# Critical Reader Response in Multicultural Children's Literature: Asian Indian Perspectives

Multicultural children's books that focus on Asian Indian Americans (AIA) can be utilized to highlight the cultural heritage and contributions of Indians to society. For learners who are cultural insiders, celebration of their heritage contributes to the development of positive ethnic identity. For cultural outsiders, such books and materials demystify unknown aspects of ancient culture and minimizes ignorance and misunderstandings. Indic-centric, multicultural children's literature is a tool that helps to contest the marginalization and misrepresentation of Asian Idians. This article presents and reviews multicultural children's literature that can be included in a Language Arts curriculum to develop appreciation for equity, social justice, and the celebration of diversity encompassing the AIA community.–Based on prior research (Smith & Iyengar, 2019), the authors posit that the reading of culturally affirming children's stories will provoke a paradigm shift toward the development of a positive ethnic identity and intercultural understanding.

*Keywords*: Asian Indian American, authentic multicultural children's literature, Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge, Pedagogy

## Context

The Asian Indian community, like other ethnic groups, has been vocalizing displeasure with the absence of cultural representation or community marginalization and absence in the school curriculum and public media (e.g., books, films). In an effort to contest various forms of symbolic violence (e.g., stereotyping, "othering") and microaggressions, there have been efforts to expand cultural representation of Asian Indians and other marginalized groups within the Ameri- and Eurocentric curriculum. Curricular multiculturalization (i.e., diversification), while fostering greater student engagement, lessens the likelihood of bullying (i.e., assault), microaggressions (e.g., name-calling) and acts of violence (e.g., pushing, shoving) (Dawidowicz, 2000) against marginalized groups. "Asian Indian American children are subjected to a variety of academic, psychological, and social obstructions along their road to academic achievement" (Iyengar & Smith, 2016, p. 115). To disrupt biases against AIA learners in US schools, a culturally focused curricular intervention is warranted. The co-authors offer the selected Indic-centric books as tools to aid concerned educators in the quest to groom students who are culturally accepting, respectful of diversity, and better informed of Indic heritage. This article outlines a literacy education intervention (i.e., reading, writing) to help disrupt aggression and disrespect for the AIA community.

Asian students (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Indian) are minoritized populations in the U.S. (Wright & Li, 2021). Their culture, heritage, world view, and epistemologies are not included in the school curriculum outside of their home

1 countries to any significant degree. Because they meet or excel the general
2 academic standards (e.g. reading levels in English, mathematical metrics) the
3 academic development or scholastic enhancement of these populations receives
4 scant investigation (Wright, 2021). One group that has received little attention
5 of educational research has been the AIA community in the United States.
6 While Asian Indian American (AIA) children have experienced general
7 success in the STEM areas, there has been little appreciable activity toward
8 increasing their engagement through the language arts curriculum (Shah,
9 2019).
10
11 **Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge**
12
13 Schools often adopt a curricular design that privileges the mainstream
14 (i.e., male, Anglo-Saxon protestant) at the expense of learners from other
15 cultures (Vlachou, 2004). This may disengage or de-motivate learners. A
16 positive alternative to a male, Euro-centric perspective is a framework that
17 embraces culturally-embedded skills, expertise, and world-views. Educators
18 can adopt culturally inclusive approaches that develop academic skills, readily
19 engage learners, while providing Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge (CRK). While
20 Rhetorical Education (RE) is instruction based on the stylistic features of
21 language to improve communication (i.e., written & oral), CRK is designed to
22 increase the students' knowledge and skills with the elements and features of
23 their heritage culture (Iyengar & Smith, 2016). Culturally efficacious
24 instruction (i.e, pedagogies that acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of
25 the diverse communities) present opportunities to advance literacy skills as
26 well as develop the critical thinking of learners (Ladson-Billings, 2021). It has
27 long been accepted that students who are mentally and emotionally engaged
28 are more likely to benefit from instruction (i.e., learn) than students who are
29 estranged or disinterested (Main & Pendergast, 2020). All students merit
30 culturally grounded literacy instruction, to include materials and activities
31 (Charity Hudley, 2017). Even a cursory review of any multicultural children's
32 books list would reveal a dearth of titles that reflect the heritage or the lived
33 experiences of AIA youth.
34
35
36 **Developing a "Critical" Lens**
37
38 For more than 50 years, research in schooling has documented the violence
39 (i.e., physical and symbolic), biases, and inequities against AIA children in
40 schools (Iyengar & Smith, 2016). Most children's book collections have few
41 titles that address and explore "Indic cultures." Learners from minoritized
42 groups like AIA, frequently suffer exclusion from curricular materials (e.g.,
43 books). The same void is encountered in classroom activities (Chakrabarti,
44 2008). Educators who are concerned with equity and matters of social justice in
45 school will contest or "problematize" stereotypes, hierarchical social stratification,
46 and stigmatization. Through intentional selection of classroom activities, they

