



**The Case of “Missing Parent(s)”:
Children’s Literature in Indian
Writing in English**

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Abstract

This paper explores the transition from the theme of the “lost child” to that of “lost parent(s)” in children’s literature in India. In the case of the “lost child,” the child is lost but the parents/family are together, and for the lost child it is s/he who is alone and has lost his or her parents. Therefore, in traditional narratives, if a child is lost, a child is lost to his or her parents, and so are the parents lost to the child. But in a strange reversal of this pattern in contemporary Indian children’s literature, it is now common that the child is present but the parent or parents are missing. In this leap, the writers of children’s literature have deviated from the established structure of “home-away-home” in which the child is lost to a condition when either or both parents are missing. Children’s literature is traditionally embedded within the paradoxical nature of the adult/child binary and it is common for writers of children’s literature to discard the adult and centralize the child. However, despite the peripheral treatment of parents in children’s literature, this paper argues that the absolute necessity of parental care still remains for the child “inside” and “outside” the text. The need for parents still remains the same in contemporary times, yet children’s texts also show how a child is affected when either or both parents are absent. Contemporary Indian children’s literature addresses this issue of “missing parents” by introducing “alternate parenting” into the narrative.

Keywords: missing parents, ‘lost child,’ ‘home-away-home,’ thanatophobia, alternate parenting

What is a Child?

An experiment. A fresh attempt to produce the just man made perfect:
that is, to make humanity divine.

George Bernard Shaw, “Treatise on Parents and Children” (1914, 45)

If the “lost child” is a common trope in children’s literature both in the East and the West, then the theme of the orphaned child or child who is alone is also not uncommon. To list some of the more prominent examples, Brothers Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel” (1812) and Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Princess and the Pea” (1835) revolve around orphaned children; Charles Kingsley’s *The Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863) deals with a boy Tom who sweeps chimneys; John Richard Jefferies’ *Bevis, The Story of a Boy* (1882) presents boys spending summer without adult supervision; Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) presents a journey away from home; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* (1886) portrays seventeen-year-old David Balfour, whose parents die; *The Story of Pinocchio* (translated into English in 1892) is a tale of a puppet boy’s traumatic adventures and social transformation; Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) presents an orphan, Anne Shirley; J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911) shows Peter Pan as the leader of lost boys; Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) projects an orphaned Mary Lennox and Eleanor Hodgman; Porter’s *Pollyanna* (1913) portrays the experience of orphaned Pollyanna; J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) presents Holden Caulfield lost in New York; C. S. Lewis’ *The Narnia Series* (1950-1956) shows Lucy and her kin fighting by themselves in the fantasy world of Narnia; Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) and *The BFG* (1982) center around orphan protagonists; and J. K.

Rowling's *Harry Potter Series* (1997-2007), the latest addition to a long list, makes Harry Potter, an orphan, the hero of the epic series. In surveying this extensive range of literature, the reader steps into what may be termed a Derridean "absent present" (Spivak xvii), and comes to the realization that children's literature is not only about the "lost child" but also about the "lost parents." Children's literature attempts to do away with adults and in this attempt even parents are often discarded in the development of the narrative. Yet that same development invariably requires a form of dialogic interaction: a child usually cannot exist by itself and consequently, many stories involve incidences of befriending animals, other children, or fantastic beings, alternate parents filling the gap due to the absence of real parents. In the paradigm of the "lost child," sometimes the child has been separated from the parents or they are both dead, at other times one parent is dead, and step-parents cause the child to be lost, and in yet another pattern, there is the death of or separation from one parent. This paper examines these different situations and their impact on the child.

The Case of the Lost Child: Separation from Parents

The British specialist in children's literature, David Rudd suggests that homes become "the originary sites of stories" for children (83), a popular pattern that Perry Nodelman further traces through the theme of "home-away-home" commonly used in children's literature:

"Home" needs "away" to define its meaning, and "away" means nothing in particular if there is no "home" to read it against...there are not just two main components to the structure of the texts, but three: home and away, yes, but also, "home again." And the home one returns to after being away is not and cannot be the same home one left. (65)

