

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Relevance of short Stories for the Psychological Development of Children: A Study of Githa Hariharan's *The Winning Team*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.101](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.101)



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Article info

Article Received: 18/06/2025

Article Accepted: 23/07/2025

Published online: 29/07/2025

Abstract

The stories, and especially the short stories, not only entertain the children but shape their psychology also. It is a kind of learning process, and presents morals for the society and children. The teachers at elementary level also tell moral stories of the crow, the dog, the fox, the monkey etc. to the little kids. These stories, loaded with virtues and wittiness, are imprinted in the young minds of the children for life time and help them to become good human beings. The stories of *Panchtantra* by Vishnu Sharma, the children's stories of Lewis Carol, Aesop's Fables, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, collected stories of Ruskin Bond and the stories of Harry Potter are among some of the collections of short stories for children in English Literature, and forms an important part of fiction. This paper intends to analyze Githa Hariharan's *The Winning Team* (2004) from the perspective of its attempt to engender innocence, rationality and logic based among the children apart from providing a healthy entertainment for their growth and development.

Keywords: Entertain, didactic, story, psychology, understanding and rationality.

The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story. - Richard Powers, American novelist.

Introduction

Stories play a very significant role for the mental make-up, social contact and psychological growth of children. Stories take them away in a world of imagination which

helps them to become creative; and creation is not possible without imagination. Children are very innocent and sincere; they are like wet clay and can be shaped in any form like an earthen vessel by the potter (parents or teachers). A story teller, like a potter, gives shape to children's thinking and molds the shape accordingly. Story telling is an art which shapes the psychology of the juvenile minds from the very beginning. A child, when comes to senses,

has no knowledge of the vices of this world. The grandmothers tell children bed-time stories to make them sleep; these stories has deep relevance, and prepare the children to face the difficulties of this world both mentally and physically.

Githa Hariharan's collection of short stories *The Winning Team* (2004) is written for the children; breaths of their enthusiasm, their wonderful world, and their zeal for learning, and contributes majorly to English fiction. The telling of short stories to the children kindles their curiosity to know the more, enhances their communication skills, and social understanding also. This process of learning elevates the imagination and learning capability of these curious little minds, and helps them to explore emotions and discover hidden strength within themselves. Githa Hariharan has written novels, short stories and essays over the last three and a half decades. Her highly acclaimed works include *The Thousand Faces of Night* which won the Commonwealth Writer's prize for the best first book in 1993. Apart from this, she has written the short story collection *The Art of Dying*, the novels *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, *When Dreams Travel*, *In Times of Siege*, *Fugitive Histories*, and a collection of essays entitled *Almost Home: Cities and other Places*.

'The Winning Team' by Githa Hariharan covers ten different short stories; very interesting and innovatively designed for kids, stroking diverse topics. In the present paper, I have covered four stories out of ten; Bhai K makes a comeback is the first story, and is the foundation of the whole collection. In the story, we are introduced to the story-teller; famous as Kahani Bhai among people of every age because story-telling is his hobby. He is a motor mechanic by profession, but 'telling stories is like hunger for him.' He gets emotional while telling stories and his audience also.

The untold stories in his head forced the water into his eyes, till he was afraid they would become a pair of leaky taps that

could not be shut tight enough.
(Hariharan 6)

Apart from being a good story-teller, he was a successful mechanic also who often conceive the stories while working under the cars. His favorite place was the terrace where he met his fans (the children), especially during summer holidays in the evening, who would like to listen his stories, sometimes demanding an extra session after the dinner. But it was an activity of the by-gone days; now the children are more interested in watching cartoon shows on T.V. It is their way of entertainment; Bhai K is now out of his 'evening job'; of telling stories to his audience. He felt 'lonely and useless', as there is no takers for his 'endless serials' which ultimately moderated his interest in his day time job: repairing the cars.

One night in summer holidays, when 'the lights went out'; the television was not working, the children 'tired of chatting, and of teasing each other', went to Bhai K: the story teller. They requested him to tell them a story, Bhai K felt excited as if a 'big whoosh of stream set free' from his head full of 'a trillion stories pushing and shoving inside.' Nasira (ten years) and Gopal (six years) were his audience that day; Bhai K told them an interesting story of Tenali Raman meeting Kali. Nasira 'was back' the next day, but 'half his audience': Gopal withdrew again for getting himself involved in watching the television. Crestfallen Bhai K; the story-teller, whose 'stories about Goddesses, King's Palace and Court' resulted in ever declining number of audience, was advised by Nasira to be modern in his stories with a bit of 'mirch masala' to 'beat the competition.' Today, in modern times, children like to watch the series of Shaktimaan, Little Shingham, Motu Patlu, Chhota Bheem etc. The issue is not that Bhai K's stories are not liked, but these stories do not cater to the demands of the modern audience. In short, Bhai K would have to rearrange the same stories but with a realistic touch of places and characters.

