The Polemics of Real and Imagined Childhood(s) in India

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This essay attempts to map historical, literary and social constructions of childhood in India and to explore ways in which these differ from Western-dominated, globalised attitudes to childhood. Evidence about Indian childhood is drawn from across a narrative spectrum including children's books and films and some adult writing and media. Notions of childhood are different within and across the cultures of the world; while there is no 'correct' version of childhood, many have common features and sometimes the influences of one culture can be strongly felt in another. In India, for example, a dominant construction of childhood was imported through Western education.[1] After Independence (1947), Indian children's literature in English became caught up in the mass postcolonial project of nation-building. As part of becoming emancipated from colonial rule, a dominant image of the child in fiction based on Western childhood had to be replaced by one that is hybrid and multicultural. This construction of Indian childhood is now itself being buffeted by forces of cultural homogenisation.[2]

Key words: *Indian childhood, Indian girlhood, cultural homogenisation, childhood studies*

> Most research on childhood repeatedly draws on a child-centred literature, and isolates children into child-centred areas and concerns, away from such matters as politics, economics, or law. Yet these matters relate to children and young people as much as to adults, and to split them away gives a thin, unreal understanding of childhood.
>
> (Alderson 6)

TRACING INDIAN CHILDHOODS

It is only recently that childhood has begun to be studied in India. The first scholars to begin this work were Sudhir Kakar and Ashis Nandi. While Kakar (1978) focused 'inwardly' to produce a psychoanalytic reading of Indian

Hindu childhood, Nandy (1983) looked 'outward', offering a postcolonial perspective. His critique of Western influences on Indian childhood has been developed by Radhika Viruru (2001; 2004; 2005), Gaile S. Cannella (2004) and Olga Nieuwenhuys (2009; 2013) among others. Sarada Balagopalan's *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India* (2014), is a ground-breaking work which focuses on sociological constructions of Indian childhood, while Pradip Kumar Bose (1995), Gautam Chando Roy (1995), Satadru Sen (2005), Swapna M. Banerjee (2015) and several others have surveyed historical constructions of Indian childhood from domestic as well as international perspectives.

As these studies suggest, to date scholarship has largely concentrated on childhood generally, but in *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness* (2013), Ruby Lal explicates how colonial as well as native reformist discourses focused on girlhood. The significance of this is considerable, since Indian tradition as set out in *Manusmṛti* (The Laws of Manu), an ancient Indian text of moral codes, neglected the girl-child. As Lal observes, without including girls, a study of 'a distinct stage called childhood is practically impossible' (36). Her research reveals that the Indian construction of female childhood only emerged in the nineteenth century, through a 'process of nurturing, education and playfulness' (42). Lal's focus on girlhood is not unique: Michelle Superle's 2011 *Contemporary English Language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture and the New Indian Girl* examines Indian girlhood from a variety of perspectives to argue that fictional female characters in English-language children's literature in India perform an ideal national/gender identity by their powerful voices, by their clothing and by wielding 'their bodies as tools that allow them to meet national aspirations' (157). By focusing on what she calls the 'new Indian girl', Superle shows how children's literature is bound up in nation and identity formation, usually with a utopian bias. The new millennium has seen a host of scholarly studies of Indian childhoods, real and imagined, from historical, socio-cultural, political and literary perspectives, including by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2003), Deepa Sreenivas (2011), Suchismita Banerjee (2013) and Nivedita Sen (2015). My research adds a new dimension to this debate by drawing a distinction between the forces of cultural homogenisation in the past that have helped reconcile representations of Indian childhoods to modernity and the current attempts at cultural homogenisation that resist and subvert this reality that there are multiple Indian childhoods. One of the principal forms of cultural homogenisation of Indian girlhood began in the nineteenth century in the form of desire for Western education.

EDUCATION AND THE INDIAN GIRL

Recently, the Tamil poet Rajathi Rokkaiah Salmaaddressed the literature graduate students at my university, St.Thomas' College in Thrissur, Kerala, India. Salma came to the attention of international audiences when Kim Longinotto

produced *Salma*, a documentary film on the poet–writer in 2013. Salma shared her life experiences with the students. From the period of her first menstruation until she became an adult, she was virtually a prisoner at home. In accordance with the Islamic conventions of her local village, she was, at the age of thirteen, engaged to marry a local man. From this time she was prevented from attending school and confined to a small room. Her experience of the world beyond was restricted to the view from a little casement window. Reading sustained her, yet she had scarcely anything to read until her brother, who sympathised with her situation, secretly provided her with books. Later, writing helped relieve her grief and distress.

