



THE CHILD AS CAREGIVER: ANALYZING INTERGENERATIONAL ROLE REVERSAL IN INDIAN PICTURE BOOKS.

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Abstract: This study examines the evolving literary landscape of intergenerational role reversal within contemporary Indian children's picture books. While traditional literature often portrays the elder as the sole provider of wisdom and protection, this article analyzes a selection of texts that challenge these hierarchies by portraying grandchildren as the primary providers of emotional, physical, and cognitive support. Through a close reading of titles such as *Grandmother School*, *Thukpa for All*, and *Tara on the Shikara*, the paper explores how role reversals redefine the grandchild's agency within the Indian joint family structure. These narratives serve as a tool to prepare young readers for a future of empathetic, intergenerational interdependence. By elevating the child from a passive recipient of care to a proactive guardian of an elder's dignity, these picture books offer a transformative vision of the Indian family unit.

Keywords: Grandparents, grandchildren, Indian Picture books, role reversal, caregiver

Introduction

India has always been a nation that abides by its values. Prioritizing family, especially children, is an important value that has stood the test of time and has remained unchanged since time immemorial. All family members, including parents, grandparents and siblings, work, think and act towards a collective goal: providing for the needs, wants, opportunities and emotional requirements of the child.

The Joint family, being a characteristic feature of Indian culture, is highly influential when it comes to shaping the personality of a child. A child who is brought up by many people, and who grows up watching many people, acquires social skills naturally and is more emotionally intelligent when compared to a child who is born and brought up in a nuclear family with no grandparents, uncles, aunts or cousins.

A joint family comprises three generations: the grandparents being the first, the parents, uncles and aunts being the second and the children being the third. It is the second generation which is the busiest, performing most of the duties and responsibilities such as earning, providing, satisfying everyone's physical and materialistic needs, and doing domestic chores, thereby leaving less action for the other two generations. These two generations at home look to each other for satisfying their emotional needs. It is observed that roles such as consoling, comforting, explaining, feeding, putting the kids to sleep, and also caregiving are taken up by the grandparents.

While the traditional narrative of grandparents caring for their grandchildren is a well-established norm, contemporary literature is increasingly reflecting a significant shift in this dynamic. This study examines an

emerging trend in Indian picture books where these roles are reversed, positioning the grandchild as an active caregiver rather than a passive recipient of support.

In *Grandmother School*, written by Rina Singh and illustrated by Ellen Rooney, the traditional roles of adult and child are reversed. The narrator, a young girl, takes on the role of a guardian for her grandmother (Aaji), who is attending school to learn to read and write. The child displays an adult like agency by managing her grandmother's routine—hurrying her so she is not late and ensuring she has all her supplies ready. This upward flow of care is not limited to practical chores; it focuses heavily on the elder's mental and emotional well-being. When the grandfather discourages Aaji, claiming that education at her age is a "waste of time," the granddaughter becomes her primary moral support, shielding her from negativity and encouraging her to persevere.

In the evenings, we huddle together, share stories and do our homework. When Aaji needs help, she whispers in my ear. She doesn't want anyone to know she's having trouble.

The impact of this support is life-changing. Empowered by her granddaughter's belief in her, Aaji gains the confidence to sign her name at the bank, finally leaving behind the embarrassment of using thumbprint. The child does not just help with homework; she helps her grandmother build a new identity.

On days when Aaji falls asleep before me, I can hear her chanting rhymes in her sleep, the ones the teacher has asked her to memorize.

I am so proud of her.

By the end, the granddaughter reminds Aaji of the beauty of the words she has learned—like 'cloud' and 'river'—showing that the child is now the custodian of the elder's intellectual growth. This story perfectly illustrates how a grandchild can provide the scaffolding needed for an elder to achieve independence and dignity.

The narrative of *I'll Go and Come Back* written by Rajani LaRocca and illustrated by Sara Palacios presents a beautiful exchange of care that transcends geographical and cultural distances. Initially, the story follows a traditional caregiving hierarchy: when the young girl visits India, Sita Pati acts as the primary caregiver, using games, market trips, and cooking to help her granddaughter navigate the different and unfamiliar environment.

When Sita Pati visits them, the girl notices that her grandmother feels lonely in America, as it is an unfamiliar environment for her. She recalls feeling a similar sense of displacement during her own visit to India and remembers the various ways her *Pati* (grandmother) cheered her up. Drawing upon these memories, the girl applies those same comforting gestures to uplift her grandmother's mood and ease her transition into this new surroundings.

