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## Pedagogy, Resistance And Social Justice In Jwala Kumar And The Gift Of Fire: Adventures In Chambakbagh (2018)

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### Abstract

The cardinal focus of this article is to investigate into the pedagogical aspects of children's literature with special reference to Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Chambakbagh* (2018). Shekhar's novella constructs subaltern spaces by depicting alternative childhoods in India and resists the generalised concept of childhood. Story telling is perhaps the best way to teach the children and children's literature serves this pedagogical purpose. Shekhar's novella offers a story of friendship, love, and fulfilment. In his novella, Shekhar has woven a magico-realist plot to allegorise the collective dreams of the poorest section of Indian society far away from the financially secure middle class of the metropolis. The baby dragon in the novella symbolises the fulfilment of those dreams.

**Index Terms-** pedagogical, magico-realist, ideological, heterogeneity, childhood

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the introductory chapter of *Literature for Children*, Peter Hunt rightly opines: "children's literature is an amorphous, ambiguous creature; its relationship to its audience is difficult; its relationship to the rest of literature, problematic" (Peter Hunt, 1).<sup>[1]</sup> Children's Literature' produces spaces of intersection, inclusion and resistance. The primary focus of this article is this amorphousness, this ambiguity and incoherence. What 'children's literature' presupposes for its dissemination is a holistic approach to 'childhood' and 'literature' for children. The notions of 'Childhood' and 'children' preconceived in Children's Literature are guided by political, and ideological dimensions. Besides, the idea of childhood is subjected to evolution and change and therefore the children's books 'do not now do the same things that they once did' (Matthew Grenby, 02).<sup>[2]</sup> Both Hunt and Grenby argue in favour of the multiplicity of the genre viewed within the gamut of history and temporality. From a spatial and cultural perspective, the heterogeneity of childhood is also visible. The reign of the dominant cultural voice now meets strong resistance, and the notion of collective childhood is put under erasure. The article offers a cultural reading of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Chambakbagh* (2018) to show how the novella resists the dominant cultural voices in Children's Literature from India and offers the depiction of a different childhood from the margins of India. *Jwala Kumar* (2018), Shekhar's first book on children embodies the story of hope, dream, friendship and fulfilment in a magico-realist narrative. In the novella, the children are not gifted with ideal childhood found in the metropolis. They belong to a poor family and

have to face lots of problems to make their ends meet. The subalternity of the children in the novella challenges the notions of collective childhood that underlines cultural aporia and *Différance* (Derrida). Shekhar's novella offers an alternative portrayal of childhood and therefore serves pedagogical purposes: "Jwala Kumar is a must-read for the young to ask questions and to observe the differences in childhoods across India" (Bilal)<sup>i[3]</sup>

The notion of childhood is not independent of culture, class, race, ethnicity etc. Similarly, the notion of children is equally problematic. The 'children' in the children's literature is a political construction set up to meet the genre. Therefore, children in conjunction with literature may not objectively refer to a mere age group. Children's literature follows certain conventions that are the by-products of political economy, culture, and ideology. Children's literature in different countries acquires different contours. For example, the African children literature is quite different from the Aesop's fables first published by Caxton in 1484. While Aesop's intention was to teach moral volition through his fables, the African Children's Literature embodies postcolonial overtones.