Salma's sad story encapsulates the conditions of many children in nineteenth-century India; it also highlights an aspect of Indian childhood heavily influenced by the West – the desire for education – and associates it with a young female. Of course, there were versions of childhood in India before colonisation, and Indian children's desire for Western education has been identified as a major component of most Indian childhoods precisely because colonial pedagogic intervention was instrumental in bringing into effect legal and administrative regulations which created distinctions between adulthood and childhood in Indian consciousness. These divisions form a significant element of *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* (1895), the debut novel by Shevantibai M. Nikambe (1865–1930), a pioneer female writer in Indian English. The novel, which centres around a young girl's longing for education, was published after the colonial government's 1891 legislation set the age of consent at twelve years for unmarried girls and eleven for wives.[3] The novel provides a realistic account of Indian girlhood at a time when child marriage was prevalent. Like Salma, Ratanbai was denied education by her parents-in-law. The novel shows her struggling to manage her anger because she yearns for education:

> How often, with an aching heart, she would sit dreaming about the school life! Her teacher, her companions, her singing lesson, the English lesson, the translation class, came before her, and then the longing would come: 'Oh could I but go to school once again!'(63)

Both the fictional childhood of Ratanbai and the real-life childhood of Salma remind us that there remain huge numbers of unrecorded instances of similar situations, not forgetting the vast number of Indian street children denied the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights envisioned in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), although India has signed this treaty.

Pande (2015) has observed that Ratanbai represents the upper-class, high-caste and aristocratic Hindu child ideal because her identity aligns with the values and models associated with an English education. Moreover, 'English appears as the object of her [Ratanbai's] *pleasure*, *interest* and *longing*; education is fetishized as the foundation of an ideal [Indian] childhood' (41). At the start of the novel, eleven-year-old Ratanbai is already married and her husband's

family disapprove of further school education. Her aunt-in-law claims modern Western education has taught Ratanbai immoral behaviour; she accuses the girl of flirting with the gardener. But her husband, Prataprao Khote, who is leaving for England to study law, insists she must return to school. The stimulation and companionship of her school life compensate for many hardships and help Ratanbai retain her connection with childhood. She remains at school, learning to be a modern Indian girl, until she is sixteen, when her husband returns from England and the marriage is consummated.

Nikambe shows how for an Indian child like Ratanbai an English education is an indispensable part of proper initiation into adulthood. Later, the marriage celebrations prove the advantages to Prataprao Khote of his young wife's education: she chants English poetic lines seeking prayerful blessings for her husband. At the end of the festivities, Ratanbai notices among the numerous presents a beautifully bound gilt-edged book. As she is about to open this book, her husband says, 'I must have this book on my table every day; there are a great many nice things in it which you must know.' Ratanbai replies, 'I have this book too.' '"Well," said her husband as he looked into his young partner's face, "then, let yours be out too, and we shall make it our guide in life"' (88). The book itself is not named, but Pande suggests it is Vātsyāyana's *Kamasutra*, an ancient Indian Hindu text on human sexual behaviour. Whether a real or an invented book, this exchange establishes Ratanbai's desire for education and underscores the complexity of social relations for a girl who is simultaneously a child and a wife.

The novel attempts to distinguish between her roles as child and wife, but it is impossible to do so systematically because Ratanbai occupies both roles from the opening pages of the novel. There is, however, an attempt at a 'temporal delinking of childhood from wifehood' by highlighting adolescence as a necessary period for developing self-control and for sex-education (Pande 49). According to Pande, this separation anticipates the imposition of a colonial ideal in the form of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. Through her husband's absence, Rantanbai has an extended period of childhood before the consummation of marriage; as indicated in the wedding exchange about the shared book, there is a strong association between freedom from marital duties and the desire to complete her education. Nevertheless, the novel shows how this period of continued sexual inexperience, which equates to childhood innocence, was constituted under the shadow of its other – 'the spectre of the sexualized child' (Pande 51). In this way, *Ratanbai* showcases how some Indians were invested in the colonial project of reconfiguring Indian childhood in line with Western models by replacing images of children as sexual beings with those that emphasise children's need for formal and moral education in ways that distinguish it from adulthood.