The sun blazed and the air conditioner droned. The streets stayed empty and silent. Pati told my mom she couldn't hear so much as a sparrow chirp from inside the house.

Pati looked lonely. I wondered if she wanted to go home.

She consciously mirrors the care she once received—engaging Pati in games and companionship to ease her transition. This act of keeping her engaged demonstrates the child's emotional intelligence, agency and a will to take care of a loved one.

When I Grow Up written by Priyadarshini Gogoi and illustrated by Tarique Aziz, is a book about a girl who dreams of becoming many different things when she grows up. She primarily dreams of becoming an engineer who builds big and small things, wild and amazing creations using the power of science. The illustrations depict her fixing machines with tools while wearing a safety helmet.

Unlike traditional narratives where a child's dreams are purely self-focused, this protagonist's ambitions are entirely centered on providing for and improving the quality of life for her Anaideo (grandmother).

Every professional milestone the girl imagines is tied to a specific goal of caring for her grandmother. As a civil engineer, she doesn't just build bridges; she builds them to include her grandmother in her journeys, ensuring the elder is never left behind. When she dreams of being a nuclear engineer, her success is measured by the joy it brings to her grandmother, who would throw a big feast in celebration. She plans to use high-tech science to build a new set of teeth, directly addressing the physical vulnerabilities of aging. She plans to create a robot named Gogo and help her grandmother by catching more fish. She envisions herself as a superhero guarding the digital world by becoming a cybersecurity engineer and making her grandmother feel proud.

Gogo and I will have many adventures.

We will paint the walls and do the dishes.

We will catch Anaideo many, many fishes!

There is no presence or even mention of the parents in the book which suggests that the girl's only family is her grandmother and it is her sole responsibility to take care of her in future. It also demonstrates that the protagonist's professional aspirations are motivated by a desire to reduce her grandmother's physical and social vulnerabilities through technological innovation.

Tsering, in *Thukpa for All* written by Prabha Ram and Sheela Preuitt and illustrated by Shilpa Ranade, is a visually challenged boy who visits gumpa everyday and returns home thinking of his grandmother's soup which is called Thukpa. On his way, he meets many people and invites all of them to visit his house in the evening to have Thukpa. He invites his friend Rigzin, Tashi uncle, Neema aunty and Norboo me-me. After reaching home, he announces to his grandmother that all these people are coming to eat with them tonight. Now she gets anxious as she has a lot of work to do. She starts her preparation right away and asks Tsering for help. The little boy who cannot see can be seen, in an illustration, picking the peas from his vegetable patch.

Back at the porch he carefully squeezes each pod at the seams. Little round peas slide into his cupped palm

One by one, the guests arrive and also bring along with them the vegetables that are required to make Thukpa.

While his grandmother is busy preparing food in the kitchen, the power goes off and his grandmother who is the host starts worrying about finishing Thukpa.

"How will I finish making my thukpa?" Abi worries aloud as she adds the onions and tomatoes to the pot.

"Lights on or off doesn't matter to me, Abi-le," says Tsering as he saunters closer to Abi, "I'll help you".

Then, Tsering offers to help his grandmother by bringing all things that his grandmother asks to get and hands them to her. Soon, with Tsering's help, his grandmother finishes Thukpa. By the time the preparation is over, the power is back and all the people sit and enjoy the meal together.

In *Thukpa for All*, Tsering's role goes far beyond that of a typical grandchild; he acts as a vital partner in his grandmother's domestic life. The bottom-to-top caregiving begins when Tsering's support is offered. Despite being visually challenged, he takes responsibility for the food supply by carefully harvesting peas from the garden, using his sense of touch to ensure only the best pods are picked. This physical labor directly supports his grandmother's role as the cook.

The most significant reversal of care occurs during the power outage. While the grandmother is overwhelmed by the stress of hosting many guests in the dark, Tsering steps in to manage her emotional and logistical needs. He effectively becomes the "eyes" of the household, navigating the kitchen with a confidence which the sighted adults lack. By handing her exactly what she needs and providing a calm presence, he removes her anxiety and ensures the task is completed. In this moment, Tsering becomes the protector who uses his unique abilities to safeguard his grandmother's reputation as a host and her peace of mind.

Forgetful Dida written by Himanjali Sankar and illustrated by Aditi Anand, is a touching story about a grandmother who has a forgetting illness, probably Alzheimer's disease. She lives with her daughter and her grandson. Her daughter is seen worried throughout the book about the illness that Dida has. Dida keeps forgetting everything, even simple things like wearing sandals.