Children's Literature in India emerged in its present form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal. Ramendrasundar Tribedi (1864-1919) coined the term *shishusahitya*<sup>ii</sup> (Bengali for Children's Literature).<sup>[4]</sup> Swapna M. Banerjee in "Children's Literature in Nineteenth- Century India: Some Reflections and Thoughts" offers a genealogy of children's literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries India<sup>iii</sup>. The first Children's periodical in India was *Pashwabali* (Animal Tales), in which fables were collected and published by Lawson and subsequently by Ramchandra Mitra. Another early example of children's literature in India is the periodical *Digdarshan*, edited by John Clark Marshman. The first attempt to consolidate children's literature was the establishment of the Calcutta School-Book Society in 1817. The members of the society were Radhakanta Deb, Ram Kamal Sen, Maulvi Hyder Ali, Maulvi Mohammed Rashid and Mritunjoy Tarkalankar. Ram Kamal Sen published "Hitopodesha" a collection of 49 fables taken from Bishnu Sharma's eponymous book. In 1847 Vidyasagr published "Betal Panchabinsati" in 1847. Keshab Chandra Karmakar published "Balak Bodhetihās" in 1850. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dakshina Ranjan Mitra published *Thakurmar Jhuli* in 1907. Upendra Kishor Roy's *TunTunir Boi* was published in 1910. Children's literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India was mostly written for the purpose of disseminating moral teaching for an ideal childhood. Later, with the publication of Dakshina Ranjan Majumdar's *Thakurmar Jhuli* in 1907, direct moral teaching took the form of allegories. The ways to an ideal childhood and upbringing, despite it being infested with toil and trouble, was now spearheaded by the allegorical fairy tales. *Rupkatha* (Bengali for fairy tales) replaced the direct moral voice and the trend soon infected most of the other writers of the time. Many stories in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907) such as "Kalabati Rajkanya" (Princess Kalabati), "Lalkamal, Nilkamal," "Sonar Kathi, Rupar Kathi" (The Wands of Gold and Silver), "Kiranmala" etc mostly deal with the conflict between good and evil with good emerging victorious at the end. Children's Literature in India has mostly embodied the dominant cultural voices. Besides, disseminating the moral codes of perfect childhood, early children's literature from India dealt with fairy elements such as kings, queens, royal palaces, dangerous and romantic quest, monsters and so on. On rare occasions, the voices from the margins of India were heard and embodied within the locus of the Children's Literature in India. It is until very recently, that the genre incorporates the subaltern spaces. Hansda's *Jwala Kumar* ushers the inception of children's literature from the margins of India.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar hailed from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand. He was born in a Santhali family. By profession he is a medical doctor and is presently employed as a medical officer with the government of Jharkhand. His bibliography includes *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2014), *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* (2015), *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh* (2018), *My Father's Garden* (2018), *Who's There?* (2020), and *Sumi Budhi and Sugi* (2020). Hansda's first novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* won the 2015 Yuva Puraskar and nominated for the 2014 Hindu Literary Prize and the 2014 Crossword Book Award. Shekhar's *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire: Adventures in Champakbagh* (2018) was shortlisted for the 2019 Neev Book Award.

The title of the novella is interesting since it incorporates multi-ethnic roots and suggestions. The appellation 'Jwala Kumar' is a combination of two Indian words. 'Jwala' is a Sanskrit word that means 'flame' in English. The origin of the word 'Kumar' can be traced back to the time of the Puranas. Originally, the word 'Kumar' refers to the four sons of Brahma-Sanaka, Sanatana, Sanandana, and Sanat. The word is also used to refer to Kartikeya, the son of Shiva and Parvati. Currently the word is used to mean 'son,'

'chaste' etc. Evidently, by choosing to call the baby dragon 'Jwala Kumar,' Shekhar has provincialized it. From the very beginning of the novella, Jwala Kumar has been offered anthropomorphic aspects. He eats the food that the other members of Mohan Chandar eat:

Rupa Devi took some rice from her plate and served the animal on the paper bag. 'Let us see if you eat this,' she told it doubtfully. To their surprise, the animal ate up all the rice. 'What!' Mohan Chandar smiled. 'It eats rice. Like us!' 'Yes, I will give him some of my share,' Naren volunteered. 'Me too,' Biren pushed his plate ahead...It ate all of it with relish, just like the family ate their share. Then it also drank water like its human rescuers did (Shekhar ch.5)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Besides, He perfectly understands human language and follows instructions like any of the sons of Mohan: Namita yells: "This animal is just like us...we should give it a name" (Shekhar ch.5). They christened the baby dragon as 'Jwala Kumar' simply because it could belch fire. The Name Jwala Kumar, as mentioned earlier, symbolises cultural resistance that the poor wage labourers of Champakbagh uphold against the cultural and linguistic dominance of the powerful. Jwala Kumar is an Indianized name for a dragon. Besides, Shekhar too registers his cultural presence by not choosing an Anglicised name for it.