However, Nasira promised to bring back a big audience, the next day. The story-teller also promised to mend all his old stories; 'grease them and oil them' as a mechanic with a new framework. The next day, again a powerless night by luck, brought the children back to Bhai K for their entertainment; among the audience were Nasira, Gopal, round faced Akbari, Shy Veer, chatter box Dulari, fat boy Ram etc. After a nod from Narisa, Bhai K started telling his story, when 'all of them fell silent and turned towards him expectantly,' the stars were seemingly 'extra bright,' assessor in their curiosity; 'have you heard the story of 'Ramu the Boy Wonder'. As a seasoned story-teller 'first cleared his throat' and then began in a clear voice.

You can imagine how poor and shabby, how small Ramu and his toothless old grandmother felt as they stood before the rich and powerful landlord, Krishanayya... (Hariharan 12)

Bhai K's audience were lost in imagination of the wonder boy Ramu and toothless grandmother, and the rich landlord, with their faces 'still and intent.' Bhai K felt himself to be the actual 'Kahaniwala', the stories and the faces of the characters in them were crowded in his memory with 'the happy, clever and funny faces of Tenali Rama, Naseeruddin Hodja, Gopal Bhai, Birbal.' The audience, the characters, surroundings, the places all contributed effectively in pushing Bhai Kahani 'back in business.

The second story titled 'The Goddess' Day Out' is about Ramakrishnadu; popularly known as Tenali Raman, being born in Tenali, who belonged to a poor family but 'was very sharp and intelligent', always encircled by 'a crowd of noisy, laughing children. His prime work was to make the people laugh; 'to entertain them' by 'saying or doing something.' The jokes came to him spontaneously like 'frisky puppies' ready to play; he 'never had to search' them. It was his brilliance that turned 'everything -a scene or a situation or a scolding

-into a clever story.' Tenali Raman did not lose his sense of humor even in young age. Once Raman happened to meet a Sanyasi 'with his long, matted hair, his flowing beard, and his beads and begging bowl.' This impressiveness of his: the Sanyasi, scales high, as on the very auspicious day rain came after years of drought. People were indebted to the Sanyasi 'who have brought the rain' with him. But Raman was uncomfortable with 'all this braying chorus of praise' of the Sanyasi.

One day, Tenali Raman came across a gathering eager to seek 'blessing' from the Sanyasi, and remunerating the sanyasi with 'flowers and fresh fruit, or sweets topped with nuts and pecks of silver foil.' Tenali Raman moved close to the Sanyasi when 'the crowd had melted away', and spoke to him satirically. 'Oh it's just the ripe fruit of the palm tree, isn't it?' The standbys including the Sanyasi were perplexed and 'puzzled. To soothe, Raman told him; the Sanyasi, the story of a crow and a palm that bore fresh ripe fruits. When a crow flew to that tree, some ripened fruit, from one of the branches, fell just then on the ground, making the passer-by thought 'it's because the crow sat on the tree that the fruit fell.' Raman, indirectly, persuaded the people to adopt a rational and scientific approach for every event happening in the surroundings.

Just as those passer-by thought a crow could ripen fruits and make them fall, you think this Sanyasi has opened up the clouds and brought down the rain to us", said Tenali Raman. (Hariharan 16)

The Sanyasi addressed Raman as 'a clever child' and suggested him to seek 'Mahakali's blessing' for 'even smarter.' The Sanyasi's thoughts and his 'stroking Raman's back gently' were not in consistency with each other. Perplexed Raman, followed the instructions of the Sanyasi, though Sanyasi's intention was only to scare him; 'there is the Kali temple. Go there tonight. I will teach you a special Mantra. Recite it a thousand and eight times, and Kali

will come to you.' However, Raman was unaware of all this foul play. He was only happy for 'being called clever', and for the opportunity to meet Kali goddess. Raman perfectly learnt the Mantra, and the Sanyasi withdrew to the forest; but he was after all a child and forgot all about the Mantra and involved himself in his usual activities. With the passage of time, all his friends were busy in their works, and left Tenali. Idling in forest in one of the 'hot afternoons', Raman 'met the Sanyasi again', and 'remembered the mantra he had learnt.' That very night, Raman 'made his way to the Kali temple'; chanted the Mantra 108 times to please Goddess. The impatience crept into him, but suddenly he heard 'bells that rang unlike any sound he had heard before.'

Before him stood a tall woman with a thousand faces; all the faces had terrible paan-strained teeth. Only the face right in the middle had its mouth closed. The other nine hundred and ninety nine faces had their mouth wide open with their blood-red tongues hanging out. (Hariharan 19)

Raman was not scared, but 'a loud hoot of laughter' from his mouth, required Kali to know the reason of this laughter. However, the reply was equally farcical.