1  challenge hegemonic practices (e.g., exoticization, "othering," marginalization,
2  trivialization) (Alim, et al., 2020]. The books and other materials selected for
3  inclusion, as well as the assignments, can scaffold students as they develop
4  their cultural and ethic identity (Barreto, 2021; Herrera, 2022).
5      Every society is plagued with societal issues that may be oppressive to
6  certain members. In Western countries (and other geographic áreas), Asia
7  Indian children confront issues of ethic or cultural biases, misrepresentation, or
8  aggression. Within the America school curriculum, diasporic Indian youth
9  (AIA) encounter few "official" spaces in which they see their culture. For that
10  reason, there is little opportunity to explore their identity through writing
11  (Iyengar & Henkin, 2020). This dearth of representation makes it difficult to
12  recognize a positive  positionality in society and schools (Iyengar & Smith,
13  2016).
14      Moreover, the dearth in representation is not limited to Asian Indian
15  children in America. In India, the English curriculum has an excessive focus on
16  canonical literature (Dutta, 2020) and a Eurocentric perspective that marginalizes
17  and eliminates diverse Indian communities (Elliott, 2020). Without an
18  intentional inclusion of Indic-centric texts, Language Arts activities become
19  culturally mypoic, undermining the students' culturally grounded engagement
20  (Carlos, Muniz, & Lameman, 2022). Though seemingly less damaging than
21  physical violence, acts of symbolic violence are both insidious and pernicious
22  (Smith & Iyengar, 2021) to the psyche. Whether at home or in the diaspora,
23  societal problems include disparagement of poor people, discrimination or bias
24  against different castes and classes, or dtraduction ad trivilizing women's roles
25  ad their cotributios to society (Smith & Iyengar, 2019). Schools can leverage
26  social maladies as opportunities for student engagement. Educators must utilize
27  curricular materials (e.g., multicultural children's literature, multimedia) to
28  inform children about injustices that deprive and exclude certain members of
29  our society from an equitable education or respectable social standing.
30      AIA  youth,  like  many  marginalized  groups,  are  victimized  by
31  misrepresentation or absence in curricular materials (Iyengar & Smith, 2016).
32  They are stereotyped and essentialized. Despite their generally high academic
33  achievement, their culture is noticeably absent in the curriculum. Concomitant
34  with  reading  are  classroom  activities  that  ignore  or  exclude  the  AIA
35  perspective.
36
37  **The Problem with the "Model Minority Myth"**
38
39      Because, as a group, AIA students enjoy a higher rate of academic success
40  than the average child in school, they are labeled model minority (Chou &
41  Feagin, 2015; Wright & Li, 2021). While many Asian groups have achieved
42  relative success including social mobility and economic prosperity, they are not
43  shielded  against  social  justice  issues  such  as  microaggression  and
44  misrepresentation (Iyengar & Smith, 2016). They may receive a token mention
45  in school curriculum (e.g., Malala Yousufzai, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi),
46  but continue to be exoticized in schools and society (Iyengar & Smith, 2016;

