

# For Midnight's Children

*Ellen Handler Spitz*

## **The Enigma of Karma | by Raja Mohanty**

Folk Tales of Uttarakhand | by Deepa Agarwal

AS TWENTY-FIRST century juggernauts of globalization and technology ride roughshod over regional cultures, there is a risk that precious legacies—oral, visual, and dramatic—are being lost. How will we preserve local customs, idiosyncratic habits of speech and dialect, humor, folklore, imagery, symbols, and artistic techniques—all with their concomitant wisdom? Sensitive editors of children's books are grappling with these questions.

India may serve as an instructive guide. Although the government of this vast nation recognizes twenty-two official languages, its children go to schools where English is spoken, written, and read. After school, most of them return to homes still steeped in intricate patterns of local belief and practice—patterns that some children's book editors would like to incorporate into children's books. Yet there is the countervailing widespread public opinion that children's books should be utilitarian, printed in functional English, and crammed with what educational authorities deem relevant for future success in a technologically advanced society. Still, a number of gifted Indian writers and artists buck this tide to produce marvelous books, and it would be a boon to make them available to American children.

Last month I participated in a conference on children's literature in India, at Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, in the province of Odisha, formerly called Orissa. Among the authors attending the conference was Raja Mohanty, a gifted local poet and storyteller, who proposed mildly from the podium that “poetry springs from our quarrels with ourselves,” a mantra he chose in order to introduce his audience to *The Enigma of Karma*, a book he made with Manoj Das and Radhashyam Raut. This small work, printed in a limited edition on handmade paper, serves as a foil for the gallimaufry of gaudy commercial children's books mass-produced worldwide today. Elegantly illustrated with full-page silkscreen images in the time-honored Patachitra painting style of Odisha, it carries forth an artistic tradition long passed from father to son and practiced communally in village squares. Less than twenty pages in length, replete with endpapers of cadmium yellow burnished in mustard overprinted with repeated designs depicting the story's symbols—a pot of gold and a sword—it enchants with its consummate delicacy of line. Its nuanced palette refines the art of chromatic juxtaposition in illustrated books: imagine oranges and vermilions, pale yellows, sepias, dusky blues, and a rainbow of greens. As you finger the pliant handcrafted paper leaves and inhale their musky scent, you rediscover the sensuous delight of holding an object of real artisanal integrity.

*The Enigma of Karma*, first heard by Mohanty as an oral narrative from the stock of Indian wisdom known collectively as the Puranas, re-tells a story that evokes ancient philosophical conundrums common to both East and West—vexing puzzles about fate and fortune versus desire and free will. Every child copes with the corollaries of these dilemmas, and none is too young to consider them as such. From the

earliest moments of life, wishes collide with obstacles, and youthful curiosity aims at probing the tensile strength of limits, be they physical, emotional, or ethical. Imagine a two-year-old closing his eyes for a few moments just to experiment with how far he can travel until he is forced to look again. He will go forward until he bumps, loses his balance, or feels anxious.

Mohanty offers up a story about two friends, young male characters, blue-skinned Ramu and fair-skinned Shyamu, who set out from home to seek their fortunes. They come by chance upon a soothsayer famous for the infallibility of his predictions. When they ask him to tell what is in store for each of them, he prophesies that Ramu will become a king in a year's time, whereas Shyamu, by the end of the same year, will die. Pursuant to his auguries, Ramu grows arrogant and presumptuous. We see him menacing a man with his sword. Shyamu, on the other hand, believing his end to be near, is transformed in a different way. He turns his thoughts inward and tries to augment the happiness of others. As the year's end approaches, Ramu discovers a pot of gold, which is suddenly snatched away by an armed bandit. Shyamu, with no thought for his own life, interposes himself between his friend and the bandit and is wounded by the latter's sword. A year has now passed. Ramu has not become king and Shyamu has not died. On a radiantly colored page, we see the two once again before the soothsayer, but, before they can utter a word, he anticipates their question. Since Ramu has grown haughty, the sage explains, his kingdom was reduced to just a pot of gold; Shyamu, because of his humility, was made to suffer merely a gash rather than death. With no fanfare and no overt didacticism, wisdom emerges. We might think again of that two-year-old pretending to explore his kingdom blindly. Imagine how far he would venture with closed eyes if his mother were confident; but think again how it might be if she expressed fear lest he hurt himself. Parents thus modify their children's fates no matter what is predicted. In this sense, the story recalls the Jewish prayer in which it is written that, even though on Yom Kippur the fate of each human being is sealed for the coming year, repentance, prayer, and charity may temper the severe decree. *The Enigma of Karma* delivers in both form and content the elements of an extraordinary children's book: it preserves local culture while revealing its transcendent applicability; it engages abiding issues; and it educates taste by offering the opportunity to relish a genuinely aesthetic object. It grants spiritual and philosophical guidance that bears repetition with no diminution of delight.