When Dida and I went to the grocery store, I put on my red sandals. Dida put a sandal on only one foot and walked out of the house. I found her other sandal and helped her put it on.

Dida said what would I do without you? Dida kissed the top of my head.

After going to the grocery store, instead of asking for bananas and bread she asks for a blue Maruti car. Her grandson as well as the shopkeeper laugh and Dida scratches her head and smiles. When they reach home, the mother looks worried and tells them they should not go out without informing her.

One day Dida even asked her daughter what her name was. The grandson then intervened, reminding her, 'She is your daughter, and you cannot forget her name Once when it was raining, Dida is very adamant that she wants to go out in the rain. When Dida's daughter warns that she cannot go out now, she stomped her foot and this makes the grandson giggle. He thinks that Dida was behaving like a naughty little girl. When Dida's daughter brings a book for her to read she sees that it is a book only with words and no pictures. She finishes the book in a second saying "La La La". Her daughter feels so sad that she has forgotten how to read and remembers how once she loved reading. The little boy observes how worried his mother looked.

I looked at Ma who looked as worried as she had that time when I put a crayon up my nose.

The little boy's mother says that she is forgetting everything and that one day she will forget all of us but he comforts his mother saying, even if Dida forgets all of them they will never forget Dida and that they will take good care of her.

The little boy in the story plays a very important role. He looks after Dida, he accompanies her and at the same time, he provides moral support to the mother too.

In this narrative, the young grandson provides a sophisticated level of inverted caregiving that addresses the needs of two generations. First, he acts as a primary physical aide for Dida, whose illness has brought grief in the family. The boy takes on the responsibility of basic grooming and safety—such as finding her missing sandal and helping her put it on—tasks typically performed by an adult for a toddler. His presence during their walks ensures Dida's safety in public, where he uses humor and patience to manage her confusion at the grocery store.

Beyond physical help, the boy provides vital moral and psychological support to his grandmother. In the story's most powerful moment of role reversal, the child comforts the adult. When the mother expresses the terrifying fear that Dida will eventually forget them all, the boy offers a profound philosophical solution: even if Dida forgets, they will never forget her.

By viewing Dida's behavior as that of a "naughty little girl" rather than a tragedy, the boy brings a sense of joy and lightness to a heavy situation. He proves that a child's resilience can sustain a household facing the challenges of chronic illness.

In *Thatha's Pumpkin*, written by Lalita Iyer and illustrated by Proiti Roy, we encounter a grandfather who practices farming and brings home sacks of bananas, brinjals, green tomatoes, and drumsticks. He is particularly proud of a large, juicy pumpkin he grew himself. He proudly announces that it weighs 10 kilos and that he grew it all by himself."

Thatha decides to make a pumpkin pie for Tia's birthday. As it is a large pumpkin, Tia suggests sharing wedges of it with their friends and neighbors. Tia and her Paati transfer the wedges into several individual bags, and Tia distributes them to Shanta Aunty for sambar, Tara for pumpkin cake, Gulu for fritters, Khusru for dhokla, and Zoey for pie.

Tia, would you be a pet and distribute these, please?" she asked as she transferred the wedges into several individual bags.

However, when Thatha is finally ready to bake his own pie, Paati brings him only a tiny remaining piece. Thatha is conflicted, not knowing whether to be happy about the sharing or sad about his small portion. Tia then intervenes, dragging him to the terrace. Hidden among the leaves is another long, juicy pumpkin that Tia had been growing secretly. Thatha remarks with pride,

I didn't realize there's another farmer in the family.

Thatha's Pumpkin serves as a prime example of the reverse caregiving trend. By organizing the distribution of the pumpkin, Tia takes over the "social care" of the family, ensuring the grandfather's hard work creates community bonds. The discovery of the second pumpkin proves that Tia has moved from a passive learner to a co-provider.

Masala Chai Fast and Slow written by Rajani LaRocca and illustrated by Neha Rawat, features Aarav, a young boy with a deep affection for his grandfather. Every evening, the grandfather has a ritual of brewing masala chai, while the grandmother is seen resting on the couch. One day, the grandfather sprains his leg and becomes unable to perform his daily task. Determined that his grandfather should not miss his favorite tea, Aarav decides to take over the responsibility himself.

Initially, Aarav's impatient attitude leads to several failed attempts to get the recipe right. However, he refuses to give up. He begins to practice patience, refining his method until he finally brews the perfect cup of masala chai for his grandfather. Notably, even though other capable family members—such as his mother, father, and grandmother—are present, it is Aarav who finds the inner drive to step up and take action. His persistence reveals a child with immense potential and the empathy required to care for the elderly.