1 Sue, et al., 2007). Referring to the plight of Asian communities in the U.S.,
2 Tran (2021) argues that:
3
4     Asian Americans hold dual identities of perpetual foreigners and model citizens.
5     There is a tension between the two, and I acknowledge that the model minority
6     identity means that under-represented groups tend to get absorbed into broader
7     categories and their struggles erased (para. 1).
8
9     Recognition of the contribution of the inclusion of diverse, multicultural
10 books for Language Arts (LA) development may enable children from
11 minoritized communities to form a healthy ethnic identity (Greenfield &
12 Cocking, 2014; Iyengar & Smith, 2016; Smith, 1991).
13
14
15                             **Challenges**
16
17     Unlike many marginalized or minoritized groups in the United States, AIA
18 learners are not the object of research because of a lack of academic success
19 (Wright & Li, 2022). While there are AIA students who benefit from additional
20 academic support as a group, they are commonly labeled the "Model
21 minority." Wright and Li (2022) explain:
22
23     [T]he frequently perpetuated "model minority" myths…reveals the hidden
24     crisis and challenges that confront Asian American students, including:
25     academic difficulties, family problems, financial challenges, identity
26     issues, racial discrimination, micro aggressions, gendered obstacles, and
27     challenges learning English or losing their heritage languages, just to
28     name a few…Only by acknowledging the diversity and challenges
29     confronted with Asian students can teachers effectively address their
30     academic, linguistic, cultural, and emotional needs (p. 94).
31
32     With the perception of a monolithic, high-achieving ethnic community,
33 AIA students may be denied support services. Tutors, culturally and
34 psychologically affirming materials, and culturally efficacious instruction are
35 the kinds of support made available to *unsuccessful* students, and seldom
36 offered to those with acceptable or outstanding progress. In the absence of
37 alarming numbers, public outcry, or district mandates to garner school
38 attention, AIA students are left to their own devices to connect home
39 knowledge with school knowledge (Vygotsky, 1987).
40     The lack of support services notwithstanding, equally troubling is the
41 absence of pedagogies that engage AIA students in culturally affirming
42 practices and explorations. Reading, writing, listening and speaking can occur
43 around topics that reflect heritage or culture (i.e., Indic-centric) (Guthrie, 2015;
44 Iyengar & Smith, 2016). Moving beyond artifacts, all cultural communities
45 have a unique worldview (cf. Chinese/Caribbean) that reflect historicity,
46 epistemology, and other lived experiences. An additional element (also
47 ignored) for many groups is linguistic capital (Yosso, 2014). While English is

1   an official language of India, the multilingual country is a rich example of
2   "endoglossia" that connects with many students. It can be said that for AIA
3   students, their experience ranges from (a) aggressive neglect (i.e, emotional,
4   psychological) (Iyengar & Smith, 2016) (b) "othering" (Jensen, 2011) and (c)
5   bullying (Henkin, 2011) and (d) other forms of microaggression. The co-
6   authors propose the application of a Critical Reader Response (CRR)
7   framework in Language Arts instruction to address the anomalies as they relate
8   to literacy engagement  from an AIA perspective. We first discuss classic
9   Reader Response and its contribution to our understanding of the reading
10  process and later apply a critical lens (i.e., *Critical Reader Response-CRR*) to
11  the same SOCIO-COGNITIVE activity.
12
13  **Classic Reader Response**
14
15      Literacy scholars (e.g., Goodman, 2001;  Pardo, 2011) argue that reading
16  comprehension transcends recognition of words in the text. They highlight the
17  social or personal connections the reader makes to the ideas on the page.
18  Social-constructivists (e.g., Bakhtin, 19XX; Soler-Gallarp, 2020) highlight the
19  importance of a transaction or conceptual dialogic during the reading process.
20  It was the educator-scholars of ReadWriteThink (2022) that parsed the possible
21  transactional levels of reading as *text-to-self*, *text-to-text*, and *text-to-world*. In
22  this light, the reader composes or constructs their understanding of any text by
23  integrating their prior knowledge (i.e., personal, global) of the content.
24  Rosenblatt (1982) further details the transactional nature of reading
25  comprehension:
26
27          The transactional view of the human being in a two-way reciprocal relationship
28          with the environment is increasingly reflected in current psychology, as it frees
29          itself from the constructions of behaviorism. Language, too, is less and less being
30          considered as "context free" (p. 268).
31
32      From this socio-constructivist perspective, reading becomes a
33  psychological process of weaving the familiar (i.e., prior knowledge) with the
34  unfamiliar (i.e., words presented in the text). Even seemingly tangential points
35  acquire significance when amalgamated with additional elements (e.g.,
36  semantics, pragmatics, syntactic structures). Words and their meanings do not
37  rest on the page. Meaning is constructed through a transaction between the
38  reader in a given context (i.e., schema) that includes prior knowledge, and the
39  reader's lived experiences.
40
41  **Critical Reader Response:** *Culturally Efficacious Pedagogies*
42
43      AIA students successfully navigate curricula designed without
44  consideration for their background.  Without negating the academic
45  achievement of AIA students in Ameri-centric schooling, it could be reasoned
46  that instruction which acknowledges, celebrates, and/or venerates AIA
47  epistemologies and heritage (Canagarajah, 2022; Sefa Dei, 2020) would have

1 comparable results.  As an additional enhancement, an Indic-centric curriculum
2 would offer AIA learners the benefit of contributing to their healthy ethnic
3 identity and psychological development. Research shows that when students,
4 of any culture, receive instruction that acknowledge or incorporate their
5 heritage, the likelihood of engagement and academic success increases(Smith
6 & Iyengar, 2016). Though referred to by different monikers, current research
7 argues convincingly for instruction that honors and incorporates a multicultural
8 perspective. Ladson-Billings (2021), discussed pedagogy that would affirm
9 students from all cultural groups leading to an enhanced school experience.