Canadian academic, Mavis Reimer, also notes the recent preoccupation of writers "in mobile subjects and in the relation of mobility to home [which] is not unprecedented" (108). The resolution of such narratives is centered on the "ultimate arrival at a dwelling place" (Reimer 107). Such a dependence of children on parents is a universally acknowledged fact. It is a dependence that manifests itself not only bodily, but also emotionally, psychologically, socially, financially and morally, yet this relationship between parents and children is also clearly reciprocal. There is an indispensable support that parents provide through their love, care, security and vision and if this support is missing then the "most striking long-term effect of love withdrawal is fear" (Kohn 30). Joel Best, in his book *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child-Victims* (1993), refers to the various images of children whose parent(s) are missing and when they lack this

parental protection they are represented as: “the rebellious Child,” “the deprived child,” “the sick child,” “the child-victim” (Best, 4-5). These categories indicate the various vulnerable positions that a child may encounter once the proper guardianship or parenting is missing and also indicate that consequently, these “missing children” may face “several misadventures” in the absence of such protection (Best, RCM 102-105). Addressing the “vulnerability to external (traumatic) force and the potential for growth and (self) development,” Mark Froud, in assessing the overall impact in terms of individual and collective development also notes that it “is the potential, in other words, for the child to become lost, which is essential to a modern psychological identity” (3).

One such example is the short story, “The Lost Child”¹ written by Mulk Raj Anand, and published in 1934, a text which coincides with the period before India attained its independence from Britain, and reflects the simple psychology of a rural people. The story echoes the fear of getting lost or losing someone in a large gathering, such as a fair or mela,² that lurked in the hearts of most Indian people of that time. Anand describes the condition of a child lost in a fair: “He turned to look at his parents. They were not there, ahead of him. He turned to look on either side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them” A man who saw him weeping bitterly in the fair comes to his rescue. Every time he is asked a question by the man, every time there is one helpless answer: “I want my mother, I want my father!” (Anand, “The Lost Child”). Earlier, enjoying the sights and sounds at the fair, the child had been attracted towards sweets, garlands, balloons and swings but, finding himself alone, he wants nothing but his parents. It is not just that as a child he depends on his parents for everything, but that they represent to him the security of his home: they are the only people he knows at the fair, and without them he is both physically and metaphorically “lost.” The story reveals the deep emotional trauma of parental absence. Yet, though the very thought of losing parents would make any child nervous and insecure, one may also argue that in such circumstances it is not only the child but also the parents who are lost, an absence which must be interpreted equally on both sides of the parent-child binary relationship. Similarly, “The Day of the Match” in R. K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* (1935) adroitly portrays the image of the lost child. Swami runs away from his home but, once in the forest, is struck by hunger and nostalgia: “What fine things the cook prepared! And how mother insisted upon serving ghee and curds herself! [...] A fierce hunger now raged in him...The only important thing now was home, and all the rest seemed trivial” (Narayan 185). Yet when he decides to travel home, “the road seemed to be longer,” “Night fell suddenly” and “his heart beat fast” (Narayan 186). Hearing the “sinister whispers” of the forest, his body failing in strength, he reaches “an unknown distant road at a ghostly hour” (Narayan 188; 190). Hopeless and helpless, he “collapsed like an empty bag, and wept bitterly. He called to his father, mother, granny, Rajam and Mani” (Narayan 190) but no one hears him, and no one comes to his aid. When he faints and falls, he is noticed by Ranga, the cart man who takes him to his home. In this brief description of Swami’s escape from

home, Narayan exquisitely presents the psychological condition of loss and nostalgia: Swami's running away from home disturbs his family who worry about his well-being just as Swami too realizes that life outside the domestic security of his home is difficult and he cannot survive without the support of his parents.

The separation from parents in Kalpana Swaminathan's *Jaldi's Friends* (2003) is seen through a dog's experience. It is a story of a dog's world that exists parallel to the human world, each often interacting with the other. The story has at its centre Jaldi, a railway puppy who lives with her family, her mother (Kismet), and father and her kin Yogi, Masti and Slow. She interacts with the humans around her but is also aware of "how pups are taken away from their parents, and never see their families [for the] rest of the lives" (sic) (Swaminathan 7). Her family knows that Jaldi possesses special powers and needs to undergo an "Expensive Education" (Swaminathan 8) and, as a consequence, Uncle Musafir takes her away from her family to Rani to be recruited as a secret agent where Rani of Bandalbaaz informs her about the Bombay criminals, JP and BB and asks Jaldi to break their nexus. Ultimately, Jaldi must endure great hardships to catch the criminals and to save her friends and herself, an analogous reference to the harsh realities of urban existence in India, as Kalpana Swaminathan notes in her Author's Note about the novel: "I wrote this book in the aftermath of 6 December 1992, a time of great bitterness and disillusionment. Bombay's twelve million, betrayed by their mothering city, fragmented by hate and suspicion." Swaminathan portrays the dark and bright aspects of Bombay's life for strays through the adventurous happenings and mishaps which occur in the lives of these animals. Michelle Superle, an English academic exploring children's literature in her book *Contemporary English-language Indian Children's Literature* writes that *Jaldi's Friends* shows an "impact of communal tensions and poverty in Mumbai" (12) and notes that "Instead of exploring communal tension that inspired her [Swaminathan], she creates an allegory: a children's animal story in which dogs, humans, birds, an elephant, and a donkey cooperate to protect Mumbai from criminals" (Superle 12). Jaldi is taken away from her biological family but makes an alternate family with her friends King Ilango, the elephant, Kaka, the crow, Jenny, the donkey, Tiger and others. The novel ends in the union of Jaldi's real family and this alternate family and shows that both of them - one's immediate biological family and one's extended communal family- form crucial components of existence.