Aarav's journey represents a significant shift from a child being a passive consumer to an active provider of comfort. While the rest of the household does not take up the responsibility of brewing tea for him, it is only Aarav who takes action. He isn't just providing a beverage, but is restoring a sense of normalcy and ritual to his grandfather's life.

Ultimately, the story depicts the grandchild as the most attentive member of the family, proving that a child's agency can become the primary support system when an elder is in need. It highlights the boy's

individual agency in choosing to become a caregiver despite the presence of other adults, emphasizing that empathy can drive children to assume complex domestic responsibilities.

Hot Hot Roti for Dadaji written by F. Zia and illustrated by Ken Min, is a similar narrative like *Masala Chai Fast and Slow*, which depicts a young boy, Aneel, who makes rotis for his grandfather. Aneel is filled with excitement and happiness because his grandparents have come to live with him. Every morning, he watches in fascination as Dadaji performs a headstand. He also finds his grandmother's morning rituals—the scent of her incense sticks and the chanting of "Hari Om"—deeply interesting. Above all, however, Aneel loves the stories his grandparents tell him about the olden days in India.

On one occasion, Dadaji tells a story about a young, incredibly strong lad from a village in Punjab. This lad was so powerful that he could fight a water buffalo, tie two cobras in a knot, and spin three elephants by their tails. When Aneel asks how the boy gained such strength, Dadaji explains that his "Badi Ma" made the best rotis, and the boy grew strong by eating many of them.

Inspired by this story, Aneel decides to prepare rotis for Dadaji. He asks his family members for assistance, but everyone is too busy to help him. Undeterred by the lack of support, Aneel begins making rotis on his own. Despite being a first-time cook and facing many failed attempts, he eventually masters the right shape and taste, creating a large stack of rotis.

Aneel mixed the flour and water and added more salt and began to knead the dough. He punched...and he pushed...and he pulled.

When the dough was smooth, Aneel rolled it into balls – enough for a roti stack as high as the ceiling.

After Dadaji finishes the meal, the two go to the park to test his restored strength. While there are no buffaloes or elephants, Dadaji swings Aneel with such force that the boy's feet almost touch the blue sky. As they walk, the ground seems to shake, and Dadaji easily shakes an apple tree to gather fruit. The story concludes with Dadaji thanking Aneel for the delicious and strong rotis that made him feel powerful once again.

Similar to Aarav in *Masala Chai*, Aneel faces rejection from the busy adults in the house. This highlights a key theme that child agency often thrives when adult intervention is absent.

The grandson assumes the role of a nutritional provider to restore his grandfather's strength. By independently mastering the laborious task of making rotis, the protagonist demonstrates high agency and a commitment to maintaining the elder's physical and emotional well-being. Ultimately, the story frames the child as a vital restorer of the grandfather's identity, proving that caregiving can be a transformative act of love and cultural continuity.

Priya Dreams of Marigolds and Masala written and illustrated by Meenal Patel features an Indian family living in America. It is the only Indian family on their street, and their home is the only one filled with the aroma of roasted cumin, the habit of eating roti, and the presence of an elderly grandmother, whom Priya calls Babi Ba. Every day, Babi Ba picks marigolds from her garden to create garlands to hang at the doorway.

Each evening, Babi Ba waits for Priya to return from school so they can make roti for dinner together. During one of these sessions, Priya asks her grandmother to describe India. Babi Ba vividly describes the climate, the bustling streets, the chai, and the colorful sarees. When Priya asks if she misses her homeland, Babi Ba explains that India lives within them and in their daily traditions. She told Priya that India is present in the marigolds of their garden and the scent of roasted cumin, to which Priya added that it was also in the "swish-swish" of her grandmother's sari.

However, when winter arrives and the garden is buried under snow, the marigolds disappear. Priya notices that without her flowers, Babi Ba becomes silent and gloomy.

"In the winter when it snows, Priya notices that Babi Ba doesn't go out in the morning because there are no marigolds to pick.

Priya wonders if this makes Babi Ba miss India even more." [Patel]

To help her grandmother, Priya comes up with an idea during her art class at school. She begins making paper marigolds, and her friends join in to help. Priya brings these paper garlands home and, with her mother's assistance, hangs them at the doorway. When Babi Ba sees the bright yellow flowers, she gives a heartwarming smile. Priya tells her that she shared stories of India with her friends, and they all helped create the garlands to bring India back to their home.

