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Migration and Eco-Consciousness in Canato Jimo's *Afo and I*

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Abstract

Picturebooks in north-east India have become a means of reconnecting to the roots of the people. Through words and illustrations, this article will critically analyse Canato Jimo's *Afo and I* through the perspectives of ecological consciousness and migration. The role of the youth in conserving Nature, the impact on people due to migration, and the social relationships of the 'left behind' after the migration are ingrained in *Afo and I*. It is a must to discuss

and analyse how the younger generation will be introduced to such critical topics in picturebooks, particularly in north-east India, where picturebooks are still in a growing stage in terms of being inclusive, diversified, and relevant to the present issues of the generation. *Afo and I*, which explores the relationship between Vinoka and Afo, merges issues like migration, nostalgia, and eco-consciousness.

Keywords: *Afo and I*, Picturebooks, Canato Jimo, Eco-Consciousness, Migration

Introduction

Picturebooks in north-east India about environmental consciousness have been in a progressive scene with efforts from private and public publishing houses in the recent decades of the twenty-first century. Public publishing houses like the National Book Trust continue to support the media outreach about environmental consciousness in north-east India with translation of picturebooks in regional languages and publishing numerous titles in children's literature with regional writers from north-east India, Arup Kumar Dutta being one of the prominent writers of children's literature in English. Most of the picturebooks of north-east India focus on the retelling of myths, legends, and folklores—a simplified version of the compilations of folklores, folktales from north-east India, or from a particular state of north-east India. India is going through a phase which can be termed as 'the Indian picturebook boom' right now, and north-east India has its share in it with non-profit organisers, artists, writers, and illustrators from this region, pursuing a unique blend of indigenous or traditional knowledge with a modern twist to adapt to the genre or format of picturebook. The Forgotten Folklore Project (TFFP) has taken initiatives to publish and translate books from different indigenous languages. Storyweaver, an initiative of Pratham Books, promote the indigenous languages through digital books, publications and translations (Nambiar 174).

Literature Review

One of the aspects of the north-east India picturebooks is the irregular distribution of interest in the publishing scope, with some topics gaining more interest from both publishing houses, readers, writers and illustrators. The retelling of Jadav Phayeng's story is available from different publishing houses—*The Forest Keeper: The True Story of Jadav Payeng*; *The Boy Who Grew a Forest: The True Story of Jadav Payeng*; *Jadav and the Tree-Place*—to name a few. It is not surprising that there are still communities from the north-east India with not a single picturebook in their own language, which ultimately have to consume books written about people far different from their own kind, leading to the inability to relate to the characters and issues in those books. This disparity is still in the process of being mitigated with efforts from various support from public and private support, with a vision to include the different aspects in picturebooks. The changes are quite vivid in the case of north-east India, where only recently publishers, illustrators and writers have taken a keen interest in publishing picturebooks in the languages of the local people of this region with themes that are close to their lifestyle.

Canato Jimo is a prolific children's literature enthusiast who has been relentlessly upholding children's literature in north-east India, combining traditional elements with interactive and nostalgic illustrations. He addresses the issues of anthropogenic impact on the younger generation, the changes in human relationships in *Afo and I*. This picturebook explores the ongoing

issues of ecological deterioration, migration with a tint of nostalgia through the relationship of Vinoka and Afo. Mountains are explored as a haven for childhood memories, the pace that holds nostalgia and human relationships. Shifting to a city, a new place, and the trees replaced by the skyscrapers and buildings, the cosmos flowers by the emotionless concrete towers—was a bit sceptical for Vinoka, he was conscious that his sister Afo would become a part of the city, a concrete world. The book ends with a hopeful tone with Vinoka's wish that Afo will write back to him about the city. It may be interpreted as a connection between the mountains and the city, one moulded by nature and the other created by Man by encroaching on nature. The experience of Afo, moving to a city, is not a separate individual's experience. It is part of collective experience, as most of the people in the mountains have to move in search of resources, opportunities and climate change. In north-east India, people moving to the city try to keep the pieces of the memories of the mountains by connecting the memories with nostalgia, a desire to keep the pristine memories alive in an ever-changing environment. The memories are intact while the mountains that built the memories are being excavated by the bulldozers, in bits and pieces, with them, the memories and the human connections are gone forever.

