

Book List of South Asian Voices in Children's Literature

Sania Zaffar and Armeen Sayani - Loyola University Chicago

Introduction

Analyzing our own intersectional identities as Special Education majors and South Asian women at Loyola University Chicago, we could not help but notice the lack of diversity within our undergraduate, education cohort- specifically South Asian males and females. We were interested in contextualizing this identity in Children's Literature to explore "How are South Asian voices represented in Children's Literature?" We have defined South Asia to include the countries of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Children's Literature ranging from Pre-K through 8th grade. Our hope to research, present, and share a list of texts, to be used as mentor texts within a classroom with the hopes of putting these books at the forefront of classroom learning. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy supports the notion of children being able to see themselves and their lived experiences in curriculum. We want our South Asian student population to hear, see, and connect with narratives similar to theirs throughout their education experience. In order to accomplish this, although we looked into South Asian authors, but we truly wanted the literature to hold the identity rather than solely the author. We acknowledge the importance of students analyzing South Asian authors, but hope to bring the characters of these texts to the main stage for students to relate to. We also want to note that these texts ought to be used within the curriculum to be effective rather than a tokenized text for the purpose of practicing multicultural, diverse literature.

*The list is organized by author, all South Asian, alphabetically by last name. Underneath each title, there is a brief description or summary of the text, followed by a Common Core English Language Arts standard that can be taught using the text, and a specific reading skill or strategy that can be taught with the text. The list overall is comprised of 13 authors and 31 books.

Book List

- Budhos, Marina
 - *Watched (grades 6+)*
 - This novel is about Naeem, a Muslim teenager who is from an immigrant Bangladeshi family and living in Queens, New York. He describes his experiences of constantly being surveilled by his parents, neighbors, cameras in his neighborhood, and the police. After getting into a situation with the police, Naeem is faced with the choice of spying on his Muslim friends or going to juvie and having his parents' green cards taken away from them. Among many issues, this story especially deals with Islamophobia, the dangerous effects of racial profiling, and the pressures of being an immigrant teenager in America.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
 - This text can be used to teach students about plot development and the author's intentional choices about the rising action, climax, falling actions, and resolution in Naeem's story.

- *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom & Science (grades 8+)*
 - This informational text is about the history of sugar, trailing from India to Europe to the Americas. Sugar was one of the driving forces of the slave trade and cost many lives, but it also caused revolutions around the world. South Asians also worked on those sugar cane fields. This book includes songs, maps, and illustrations to depict the history and interconnected impact of sugar in the world. There is also a timeline, bibliography, and index included.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3 Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).
 - Using a graphic organizer, students can depict the connections between sugar and various countries, people, and events around the world.
- *Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers (short stories, grades 6+)*
 - By interviewing young people growing up in a diverse climate, these short stories are based on interviews with young immigrants and their challenges and insights living in America's teenage culture.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.3: Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).
 - The diverse nature of the young adults interviews for this text lends itself nicely to teaching the above CCSS. Through graphic organizers and writing prompts, students can draw connections between the various characters, their ideas, and the events that led them to where they are today.
- Dhami, Narinder
 - *A Tiger for Breakfast (folk tales, gr. 2-4)*
 - Using dialogue between a tiger and farmer, this book is a retelling of an Indian folktale.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.2: Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.
 - Discussing morals/larger meaning behind texts, what does the author want us to take away?
 - *Bhanga Babes & Bindi Babes (Series, gr. 5-8)*
 - Told from the perspective of three sisters, this series highlights relatable situations through the perspective of Indian culture.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3: Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
 - Graphic organizer for story diagramming
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee
 - *The Conch Bearer, The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming, Shadow Land (Series, gr. 4-7, takes place in India)*
 - This series involves a young boy, Anand, and his desire to change his surroundings. He is then entrusted with a magical conch taking him on adventures through India and forcing him to make difficult decisions.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6: Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