As well as making the desire for education a key component of Indian girlhood, the novel also works to promote a particular ideal of childhood for all Indian children. For instance, Lokuge (2004) observes that Nikambe's novel both presents heterosexual monogamy as the desired end to a child's

personal development and promotes Christian ideals as the essence of childhood. More recently, an alternative vision of Indian girlhood can be found in *Balika Shikshan* or *Education for Girls* (2003) promoted by Vidya Bharati, the educational wing of the Hindu nationalist organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This organisation actively disseminates its model of Hindu girlhood – *Hindutva* – as appropriate for female children and their 'family, community, and nation' (Manjrekar 350). From Nikambe's *Ratanbai* to the present, the construction of Indian childhood, and perhaps particularly Indian girlhood, has formed part of a historical continuum shaped by moral and cultural institutions and reproduced largely by females. The role of females in both reproducing and transfiguring childhood can be seen in the way Nikambe, a female writer who worked to open up what it means to be a female child in India, has Ratanbai's old aunt observe, '[w]ith all this education and examination, they must "bake the bread"' (Nikambe 30). Her words convey how traditional society readily identifies femininity with the personal and the familial, while constant efforts are needed to link female childhood with a desire for education and a devotion to nationalism. These are the objectives of *Balika Shikshan*, a pedagogy built to perpetuate 'a particular set of symbols, rituals, customs and sacred geographies to construct subjectivities and dispositions in Hindu girls that are suited to the ideal of an ennobled Hindu womanhood' (Manjrekar 361).

Balika Shikshan, 'sets moral and ideational horizons for an empowered girlhood that can be directed towards militant action, establishing a basic vocabulary for both passive and active engagement with the politics of *Hindutva*' (363). This is one way in which colonial attempts to create a homogenised Indian childhood founded on Christian ideals has been resisted; militant Hindu ideals have considerable appeal in the majority population in contemporary India. That said, there remains the question of whether or not the *balika* (girl) of *Balika Shikshan* exists in the real world. According to Manjrekar, imagined Indian girlhood is closely allied with Hindu nationalism, but this imagined childhood is not 'ossified in tradition'. It is transformed according to social as well as historical changes (361–3). This obviously creates tensions as there is little agreement between real and imagined childhoods. For instance, agency is ascribed to girls in particular strands of post-independence Indian children's fiction, whereas *Balika Shikshan* 'ideological[ly] consent[s] to Brahiminical patriarchy' and perennially entraps female childhood in the *Hindutva* model (363). One of the significant dangers of such trends to define and manage understanding of contemporary Indian childhood may be the loss of 'children's own creativity in challenging social injustices and reinventing childhood(s)' (Nieuwenhuys, 'Theorizing Childhood' 7).To avoid this situation, Nieuwenhuys advocates postcolonial childhood studies with a view to subverting and/or disturbing 'the very nature of childhood(s)' (7).

Postcolonial childhood studies is an emerging field of study that emphasises the centrality of 'anti-authoritarian movements of youth (and gender) emancipation', thereby 'subverting authority systems and reinventing... a

generation and a nation' (7). Nieuwenhuys (2009) identifies three tiers to the scope of postcolonial childhood studies in India: historical, literary and socio-political:

> Three main strands can be discerned: historical studies of how a specific Indian model of modern childhood emerged among the elite during the colonial encounter; literary studies of how fiction both constructs and represents Indian childhood; and critical social science that seeks to uncover children's active participation in struggles for social justice. (150)

Postcolonial childhood, then, recognises and subverts the version of 'modern childhood [that] has been constructed as a European archipelago' (Sen 3). Nandy (1984–5) critiques Western notions of childhood as 'a metaphor used to rationalize imperialism' (360). The West, he says, uses the child as 'a projective device' and portrays the child 'as a screen as well as a mirror' to consider childhood as 'a major dystopia for the modern world', frequently employing childhood as 'a battleground of cultures' and presenting it as 'an area of adult experimentation in social change' (364–6). For Nandy, Western minds 'mystify the idea of childhood more than the idea of the child', and this 'differential mystification' constructs a more 'positively cathected' presentation of the 'idea of the child' than a focus upon the real child (367). This imported Western idea of the child and childhood has come to be a universal and homogenising concept. We may understand Indian constructions of childhood as essentially syncretic and hybrid as part of a postcolonial resistance to the threats of this homogenisation of childhood.