Chinua Achebe asserted the pedagogical role of a novelist in his essay: "The Novelist as a Teacher:" "The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done" (45).<sup>[6]</sup> In *Jwala Kumar* Shekhar offers a story of friendship, love, and fulfilment by weaving a magico-realist plot to allegorise the collective dreams of the poorest section of Indian society far away from the financially secure middle class of the metropolis. The pedagogical aspect of Shekhar's novella rests on the depiction of alternative childhoods in India. The novella depicts the toilsome and yet peaceful lives of the people of Champakbagh. Mohan Chandar is a daily wage earner who works in a factory. He went to work riding on a rickety bicycle. His family had a few goats. The children of the village went to our school run by the government. There was no electricity, nor any urban luxury. The only route that led to Champakbagh was unpaved and full of potholes. The people of Champakbagh lived hand to mouth existence and yet they were happy and contented. The seasons took heavy toll on the people of Champakbagh every year. Summer scorched the soil and turned the wells dry. The monsoon damaged the only road of the village. Winters were cold and hard, and the old people died unable to bear extreme cold. They eat subsidised food and the children their midday meal in the school itself: "Rupa Devi had grown some saag outside their house. She often cooked the saag because they did not have enough money to buy vegetables from the market" (Shekhar ch. 6). Food is an important cultural artifact. In Shekhar's novella, food plays the role of a cultural marker. Besides, 'saag' the children of Chandar family ate rat's meat occasionally. Biren, Naren and Namita loved rat's meat. The delicacy of rat's meat depicted by Shekhar in the novella might appear to be incredible and despicable to the readers. Poverty forced them to take resort to the sustenance that were easily available and free:

Biren loved eating roasted rat meat. And so did his brother and sister. Had he known that he would have two rats passing by him, he would have certainly set up traps to catch them. He loved catching rats and mice and was quite good at it. It was just that the rats and mice turned out to be smarter. He had a golden opportunity now and he was just letting it pass him by. What a pity! (Shekhar ch. 6).

Jwala Kumar hunted the rats and roasted them by belching fire. Naren poked the roasted rats and divided the meat into four parts: "Naren, Biren and Namita took their share of the roasted rat meat, touched it to the salt, and ate the rat meat with relish" (Shekhar ch. 6).

The childhood of Biren, Naren and Namita was quite different from the collective preconceived notion of 'childhood' in most fairy tales. Traditional children's Literature, as already maintained in the introductory paragraph of the article, upholds the ideologies of angel infancy. The notion of collective childhood as a space of innocence and bliss justifies the dominant cultural voices and marginalises the alternative childhoods. Shekhar's narrative offers strong resistance to those dominant ideologies of childhood and demands social justice so that the subaltern voices of children may speak. Besides, going to school, Naren, Biren and Namita had to look after the cattle. Unlike thousands of children enjoying the comforts of childhood, they "untied the goats before leaving for school" (Shekhar ch.6). They looked after the four goats the Chandar family owned. Biren plucked leaves from the jackfruit tree to feed the goats.



Jwala Kumar, the baby dragon that was somehow alienated from his family serves more like a symbol than a creature in the novella. It symbolises hope, dream, and fulfilment. It is a Promethean figure that brought the fire of hope to the lives of the Chandar family and many other families of Champakbagh. Incessant rain for a few days brought miseries to the Chandar family: “Washing clothes has become so difficult. Everything is stinking of dampness. If only we could have more fire and more heat. We have almost finished up all our firewood and kerosene oil” (Shekhar ch. 4). Jwala Kumar gifted the Chandar family with fire. He opened his mouth and breathed a stream of flame into the chulha. The dying oven blazed up. The ‘impossible’ in Shekhar’s novella is posited in the domain of realism. The dreams of the villagers are founded on the basic needs such as food, fire, and shelter because they are often denied the very sustenance. Shekhar’s novella becomes a parable of the ‘other’- of the childhood that has remained neglected long since the inception of Children’s Literature in India. Jwala Kumar in the climactic scene of the novella flew to every household of the village and ignited all chulhas, flew up and joined a herd of dragons and then disappeared into the immensity of the skies. The novella ends in an optimistic way as the Chandar family hopes that Jwala Kumar will return to his nest that he built on the rafters.