- Characterization
 - *Grandma and the Great Gourd (pre-k-2)*
 - This text is a retelling of a Bengali folktale about a grandma going on a journey through the jungle to visit her daughter.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.2: Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).
 - Have students study the onomatopoeias throughout the text through choral reading, echo reading, or another form of reading aloud.
- Husain, Shahrukh
 - *The Wise Fools (fables/folktales of Islam, gr. 1-5)*
 - Follow along with Mulla in this text that explores the Islamic world through an honest, open, and humorous collection of short stories.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.4: Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.
 - Can have students create puppet shows to practice retelling a story based on an experience, teaching perspective, compare/contrast with fables in English/another culture
 - *What do We Know about Islam? (informational text gr. 4-7)*
 - This informational text provides answers to a range of questions surrounding Islam as a religion, specifically directed toward young people.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.6.4.c: Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning or its part of speech.
 - This would be a great book to teach nonfiction text features as it is filled with photographs, illustrations, and derived from inquiry questions around Islam.
- Karim, Sheba
 - *The Skunk Girl (gr. 6-8)*
 - This novel provides a humorous and relatable look into growing up with a bicultural identity. Trying to balance two worlds, Nina explains the ups and downs to living in two cultures.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6: Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.
 - In addition to teaching characterization of different characters, teaching characterization within one character who feels as if they are split between cultures can add a layer of complexity and create a relatable reality for many students.
- Khan, Rukshana
 - *Wanting Mor (gr. 6+)*
 - This book follows Jameela in Afghanistan as she tries to balance the loss of her mother, her fight for education, and surviving on her own.

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.5: Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text, including how the major sections contribute to the whole and to the development of the ideas..
 - Teaching this text to highlight the environmental and structural factors contributing to Jameela’s experiences can bring this text to life.
- *Many Windows (Short Stories, gr. 4-7)*
 - This collection of short stories brings together six children, from the same class, to share their faith based celebrations. Not only does the text touch on various religions, but it also creates a community of celebration among the religions.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.6: Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and the information provided.
 - Pairing this informational text, with an objective informational text about the religions touched on within the books will set up a compare/contrast activity of nonfiction texts. The narrative additive can push students to analyze the realities of religion for young people.
- *King of the Skies (Main character has a disability, gr. k-3)*
 - Set during the Basunt kite festival in Lahore, Pakistan this text follows a young boy that has a disability and his excitement for the kite festival.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7: Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).
 - The illustrations in this book are worth spending the time on by teaching how the illustrations contribute to the text.
- *Muslim Child (Short Stories + Poems, gr. 3-6)*
 - Sharing short stories, recipes, and an overview of the basics of Islam through narrative, this text shows what it means to be a Muslim child with all the doubts and insecurities in between. The text also has a reference section in the back for pronunciation.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.7: Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.
 - Teaching text features (footnotes, sidebar, glossary, pronunciation guide, visuals)
- *Dahling, If You Luv Me Would You Please, Please Smile (grades 6/7+)*
 - This book explains growing up Muslim in the Western world in a relatable way for middle schoolers regardless of their social identities.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3.b: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
 - The nature of this book prompts a good dialogue around tolerance, respect, and acceptance. Having students write about something they connected to through

using the narrative techniques allows students to explore storytelling through a personal lens.

