to be replaced by 'atypical'.

Manna's story subverts the idea of a normal child. Her 'not understanding' because she has Down's Syndrome is positioned in direct contrast to the rejection she faces from her 'normal' classmates. Her ability to forgive the 'normal' children who wrong her, bully her, cause teenage readers to ask questions and deliberate how different people understand differently and why differences should be accepted and celebrated.

Another text that quickly becomes a subject of conversation and reflection in my classes and can be read through the lens of Poststructuralism is Kamla Bhasin's *Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys* (illustrated by Priya Kuriyan).

Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys is a rare picture book that works against social and cultural indoctrination and asserts that all children must have the agency to assume any identity and to express their gender in any way they wish. The book asserts that gender is a social construct, and invites readers to rethink how they have been conditioned to look, feel and behave

based on this societal norm. It makes its readers question what normal gender based expectations are, what or who decides what normal is, and whether it is possible to dismantle these established boundaries and boxes.

Lawrence Sipe emphasizes the “open-ended, dialogic” nature of postmodern picturebooks that promote reader response and critical engagement and Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys invites the reader to do just that.

Speaking strongly against forcing gender specific roles on children, Bhasin says - “I have always challenged gender, and I have challenged boxes, for girls and boys. Instead of asking a boy why has long hair, and why he is wearing a dress, let him choose, and let us encourage that.”

The book assures the readers that all children, regardless of their physical attributes, their temperaments and their preferences, deserve freedom to express themselves and find joy in it.

The illustrations assert that bald, unkempt, athletic, loud, angry, mischievous, assertive children are just as deserving of love and acceptance as those who are calm, kind, happy and sensitive. The book does not present children in two opposing categories or boxes that define them as good or bad, does not pit them against each other, does not say one kind is better than the other and thus aim to create an aspirational image of an ideal child and in liberating childhood from how it is obligated to look, the book does all its readers (children/parents/teachers) a greatest of favours.

Conclusion. Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy reimagines the function of children’s literature beyond the orthodox and uninformed roles shaped by ageist and excluding stereotypes. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Posthumanism opens space for critical, and imaginative engagements with picture books as serious pedagogical artefacts. Having recognised the need to address childhoods that look and feel different from the normative and therefore prevalent versions, children’s literature in India is evolving like never before. Creation and acceptance of Indian picture books that provide an opportunity for co-construction of meaning and tell stories of complex and diverse experiences to young adults through powerful images coupled with little to no text in the average Indian bookstore is most certainly a step towards establishing pictorial literature as “a genre for all ages”.

However, Indian classrooms are yet to integrate or even acknowledge Picturebooks as relevant pedagogical artefacts. Our curriculum still shuns picture books as infantile and inadequate which is ironic, seeing the unlimited learning opportunities they provide.

That contemporary picture books demand an interpretive agency from their readers across all age groups and thus challenge the carefully constructed, perpetuated and oft-rewarded classroom practices of conformity and obedience, could ironically be another barrier to the acceptance of these books. The Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy relies on the reader to take a position of more authority, of reflection, of questioning the existing structures. This is in direct contrast to the didactic, instructive literature which limits the reader to understanding, agreeing with and implementing the author’s intended message without question and as educators, the question we need to ask ourselves is whether our educational as well as social ecosystem is prepared for the shift in power dynamics that the Post-age Picturebook Pedagogy is capable of causing.

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