

PROMOTING DIVERSITY THROUGH CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN PAKISTAN

by Fauzia Aziz Minallah

Pakistan is going through tumultuous times. Growing militancy has worsened the security situation in many parts of the country. Increasing violence coupled with successive governments' inept educational policies threaten the very existence of education in general and girls' education in particular.

Between 1975 and 2000, the school-age population in Pakistan doubled, with poor families turning to religious schools (madrassahs) as the only affordable option for their sons' education. Boys in these schools receive neither proper academic nor technical training, which makes it difficult for them to access the job market. While opinions differ as to how militancy has grown to menacing proportions, the growth of madrassahs has repeatedly been cited. The decline in quality of government-run schools has been a key factor both in the drop-out rate – which stands at over 50 per cent for the first five years of learning – and in the resort to madrassahs.

General Zia-ul-Haq and his eleven years of Islamization did the greatest damage to our link with our multicultural South Asian past. Not only did Saudi-funded madrassahs mushroom throughout the country, even the curriculum of state schools changed drastically. Successive civilian governments, as well as the 'Enlightened Moderation' rule of General Musharraf, were unable to undo the destructive policies of the Zia regime.

During the recent conflict there are many examples of children whose childhood has been lost. The Taliban destroyed hundreds of schools, mostly girls' schools, where students were the victims of bombing by their own army as well as of the violence of terrorists. Drone attacks also have resulted in the loss of innocent civilian lives.

In this scenario, where children are exposed to unprecedented violence, what can a Pakistani children's writer do? Writing about the importance of cultural diversity and Sufi Islam, once hallmarks of a rich and diverse South Asian culture, is my choice. My passion for writing for children converges with my activism, whose objective is to promote non-violence, multiculturalism and environmental protection.

It was in 2002, post 9/11, that I felt the need as the mother of two young boys and as a children's writer for books that encourage non-violence, tolerance and diversity. It had disturbed me greatly when I heard an eight-year old boy say, 'Good, it (the destruction of the Twin Towers) happened to the Americans. Look what they are doing to poor Afghan children.' I was very concerned

about this comment and felt that we all needed to act to change the messages our children absorb from their surroundings. When I repeatedly heard messages of hate, war and enmity from the lips of children, I decided to write books for Muslim children, knowing that this world was not an easy one for them to live in.

I developed a cartoon character for children, Amai, the magical bird. Amai is made of light and a million tiny stars. She is a friend of children. Her special friends are Ali and Seema. This tiny bird can turn magically into a shooting star and zoom around the world taking Seema and Ali on exciting adventures. My first children's book, *Amai's Wish*, encourages compassion and empathy with the suffering of others.

In my second book, *Children of Light*, Amai introduces Pakistani children to an Indian child. The book's aim is to promote peace and tolerance between India and Pakistan and create awareness of the horror of nuclear weapons. It is indeed sad that India and Pakistan, with huge populations living in abject poverty, have spent billions in a senseless arms race. Children, as it is, absorb messages of violence on television, whether in the form of their favourite cartoon channels or aggressive sports such as wrestling. Why should the ultimate symbol of aggression be presented to children as a symbol of pride? *Children of Light* was published and distributed free of cost in Pakistani schools.

In 2006, I wrote and illustrated *Sadako's Prayer* about a young victim of the Hiroshima nuclear holocaust. Here Amai features with Sadako, an 11-year old Japanese girl who survived the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Since her story is true, Sadako makes a fine symbol of hope for children traumatized by conflict or environmental disasters. After the devastating earthquake of 2005, the book was distributed among children living in the earthquake-affected areas of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. During the recent conflict in northwest Pakistan which displaced thousands of people, I also encouraged children to draw and paint as a way of exorcising their fear of the Taliban and army shelling. Wherever I went, I organized story telling sessions and distributed *Sadako's Prayer*.

In addition to children's books, I have produced books for adults and young students. *Glimpses into the Soul of Islamabad* is a coffee table book that promotes the multicultural heritage of Islamabad and respect for Nature. It espouses peace by encouraging young people to respect their city's diverse religious heritage, which includes the material culture of Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity.

The most negative outcome of the process of Islamization that began in the 1980s is the nation's collective loss of its sense of identity. This is especially true in the case of children deprived of an understanding of and respect for their millenia-rich pre-Islamic heritage. My book *Chitarkari and Banyans – the Pursuit of Identity* reflects the quandary that my children and I face.

These humble steps are my contribution to working with children and promoting ideas of diversity and tolerance through books and art. I represent the tiny minority of Pakistani children's

writers in Pakistan who promote peace and diversity. We must keep on producing children's books to contribute to bringing about a better future for our children.

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