- *The Roses in my Carpets (grades K-3)*
 - This picture book depicts the life of a young Muslim boy who is an Afghani refugee living in a poor refugee camp. He has frequent nightmares about the planes that killed his father and imagines him, his mother, and his little sister, Maha, trying to escape from those planes. The boy prays daily, goes to school, and weaves beautiful and colorful carpets to earn money for his family and to find happiness while living in the camp. Amidst the many struggles his refugee family faces, the boy dreams of his family running through a field of roses, like the ones he weaves on to his carpets.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.7 Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.
 - Students can look at the colors in the illustrations and the specific words in the text to determine the emotions that the young boy is feeling during his nightmares, nice dreams, and events throughout the book.
- Krishnaswami, Uma
 - *Book Uncle and Me (gr. 2-4)*
 - This book follows Yasmin, a nine-year-old girl who borrows a book from the Book Uncle's book stand every day. When the Mayor threatens to shut the book stand down, Yasmin uses her friends, her activism, and her community to try to save the bookstand and to make the voices of the people in her community heard.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).
 - Students can do an in-depth study of Yasmin's character and the traits and qualities that she holds by analyzing her words, thoughts, and actions throughout the book.
 - *The Closet Ghosts (pre-k-2)*
 - Although afraid of ghosts in her closet, Anu conquers her fears through the help of Hindu God Hanuman.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.2: Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.
 - Compare/contrast folktales in Hindu culture to another
 - *Monsoon (pre-k-3)*
 - A young girl and her brother wait with their family for the Monsoon rains to come and help with the dryness in India.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
 - Pair this text with a non-fiction text on Monsoon season to have two anchor texts in a study of writing informative/explanatory texts

- *Chachaji's Cup (gr. 1-4)*
 - This book ties the relationship of a nephew and his Chachaji to the importance of Chachaji's favorite teacup. Written from the child's perspective, the book is familiar and relatable.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.2.1.e: Use adjectives and adverbs, and choose between them depending on what is to be modified.
 - Making connections
- Makhijani, Pooja
 - *Mama's Saris (pre-k-2)*
 - This text explores a girl's desire to wear a sari through conversation with her mom. Throughout the book, she describes the beauty she finds in Sari's.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.K.7: With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).
 - Illustration to text sorting, recall, main ideas and details
- Perkins, Mitali
 - *Tiger Boy (3-6)*
 - This chapter book is about a boy named Neel who lives on an island in West Bengal's Sunderbans. Neel and his sister, Rupa, are on a dangerous and adventurous mission to find a tiger cub that escaped from a nearby island reserve and is now lost on Neel's island. At the same time, he is under pressure from his family to balance his schoolwork because his parents need him to win a scholarship to go to a boarding school in Kolkata, India.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3 Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
 - Because the text is filled with such vivid and suspenseful action, students can use a graphic organizer or journal to keep track of and break down Neel's actions throughout the plot as he tries to find the tiger cub and also win the scholarship. Students can also use this information to synthesize how Neel's character develops throughout the story.
 - *Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices (poems, 6+)*
 - This book is a collection of humorous, powerful, and personal stories and poems written by ten different young adult authors about their experiences with their races and cultures.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
 - Students can analyze the different intersections of racial and cultural identities in each piece in the book, and how the different authors' experiences are connected to each other.

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3.b: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
 - Using this book as an anchor text, students can develop writing that includes descriptions, pacing, and/or events as the text not only includes flashbacks, but how Fadi grows as a character based on his dialogues and actions.
- Sheth, Kashmiri
 - *Boys without Names (4-7)*
 - This book is about an eleven year-old boy named Gopal who flees with his family from their poor, rural Indian village to the big city of Mumbai. Gopal and his family dream of earning money and creating a better life for themselves. One day, Gopal is tricked into working in a sweatshop with five other boys. Separated from their families, Gopal and the other boys are trapped in this sweatshop. They are forced to work under extremely brutal conditions and aren't even allowed to call each other by their names.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.9 Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.
 - Students can compare and contrast the conditions of the fictional sweatshop that Gopal is enslaved in and the real sweatshops that exist in developing countries today. Students can study the detailed imagery that Sheth uses to understand the conditions of the fictional sweatshop, as well as learn the history of real sweatshops in the world and the injustices that workers face today.
 - *Sona and the Wedding Game (k-3)*
 - This book is about a young girl named Sona who attends her first Indian wedding. Throughout the book, Sona's cousin Vishal explains to her the significances behind the various traditions that are part of a cultural Indian wedding. Sona takes part in one of those traditions: stealing the groom's shoes without him knowing and then bargaining with him when he asks for them back. She devises a plan to steal the shoes and is ultimately successful. In exchange for the shoes, Sona asks the groom to give her the beautiful white horse that he entered on as her prize.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3 Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events
 - With this text, students can describe Sona's character and her motivation to successfully steal the groom's shoes, as well as how her strategic actions contribute to the sequence of events in the story.
 - *My Dadima Wears a Sari (pre-k-4)*
 - This story is about two young sisters, Neha and Rupa, who learn about saris from their grandmother, who always wears a sari everywhere she goes. Their grandma teaches them how to wear saris in different ways, how a sari can come in handy in daily life, the different colors, materials, and styles of saris, and

