

**"That is not cha-na, its chhan-na."**

**M**y 11-year-old daughter born and raised in America corrects the white traveler on television sampling street food somewhere in northern India. Our family is of Indian origin. We speak Tamil and English at home sprinkled liberally with words from Hindi that have made themselves part of our lexicon. "Chhan-na" is one of them.

"Deepavali, not Diwali..." I correct my youngest daughter when she comes home from school telling us stories about this festival of lights celebrated in India. I feel at once emotional and distant from my culture. We talk about the various versions of why Deepavali is celebrated, we talk about how rituals and customs are different in different parts of India. We also talk about the influence of local foods, belief systems, and culture in shaping some of these traditions.

I grew up in the Indian 70s on a steady diet of books written by white men and women. These books, true to the times they were set in, featured white boys and girls with blue eyes, blond hair and freckles. These books always had the father(s) going to work while the mother(s) took care of the home and hearth. The food was mostly sandwiches, tea, currant buns, scones with marmalade and occasionally treacle. The stories I read had girls like me going to boarding schools, carrying tuck boxes, planning midnight parties and having all sorts of adventures. Any character of color in the books were incidental and menial. That it was racist is something I understood as an adult, but bought into as the truth when I was a child.

The books were a portal into a world I was not privy to. I enjoyed these adventures very much, but I also grew up with the notion that adventures were not for girls or women like me. My first exposure to books featuring people like me was *Malgudi Days* by R. K. Narayan. The book was simple, the names familiar, the cultural conditioning so like mine. The illustrations made the book feel like home. In fact, this was a book I have gone to many times in my life when I have wanted to feel home.

As I grew up, I slowly accumulated books written by Indian authors. Some were raw, earthy, poignant and filled with pain. Others

PARENTING | Teaching Diversity

# We Need Our Own Heroines

Diversity in children's literature enhances a child's feeling of identity and belongingness.

By LAKSHMI IYER

took me to a post-colonial Bengal and steeped me into a culture so far removed from my own. Yet, the foods were familiar, the sounds and textures of the scenes reminiscent of the world I grew up in. I craved that connection, that view into worlds like mine yet not so much that it did not feel like an escape.

My children (not yet teens) view India as a kaleidoscope, an ever-changing, vibrant canvas upon which stories take shape. Their views are colored by the lens through which they learn these stories. As a desi parent, the stories I tell them are shaped by the ones I grew up listening to and reading. As a parent, when I look to buy books for my three daughters, I am looking for many things. I look for a well written book. I look for representation. I look at whether stereotypes exist and if they do, what kinds of stereotypes make their way into the books, and by way of the books, into my children's lives.

Seeing protagonists with their names, reading about the foods they eat at home, seeing illustrations that mimic what their home life is like, all make my children "see" themselves in stories, in adventures and in complex plots. It gives their imagination wings to fly. These stories give them permission to imagine themselves as heroes in these stories. It reminds them that brave, courageous, beautiful, successful, meek, mild and complex people are people like them. People who look like them, talk like them and eat like them.



When my children see a working mother, a frazzled mother, a mother who is not self-sacrificing, it reminds them that the trope of the all sacrificing mother is not necessarily true. When my children see the fathers in the books they read, tend to and nurture their families and children, it does a little bit to further the notion that the home is not purely a woman's domain. It makes my children view the world as equitable and makes them demand more from the people around them.

**B**ooks, like movies and society around us, shape our thoughts and instill ideas that last a lifetime. Books that foster curiosity about the world serve as ways to travel without leaving the confines of the home. Books that feature children and adults who are differently abled, neuro-diverse without making the story all about the difference tell the readers that all lives matter, that being different is to be celebrated.

Diversity in children's literature and all literature in general is only a good thing. The world is a far more exciting place to be when it is inclusive. When we as authors, publishers and distributors diversify the stories and characters, we all win.

Last year, I was afforded the opportunity to write a book for children.

One of the first things I did was to make sure the book I wrote did not dilute the essence of who the characters were for greater accessibility. The parents in the story were amma and appa. The children ate dosai and chutney. Amma and appa often referred to them as pattama and chellam.

Did that make it hard for a lot of children to follow? It probably did, but, I had children in the classrooms I spoke to come up to me and ask what an idli was. It kick-started conversations on what kind of places Chennai and Coimbatore were. Most importantly, children here in America read about brown children who grappled with problems just like them and lived happy, joyful lives just like them. Not only do we need diversity in literature, we need joy, we need adventure, and we need our stories to be universal. ■

*The writer is a software engineer and author*