The novella, as already, pointed out before, offers a space for the marginalized voices to speak. The Chandar family represents billions of underprivileged people across India whose stories, whose childhood had remained untold, unaddressed, and unsung. Lost in the luxurious world of *Rupkathas*, the voice of the subaltern remained buried. Shekhar’s *Jwala Kumar* voices social justice for those ghettoised childhoods and childhood innocence.

Here is a copy of an interview of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar through email, dated 22 January 2022:

**1. What is your view of children's literature? (I mean Children's literature in the present transnational scenario)**

A: I cannot give an expert-like opinion on this matter; I can only say that literature is important, and children’s literature more important. To a lot of readers, literature is also a form of escape. I think children should be given an opportunity to imagine and create their own worlds and be enabled to form opinions. Children’s literature helps in that way. And children absorb. What they see around them, in their families and among their friends, what they read, what they see on TV, films, and computer screens and phones and tablets, influence the way they think, even the words they speak in their actual lives. Right now, at the place where I am seated and writing these answers, there are children around me, three boys aged 7 to 11 years. They are watching on YouTube videos about German Shepherd and Pit Bull dogs, and one of those boys asked his father to get him a German Shepherd dog. They are also watching a video on Doberman dogs and one of those kids just said “government dog”! So a carefully-curated children’s literature and carefully-curated arts and cinema can contribute a lot in what all a child learns and in shaping the life of a child.

**2. What is your opinion on dominant cultural voices present in conventional children's literature?**

A: Dominant cultural voices are there in every literature, every form of art, and not only in children’s literature. Dominant cultural voices are there in literature, in general, and also in cinema and music. And this might be perhaps because those from dominant cultural voices got those opportunities quite early on to tell their stories and display their arts and culture. If we are inclusive, if more of us from everywhere, away from the dominant centres, are given the opportunity, this issue of dominant voices may possibly be addressed.

**3. Do you think children's literature should serve pedagogical purposes? What does Jwala Kumar teach about childhood?**

A: Jwala Kumar teaches nothing. Really. I, actually, do not expect my writings to teach anything. If I write a story, it is only to tell that story. So there is no pedagogical purpose of my writings. If anyone learns something from my writings, it is just a bonus. This answer of mine might seem somewhat contradictory if you compare this answer of mine to my answer to Q1 in which I have said that a carefully-curated children’s literature and carefully-curated arts and cinema can contribute a lot in what all a child learns and in shaping the life of a child—but, honestly, I do not really intend to teach anything through my writings. Teaching is a huge responsibility, and I would rather leave it to the carers of children (parents, guardians, teachers, etc.) to do the curation of books, films, etc. for children.

**4. Does the Chandar family belong to the Santhali community?**

A: No, the Chandar family does not belong to the Santhal community.

**5. Why did you choose a socially marginalized family for your novella?**

A: Because I felt that a socially marginalised family suited the story that I had wanted to tell. A family that could own a gas stove for their kitchen would not need a miracle to light their clay chulha, right?

