For all children, the first books they read are the keys to the magic of the world ...

Dr. Zakir Hussain, 1967

Samina Mishra is a film maker and an author of children's books based in New Delhi.

Two years ago I worked on a project, the Magic Key, a collection of six children's stories written by Dr. Zakir Husain in Urdu. The Magic Key series is in English, Hindi and four other Indian languages. I had heard these stories as a child because the writer was my great-grandfather. But their readership was extremely limited because they were only available in Urdu (and some badly translated, badly produced versions in Hindi and English). As a media practitioner who had done a fair amount of work with and for children, I felt that these were a bunch of stories waiting to get into the minds of children across India. They were written in colloquial Hindustani, in simple prose and had a parable-like quality. It was apparent that some of the stories like Poori Jo Kadhai Mein Se Nikal Bhaag, were retold versions of fables like the Gingerbread Man but their localised flavour and language was their fresh appeal - a poori running away from a kadhai, a chicken called Chooza Mian from the Hindi word Chooza for chicken, a charpai being placed in an angan.

I grew up on Hans Christian Anderson and Enid Blyton and I'm sure they have a lot to do with my love for reading. So, while I think that children across the world should continue to read them, I am uncomfortable with the virtual monopoly that western children's books have had in English, in India. I think children across the world should also read stories that come from other parts of the world. And so, an Indian version of a popular European fairy tale can become a way for us to show children that there are both multiple versions of reality as well as multiple versions of fantasy. The Magic Key stories do this. Using the fantastic and the familiar, the simple narrative of such stories can draw children in and at the same time, widen the landscapes in their minds.

The Magic Key stories are also windows to the world of small town and village India. A farmer who asks the landless labour to help out in his fields on a festival day, an old man who lives alone in the hills with just his goat for company, a woodcutter who lights a fire and boils potatoes for lunch while he cuts wood deep in the forest, a little girl who's mother is sick and has been getting treated by hakims. These are not realities that today's urbanised children are familiar with and yet they are still some of the realities of modern India. Children's stories can be a way to familiarise children with these realities in a casual manner without unduly exoticising them. These are the characters of the Magic Key stories but it is not this that the stories are about. The stories are about other things, ideas that are more universal - the desire for freedom, the fulfilling of a promise, pride and it's proverbial fall. And so, without drawing attention to the fact that the stories are set in a world so different from the reader's, these stories can make a place in children's minds for the diversity and plurality that need to be acknowledged in today's world.

Another thing about these stories that appealed to me was the language. Written in spoken Hindustani, the stories used words that are less and less available in the mainstream. For example, a character praying to God and calling him Allah Mian or the wind whose daman gets stuck in a thorny bush or the fragrant harsingar flowers which waft down in the breeze. These are words derived from a cultural terrain that is more marginalised today and it is important to fight this marginalisation through a more commonplace usage of words like these. Then there were the names - Mian Chut Dumey Khargosh, Bi Mut Dumeet Lomdi, Bibi Luplup. The words Mian, Bi or Bibi are so rarely heard but were once common words of respectful address in North India. Including them in a casual manner in a story can, thus, become a way to inform children about these cultural nuances, without unnecessary exoticising. And so, even in the English versions of the stories, we decided to keep the Hindustani words for those terms which did not have an equivalent in English. Mr Bob Tailed Rabbit, Madam Bushy Tailed Fox or Mrs Slobbering Dog just aren't the same thing!

Sometimes, fable like stories such as these, which have been written in an earlier time are also untouched by the social and political realities of the times we now live in. So, in the version that I and children of my generation read, the hunter in Red Riding Hood cut open the wolf's tummy to free Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. This seemingly violent act has led to more sanitised versions of the fairy tale being written to suit the more sanitised understanding of childhood today. As a reader of the ‘violent’ version, I don't remember being traumatised by the story. I just remember being entertained by the drama of Good triumphing over Evil. Fantasy is about the fantastic and as children, we find an instinctive understanding of characters that are not real, performing acts that are not real. But it is also true that stories derived from an oral tradition lend themselves to being changed as they move through changing times. This is, perhaps, inevitable. But should political correctness affect these tales so much that they lose their primary ability—that of entertaining children and drawing them into a world of books?