Postcolonial criticism has revealed that the effects of hybridity mean that 'the everyday Indian, even when he remains only Indian, is both Indian and Western' (Ashis, *Intimate Enemy* 76). To illustrate his point, Nandy compares the childhoods of Sri Aurobindo, a leader of the movement for independence as well as a guru, writer, yogi and philosopher, and Rudyard Kipling as potential models for every Indian child. Aurobindo's childhood was spiritually oriented while Kipling's was martial and materialistic; nevertheless, both fused elements of India and the West. 'Kipling,' he writes, 'was culturally an Indian child who grew up to become an ideologue of the moral and political superiority of the West. Aurobindo was culturally a European child who grew up to become a votary of the spiritual leadership of India' (85). Similarly, Kakar's earlier psychoanalytic exploration of Swami Vivekanada's childhood delineated it as a 'syncretic hybridity' of the influences of the traditional Hindu mother and the Westernized father in Naren (166).[4] So far we have seen two modes of constructing Indian childhood: one is based in a powerful desire for education, the other in the ideals of 'syncretic hybridity'. Additionally, many authors of children's literature imagine Indian children as enthusiasts in the collaborative process of nation-building, although the majority of children's books portray upper-middle-class children as the major characters and encourage young readers to identify with them rather than the vast majority of actual Indian children. Inculcating a sense of national consciousness is a feature of mainstream children's literature in

India. Banerjee circuitously accentuates the syncretic aspects of childhood and links them with national ideals when she concludes, 'Indian English children's fiction constructs child characters as a complex blend of tradition and modernity, and the subjectivity of these characters is simultaneously shaped by notions of individualism and a deep sense of connectedness to the native culture' (194). The creation of fictional constructions of the ideal nation seem to be a shared project for many Indian writers for children, and it is regularly observed that not even critics from outside India can avoid referring to it. Wood identifies this trend in 'national indoctrination' when she quotes Deepa Sreenivas and Deeptha Achar: 'From its very beginnings, children's literature has . . . assumed the responsibility of moulding a "national child" that represents the norm for others to copy' (169). Similarly, Superle's central argument is that Indian English children's literature portrays fictional Indian children as succeeding in 'shaping their lives, communities, and nations' (2). Indian English children's literature depicts, she asserts, 'idealized versions of nation' and attempts to offer 'simple, optimistic models of national . . . identity' (16–17). However, this construction of a naïve sense of national consciousness as a significant aspect of Indian childhood is also critiqued, making possible a reinterpretation of it in postcolonial childhood studies. Nieuwenhuys declares that decades of sustained involvement with studies of Indian childhood have shown that Indian scholars perceive 'childhood as a battlefield about Indian-ness', as if they are entrapped in an eternal mission to release 'Indian childhood from the colonial heritage' ('Is there' 152). Postcolonial childhood studies, thus, offers the possibility to reconsider the space of national consciousness as an ideal in constructing Indian childhood. Additionally, it re-evaluates the different attempts to dominate, standardise and universalise childhood in Indian children's literature.

Superle has delineated the polemics involved in the portrayal of central characters in Indian children's literature in English as 'representative of hegemonic groups', and the way childhood is ideologically constructed to maintain power so that even while fictional heroes and heroines work together to achieve social transformation, 'the central characters portrayed are homogenous rather than diverse' (86). Thinking again about the importance of constructions of girlhood, she goes on to observe that much contemporary Indian children's fiction in English deconstructs traditional notions of female childhood and portrays girls as active, independent, liberal and empowered. The female child protagonists make use of their agency to improve their own lives and those of others. Sarika in *The Chandipur Jewels* (2004) claims that 'girls can do anything boys can and much better too' (Sinha 39). Deepa Agarwal's stories in *Not Just Girls* (2004) imagine girls as assertive, individualistic, courageous, interdependent, emancipative and revolutionary, portraying them as persons of increased self-esteem and harbingers of social change. Even this renewed portrayal of modern Indian girlhood is stereotypical, however, as these protagonists are representations from urban, upper- and middle-class educated society and display what Sunder Rajan terms, in another context, as 'a normative model of citizenship' (130).