Children as the Little Guardians of the Environment: Primary Voice for Environment Advocacy

One notable instance of this picturebook is the absence of adult input in voicing the destruction/ deforestation of the mountains. Vinoka's perspective on Nature can be discussed through the Arcadian Environmental Discourse of John Hannibal. As mentioned by Vinoka repeatedly, things are changing very fast, which might have affected the adult inhabitants of the mountain, the people who are using the resources of Nature—the trees, the river and the mountains. In *Afo and I*, the adults' perspective of the story is completely absent in this picturebook. It is through Vinoka's voice that the changes are introduced or made known to the readers. The details of the destruction of Nature are illustrated in different pages of the picturebook. The illustrations are not just complementing the words. The happy moments of Afo and Vinoka, the illustrations complement the texts—cosmos flowers, puddle in the rain, watermelon under the tree, and walking in the golden rice fields. The deforestation, the tree stumps, which were once part of the flourishing mountain forests, were never mentioned in words in the picturebook. The illustrations have a story of their own, narrating the damage done by human beings, adult human beings to be precise. This may be interpreted as giving the responsibility to voice the deforestation and climate change to the younger generation. The children are put in a position responsible for rejuvenating the mountain once again.

Adults in the Silhouette

The parents of Vinoka and Afo are illustrated in silhouette, without any distinct characteristics or features to differentiate them from other adults. This picturebook suggests shifting, and is different from Maria Nikolajeva's aetonormativity-centred criticism of children's literature. There is no balance between the child and the adult world; rather, the power of change, healing, and restoration is provided to the children. The adults are removed from their usual position of power and responsibility. The child,

Vinoka is portrayed in the picturebook as a budding thinker, keen to the changes of their surroundings, with a desire to restore and preserve the collective memories. Canato Jimo delineate the child as an individual with a sense of consciousness to preserve what was close to him, the memories, the interactions with nature, and a wish to retain the relationship with the fragile Nature. There was no advice, no procedures or traditional knowledge transfer provided by the adults to curb the ongoing destruction in the mountains where Vinoka and Afo called their home. The perspective is from Vinoka's point of view, showing how he feels and interacts with the ever-changing world around him, in terms of both environment and intergenerational relationships, specifically the relationship between him and Afo.

Migration and the left behind people in *Afo and I*

Afo and I can be critically analysed from the context of migration or human movement across terrains for better opportunities and climate change. Afo is relocated to a city, far from the mountains where her family had nestled. People move for resources. It is not just Afo that is moving, but also the mountains; the change is not only the humans but also the anthropogenic impact on the mountains. The mountains are slowly being transformed into cities, with the clearance of the mountains for road construction and the fallen logs. The migration, or rather the shifting of the importance of the environment, from mountains to the city, is rather accepted with a doubtful. In *Afo and I*, Vinoka asked, "I wonder what the city is like."

Vinoka and his parents can be considered from the perspective of the 'left behind'. They are left with the mountain. Vinoka feared the unknown city of Afo. There is a shared responsibility of the 'left behind' people to curb deforestation and safeguard the collective memories of the community. There are picturebooks that deal with people returning to the mountains and embracing the once lustrous nature again. One such picturebook is *The Spring of Life: How Moirangthem Loiya Saved a Forest*, which explores the theme of the rejuvenation of nature in north-east India.

Conclusion

Picturebooks that discuss and analyse the critical position of children in rejuvenating nature are a necessity for regions with heavy anthropogenic impacts on the environment. Canato Jimo's *Afo and I* collaborated on the themes of migration, deforestation and the case of the left behind in north-east India. The loss of the mountains not only destroys the memories but also disturbs the communities that depend on the mountains. Children are represented as individuals who are conscious of the ill effects of anthropogenic activities, with a wish to preserve the nostalgic touch of the fond memories. Through the illustrations and texts, Canato Jimo has brought a deeper understanding of the position of children in the global issue of eco-consciousness and the effect of the inevitable migration on human relationships.

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