10

11     Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually,
12     socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart
13     knowledge, skills, and attitudes…Thus, the students learn the significance of …
14     focal texts and materials] in forming institutions and shaping ideals while they
15     also learn that their own people are institution-builders. This kind of moving
16     between the two cultures lays the foundation for a skill that the students will need
17     in order to reach academic and cultural success (p. xx).

18

19     Children's literature, especially books written by cultural insiders, offer
20 unique possibilities for learners. Bilingual books/dual language texts present
21 subtle but powerful linguistic scaffolding; examples include novel sentence
22 structures, new vocabulary (both exo- and endo glossic), proverbs and
23 culturally framed adages that harness the wisdom of ancestors (□□□□□ □□
24 □□□□ □□ □□□□ □□□□ न □□□□□ [*Don't sew the cap before the child*
25 *is born]*). Picture books, along with clarifying a story, may present a new
26 object (e.g., historic figure) or concept (e.g., *Arangetram, Prana*) to AIA
27 learners far from their  heritage country. Those too young to read by
28 themselves can use the images for comprehension. By using culturally
29 embedded, illustrated children's literature, the learner is immersed in language,
30 phenotypes, characters, and settings that create an Indic-centric habitus for the
31 diasporic AIA learner. To be sure, learners may elect to interact with the text
32 through English, a heritage language, or commonly-spoken dialect. Also,
33 illustrated children's literature provides colorful images to stimulate
34     Select a set of culturally grounded texts to construct an Indic-centric
35 habitus for AIA readers (e.g., *Romina's Rangoli*, 2007; *Tan to Tamarind*,
36 2009). Reading materials that reflect the adages, historic events, celebrities,
37 and celebrations of India are recommended. Activities may be varied (e.g.,
38 silent and guided reading, group reading, buddy reading, letter writing).
39 Instruction might engage the learners in *Critical Reader Response* (CRR) by
40 incorporating AIA children's literature (chosen with cultural intentionality). By
41 targeting a specific cultural group,  the heritage of the marginalized community
42 is venerated, while the worldview (i.e., Indic) is normalized or quotidian. This
43 approach creates an affirming socio-cultural and psychologically nurturing
44 space through which AIA children can develop emotionally and cognitively.
45     Most people would assume that books for children should center on
46 angelic stories and pastoral images. Such is the preferred world for children.
47 Despite the best intentions of parents and teachers, the reality is that children

1 are exposed to acts of violence (e.g., New Town and Uvalde Massacres). In
2 the 2020's "Asian Hate" was frequently highlighted in the media as elders in
3 the Asia community were targeted for violence. Even the Oval Office maligned
4 those of Asian descent for the pugnacious and spurious "China-virus."

5     Event has passed, children and their caretakers must deal with the
6 troubling emotions and other forms of psychological aftermath. Equally
7 harmful, though less overt, are acts of symbolic violence. These include
8 marginalization, trivialization, or omission. Even as preschoolers, children may
9 become alienated from instruction, which privileges Euro/Ameri-centric
10 perspective or devalues other cultural groups. Symbolic violence includes
11 culturally dissonant (i.e, distal) curricular content. One strategy to mediate
12 strong or ambivalent feelings is through Language Arts, i.e., literacy activities.

13     Even seemingly innocuous matters may be the source of debate and
14 polemics. While Rosenblatt proposed reader response, the present authors
15 advance *Critical Reader Response* (CRR). When instruction is framed with a
16 CRR lens, students can explore and problematize social issues that affect their
17 lives. They are made to confront the social inequities or injustices that affect
18 people's lives (e.g., child marriage, child labour, human trafficking, religious
19 tolerance, women's rights). Through CRR activities (i.e., LSRW), the learners
20 receive guidance, scaffolding, and practice in literacy.