Look, I have one nose. When I have a cold, even this one nose is too much for me –all that leaky snot and all that wiping and blowing! What I was wondering' he said earnestly to an amazed Kali, 'is what you do when you catch cold. Do you blow all thousand noses at the same time? (Hariharan 19)

Outwardly offended, Kali responded with a laugh and called him a 'vikatakavi': 'vika-ta-ka-vi left to right, and the same right to left.' She offered her blessings to Raman 'holding out a cup in each hand': one cup full of wisdom and education, the other cup overflowing with gems and gold coins with the condition to choose one of the cups without

splitting any of them. Raman, 'looking very innocent and pathetic' admitted that he has 'never seen or smelt or tasted either wisdom or wealth'; convinced Kali allowed Raman to 'have a quick lick at each cup' to enable him to choose the right. Very quickly and smartly, Raman drank away both the cups. Kali reprimanded Raman for his daring attempt, and breaking the rules; called him 'rascal.' He hugged Kali despite 'his sticky palms, and her many arms getting in the way', and somehow tried to please her. Devi being satisfied with Raman gave him five blessings:

One: you will be a jester all your life, but- (seeing Raman's face)'. Two: in a palace, in the Vijayanagar palace in fact. Three: you will be a clever poet, but no one will see that; they will think you are just a joker. Four: don't worry, you will never get bored. You will have all kinds of adventures- a few dangerous ones- but Five: your tongue (blessed by mine) will save you (I hope). (Hariharan 22)

The story motivates the children to be innocent and not wicked in their behaviour. Their alertness and smartness make them confident in odd situations and circumstances. It is their humbleness that counts; be in peer groups, with elders and even Gods.

The third story named 'Moving Hills' apart from being very interesting and didactic contributes effectively in the psychological development of the children. In nature. The story, about Naseeruddin Hodja (the miracle man) and villagers, is full of humour. Mulla Hasan, 'the sour-face of the village', has been continuously boasting of his expected guest: Naseeruddin Hodja, who can 'do great things.' Almost whole village, except Birbal Bhai, is very optimistic about their dream coming true; minimize their hardships. However, Birbal Bhai is skeptical of this nonsense. The villagers are very much aware of Mulla Hasan's nature; 'a moody type', who may suddenly decide 'not to let them meet the great man', so

deputed Ramu and his friends to peek 'at Mulla Hasan's house every now and then.' Suddenly, 'a gruff voice' of a 'funny little imp of a man astride a donkey wagging his bushy eyebrows at them like a buffoon', alerted them. He was in fact Mulla Naseeruddin Hodja who looked 'too friendly, too much like a clown.'

It was impossible to be afraid of a man who had eyebrows like two bushy, wriggly caterpillars! (Also, thy had never met a wise man before, but looking at this one, the children thought they wouldn't mind becoming wise...) (Hariharan 27)

Shortly, Mulla Naseeruddin befriended with the children, and corroborated with them on 'a few super-sour mangoes.' The news of Naseeruddin Hodja's arrival brought villagers at the house of Mulla Hasan. The elders were delighted to find a wise man among them like Mulla Naseeruddin Hodja, famous for doing miracles with his magical power. Mulla Hasan, on the behalf of villahers, requested Mulla Naseeruddin to perform a special miracle: 'move the hill to a different place' as the hill is an enemy of the villagers; 'it sits just where it blocks the breeze from passing through this village.'

Witty Mulla Naseeruddin agreed but with a condition that the villagers will make 'a long, thick rope-the longest and the thickest' indeed 'the king of ropes- tougher than the toughest.' The work was done overnight, and presented to Naseeruddin the next morning who 'pulled it and tugged at it, twisted it round his arm, then round his donkey's leg' to test. He then asked the villager to lift the hill, and stand it on' his back. He will 'move it wherever' they want. On being questioned, Mulla Naseeruddin replied:

All of you agreed to do the work and let me perform the miracle. But if you won't do a simple thing like lifting the hill, why should I do the harder thing- moving the hill to a different place? (Hariharan 32)

All were astonished at Mulla Naseeruddin's answer. Birbal thanked Naseeruddin, and made a way towards the fields. The other villagers also 'seemed to wake up'; feeling a 'bit foolish.' The story, though very entertaining and educative, conveys a deep message that miracles never happen. Hard work has no substitute; and is the only key to success.

Conclusion

The story telling is a key tool for the growth and development of children. With the help of stories, children learn new vocabulary and can better understand the world. It is a kind of gymnastics for brain; and helps to keep children's brain active for a longer period of time. It has also been proved by the scientific studies that children who study fiction regularly can understand human nature better than others. Stories change attitude and behaviour; through the imaginative process that involves reading and telling of stories, children have the opportunity to do what they cannot do in real life. Githa Hariharan in *The Winning Team* has tried to cover many issues very pertinent to children and their mentality. She is successful in her study of the young minds, and have a good grasp of child psychology. The short stories, included in the collection, are full of laughter and joy and refresh us like morning tea.

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