Anita Nair's *Living Next Door to Alise* (2007) gives twin accounts of separation: one of a human child, the other of a baby elephant. Siddharth, the protagonist, befriends a baby elephant, Alise. Their bond is so strong that Siddhartha likes the company of Alise better than his parents and both of them run into the jungle. In the jungle, Alise is able to meet her family which makes Siddharth happy but ironically he is now separated from his own family. The situation seems to be the perfect reunion until they encounter a Bearded Bandit, "the murderer of countless elephants and the robber of their priceless tusks" (Nair 86) yet though Siddharth is scared, Alise is able to catch the bandit through her intelligence. In this narrative, the absence of a mother and

father gives Siddharth the necessary impetus to produce strength in the face of adversity, though he is not alone as he has Alise to help him. Nevertheless, even though Siddharth enjoys the company of Alise he also realizes that life without his parents is difficult and, as such, when Siddharth is discovered by his father, he is guided by this new-found knowledge: “I didn’t have to pretend. I truly was relieved to see him. Everything would be all right, now that he was here” (Nair 89-90). The novel begins with Siddharth’s parents criticizing him for being so different from the other children of his age but ends with his parents’ understanding and celebrating these differences and the bond that Siddharth shares with his elephant friend, Alise. Siddharth’s need for parental guidance and for social interaction are thus balanced - as in Kalpana Swaminathan’s tale - by bringing them together. Separation has not only made their bond stronger, it has also made Siddharth more confident and his parents more accepting of him as he is.

Harshikaa Udasi’s *Kittus’ Terrible-Horrible-No-Good-Very Mad Day* (2017), as the struck-out title suggests, is a humorous response that has at its core the underlying seriousness of the “lost child” story. One-legged Kittu calls his family “the World’s Most Chaotic Family” (Udasi 9-10) because of their clumsiness and the noise they make. His family decides to go on a trip to Panna, a small town in Madhya Pradesh also known for its National Park for tigers but Kittu is left behind at a dhaba on the highway in the middle of nowhere and realises that he is lost. Madhav, the icecreamwala, is shocked at the child’s plight and, though a few minutes after their departure the family realises their error, Kittu is rescued by Madhav and his terrible, horrible day turns “mad” upon his discovery of a skate-park. Madhav’s daughter, Mad, is also mad about skating and, despite his disability he begins to skate. The novel ends in reunion: Papa holding “his son in tight embrace,” Ma wailing, and Madhav and Mad also crying along with them (Udasi 77), and is again a projection of the twinned aspects of separation in the parent-child relationship. Contradictorily Kittu enjoys his day without his parents, while his parents, once realizing they have lost their child, agonise over him. The narrative displays the kind of freedom a differently-abled child outside the protected and secure supervision of his parents, arguing for the need for parental supervision but, equally, the need for independence in the growth of any child, no matter the circumstance.