21     Rosenblatt (1993) also recognizes the role of prior knowledge that is
22 brought to bear on reading comprehension: "In order to shape their work,
23 people and the world, our past inner linkage of words and things, our past
24 encounters with spoken or written text" (p. 270). This explanation of reading
25 depicts a multi-level process that encompasses both physical (e.g., letters,
26 sounds) as well as social, and affective elements. It was later that Harvey and
27 Goudvis, (2007) and others would discuss a *transaction* between the reader and
28 the text. These textual connections (i.e., text-to-self; text-to-text; text-to-
29 world) are at the heart of Critical Reader Response. It is a Language Arts
30 instructional framework that advocates for the use of reading, writing and the
31 other linguistic skills to explore topics that have critical (i.e., social and
32 emotional) significance to the learner. As learners engage in concepts broached
33 by texts, they have the opportunity to develop literacy skills and to express
34 their perspectives or opinions on matters that affect their lives. When the
35 teacher scaffolds Language Arts instruction to facilitate students' examination
36 and their contestation of the norms of society, the instruction is within a
37 Critical Reader Response framework.

38
39 **Critical Reader Response: Critical Differences**
40
41     For many, literature instruction must focus on mechanics (e.g., spelling,
42 grammar) or aesthetics (e.g., characterization, setting, plot points), and other
43 "tools" of literature (e.g., literary tropes & devices) (Daniels 2002). Language
44 Arts provides an ideal space to review and critique the barriers, omissions,
45 essentialization, inequities, and injustices that students encounter in their daily
46 lives. While AIA learners, as a group, have not experienced academic

1 challenges, they may not be afforded opportunities to give voice to the kinds of
2 marginalization or cultural erasure they experience in schooling. When
3 teachers provide a critical framework (i.e., opportunities to question or
4 challenge common beliefs or practices) through Language Arts instruction,
5 they scaffold the development of a social consciousness that guides the learner
6 to "read the word and read the world" (Freire, 1985; Morrell, 2014).
7     For critical reading, literature instruction expands beyond mechanics (e.g.,
8 spelling, grammar), aesthetics (e.g., "the descriptions of the color" ) or
9 examination of other literary "tools"  (e.g., metaphor, trope)  (Daniels 2002).
10 The teacher scaffolds and guides students as they  reflect on and evaluate
11 situations presented in the text.  When readers prepare a critical response, they
12 may single out objects and symbols. Additionally, they offer a concomitant
13 discussion about the iconicity or social significance of the element of the story
14 under scrutiny, only "hone in" and its iconicity (Agee 2000). With a critical
15 approach, teachers help students to problematize and contest situations as they
16 write about social issues (e.g., slavery, reproductive rights) or personal
17 experiences, which mirror the drama in the text. This is Critical Reader
18 Response (CRR). Smith  and Iyengar (2021) posit that:
19
20     With a CRR approach, the text, with all of its literary elements, becomes a
21     catalyst for deeper reflection and ignites thoughtful disputations of social
22     responsibility, ethics, and morality. The reader is asked to articulate their
23     position, using both concrete support (e.g., documents, media) and general
24     knowledge (e.g., sanitation is important around (p.12).
25
26     The CRR framework for instruction, customarily, allows for a mentor text
27 (e.g., novel, short story) to be linked to an authoritative source (e.g., census
28 data, government documents). When used in tandem, the texts offer a broader
29 perspective on the social issues explored. The learners reflect, read, write, and
30 discuss what they learn through this critical Language Arts process. In the case
31 of enrichment for AIA learners, the teacher selects texts (e.g., children's
32 literature, videos) that highlight the Indic community, Indian heritage, and its
33 contributions to society. With other cultural iterations (e.g., Afro-centric,
34 Latinx-centric, LGBTQ+centric, gender-centric), the educator is encouraged to
35 make the appropriate selections of texts to stimulate critical engagement
36 among students.
37
38 **Procedure for CRR**
39
40     The children's books selected for instruction respond to various exigencies
41 (e.g., language development, vocabulary enrichment, aesthetics appreciation).
42 We provide a selection of appropriate children's literature at the end of this
43 chapter. The stories selected offer situations, a world view and or cultural
44 referents that create an Indic-centric *habitus* for learning.
45     For CRR, learners must receive reading materials that extend beyond
46 aesthetics or superficial artifice. Students who are critically engaged become
47 motivated to read and respond to the social, emotional levels of the text, as

1 they develop their cognitive (i.e., language arts) skills. For optimal instruction,
2 the teacher must provide socially responsive literacy activities that
3 *depathologize* and normalize the practices and beliefs of India. For ethnically
4 marginalized/ stigmatized learners, instruction should allow students to take
5 pride in their culture or contribute to reinforce their self-esteem. To implement
6 CRR, the teacher selects the children's literature with intentionality, that is, the
7 content must reflect or be Indic-centric. Through a culturally affirming space,
8 learners are free to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for their
9 heritage practices unfettered  by disparagement (e.g., "Indian with a spot or a
10 feather?) "or derision (e.g., "Your food smells weird").