Works that confound Superle's and Rajan's observations do exist, however, including contemporary Indian children's stories that acknowledge the marginalised female child's ability to embody a better model for the world than the old androcentric models. *Who Will Be Ningthou?* (1999) is a commendable collaboration by the author Indira Mukherjee and the illustrator A. V. Ilango. Their book, which attributes more wisdom and insight to the princess than to her brothers, is a retelling of a folktale from the remotest region of the state of Manipur. It tells the story of the Ningthou (king) of Kangleipak (an ancient name for Manipur), who seeks the worthiest among his children to succeed him. In a great competition between his sons, they all prove to be equal. In a horse race, all three sons reach the goal – a Khongnang (the banyan tree) – simultaneously. The sons are asked to perform unique and incredible feats to justify their claim to the throne. At the end of this contest the king and his male subjects decide that Sanatomba, the youngest son, is the strongest because he has uprooted the Khongnang. But Sanatombi, the five-year-old princess, is sad about the destruction of the tree. She approaches it and cries. Suddenly, the king declares: 'If anybody is worthy of becoming the ruler ... it is little Sanatombi. It was she who told us to look at the soul of the Khongnang. Sanatombi feels the pain of the people, the animals, the birds, the trees' (n.p.). This is how the princess succeeds to the throne of Kangleipak. Through Mukherjee's and Ilango's picturebook, the story of this five-year-old girl from a highly marginalised region of India now reaches all parts of the country as a school textbook selected by the Central Board of School Education in India. What is significant is not only that female wisdom is upheld as superior to male valour and athleticism, but also that the child teaches the adults a great lesson about empathising and identifying with all other beings in nature.

A child's ability to save endangered species and balance the ecology also features in *Gulla and the Hangul* (2008), a tale from Kashmir by Mariam Karim-Ahlawat, illustrated by Roiti Roy. Hangul is an endangered species of deer in the region, and therefore a protected animal. The story is set in the shades and tones of contemporary Kashmir. It portrays the quiet life of the villagers in Tangdhaar (the valley), their close links with nature and the underlying disquiet caused by the militant and military presence they have learnt to live with. Kashmir is frequently affected by earthquakes; this story features Gulla, a lonely shepherd boy who has lost many cousins in a previous tremor. One day, while coming back from the forest, he spots a hangul being chased by two wild dogs. Gulla forgets about all the lurking dangers – other wild animals, children's fantastic tales of Banbudhiya (the old woman who eats male children) and military men moving about with guns in hand. He is determined to save the deer and acts without considering his own safety. When dawn comes and Gulla is quite certain that the hangul will be safe, he takes it from his pheran, a traditional loose gown of Kashmiris, where it was safely ensconced for the night. The story now twists as the hangul miraculously turns into a boy, who Gulla recognises as Sheen, the Spirit of the Eternal Snows. Sheen is pleased with Gulla and offers him a boon. Gulla requests that there be no earthquakes in Tangdhaar. The conclusion explains that this tale

is the reason why Kashmiris consider a hangul a protected animal; it is believed to possess the Spirit of the Sheen, ever willing to bestow a boon.

These two picturebooks imagine marginalised Indian children from remote regions as important social and environmental agents. In doing so, they add a new dimension to the understanding of Indian childhood. The work of such children's writers is not unique, and gains from being put alongside the often more conflicted versions of Indian childhood found in films.