It has been observed that in the threads of the concept of the “runaway-child” and “missing child” the “children and parents confront one another as two classes in which all the political power is on one side” (Shaw 7). As such, the escape for a child is also an escape from the “civilizing mission” of an adult world and, as David Rudd points out, “the children need a separate space, one that openly marks its standing as marginal, and outside the symbolic” (97). Clémentine Beauvais, who has exclusively worked upon the didactic aspect in children’s literature, uses terms to express this educational power imbalance which include, “didactic other,” “adult-child didactic relationship,” “didactic power,” and “didactic adult” (Beauvais 38) and points out that the “educational “message” delivered to the child [...] is therefore articulated around a time-slip” (Beauvais

46). Furthermore, this mono-directional didactic relationship has also at times expressed a colonial motive in which childhood “increasingly looked like a blank slate on which adults must write their moral codes” (Nandy 15). The final union of a child with its parents settles their uneven power equation. As Shaw writes:

For though parents and children sometimes dislike one another, there is an experience of succor and a habit of dependence and expectation formed in infancy which naturally attaches a child to its parent or to its nurse (a foster parent) in a quite peculiar way. (Shaw 65)

Thus if the parents have “power to control,” a child has “power to be lost” but a child’s reunion with family after a separation creates an equilibrium between the opposing binary of “power to control” and “power to be lost.”

The Case of Missing Parent(s)

In contrast to the popular narrative trope of “home-away-home,” Western children’s literature has also produced the concept of the “transnormative family”, as may be seen in many fairy tales. Elizabeth Thiel, in her book *The Fantasy of Family: Nineteenth-Century Children’s Literature and the Myth of the Domestic Ideal* (2008), defines the “transnormative family” as “those family units headed by single parents, step-parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings or the state that exists in opposition to the “natural” and “complete” family of husband, wife and children” (8). She adds that the basic characteristic of the transnormative family is the “temporary or permanent absence of a natural parent or parents” and “the presence of a surrogate mother or father” which takes place “by the relocation of the child to an environment outside the “natural” family home” (Thiel 8). Thus, there is a conscious effort by the writers of nineteenth-century children’s literature to “frequently incorporate a longing for the familial ideal which is both nostalgic and poignant, a manoeuvre that reinscribes the desirability of the idyllic domestic sphere and introduces a sense of loss into the narrative” (Thiel 159). Thiel sees the transnormative family life as a “resistance to a happy-ever-after closure” and one which “recognizes the child’s predicament, incorporates a sense of hope, and, perhaps, some guidance for survival” (Thiel 163). The image of the “orphaned child” also opposes the image of the “romantic child” (Thacker and Webb 14) which marked the birth of children’s literature.

The theme of “missing parent(s)” in children’s literature centers around physical, psychological, emotional, moral, spiritual, philosophical and social survival. It also indicates how a child develops a perception and “creates a world of his own...seriously... [out of the] visible real world” (Freud 3-4). Jean

Piaget refers to this cognitive aspect as ‘perspective taking’ in the context of child development (Piaget 85-86) and refers to this as “the Socialization of Individual Intelligence” (Piaget 157). The writer Alfie Kohn argues that the process is to “step outside one’s own viewpoint, to consider how the world looks to another person” (Kohn 200) and that there are three aspects of ‘perspective taking’: how the world is seen (spatial aspect), how it is thought about (psychological aspect) and how it is felt about (emotional aspect) (Kohn 200). Thus, a child’s position is shifted from an object to a subject as s/he acquires the status “as reader, as critic, as creator of meaning” (Lundin 147) both inside the text and outside the text.

Thacker and Webb have also associated childhood with the “innocent apprehension of the world” (13). However, the experience of childhood in India appears to have become increasingly problematic in recent times, so much so that an “innocent apprehension of the world” often seems flawed and impossible. Conditions which permeate Indian society, particularly at lower socioeconomic levels, such as poverty, illiteracy and child labour need to be tackled simultaneously to prevent the exploitation of children and ensure their well-being (Satyarthi 44). In addition, there has also emerged the need to save children from being commoditized (Gupta, “The lost childhood in India”). The visibility of children in the public sphere has increased in the past two decades and there are many media “stories of children being violated in some way – children dying of malnourishment, children run over by vehicles, children neglected by parents, children committing suicide” (Wadia, “Confining Childhood in India”). In many instances, a “culture of fear” for “children in schools” has emerged (Mukhopadhyay and Mukunda 275) and the parents are haunted by the threat of “stranger danger” for their children (Moran, et al 11). In essence, the “power, crime, violence, selfishness, greed, materialism, sex, and hedonism” (Zipes 16) and the abduction, rape, molestation and mutilation which mark the fairy tale genre are now the reality for many children in India. As such, the “moral didacticism” of traditional fairy tales, it would seem, has failed to teach a ‘survival strategy’ to children and, as a consequence in the recent children’s literature the writers have shifted away from this moralist position, which has been reflected in:

... a marked transition from “moral didacticism” to “critical didacticism.” The children are not given moral lessons in isolation from reality. The reality is represented through fiction, fantasy and child psychology, and the ‘shadow text’ in these books tries to generate in children a critical awareness about the world around them. (Verma, “Children’s Fiction in India”)