11     Books that feature community members who have contributed to society
12 are good choices. To foster academic gain (Paris & Alim, 2014) especially
13 among ethnically marginalized groups, the curriculum should allow students to
14 take pride in their culture or to reinforce their self-esteem. To counter subtle
15 misogynistic microaggressions, special attention should be paid to locate titles
16 featuring women.  Examples include astronaut, Kalpana Chawla; for social
17 issues, educational activist, Malala Yousufzai; for leadership, Benazir Bhutto or
18 her predecessor, Indira Gandhi. The matrix below contains a selection of titles
19 that are Indic-centric and feature women as the protagonists.

20     It should be noted that the children's books, while offering elements of
21 literary aesthetics (e.g., character development, sentence structure), the focal
22 point rested on the social issues emerging through the text. For Indic-centric
23 instruction, reading and writing activities are chosen to facilitate the
24 exploration of oneself, lived experiences, and "Indian-ness." Students are
25 guided through reflections, contestations, or critiques of social norms that
26 affect their lives (e.g., child labor, child marriage, human-trafficking,
27 biculturalism).
28
29 **Modes of Communication**
30
31     To create a more inviting or affectively engaging learning context, texts
32 and writing activities are devised to privilege "an Indian perspective." As we
33 have argued, reading and writing activities acquire deeper meaning (leading to
34 greater enjoyment) when learners are free to explore their lived experiences or
35 emerging themes in the texts that are Consonant with their lives. As they
36 interact with texts through literacy activities, students venerate and expand
37 their "Indian ethos." Events can be explored unapologetically through an
38 Indian perspective or worldview.  Culturally-grounded literacy activities, (e.g.,
39 readings, discussions, writing assignments) build Cultural Rhetorical
40 Knowledge (Iyengar & Smith, in press). This knowledge of acts as a defense
41 mechanism against disparagement (Smith & Iyengar, 2016) confronted in
42 society and schools (Smith & Iyengar, 2021) while advancing the literacy skills
43 of the learner.
44     When seeking books with authenticity, there are meaningful characteristics
45 that build the Indic-centric perspective. The first consideration deals with
46 modes of communication. Firstly,  while Hindi and English are widely spoken,

1 they are only two of the many used daily. A first step toward authenticity is
2 the presence of words in Hindi. Words that haphazardly pepper the text (in
3 whatever language) are fetishes. Words must contribute to the story and form a
4 natural part of the discourse of the characters. Children's stories with Indian
5 themes published in the diaspora, (i.e., outside of India) may include Hindi
6 words for no obvious reason.

7      Depending on the level of fluency and perceived social context,
8 individuals will select any of their languages or translanguage (Garcia, 2009).
9 This term, popularized in the literature by Garcia (2020) gives recognition not
10 only to the linguistic code, but also the cognitive demands through which the
11 speaker is able to weave their discourse using more than one language.
12 Individuals weave, i.e., go in and out of the multiple languages and dialects
13 spoken in India. While India has Hindi as a national language and English as
14 the lingua franca in schools, government offices, and mass media, India has a
15 plethora of languages and dialects that must be acknowledged and integrated
16 into any authentic text. Children's literature striving to achieve the necessary
17 authenticity to construct a welcoming or indic-centric ambiance would be well
18 advised to include linguistic diversity of India.
19
20 **Visuals**
21

22      To establish the correct "ambiance" a book needs to weave visual cues
23 throughout the illustration. Perhaps the most significant visual cues refer to
24 phenotype. The characters depicted should be representative of the physical
25 diversity of India. To that end, characters of different hues, height and weight
26 should be found among the mages. Vestments (e.g., clothing, jewelry,
27 adornments) should be representative of the people of India. *The Neverending
28 Story* translated from Kannada to English by Ashwini Bhat and illustrated by
29 Chinmaye.