FILMING THE INDIAN CHILD

In *Halo (1996)*, a popular children's film in Hindi, Sasha, a young motherless girl, is lonely and sad but hopes a divine intervention will bring her happiness. One day a stray dog befriends her and she names it Halo, her gift from God. But soon Halo gets lost and Sasha begins her quest to search for him through the streets of Mumbai. This leads to encounters with many idiosyncratic adults, offering a glimpse into Indian society from the girl's point of view. Ranga Dada, a local orphan who heads a group of urchins, assists Sasha in her mission and they finally find Halo at an old Parsi couple's place. Her joy in finding Halo is total, but soon Sasha learns that the old Parsi couple have a mentally challenged child who is emotionally attached to Halo and unwilling to part with him. Sasha's compassion leads her to decide to let that child have the dog. The challenging lives of street children and their extreme poverty are central to this film, but what finally impresses the viewer is Sasha's ability to empathise with the mentally challenged child whose need is different but perhaps greater than hers.

There are also examples of Indian film narratives imagining ideal rural girlhood – for example, *Lilkee (2006)*, a Hindi children's film about girls' education. It is the story of Lilkee, who is brought to Mumbai by an upper-middle-class couple to take care of their baby. The eleven year old girl soon makes friends with the children in the residential complex. When her friends decide to make a risky visit to the sea without informing their parents, Lilkee informs her employer. Lilkee's sense of responsibility impresses her employer, who decides to educate her. That the central character of this film is a rural female child and that it portrays this poor girl's positive identity makes *Lilkee* a film with a difference. *Gippi (2013)* is another unconventional film that portrays how a rural Indian girl comes to accept her own self and identity. The film follows the coming of age of Gippi, a fourteen-year-old overweight teenager in Shimla who lives with her single male parent and younger brother.

While domestic Hindi films for children generally use considerable cinematic imagination to construct girl child characters as competent members of society, negotiating poverty and being the agents for bringing about a new but imagined world order, Meera Nair, an Indian-American film maker based in New York City, specialises in films about Indian society for international audiences. Her debut film (for an adult audience), *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) is a starkly realistic depiction of certain Indian childhoods. Krishna (Shafiq Syed),

the central character, is sent him away from home by his mother for having destroyed his brother's bicycle. While working for a circus troop he is deliberately left behind and so finds a job as a runner for a teashop (a Chaipau). The film depicts Krishna as a 'naïve and innocent child adrift amongst the cynical and exploitative world of the big city' (Mills and Mills152). Although its portrayal of childhood in India is controversial, *Salaam Bombay!* speaks eloquently about 'the desperate lives of young subaltern girls and boys living in the streets, brothels, and detention centers of Bombay'(Wojcik-Andrews 68). Eighteen years after the first screening of this film, Lara (2006) documented similar conditions for Indian children, testifying to the fact that millions of Indian children still spend their childhoods on the streets, in railway stations and detention centres. While some of these children are orphans who make the streets their home, others have run away from their homes to embrace the adventures of a street life. *Salaam Bombay!* was severely criticised in India as wrongly representing India and catering to the Western understanding of Indian childhoods. That similar scenes are found even in the recent award-winning film *Lion (2017)*, indicates that the issue of abandoned children in India continues to attract attention. More than ten years after Lara's social audit of street children in India, in 2017, these bleak situations have yet to be alleviated. So why do Indian scholars and thinkers react vehemently against and resist the depiction of slums and miserable conditions of children? Or, to turn the question around, why do outsiders notice only such depressing injustices when they film Indian childhood?

Western-trained film makers tend to focus on the absence of their particular 'ideal model of childhood', resulting in the 'forced commonality of an ideological discourse of childhood' (Jenks in Mills and Mills 154). Their gaze fails to take account of the extent to which structures and institutions that regulate children, such as schools, the laws, statutes and so on, are culturally relative. Kakar has observed that while Western children are 'looked after' and 'trained', the Indian concept of child-rearing maintains 'it is the adult who needs to learn the child's mode of experiencing the world' and sets the 'paradigm' of the child–adult relationship as the 'interplay of beings instead of a "socialization" process for the child' (210).