The Case of No Parents

Children’s literature theorist, M. O. Grenby writes that the “paradox of the family story genre is that it probably includes more accounts of family disordering than family coherence” and that there are numerous incidences

of family disruption through the removal of parents and children “from one another by death, divorce, evacuation, flight, abandonment or some other mechanism” (Grenby 119). In such a scenario, a child turns into an outsider in its own world as is argued by Christine Wilkie-Stibbs in her “outside theory”, which is associated with a displaced child or a child without parents:

Child-outsiderness [...] manifests itself in the child who is adopted, in care, orphaned, homeless, a refugee, seeking asylum, part of a diaspora, immigrant, displaced, or dispossessed; is the victim and/or survivor of violence, abuse, poverty, neglect, or war; or is silenced, rendered invisible, or specially controlled and silenced by certain power structures, ideologies, or belief systems. The concept of child-outsiderness is different from, and more than, the mere “Other” (though the latter is subsumed in it), because, unlike the “Other” of psychosocial theorization, which is by definition locked into the subjective, self-Other binary, child-outsiderness incorporates into itself also the pluralist context and the third-person objective view of that condition. (Wilkie-Stibbs 10)

Anita Desai’s *The Village by the Sea* (1982) presents the case of “mal-parenting” as the mother is perpetually sick and bedridden, and the father is a drunkard, as a result of which the burden of carrying the family falls on the elder children in the house, Lila (13 years) and Hari (12 years). The novel portrays “the family story [...] increasingly dominated by an attempt to depict the sort of lives that children really led, perhaps especially working-class children, and the problems which afflicted real families and the emergence of different patterns of family life (Grenby 135). The “mal-parenting” (due to marital conflict, the absence of parent(s), or the presence of depressive elements in the family) is bound to affect the emotional and psychological condition of a child (Pantelis, et al 635; Morrison 44; Cummings, et al 479; Mustillo, et al 169-170). In Desai’s text, as a result of their childhood being lost, Hari and Lila acquire psychological maturity prior to their years. They take care of their mother and sisters, Bela and Kamal and to them home becomes “a site of ambivalence” because it is transformed from “a place of great familiarity” to being “defamiliarized (or perhaps defamily-ized), becoming strange” (Rudd 83). The dysfunctional presence of the parents is equivalent to their absence as they are unable to take care of their children and the family is struck by poverty, hunger and emotional deficit. Because of their dire circumstances, Hari decides to go to Bombay to earn for his family and begins to work in a hotel. Lila, on the other hand, remains at home, worried about Hari, looking after her mother, father and sisters, emphasising the narrative implication that children “become independent survivors seeking new support and emotional networks” (Bradford, et al 132). In Bombay, Hari learns to mend watches and decides

to open a poultry farm in his village and returns home with money and hope for Lila and his family. Thus the novel develops around a family story which begins “with asundering but proceeds to show how the protagonists continually strive to regenerate their family in revised form” (Grenby 119).

The Anglo-Indian author Ruskin Bond’s *The Room on the Roof* (1956) and *Vagrants in the Valley* (1987) present a ‘gypsy trope’ in children’s literature yet both texts also deal with the themes of loss, separation and authoritarian cruelty through the orphan experience. In *The Room on the Roof*, Rusty lives under the strict guardianship of Mr Harrison, who controls and dominates him: “He [Rusty] had, in a way, been bought up by Mr Harrison. And now he was owned by him. And he must do as his guardian wished” (Bond, *RR* 9). Mr Harrison beats Rusty for disobeying him and for playing with the local people, their relationship being an example of the association of “the domestic violence in the family...with the father” (Strenberg 284). Unable to bear the tyranny any longer he leaves his house and begins to earn for himself by giving tuition to Kishen, with whom he subsequently develops a close bond: “But Kishen was a brother more than friend. He loved Rusty, but without knowing or thinking or saying it, and that is the love of a brother” (Bond, *RR* 73). The narrative proceeds from focusing on an orphaned adolescent to an orphaned child when Kishen’s mother, Meena Khorana, dies and his father, who never bothered about his son, abandons him. Rusty and Kishen are left together as a pseudo-family to help and support one another. The second of these novels, *Vagrants in the Valley*, begins with Rusty (now 17) and Kishen (now 15) going to Raiwala. Both are destitute, without a home and without any shelter: “Kishen had run away from a drunken father. He possessed distant relatives, but he preferred the risks and pleasures of vagrancy to the security of living with people he did not know” (Bond 122). As is revealed in the narrative, “[t]he death of parents leaves the children like castaways, exiled from the world they have known” (Grenby 123), creating a ‘gypsy trope’ in the two texts that shows a “move from a culture of dependency to an age of ‘post-emotionalism’” (Bradford, et al 135).

