

Portrait of Childhood in Indian English Short Stories by Women

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The domain of Indian English short story has been dominated by women writers such as, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, R. P. Jhabvala, Shalan Savur, Prema Ramkrishna, Gauri Deshpande, Tara Deshpande, Anjana Appachana to name a few. So far as the current scene of the genre is concerned Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Shama Futehally, Shashi Deshpande and Gita Hariharan have emerged as significant names. Though all these writers make an impression of their individuality through their stories, there are various points in terms of themes and selection of style where they appear to coalesce with each other.

Nuances of the women's world; relationships, marriage, love and sex, living the dream of being educated and independent, lacerating patriarchy, representation of empowered as well as under privileged female characters; socio-cultural realities, cross-cultural interactions are some of the major concerns of their narratives. Of these many concerns, depiction of juvenile, and issues relating to them makes an important part. Children of different age groups; infants, toddlers, school-going kids, and adolescents are deployed to play varied roles in the stories. Apart from the subjects or situations directly involving children such as pregnancy, child birth and parenting, the women writers also explore other personal, professional, and socio-cultural matters by introducing the young characters.

The paper attempts to examine certain dimensions of the portrayal of children in Indian English short stories by women. For the purpose, the short stories of four recent authors, namely, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Shama Futehally, Githa Hariharan, and Jhumpa Lahiri have been selected. 'The Bats' and 'A Perfect Life' is taken from Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*; 'Portrait of a Childhood' and 'Jani's Morning' are stories from Shama Futehally's *Frontiers: Collected Stories*; 'Field Trip' is from Githa Hariharan's *The Art of Dying*; and 'Once in a Lifetime' and 'Year's End' are chosen from Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shot into fame with her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni is an India born writer who lives near San Francisco. Her short stories are highly acclaimed and have been American bestseller.

'The Bats' by Chitra Divakaruni is a story related by a child narrator who overtly shares her personal experiences (Galbraith, Mary) and offers an account of the violent torture of her mother by a short-tempered and brutal father.

She describes, in an utterly innocent way, the cruelty her father bestows upon the mother: "That year mother cried a lot, nights. Or maybe she had always cried, and that was the first year I was old enough to notice. (*Arranged Marriage* 1)

The child has just started to observe things and what she finds is ruthlessness, pain, wounds and wailings. She is forced to witness the unfortunate relationship of her parents, which is marked by discordance and wildness: "Things fell a lot when Father was around, may be because he was so large. His hands were especially big, with blackened, split nails and veins that stood up under the skin like blue snakes."

(2) Anger is an everyday phenomenon at the narrator's household. The father figure is described as having coarse, big hands and dirty, split nails. His taut and furious veins are compared to snakes. Obviously, the narrator loathes her father for his fierceness:

I was little and he used to pick me up suddenly and throw me all the way up to the ceiling, up and down... while Mother pulled at his arms, begging him to stop, and I screamed and screamed with terror until I had no breath left.

The child narrator takes the violence nonchalantly for she has experienced its horror too closely. Also she often parries from direct mention of it and partakes into the hideousness practices by the adults giving ironic overtone to the story: "Father always slept late in the mornings. Because he worked so hard at the Rashbihari Printing Press, where he was a foreman, earning food and rent money for us, Mother had explained." The narrator feigns innocence about her mother's vulnerability in the relationship. The mother, rather than fighting back or protesting, justifies the husband's actions and behavior for she is dependent on him for her living.

The affected innocence of the narrator mollifies the acrid details making the story bearable for the readers. Besides, it underlines the crisis of a lighter, more innocent world for a child whose tender years are thrown into the furnace of domestic violence; causing threat, terror, and fear, in the place of protection and concern: "I noticed something funny about her face. Not the dark circle under her eyes. Those were always there. It was high up on her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edges turning purple. It looked like my knee did after I bumped into the chipped mahogany dresser, next to our bed last month." (2)

"Childhood is meant to prepare us for adulthood... (and) is defined in opposition to maturity." (Georgieva, Margarita) But in the story, the child narrator reflects rare maturity which is, ironically, absent in the adult characters around her. As the narrator's mother escapes from the house, taking her along, to Grandpa-uncle's place, arriving to the dirty little station of Gopalpur in piercing afternoon, the narrator's stomach felt like "it had been empty for years" (5). Yet when the mother asks if she was hungry, she says "no".