three particular saris she owns that are special to her. By the end of the story, Neha, Rupa, and their grandmother become closely bonded by their strong love and appreciation for saris.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
 - Students can explore the development of the main theme of this story by analyzing the dialogue between Neha, Rupa, and their grandmother and the feelings they show about saris. Students can also summarize the various experiences that the three characters have together with saris throughout the book.
- Shraya, Vivek
 - *The Boy and the Bindi (K-2)*
 - In this story, a young boy is fascinated by the bindi that his mom wears on her forehead. He asks his mom a lot of questions about the bindi. She teaches him the cultural significance behind the bindi and also lets him wear one on his own forehead. A lot of people stare at the boy in public and ask him lots of questions about his bindi. However, he continues to love and be proud of his bindi. His bindi makes him feel unique, beautiful, peaceful, protected, connected to the world, and grounded in his culture and identity.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2 Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.
 - Students can explore the central message in this book of accepting differences and being proud of their social and cultural identities. It is possible that the boy in this book is exploring his gender identity since bindis are usually worn by Hindu women. Therefore, this book can be used to teach students about breaking gender norms and embracing individuals who are gender fluid.
 - Zia, F.
 - *Hot, Hot Roti for Dada-Ji (k-5)*
 - Aneel is a young boy who has a very close relationship with his Dada-ji, or grandfather. Dada-ji tells Aneel stories of how he used to fight the animals in his village because of the strength he got from eating roti, a popular form of flat, whole-wheat bread in South Asian culture. Inspired to help his grandpa regain his strength again, Aneel takes on the challenge of making roti for his grandpa. Ultimately, Aneel is successful at making roti and, after devouring it, his grandpa regains his power and becomes strong and lively again. In the end, Aneel and his grandpa go on many adventures outside together.
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.
 - Students can develop a deeper understanding of this book by studying the metaphors, imagery, higher-level academic vocabulary, onomatopoeia, and Hindi words in the text.

Conclusion

Developing this book list was a very eye-opening and powerful experience. This project allowed us to find a wide variety of books that encompass so many experiences and intersectionalities of identities, including religion, class, race, and gender, that South Asian students will be able to relate to (as we continue our research, we are interested in finding more texts that intersect South Asian and LGBTQ identities). We were able to find texts that range across grades K-12 and include many different genres and styles. However, it is important to note that this book list is not all-encompassing. There are many more South Asian children's texts out there, but we developed this list in an effort to start somewhere. As we read the books on this list, it was such a validating and empowering experience to see our cultures and traditions represented in stories, to see main characters that looked like us, to understand the words in Hindi, and to relate to the different experiences of the South Asian characters. If it was so impactful for us to read these culturally relevant texts, then it will surely be just as impactful for students. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to include these texts in their classroom libraries and lesson plans. Developing a multicultural curriculum and classroom environment will not only help students see themselves in the books that they read, but it will also increase students' engagement and motivation to read, which is especially important for struggling readers. Before doing this project, we were not aware of many South Asian authors or children's texts that were out there. This proves how little books with South Asian voices are exposed and talked about. It's not as if these books do not exist. They do. However, as future educators who care about shaping our students to embrace their cultural backgrounds and identities, we must actively and extensively search for these books, share them with everyone we know, including teachers, librarians, friends, and family members, and effectively incorporate them into our classrooms.