Kamala Das’ novella, *Panna* (2010) depicts a relationship between a brother and sister. Moti loves her sister very much and works very hard. The two siblings belong to a poor fisherman community, yet Moti “had all the money to buy his sister the things she wished for” (Das 2). He spends his nights with her looking at the sky and telling her myriad stories, thus performing the parent’s role in Panna’s life, but when the monsoon comes and the fishermen go to the shore to catch fish, the weather scares Panna and she asks Moti to take her along with him. She waits for her brother to return and, while waiting, becomes fascinated by the seashells lying on the shore and collects them and makes “colourful heaps of them under a palm tree” (Das 5). As time passes the boats start returning, fishermen go back to their homes, but Moti does not come. Night falls, but Panna keeps on waiting and falls asleep. When she wakes up she finds herself in the Kingdom of the Fish King and Fish Queen. Panna’s journey ahead in the fish kingdom is not only an extension of her lonely individual existence but also symbolically indicates that she has now grown up representing, as Eric Tribunella suggests,

that children's literature introduces a traumatic loss as a cultural *use* "to induce melancholic maturation" (xxix).

The Case of No Father

Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella* (1974) introduces the character of the mountain girl, Binya, who is about ten years old. Binya lost her father two years after her birth and lives with her mother and brother, Bijju in a small house in a small village. Yet the death of her father does not seem to make a real difference to their lives: "They had three terraced fields on the sides of the mountain... [and had] not enough to sell in the town, but enough to live on" (Bond 4). Just as the father is absent from their lives, so too is the mother absent from the narrative and they are depicted as independent children taking care of their cattle, playing with each other, busy in their own adventures in a lifestyle that bears close resemblance to Elizabeth Thiel's reference to the Victorian ideal of "the Divine Home" in which "the home is revered and the hearth is sacred" (4). The same holds true for the pure-hearted Binya and Bijju, who enjoy their simple life, yet the absence of a father is bitterly felt when they encounter Ram Bharosa, the shopkeeper of the tea-shop on Tehri Road, whose covetous eyes fall on Binya's blue umbrella. The clear implication in the narrative is that they fall prey to Ram Bharosa because they have no father to defend them and become easy targets. When Ram Bharosa asks Rajaram to steal the blue umbrella, a fight takes place between Bijju and Rajaram but Bijju defeats Rajaram in fight and gets Binya's umbrella back. The story very realistically develops a strong moral lesson in that Binya and Bijju are able to resist the corrosive forces of materialism and stand for a humanitarian approach in life but the story also suggests the hidden "spiritual parenting" (Kapoor 2010; Mathews 2010; Anthony 2010) that the two central characters have undergone. While Ram Bharosa is taunted by village children as "a man who had sold his soul for an umbrella" (Bond 70), Binya also asks herself whether in fact she had not been too materialistic: "had she loved the umbrella too much? Had it mattered more to her than people mattered?" (Bond 71). Finally, in an affirmation of her essential belief in humanity, she forgives Ram Bharosa and reconciles with him.

Polie Sengupta's *Vikramaditya's Throne* (2007) portrays a girl named Upa, whose father has been kidnapped and, as a consequence, she stays with her mother in her grandma's house. Here, it should be noted that the perception of childhood in India is very different from Shaw's observation that, "our practice is to treat the child as the property of its immediate physical parents" (6). A child in India is owned not only by his or her immediate physical parents but also by grandparents, relatives, and the broader community in general. This novel emphasises that relationship between grandparents and grandchild, a relationship which Eleanor Kay MacDonald explains in the following manner: "Children [...] gradually become aware that their parents' connection to their grandparents is like the connection they feel to their own parents, and they begin to develop

a sense of the bonds that tie generations together” (155). In relation to parenting in India, Meenal Atul Pandya has talked about the “cultural parenting” that it is a practical way to bring culture into everyday life, but one which also forms attachments and disciplines the child through the use of cultural beliefs. Devdutt Pattanaik comments on the use of mythology in parenting, noting that: “Parents, most often because of their own lack of knowledge, turn the sacred into scary” (“Parenting with Mythology”). This “cultural parenting” becomes apparent in Upa’s interaction with her grandparents. They prepare her mind for a cultural icon as an alternative parent as *Vikramaditya’s Throne* deals with the absence of a father by introducing the fictional character of Rumpelstiltskin into the narrative who, along with other people around Upa, tells her about the great deeds of King Vikramaditya. Upa is able to face her situation through the lessons learnt from these stories: on the one hand, Vikramaditya serves as a cultural icon; on the other hand, Rumpelstiltskin provides a fatherly substitute.