30      The children's picture book, *The Neverending Story* (translated from
31 Kannada to English by Ashwini Bhat and illustrated by Chinmaye) is a perfect
32 example of visuals that scaffold meaning and make cultural connections. We
33 find a young girl asking her grandmother for a story. The book cover has a
34 plump woman with commonly-worn clothing from the state of Karnataka: a
35 colorful sari and a red *kumkuma.* She has center-parted black hair and a red
36 *bindi,* The woman begins to plait the child's long braids as she tells her a
37 favored tale.

38      There are a myriad of culturally-based objects and experiences that, when
39 interwoven, create Indic-centric ambiance in a children's story. Examples of
40 images with the appropriate iconicity include jewelry (e.g., *Bindi,* glass
41 *bangles*), traditional clothing (e.g., *sari, dhoti*), religious adornment, seating
42 on the floor, veneration of the cow (e.g., *go pooja*), celebrations (e.g.,
43 *Deepavali*), veneration of the elders (e.g., *namaskaram*), all establish an Indian
44 ethos or Indic-centricness. Even when depicted with their quotidian activities
45 of home and community, the people (i.e., characters) contribute to the cultural
46 preservation of Indian heritage in the story (Iyengar & Smith, 2016).

1   To accurately and fully describe the Language Arts of India, the rich,
2   centuries-old oral traditions must be acknowledged. The illustrated children's
3   book by Manohar Reddy (translated from Telugu by  P. Anuradha) is *Under*
4   *the Neem tree* offers an example. In this tale, an elder gathers eager young
5   listener under a big tree for stories. With this children's story, the reader is
6   offered a glimpse of traditional practices and literacy development independent
7   of written text.  Throughout this illustrated book, like many others, the reader
8   finds description of performing arts (e.g., *Bharatanatyam),* flora (e.g., neem
9   tree), fauna (e.g., monkeys), natural wonders (e.g., Ganga River), famous
10  architecture (e.g., the Taj Mahal).

11  Texts chosen with intentionality facilitate CRR. While the original structure
12  of RR focuses on the aesthetics of literature (e.g., character development,
13  sentence structure), CRR instruction prompts deliberation on the social issues
14  emerging through the text.  For Indic-centric instruction, reading and writing
15  activities are chosen to facilitate the exploration of oneself, lived experiences,
16  and "Indian-ness."  Students are guided through reflections, contestations, or
17  critiques of social norms that affect their lives (e.g., child labor, child marriage,
18  human-trafficking, biculturalism). Texts and writing activities are devised to
19  privilege "an Indian perspective."

20  As an illustration of a Reader Response (i.e., RR) within a critical frame
21  (i.e., CRR), the teacher can ask students to write their earliest "memory of
22  storytelling."  The children would be asked to write about the location, the
23  people involved, and the nature of the story.  They could write about their
24  affect (e.g., "how did you feel at the conclusion of the story; "was there a
25  hidden message?").

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27  **Table 1**:  Lesson Plan: *Tan to Tamarind*

| Materials | Thematic focus | Activities |
|---|---|---|
| **Children's books:**<br>A. *Tan to Tamarind*<br>B. *Romina's Rangoli*<br>*Additional Materials:*<br>1) *writing paper*<br>2) *pen/pencil* | 1. Diversityé is the human condition<br>2. Biculturalism, positive ethic identity | Discussion<br>● Connections: social, personal, textual<br>● Writing genres<br>  ○ summarization<br>  ○ critical commentary (opinion piece/point of view)<br>  ○ Creative writing<br>    ■ a poem<br>    ■ transformation (rewrite) of a chapter<br>    ■ comparison to other text<br>    ■ Characterization |

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1 **Table 2.** *Writing*

| Activities | Suggested group-guiding prompts/questions |
|---|---|
| **Discussion** - Connections: affect, cultural/ | ❖ *Did you enjoy the reading? If so, what was some aspect you particularly enjoyed?*<br>❖ *What would you say was the main theme of the story?*<br>❖ *Was there an additional theme evident?*<br>❖ *Were there people, objects, or situations that reminded you of your community? /Do you think that all cultures have those features (e.g., people, situations, clothing)or is it unique to Indian culture?* |
| **Discussion** - Connections: textual, linguistic, social | ❖ *Did you find that the story referred to objects you knew but with a different word?*<br>❖ *Who was the leader/s/hero of the story?*<br>❖ *Why do you think the word "shero" fits the story?*<br>❖ *What did that character do so that you would say they were the leader?* |