The narrator's life illustrates a cursed childhood. However, she savors the carefree fun of the springtime of her life, briefly, when she stays with the Grandpa-uncle; "the oldest man in the whole world." (6) This period is the period of absolute mirth for the child narrator; she enjoys the little tasks assigned to her by the old man, his generous encouragements, roaming around the fields with him, fishing in the Kalodighi lake; "largest lake in the world", eating soft *chapattis* and spicy *alu curry* for lunch, drinking the sweet lake water which tastes sweeter than *sandesh*. These are the events which immensely gratify the narrator's craving for happiness, peace and love. Grandpa-uncle's promise that he would teach her to swim excites the narrator's tender imagination as never before and she develops a strong bonding with him:

Dragonflies flitted from lotus leaf to lotus leaf, the scent of *champa* blossoms lay lightly on the air, I leaned my head against Grandpa-uncle's shirt with its pungent

tobacco smell, and my whole chest ached with the wish that I could spend the rest of my life just like this. (10)

The village presents a contrastive ambience from the clamorous and nightmarish domestic world; and Grandpa-uncle's character is deeply contrasted against the parents of the narrator. Unlike them, he offers unconditional and pure love that the child needs. That is why the narrator wishes to stay in the village with Grandpa-uncle for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, chained in the fetters of social and moral obligations the narrator's mother goes back to her husband dragging the little one along.

The story, thus, presents a darker picture of a relentless adult world, which robs kids off their innocence for no fault of their own. Children inhibiting such a world are "encumbered with adult sorrow". (Georgieva, Margarita).

... one night I woke up to her crying, just like before. I lay there listening to those racking, muffled sobs that seemed to go on forever. It was like sliding into a dark bottomless hole. I gripped my bedsheets, twisting it around my knuckles as though it could save me. (7)

The story also illustrates failed parenting in a mismatched marriage. Divakaruni uses the "child's eyes" (Tammy, Mielke.) to give vent to her critical outlook to the concept of arranged marriages which encourages dependency of women on their husbands and prepares ground for their exploitation: "I wondered... how she'd paid for them and I then wondered how she would buy our tickets. She never had much money, and whenever she asked for any, Father flew into one of his rages." (3) The narrator functions more as a "literary construct" to highlight the idea of subjugation of women under conventional ethos.

'A Perfect Life' explores the concept of parenting by the depiction of Krishna, a stray child.. The protagonist narrator Meera is a young, independent, single, Indian woman who stays in America. One morning, while she prepares to leave for jogging, she finds a boy hiding himself near the entrance of her house; unable to decide what to do, and touched by the predicament of the boy, Meera gives him shelter in her house:

He looked about seven, though he could have been older. He was so thin it was hard to tell. His collarbones struck out from under his filthy shirt, and in the hollow between them I could see a pulse beating frantically. He didn't seem to comprehend anything I said, not even when I switched to halting Spanish, and when I leaned forward, he flinched and flung up a thin brown arm to protect his face. (78)

The boy seems starved and terrified. Meera takes him in with a desire to help him. But gradually she felt agitated at the idea of giving him up in spite of the serious problems keeping him will entail so far her personal and professional life was concerned. She did not know how will she explain things to her family and friends, but she knew she wanted to keep him.

The boy, on the first day, pees all over the bathroom and creates a dirty mess. But rather than getting angry Meera patiently guides him how to wash himself and how to clean the bathroom afterwards:

He wouldn't go into the tub by himself, so I had to make him. "I'm not going to hurt you," I kept saying. ... I put him in the tub and started soaping him, and that's

when I felt them, the puckers of old burns along his back. *Cigarettes? Who?* I tried to imagine someone- a man? a woman? holding him down, his body ... under the enormous press of that adult arm... then I was crying, holding him tight and crying, the lukewarm sudsy water soaking my white givenchy blouse...and I didn't even care. (82)

Meera feels all the more attached and protective to 'Krishna' (this is what she calls him) as she discovers that he had a painful past. Everything else turns secondary to her. While cooking her dinner she considers what Krishna may like. Though the name Krishna comes suddenly to her mind, she is surprised by its suitability as Krishna, the lord, was also raised by a foster mother. Krishna becomes a part of her life now: "Krishna and I had established a good routine. We ate breakfast together in the mornings and watched the news. While I was at work, he amused himself by looking through the pictures in the books I brought for him from the library." (87)

Under threats of social security and legal restraints Meera decides to adopt Krishna but she is strongly opposed by her boyfriend Richard who hints her that she needs a child of her own. This suggestion sets Meera thinking; nevertheless, she fails to visualise sophisticated Richard as a father while "it was much easier to picture Krishna":