Sampurna Chatarji’s *Mulla Nasruddin* (2008) depicts a boy, Shashank, who is struggling, along with his mother, to emerge from the grief of his father’s death. Shashank, while solving a math problem, encounters a turban which later transforms into Mulla Nasruddin in a story which provides an example of, as British academic Cedric Cullingford notes, “children reading in their own way” (Cullingford 13) in order to face the “unreal” through “reading” and to “listen” to the uncanny. The bond that Shashank develops with Mulla Nasruddin is that which exists between books and children because: “Books become for children the overcoming of loneliness, the portable video, the entry into friendships which do not depend upon other people” (Cullingford 16). Mulla Nasruddin is an enactment of what reading can provide to children, embodying “a coherent and recognizable depiction of the real world, reminding children of the shared human experience and of the fact that no one lives in isolation” (Cullingford 12). Mulla Nasruddin is a fatherly substitute, who teaches Shashank how to come to terms with the real world. In a literary sense, he “socializes” Shashank, who otherwise would be reduced to his own solitary world:

Young children need stories to outline, structure and clarify their own perceptions of the world. To receive this sense of story they need reading adults, people who will share with them, by telling or by reading the familiar outlines of meaning that enable children to cope with the challenges of the world” (Cullingford 12).

Mulla Nasruddin fulfills this need in Shashank’s life through his anecdotal accounts.

The Case of No Mother

Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest* (2010) tells the story of a differently-abled female child who lives with her father, a forest officer, in the jungle in the vicinity of Kurumba tribals³. Conflict in the father-daughter relationship arises when Atiya discloses her desire to learn the flute, which goes against her father's will:

‘No!’ he said again, ‘And that’s final. I refuse to see any more of my family ending up on stage. Not after your mother vanished with her dancing ambitions. No way!’
 ‘But Papa,’ Atiya said calmly. ‘I’m not interested in going on stage. I just want to enjoy playing it, that’s all.’ (Broome 70)

Although Atiya's father is loving and caring, he is depicted as a man without hope, who is unable to come to terms with his separation from his wife. Atiya's ambition to play the flute generates an insecurity in her father and a fear of being left alone because he fears that Atiya, whose face reminds him of his wife, will follow the track her mother had chosen: “Are you also going your mother's way? Music, dance, the stage? I cannot stand the idea of losing you too!” (Broome 78). The novel provides a complex and sensitive treatment of the issues of tribals, the animal world, old age, and differently-abled children. Ultimately, Atiya learns to play the flute secretly and acquires such grace and serenity in her music that she is able to calm down Rangappa, the mad elephant. Seeing her play the flute so well her father feels a pride in Atiya which overrides his previous concerns (Broome 180, 182).

Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of the Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) present two different cases of fatherly presence and motherly absence: In *Haroun* the father is physically present, but he is psychologically absent; in *Luka* the father is ethereally present but physically absent. Both the texts are characterized by a strange caricature of the mother and, in essence, both novels “fall into a Freudian Oedipal narration with their accounts of ‘fatherhood’ and patriarchal succession as the only viable means for progression towards identity formation and the continuity of culture” (Bradford, et al 145). In *Haroun and the Sea of the Stories* Haroun's mother, Soraya, runs away with her tenant Mr Sengupta and deserts Rashid Khalifa, his father (*Haroun* 21), who is so shocked that he loses his gift of telling stories. Haroun must travel to the Land of Kahani to restore his father's storytelling talent and there he encounters Princess Batcheat, who becomes symbolic of his mother because of their shared trait of singing. In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, Luka sets out on a journey with his father's apparition, called Nobodaddy, to restore life to his dying father. In the narrative, Luka encounters Insultana of Ott, who reminds him of his mother (*Luka* 69). Luka tries to recall the name of the Queen, until he finally says: “I know the Insulatana's name... ‘Soraya!’” (*Luka* 84). Both of