**Writing**
- ❖ Summarization of the story (younger children may find it easier to draw an image
- ❖ Students may craft critical commentary in which they offer their opinion/point of view raised in the text (opinion piece/point of view)
- ❖ Students may compose comparative essays in which they compare and contrast the present text with another text (Imagine comparative essays that contrast observations written by a British officer and a text by an Indian covering a skirmish in India during the British invasion of 1ndia         during the colonial period)
- ❖ Characterization
  - ➢ For this writing task, the students must sieve through the text to locate descriptions of an individual character from the story
- ❖ Creative writing
  - ➢ a poem
  - ➢ a play
  - ➢ a song
  - ➢ a letter
  - ➢ a newspaper story/colum
- ❖ Transformation (rewrite) of a chapter: students may write a different ending to the story
- ❖ Translation
  - ➢ Children select different passages to translate into their community language

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**Suggested Questions for Discussion Time**

1. Who is your favourite character in the book? What was it about the character you especially liked?
2. The story mentions many different kinds of plants and foods. What foods would you use to describe your colour?
3. Is it wrong to describe skin colour by using plants and other foods?
4. Why do you believe the author is describing different skin colour?
5. Using the language of your home, rewrite the last poem in the book. Be prepared to share the poem in your language with the class or small group.

### Suggestions for writing Activity

*Summarization.* Students should identify only the most critical elements from the story and construct a text

*Critical commentary* (opinion piece/point of view). Students should select a social element embedded in the text (e.g., privilege of skin color). They will then write their opinion, in support or against the issue identified. They may also include their personal experience or those of friends or family

**Creative writing**
*Write a poem.*
1. Children create a list of their ten favorite plants/foods (e.g., mango/*Aam/Mavinakai/Mampalam/Keri*)
2. with a partner, put the word into another language (e.g., tea, carmel, coconut, orange, tamarind chai, lemon
3. Inviting two additional classmates, the students share their list
4. The group of four, using at least 20 words from the combined list, writes a poem.

**Characterization**

Select one character from the text. Using every point in which they intervene (e.g., dialogue, description of behavior, facial gestures, other drawings), create a description of that character. The co-authors offer the following fictional essay.

*In the story, "*Under the Neem Tree*, "Nainamma," the village elder, appears very calm and quiet. Because she uses her time to tell stories to all the children, I think she is a kind person. I think she is very old, like thirty or fifty years, because when the children come to her, they are obedient and listen closely to what she says."*

*Transformation* **(rewrite) of a chapter**

Children can write an alternative ending to stories. Stories may conclude with unexpected endings. Characters may behave out of character. Karma may appear in the transformed version. There are no rules to limit creativity.

**Research Writing**

Perhaps the easiest procedure is to use a children's tale that references a historic event (e.g., *Gandhi's Dandi Salt March, Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*). After reading and discussing the story children are asked to list critical moments in the story. They are then offered copies of newspapers or other documents that talk about the same event. They locate within the other published texts references regarding the incidents. They write an essay to compare and contrast the language they find in the texts (i.e., storybook documents).

**Textual Connections**
- ❖ *Text-to-self:* Children may write about how a personal experience is similar to what they have read in the text.
- ❖ *Text-to-text: C*hildren may write about what they read in the present text is similar to what they read in another book or text (e.g., newspaper).
- ❖ *Text-to-world:* children may write about what they read in the text is similar to a current event or real-world experience

## Conclusion

Reading and writing activities acquire deeper meaning (leading to greater enjoyment) as learners explore their lived experiences or emerging themes in the texts that affect their lives. As a function of their interactions around texts (e.g., essay writing, debates), students venerate and expand their knowledge of their cultural heritage and explore meaningful events within the context of their culture. Culturally-grounded activities, including readings, discussions, and writing assignments build *Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge* (Iyengar & Smith, in press). This knowledge of culture acts as a defense mechanism against disparagement (Smith & Iyengar, 2016) found in society and schools (Smith & Iyengar 2021).

Equally distressing, minoritized groups are often misrepresented and disparaged by careless publishers. To disrupt the pejorative and dismissive claims against the Indian community, home, and in the diaspora, it is imperative that children receive opportunities to explore, celebrate and venerate their people, culture, and language(s). By incorporating multicultural children's literature featuring Asia Indians, within an asset-based pedagogy,

teachers hold/give/obtain a powerful weapon against hegemony, oppression, and microaggressions against Indians, their heritage, and their contributions to society.




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