He is running in the park. While I cheer, he pulls the kite up in a tight purple arc until it hangs high above his head, as graceful as any bird. On first day of school, I drop him off at the gate, hand him his lunch money with a kiss, and watch him follow the other kids in. He turns at the door to offer me a tremulous smile and a wave, scared but determined to be brave. (90)

Meera's dreams, nonetheless, do not materialise for in the process of adoption she is forced to give away Krishna under another guardian for a week. But unable to cope with the new caretaker Krishna flees never to be found again:

I searched for Krishna all that day, and the next, and the next. ...At night I ignored the stares of other tenants and sat for hours on the front steps of my building, my legs aching, my arms stinging from the thorns, waiting and hoping....But I did not really expect him to turn up. I wouldn't have come back either to someone who'd taken me in only to give me up, who had loved me briefly to betray me forever. (106)

Meera resolves not to have her own baby. This way she wants to keep her feelings for Krishna intact. Moreover, she also compensates for her unspoken guilt for having lost him even though unwittingly.

The story is as much about adulthood as about childhood. It underlines an adult's need for a child. Helpless Krishna, who seems to be tortured and neglected by his previous guardians, needs care and protection. He is revived and sustained by the motherly care of Meera, but Meera is equally sustained in the process. She finds fulfillment in her new role of a parent. It's only after the arrival of Krishna that she realises her vision of a "perfect life" which seemed incomplete without him.

Shama Futehally, born in Bombay (1952) and studied in Leeds, Futehally is a noted writer and translator. Her writing consists of novels, short stories, essays, and translation. *Tara Lane* and *Reaching Bombay Central* are her novels. Her short stories appeared in many anthologies including *The Inner Courtyard* and *In Other Words*.

Shama Futehally also comes out with an unmistakable understanding of children's mind and their world. She depicts with mastery the nuances of young universe in stories such as 'Portrait of a Childhood' and 'Jani's Morning'.

In "Portrait of a childhood" the narrator revisits her childhood days pinpointing the gradual development of the complicated perception leading to maturity. She begins by recounting the memories of her "uniquely beautiful" house with a lovely garden. The garden having "smooth surfaces of lawn...with dark and light patches...thick clumps and light stone path...pond with lily and kingfisher" (*Frontiers* 148) was especially dear to her "ten-year-old heart". Nonetheless, by the time the narrator turns twelve she learns that the field and gardens which was so much her "own" might disappear in the wake of construction projects. She is highly upset with the idea. However, she relieves herself by the thought that "large cool buildings...with potted palms, a chowkidar and shiny cars in front" will appear one fine day.

She finds the working up quite filthy: "...trenchers were dug, they filled up with rain water in the monsoon, and an assortment of cement-colored men, women and children arrived with their pots and pans...." Further, the newly constructed building, too, looked despicable "...with three or four grimy floors each, large black patches caused by the monsoon, and with clothes hanging all over them." (152) The pristine beauty of fields that the narrator takes for granted is ruined by the process of construction. Much in the same way the childhood serenity and purity of the narrator is dissolved under various "sights or episodes" causing "a helpless mixture of feelings".

Besides the natural environment, the narrator also comes to know about the dimensions of human nature and notions that rule the society.

Once the narrator and her friends face onslaught of pebbles by the "labourer's boys sitting on the unfinished balcony of one of the buildings", the narrator is extremely terrified and she hears someone angrily commenting; "this is what happens when you lift people out of their proper station." The incident rouses the narrator to the implication of class and disparity.

Pretence, further, makes its way into the behavior of the narrator. Unable to do anything about the embarrassing sight of "squatters" who used the fields near her house as toilet, the narrator "learns" to apologise with charm if guests arrived in her house. The narrator ascertains that it is of no use "expecting other people to be like us."

Next, the narrator's response to her Ayah, around whom her child life revolved, changes. Now, she starts to notice curry stains and a peculiar smell on her saris and dislikes to be hugged by her, whereas, as a kid she always clung to her. The narrator's behavior shows growing sophistication and snobbery. It also shows that with growth reasons and conditions begin to determine the choices of a person and emotion takes the backseat.

Later, the narrator encounters Mr. Ghote, her father's typist, on her visit to the factory premises with her father. Mr. Ghote seems to huddle among his papers with his tiffin carrier. The narrator could see "a brownish vegetable and two thick

chapattis" (153) inside the tiffin box and thus leaves Mr. Ghote embarrassed. Nevertheless, she herself feels deeply moved by the typist's quandary and wishes to run away from there.