The absence of Western values of childhood in Indian culture can be shocking to outsiders, but the gritty portrayal of the lives of Krishna and his companions in *Salaam Bombay!* must not be understood as representative of all Indian childhoods: as always,'[t]he real on the reel is not real!' (Wojcik-Andrews 193). Much can be learned by comparing the depiction of childhood at the centre of *Salaam Bombay!* and the British-made film *Slumdog Millionaire (2008)*, an exciting description of the life of three slum children in Mumbai which shows how they resist succumbing to deprivation, poverty and violence. Although it attempts 'to move beyond the limiting confines of reading cinema within a national optic' (Chan 37) to depict postcolonial Indian childhood, many critics regard *Slumdog Millionaire* as a neo-colonialist misrepresentation of India (Chan 2010; Magnier 2009; Gehlawat 2013) which reinforces Orientalist attitudes by representing India as the land of the primitive, inferior and exotic Other

(Gehlawat 2013; Chan 2010). Chan observes that because of its 'nationally hybrid origins and its success among "western" audiences, *Slumdog Millionaire* has become the ideal battleground for issues of cultural and national representation' (38). For instance, Indian critics have complained that *Slumdog Millionaire* misrepresents the nation in part by '[c]onstructing Indian childhood into a series of fundable "issues" such as "child labour" and "street children" … [and appraising] India as a country lacking a proper notion of childhood' (Nieuwenhuys, 'Is there' 148).

Unlike the recent picturebooks discussed above, *Slumdog Millionaire* belongs to the dominant tendency to focus on sociological constructions of Indian childhood at the expense of, say, literary and historical alternatives. Arguably films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Salaam Bombay!* drive home in Western minds 'the colonial imagination of India as a country lacking a proper notion of children' and they are tempted to 'intervene through UN, NGOs, and missionary initiatives' to alleviate the pains of these Indian children (Nieuwenhuys in Wood 169). But *Slumdog Millionaire* also offers some distinctive standpoints and critiques of existing ways of constructing Indian childhood. For instance, Jamal, the child protagonist of the film, asks two American tourists, when their taxi driver beats up the boy: 'Do you want to see the real India?' The American tourists came to India to witness the rich cultural heritage of the country; but what they see is a boy being beaten up by their driver. Given what they have just witnessed, the question might more appropriately be changed to, 'Do you want to see the real Indian childhood?' The task then becomes to discover whether Indian childhood(s) are universally affected by pathetic conditions of poverty, squalor, sexism, injustice and violence. In interview, Danny Boyle, the film's director, stated that, having seen Indian childhood in the slums, he recognised that children living in poverty also have dignity, productivity and joy (*Metacafe*). And his film proved it so. Thus, as a representation of Indian childhood, *Slumdog Millionaire* is a success. The film offers materials to Indian academics for self-examination of their previous blindness to the miserable conditions of street children while inviting adults in general to transform the childhoods of the unfortunates instead of indulging in unproductive criticism about the film's intention to misrepresent India.

Despite its merits, Boyle's film is part of the forces of globalised homogenisation that are permeating Indian perceptions of childhood, a significant threat for a postcolonial country now facing the effects of neo-colonisation. Cannella and Viruru warn of the dangers of 'the ultimate goal of colonization, one in which the colonized desires to become like the colonizer' (83). An example of this is found in *Bal Narendra: Childhood Stories of Narendra Modi* (2014). While the subject matter may be local, the simplifications and paratextual trappings of this illustrated cartoon-style story are borrowed from globalised commodity culture. *Narendra* depicts the ideal childhood for Indian children in the form of the childhood of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Narenda Modi grew up in tough circumstances but overcame them to be the leader of the nation. The overt message for children is to emulate their prime minister, who as a child is shown as the embodiment of all virtues. Modi is thus branded on young minds

as a living saint who lived an ideal childhood. Basu's online review remarks that the editors of this book for Indian children are sycophants who idolise Modi, and they now reduce children's literature to 'an airliner safety instructions chart' (n.p.) This attempt at homogenisation is aimed at creating a Modi Nation; the book is supplemented with Modi masks, Modi tunics and Modi pen drives. Globalised consumer culture can thus infiltrate childhood with links to consumer culture allied with religion and state and promoting hero worship.