Babi Ba's face lights up when she sees the garland of paper marigolds hung up in the doorway.

Priya thus becomes a caretaker of her grandmother's mood. She is the first one to notice Babi-Ba's gloomy nature and even finds out the reason and immediately steps into action without the intervention of the elders.

In *Tara on the Shikara*, written by Sigrun Srivastava and illustrated by Vandana Joshi, we meet Tara, a young Kashmiri girl who lives with her grandfather. To earn a living, the grandfather sells vegetables and Tara helps him pile the vegetables on to his *shikara* (a small boat) and he sells them across the lake; he is well-known for both his fresh vegetables and his melodious songs. While he is out, Tara manages all the household chores. Over time, she notices that her grandfather is becoming increasingly frail and sick, and he is constantly burdened by worry.

When Tara offers to sell the vegetables for him, her grandfather shakes his head calling her a little flower and telling her that she must look after the house as her grandmother and mother did. He mutters that if she were a boy, things would be different, and he wouldn't have to worry about who would look after him in his old age.

At home she did all the household chores like scrubbing the floor, washing the clothes, polishing the pots and pans and cooking food before her grandfather returns.

Witnessing his health decline, Tara decides to take the *shikara* out herself. Initially, she struggles to handle the boat; it spins in circles and hits an oncoming vessel. Despite being laughed at by other children, she persists by carefully observing and copying the rowing techniques of the men on the lake. When she finds her voice is too thin to attract customers, she stands up and begins singing the traditional songs her grandfather taught her. Her singing draws people in, allowing her to sell all the vegetables and return home successfully. Her grandfather, moved by her strength, exclaims,

There is no need to worry as long as I have you.

Tara on the Shikara presents a powerful narrative of a grandchild who provides care by breaking gender stereotypes. Tara takes care of her grandfather by relieving his psychological burden. His greatest fear—that a granddaughter cannot be a protector—is dismantled by her competence. She proves that a grandchild's ability to provide support is not determined by gender, but by the willingness to inherit the elder's skills (like his songs) and apply them in times of crisis.

In "*Grandma's Glasses*" written by Noni and illustrated by Tanaya Vyas, Grandma keeps losing her glasses and her granddaughter takes up the task of finding them out. They are usually found in the bathroom or on her bed or on her head. But this time, it's challenging as she is unable to find them yet. The girl has searched everywhere and she decides to become a detective, enquiring her grandmother what she did all day.

The girl, then, goes to her mother and takes her version on what grandmother did all day. The girl comes to know that the grandma sat down at a table to write a letter to the Chief Minister about her pension and then, she knit for some time. She searched near the table where she sat down to knit. There, she found the glasses.

The grandmother in the story is portrayed in an advanced way as we see that she spends her time wisely by going for a walk, knitting, talking to loved ones on phone and writing a letter to the Chief Minister about her pension.

The story ends with the girl saying,

For Nani's next birthday, I will save money for an extra pair of glasses.

By retrieving the glasses, the child directly supports the elder's intellectual agency, allowing her to continue active tasks like writing and knitting. Ultimately, the story demonstrates that a grandchild's attentiveness serves as a vital support system that preserves an elder's independence and social engagement. The girl's decision to purchase a gift that addresses a physical vulnerability marks a significant development in the trend of inverted caregiving. She recognizes that her grandmother's need is recurring and decides to use her own agency to provide a long-term solution.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian children's literature, as evidenced in the analyzed picture books, masterfully subverts conventional caregiving hierarchies, elevating grandchildren from passive recipients to empowered architects of their grandparents' well-being. Through acts ranging from brewing masala chai (Masala Chai Fast and Slow), harvesting peas amid blackouts (Thukpa for All), crafting paper marigolds (Priya Dreams of Marigolds and Masala), to rowing shikaras against gender barriers (Tara on the Shikara), these young protagonists provide not just practical aid but profound emotional scaffolding—shielding elders from loneliness, stigma, and frailty while restoring their agency and joy.

The books discussed above demonstrate that in contemporary picture books, children are increasingly portrayed as the guardians of an elder's health and happiness, proving that a single child's effort can revitalize the entire family dynamic. No longer are grandchildren merely silent spectators of an elder's life; instead, they have emerged as essential caregivers. Whether it is Aneel and Aarav mastering culinary rituals to restore a grandfather's strength, or Tara and the aspiring engineer using professional skills to secure an elder's future, the roles of caregiving are reversed.

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