On all such occasions which agitated her, the narrator takes refuge in her swing: "I went off to the swing to forget what the future was to bring." (152) The "swing" is a soothing companion which sustains the narrator against the bitterness of the life.

The protagonist narrator receives a series of shocks as she witnesses varied unforeseen colours of humanity and painful social realities. Matters such as pollution, class, poverty and disparity begin to vex her. Her ideal notions of living are battered against the realisation that most of the things were beyond her control. The story, in fact, is a recounting of some of the burning social events by the portraiture of "natural pity and wisdom" (Georgieva) of a growing child.

The other story by Futehally, "Jani's Morning" (*Frontiers* 155), centers round a particular morning in the life of a "two and half years" old boy Jani. It illustrates the intrinsic imagination of children.

The narration begins with an account of Jani's activities inside the bathroom which is more of a magic world for him with greeny-blue mug containing varied coloured toothbrushes and a mirror which showed another mug. Jani is overjoyed to see the mug which seemed to wait for him as he would wash all the brushes and keep them back in it. He is also fascinated by the steel tap and the gleaming line of water coming out of it. Further, Jani's day is made when his mother asks him to "put the paste on her (my) brush" and that she will also join him in brushing the teeth. Jani exults in the anticipation of the "tooth-brushing race" with his mother. But the mother seems to have forgotten her words as when she comes she starts putting everything back into the mug. On top of all, she squeezes her own paste. This is an unbearable breach of promise for Jani and he is struck with intense grief. He begins to cry loudly and is appeased only when his mother implores him lovingly and fulfills her promise by letting him press out the paste for her.

The writer here hints at the contrast between the nature of a child and that of an adult. A kid is driven by impeccable belief system. It discovers a world of miracle in the mundane happenings of world and thinks what was said will be done while "grown-ups" treat things pragmatically and are guided by conditions that's why with them "...suddenly everything was different." (156)

Besides, in narrating the story the writer makes smart use of "baby talk" (Georgeiva) style. One can notice this in the passage: "Amma stopped squeezing and looked at him with set lips. Jani couldn't stop the howl; it kept coming like endlessly puffy train. 'Stop yowling!' Baba shouted from the room. They were both 'like that' today."

The style is marked by use of simple words, short sentences and children friendly imagery such as "puffy train". The writer frequently refers to bright colours such as, "round red gulpy", "green paste", "a green snail" to paint the world of a child.

One can also observe the misplaced punctuation, typical of small children's way of talking, in the extract: "...but Jani's chest was full of sobs.... Because that was the

best part of all. To squeeze Amma's green paste, to hold the tube tightly in both hands till his very last breath was gone. And then the slow beautiful reward crawled out, a green snail off paste made by Jani. " (156)

Githa Hariharan was born in Coimbatore, grew up in Bombay and Manila, and now lives in New Delhi. She has written many novels including *The Thousand Faces of Night* which won her Commonwealth writer's Prize for best first book. She has published two collections of short stories.

Githa Hariharan's short stories strongly smell of relationships, family, grandmother, and current apartment culture. But she is also very keen on representing children; her *The Winning Team* is a short story collection for children, where a number of stories revolve round child characters. In *The Art of Dying* also she portrays child characters. In the story 'Field Trip' the writer reflects on certain childhood experiences that melt prejudices and shape perception much in the same way as Futehally does in her 'Portrait of a Childhood'.

The story outlines Krishna's first confrontation with village life as he comes from Bombay to visit his Sundaram Mama in the village. For Krishna, a city-bred, sophisticated child dreaming to be "an astronaut or at least a space scientist", the trip proves to be an eye opener. He is surprised to see village boys who ridicule him for being a namby-pamby boy who "couldn't swim" or "clime a tree without feeling dizzy." They also pass derisive comments upon him such a "little girl, where is your skirt?" (24) Krishna, too, despised the village boys for they do not know English and keep dirty appearances.

Embarrassed that his sophistication was considered as his weakness he feels the need of learning swimming. Luckily, his Mama offers him to take to the tank and teach him how to swim. However, Krishna feels shy in having to swim amid the instruction and commentary by his Mama's friends and is relieved when he finds nobody near the tank.

In the story Krishna is a medium through which Hariharan renders her criticism of the present city culture and highlights the polarity between the village and the city. The observation about

Krishna that "he could learn in secret" is directed to the city culture which endorses egocentrism and secrecy so much so that urban children prefer to stay closeted in their houses rather than opening up to the environment. As a result, they are "shy" of vigorous physical activity and "fearful" of the forces of nature. At village tank Krishna mistakes a straw touching his legs under the water to be a snake and get extremely terrified; but Mama finds out that it wasn't actually a snake.