Rushdie's texts convey the importance of "the line of succession from father to son" and that the mother is repudiated (Bradford, et al 145). The denial of the mother in the narrative is symbolic in that the maternal figures are "seen as inhibiting separation and subjectivity and as providing a dangerous image of women that must be encountered by a masterful man in what may be called heroic Oedipal resolution" (Bradford, et al 145). The portrayal of Soraya as Princess Batcheat and also Queen Insultana is satirical and contradictory because she is presented as an ugly singer and a ruthless Queen, respectively. Princess Batcheat sings her song in such a discordant tone and voice that it becomes almost unbearable for the people to listen to her and when she is abducted by Khattam-shud, the villain, this is seen as "good riddance, especially with her nose, her teeth ...and...her singing, you wouldn't believe how horrible" (*Haroun* 106). Similarly, because she is "the most brilliant and sharp-tongued abuser of them all" the Queen of Otters is called "Insult-ana" (*Luka* 77). Thus, in these stories, the mother is not only significantly absent but also misogynistically caricatured as an object of ridicule and sarcasm, negatively reinforcing the patriarchal connection and lineage between father and son at the expense of the absent – and denigrated – mother.

Conclusion

Eric Tribunella, who specialises in trauma theory in children's literature, connects the twin purposes of trauma for the protagonists and for the readers. On the one hand such an experience is useful and instructive as a "method for becoming a mature adult;" on the other hand, it also lends a seriousness to children's stories by making them artistic and literary (xxix). The trauma in the narrative leads to the physical and psychological maturation of the children depicted – "Children are compelled to give up being children; they must sacrifice themselves" (Tribunella 133) – and the loss or absence in the narrative assists the child in mastering a "physically bewildering relationship by providing a story that reflects their experience of perpetually "losing" the body that is always in flux" (Tribunella xxxvii). There are two forces acting simultaneously in the texts: adult didacticism in connection with, but also in opposition to, the child's resistance to losing his or her childhood. British educationist, Clémentine Beauvais, argues that this tension in children's literature is "the didactic discourse, followed by future liberation through child might; consequently, it constructs a divided child. However, and this is paramount, it also constructs a divided adult" (58).

It is also important to note that trauma in children's literature is essentially a "familial" or "parental" phenomenon which results from separation from parent(s) or through their death. Children's literature is grounded in an adult/child binary; its function is to subvert this binary and this can only be done by the exclusion of parents, who are the primary adults with whom most children have contact. If the trope of the *missing child* emphasizes the adult's concern for a child, then the trope of *missing parent(s)* asserts the

importance of parent's presence in a child's life. Therefore, it is not only the childhood and the child that is sacrificed in the process of maturation, but also the parents. The trope of missing parents in this range of stories makes the intent in children's literature very clear, in that it represents the Emersonian strategy that in order to be independent one has to rely on oneself. At the same time, this "self-reliance" of a child is not isolated but symbiotic of parents' support. Children, then, are predominantly affected by a "thanatophobia"⁴ of their parent(s)' death and, in the case of "missing parents" it is this phobia that a child-reader encounters in a text. The missing parent(s) trope thus reinforces the primeval childhood fear of the death of parents and the anticipatory trauma that is always present in children, and which is constantly repeated and re-enacted in children's literature both in India and across the globe.

Notes

- 1 The significance of the story to an Indian child is emphasised by the fact that it is prescribed in the syllabus of C.B.S.E. board in ninth grade and U. P. State Board for students of Intermediate grade.
- 2 The rural fair in India is referred to as *mela*. The *mela* represents the fun of being in a crowd of strangers and seeing or buying toys, food items or ornaments and clothes as well as the chaos of hundreds of people from far off places getting together. The *mela* is a trope in Indian folk culture/ literature for a space where people lose or find loved ones.
- 3 *Tribals* in India are also known as *adivasis*. They are the original inhabitants, the indigenous people and live in the remote and interior locations isolated from rural and urban life. Tribals or Adivasis have their own language, religion, festivals, cuisine, dance and music ("Kurumba").
- 4 "*Thanatophobia*" is a fear of death. This fear of death in children is found most commonly in relation to their parents and exists in the psychology of almost all children (Matthews, "Young Children and the Fear of Death"; Meleen, "Fear of Parent Dying"; O'Callaghan, "Easing Worries around Death with a Child"; Himelfarb, "Children and the Fear of Death"). Children's literature incorporates this fear either as the actual death of parents in the text or through the separation of children from their parents.

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