To conclude, Indian childhood is mainly constructed on the desire for education, on the syncretic, hybrid or multicultural identity of Indian children, and on the constructions of national consciousness in children. Although there are multiple strands that might work to individualise different kinds of Indian childhoods, they are always beset by forces working to homogenise childhood and culture. Elements of homogenisation and universalised childhood simultaneously operate as an external threat and an internally degenerative force. External pressures are causing Indian childhood and culture to merge into universalised (Western-dominated) notions of childhood, thereby making less visible the postcolonial identity. At the same time, childhood is also subject to internal forces of homogenisation which operate in subtle but more calculated and potentially dangerous ways. In current Indian constructions of childhood, colonial desire for education is altered to modes of communalism; apparent syncretic identity/hybridity and multiculturalism are shaped to uphold the hegemonies of upper-caste and upper-class childhood in the country; high ideals of nationalism corrode to representations of 'bourgeois nationalism'.

At this juncture, it is necessary to reorganise the traditional operations of postcolonial thinking, which are built on binary constructions. Postcolonial childhood studies have to take the bold decision to tread a different track by critically leaving the path set by Ashis Nandy. In other words, it is time 'to bypass the terrifying images of Indian childhood that feed the "enemy within" and to do so by reconstructing childhood as both continuity with a reconstituted past and a hope for a better future' (Nieuwenhuys 151). For this advancement, I suggest that an invitation to Indian colleagues to collaborate with regional and vernacular writers could invest childhood with more freedom through intellectual choices that lead to highly imaginative creative works. Although there is a danger that this step could create another homogenised version of Indian childhood at a new level of magnitude, postcolonial childhood studies may, perhaps, be generative to further theorising of literary constructions pertaining to all facets of Indian childhood. Let me illustrate this point.

After the seminar at my college, I accompanied Salma to a restaurant for dinner. Salma ruminated over her early childhood days when she had frequented the small but rich public library of her village to devour several Tamil translations of Russian literature. She remembered that as a young girl her reading had progressed from light books like comics and little magazines to the more sober writings of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Listening to her talk about herself as a reading child, I asked, 'Why don't you switch over to writing for children? I feel,' I continued, 'you should write for the highly marginalised Islamic village girls

of India, those poor children who have suffered the subjugations of family, social patriarchy, and religion. It would be a fair blend of real and imagined childhood, and, above all, a step to help young children dream of attaining freedom and happiness.' Salma just smiled enigmatically.

It is a pity that even someone with a powerful voice in India today is not committed to writing for children. Significant changes can occur in literary constructions of Indian childhood when the voices of regional authors are no longer feeble. Promotion of regional children's writers in India and the wide translations of their work is the key to unlocking the puzzling thresholds of Indian childhood. Translation between Indian languages is vital to survival in the complex postcolonial Indian context. It will call attention to the heterogeneity of ideas and thoughts on Indian childhood, which will give rise to the ability to resist the forces of homogeneity that are distorting understanding of Indian childhood(s). Postcolonial childhood studies thus needs to work with literary studies to become a catalyst that promotes translations of regional Indian children's literature, delineating how regional fiction both constructs and represents diversities of Indian childhood.

NOTES

1. Traditionally, patriarchal Indian society advocated male Brahmin and upper caste children's formal education, whereas even for high caste girls formal education was a formidable obstacle. Colonial education changed this situation. Erudite male characters in late-eighteenth-century Indian literature often promote girls' education, while the uneducated males as well as womenfolk in these stories discourage it. The desire for Western education has played a key role in constructing Indian childhoods.
2. By the subtle strategies of cultural homogenisation in Indian children's literature, I mean the polemic involved in continually disseminating reading materials for children that standardise and uphold the ideologies of the majority. Colonial education homogenised Western concepts of childhood and thus Indian childhoods were modelled to be identical and analogous with it. Now, homogenisation of childhoods in India is, on the one hand, a normative process that promotes the ideologies of the upper caste and religious communities and, on the other hand, appeals to uniform globalised tastes of the West. Indian tradition strongly subverts the tendencies for all sorts of homogenisation and resists 'cultural consensus' to sustain the 'heterogeneous terrain' (Paranjape 10), but the New Educational Policy being framed by the rightist RSS wing of the BJP Government is placing notions of Indian heterogeneity in serious danger.
3. Gender affected how childhood was defined. While girls over the age of fourteen were no longer considered children, for boys the limit was eighteen. It was only in 1929 that the British government passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act that prohibited the marriage of a girl child younger than fourteen years of age.
4. Swami Vivekananda's original name was Narendranath. When he was a boy, his parents and relatives affectionately called him Naren (Kakar 165).

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