Krishna's Mama, Sundaram represents village lifestyle and belief. He takes Krishna for visiting the field where they meet Karuppayya, the caretaker of the farms, and his family. During their stay at field, Krishna is offered a vigorous oil massage by Vengamma, Karuppayya's sister-in-law, which he dislikes. Also, he is not happy in sharing his bed with Vengamma. He wishes he could go back to Bombay sooner and continue his studies to pursue his dream of becoming an astronaut.

Nevertheless, he has deep respect for his Mama. He learns that villagers were full of appreciation for his Mama because he knew the old ways and stayed among the peasants whereas his brothers knew nothing of family land. But to Krishna his mama was a hero as he "was not just one of the village pillars. He was something more – a strong-armed, honour-bound man, like a hero. (28)

One finds a gradual shift in Krishna's views. On his way back from the farms, on the bullock cart driven by his Mama, he seems to overcome his biases about the village life. Rather, he appears concerned and attached to the village:

"He chewed and chewed on the cane ...he saw before him...himself, alone. For a minute he felt ...frightened,...But when he saw the village at a distance, coming toward them with every jolt, his lips stopped trembling....his eyes became cool and intense behind his thick spectacles, a little like his childhood hero." (31)

The writer hints at the fact that villagers have greater physical and mental stamina for they work in fields and stay amid the Nature. Also, one sense a suggestion that dreams and aspiration of children living in city may be higher but they are rarely inclusive. That's why Hariharan makes her child character, city bred Krishna, realise the values of village culture.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Pulitzer Prize winning author who came in limelight with her very first short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Her novel *The Namesake*, and another collection of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* have, too, been extremely acclaimed. Set in New York, Lahiri was born (1967) in London to Indian parents.

Lahiri's children are set in her unique diasporic situation; combating with the culture and language of a new place or struggling to come out of the aboriginal garb, they demonstrate the peculiar adjustment under the impact of two different cultures. There are two stories in 'Hema and Kaushik' section of *Unaccustomed Earth* that exemplify this observation.

In 'Once in a lifetime' Hema, the narrator, shares a young girl's fancies, insidious jealousy, fears, and affections ensued by a person of opposite sex. Presumably, talking to Kaushik, as a grown up now, she reveals how enamoured she felt to him while he happen to stay at her home in America. She hints how their families, both being Bengali, identified with each other in the foreign land. But staying under the same roof they, too, had to make certain compromises according to the other. Hema partakes that she was disturbed by the "immediate schoolgirl attraction" she felt for Kaushik whose voice has "deepened" by the time and it was no longer a child's: "I was used to admiring boys by then, boys in my class who were and would remain unaware of my existence." (*Unaccustomed Earth* 234)

One finds that Hema's attraction to Kaushik is rooted in her crisis of being a single child and being an Indian living in America. She did not receive any attention from the American boys in her class; they remained indifferent to her because they felt she belonged to a different culture even though Hema no more feels connected to India. It is this dilemma of an immigrant's situation that is presented through the child character of Hema in the story. It is notable that Kaushik is referred to belong to "the world of her (my) parents" that is not her world. However, Kaushik could still promise

some identification and connection which was unavailable elsewhere in the alienated situation of Hema. This was the reason why Hema feels interested in Kaushik in spite of wide differences that lay between them in terms of habits and choices.

Hema is, initially, envious of Kaushik because she has to give up her bedroom to accommodate him. Moreover, she is stunned when she learns that Kaushik's parents were in no hurry to get him admitted to school: "to my added chagrin, you were not expected to do anything around the house, never to return your plate or glass to sink, never to make bed...." (*Unaccustomed Earth* 240) She also finds Kaushik insolent and "moody" flaunting strong differences based on likes and dislikes as compared to her own:

You ate enormous amount of fruit whole bunches of grapes, apples to their cores, a practice that fascinated me. I did not eat fresh fruit then." And "you seldom set foot in the kitchen, but that evening you hovered there, excited by the promise of trifle, which I gathered you loved and which I had never tasted." (248)

Kaushik liked living in India while Hema found her "trips to India dull." Yet Hema does not express her disinterest in India for the fear of upsetting Kaushik. Moreover, her parents feel slighted by the extravagance of Kaushik's parents but it does not affect Hema. She did not mind Kaushik staying with them: "In my quiet, complicated way I continued to like you, was happy simply to observe you day after day." (246)

Hema intimately observes Kaushik for he was the first person, near her age, who has come in such a proximity to her. The need of companionship and cultural similarities draws her closer to him.