**6. What does the dragon in the novella symbolize? I consider him to be a Promethean symbol, do you agree?**

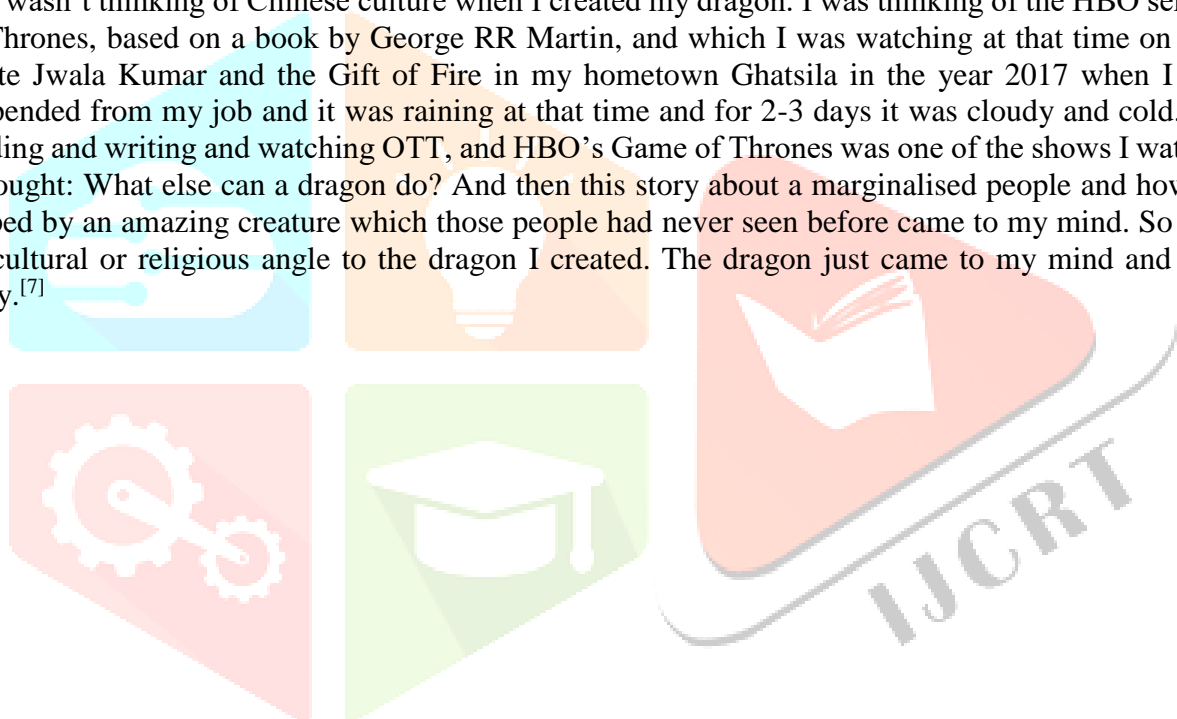
A: To me, the term Promethean is quite academic. The dragon in my story is a wonder, a miracle, something that comes to rescue during a difficult time. Just that.

**7. How does Jwala Kumar differ from the traditional Rupkathas (fairy tales)?**

A: Jwala Kumar does not quite differ from traditional rupkathas, does it? Just like rupkathas, there is a crisis and an element of amazement and a happy denouement.

**8. Dragon is well associated with Chinese culture. Why did you choose dragon for your novella? Does it serve any religious purpose?**

A: I wasn't thinking of Chinese culture when I created my dragon. I was thinking of the HBO series Game of Thrones, based on a book by George RR Martin, and which I was watching at that time on Hotstar. I wrote Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire in my hometown Ghatsila in the year 2017 when I had been suspended from my job and it was raining at that time and for 2-3 days it was cloudy and cold. So I was reading and writing and watching OTT, and HBO's Game of Thrones was one of the shows I watched, and I thought: What else can a dragon do? And then this story about a marginalised people and how they are helped by an amazing creature which those people had never seen before came to my mind. So there was no cultural or religious angle to the dragon I created. The dragon just came to my mind and I wrote a story.<sup>[7]</sup>



<sup>i</sup> Maaz Bin Bilal (October 7, 2018). "This children's book starring a dragon doesn't shy away from showing the inequalities of India". *Scroll.in*. Retrieved January 14, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> See Khagendranath Mitra, *Shatabdir Shishu-sahitya*. Kolkata: Pashchimbanga Bangla Academy, 1999 (first published in 1958), p. 138

<sup>iii</sup> See Swapna M. Banerjee in "Children's Literature in Nineteenth- Century India: Some Reflections and Thoughts"

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