In the other story, 'Year's End', Kaushik takes up the role of the narrator and informs Hema about the second marriage of his Father following death of his mother and his consequent exposure to the new relations ; his father's new wife and two young stepsisters, Rupa and Piu. Kaushik confides that his relationship with his stepsisters remained overshadowed by the fact that their existence in his life was related to his mother's demise.

Rupa and Piu are innocent and sweet girls who quickly earn Kaushik's affection in spite of his feeling of awkwardness, and inhibitions, towards them. He immediately identifies with them for they also possessed "knowledge of death" (of their father); this awareness of "... something that had broken too soon and had not mended marked(ing) them in spite of their lightheartedness.": "I felt suddenly vulnerable in front of two little girls I'd known less than a day and yet who understood me better, in many ways, than friends who had known me for years." (*Unaccustomed Earth* 274)

Rupa and Piu had just arrived America from India and are apprehensive about going to school for they fear that all the students will laugh at them owing to their Indian accent. Kaushik assures his sisters in spite of himself: "Look, I know how you feel. A few kids might laugh in the beginning, but it doesn't matter. They laughed at me too. I came here from Bombay when I was sixteen and had to figure things out all over again. I was born here but it was still hard, leaving and then coming back again." (274).

Further, Rupa and Piu respond enthusiastically when Kaushik treats them with donuts. They are sensitive children; they are concerned about their mother. When asked to take another donut Rupa declines though she expresses her wish to take one home for the mother. Also when Kaushik fails to understand why Chitra bothered being all alone in the house, Rupa explains "She is afraid because she cannot see neighbors." When Rupa and Piu learn that Kaushik has declined the idea of going to Disney World they feel "devastated". They insist that Kaushik come with them; "they needed Kaushik (me) to guard them." (282) These girls are affectionate and attached to Kaushik for he makes them comfortable in the face of new world and new relation.

Their nature is also marked by curiosity; they were curious to know about the narrator's mother. Piu is already interested in her photographs and asks with reverence and sadness about his mother as if she'd actually known her.

This inquisitiveness leads them to search for the photographs of Kaushik's mother, hidden in a shoebox, leading to Kaushik's fury. He not only rebukes the girls for daring to touch his mother's photos but also rants about their mother's inferiority to his own.

This event changes the dynamics of their relationship for good. Following it, Kaushik runs away, leaving the two girls all alone at the time of night and does not return for weeks. He feels ashamed and embarrassed though, and realises that he owes Rupa and Piu an apology. When he meets them on his convocation, however, they behave most politely but distantly with him. Kaushik learns that they had not told their mother or father about the unruly behavior of Kaushik that night. It fell between just three of them; "in their silence they continued to both protect and punish" Kaushik:

"The memory of the night was now the only tie between us, eclipsing everything else. In their utter polite way they made that clear. They spoke only to each other, and though their accents had turned American, my stepsisters, the closest thing I would ever have to siblings, seemed more impenetrable to me now than just after they'd arrived." (293)

The girls show sensibility and maturity in keeping the incident to themselves; they seem to understand Kaushik's crisis, nevertheless, they could not attempt to revive the old familiarity with him for he has broken their trust. The story demonstrates complicated familial relation produced by settlement in multi-cultural sphere.

To sum up, the representation of children in Indian English short stories is informed by the deep insight into the nature and matters related to the juvenile such as parenting, child-adult relationship (dichotomy) and the process of maturation. However, the aim does not so much seem to be the "rendering of childhood as accurately, or as artistically as possible (Gooderham, Wayne). This can be seen as part of "shifting focalization" as most of the stories depart from symbolic use of child character. Children appear more as "agents of message and catalyst of adult emotion often responsible for sending heavy, politicized messages" such as in 'The Bats'. They become means to highlight social issues as in 'Portrait of Childhood' and sometimes through them the writers illustrate the subtleties of cross-cultural interactions; and relationship as in Lahiri's stories. In this role children are more intertwined with the adult world.' (Loo, Hanna)

Most of the stories discussed here also use children as narrators to introduce “multiple points of view” as the child narrators create necessary distance for the writers to observe the characters and situation and comment upon them. In addition, children can both be “reliable and unreliable” as narrators and present the goings-on of the adult world through a filter of irony.

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