Deepa Agarwal, one of India's leading writers of children's books, also came to the Ravenshaw conference. Agarwal, who has written over fifty books and received prestigious literary prizes in her native country, is virtually unknown in the United States, which is a great pity. She does not make artistic books like Raja Mohanty, but her work is valuable in similar and different ways. Drawing on the folklore of her native north India bordering on Nepal and Tibet, as well as on her childhood as the daughter of a busy doctor who made nighttime house calls with a flashlight and sometimes on horseback, Agarwal's invented child heroes and heroines meet danger with daring as well as with fear and doubt. She takes her stories from a variety of sources, some previously published in Hindi, and others tales she heard growing up in the small town of Almora in Uttaranchal. One of the latter, "The Kaafal is Ripe," may be found in *Folk Tales of Uttarakhand*.

As is typical of folklore, this story mines psychological gold, proffers a mythical understanding of natural phenomena, brings animals and humans together, and reverberates cross-culturally. To account for the

soulful responsive cries of pairs of birds that are heard throughout the Uttarakhand valleys during springtime when the native red berries (kaafal) are ripening, Agarwal's tale tells of Haruli, a little girl sent into the fields to pick berries for her mother. As she plays with her rag doll in the sun, the plucked berries wilt in their basket and shrink. Her mother angrily accuses her of eating the best of them, and although she professes innocence, her disbelieving mother looms up to chastise her. Terror-stricken, Haruli runs away, shrinking as she does into the form of a bird, and then flies off into the sky. Later, when evening falls and the moist breezes waft by, the wilted berries swell in their basket to their original size, and the girl's bereft mother, seeing she has erred, is overcome with remorse. She, too, transforms into a bird, and following her lost daughter to the skies, cries out after her: the one bird calling penitently that the berries are still ripe and the other endlessly pleading that they are all still there.

This frightening and sorrowful tale cannot help but remind western readers of Ovidian metamorphoses—not only Demeter's doleful pursuit of Persephone, but also the transformations of Daphne and many others, and the travails of the never-to-be-trusted Cassandra. What child has not suffered humiliation at being disbelieved by an adult? What child has not shrunk in fear of parental wrath and longed to escape by sudden enchantment into some alternate form so as to evade impending fury?

Agarwal's masterpiece is *Caravan to Tibet*, which appeared in 2007. I was so instantly absorbed in it that I almost missed my train. Set in the remote mountain regions where Indo-Tibetan trade flourished until the Chinese occupation of Tibet, its hero, a fourteen-year-old boy named Debu, belongs to the nomadic Shaukas, and his father, a trader, has disappeared during a raging snowstorm while he and his caravan were attempting to cross a treacherous Himalayan pass. The villagers have given Debu's father up for lost, but although many months have passed, the boy believes his father is still alive, and he persuades the caravan leader to allow him, despite his youth, to accompany the traders over the mountains in order to search. Western readers might recall Telemachus and possibly even Orestes, boys of ancient Greece who also longed for missing fathers.

In addition to its arresting color and detail—the buttery tea gulped by the frozen traders, their furs and wooden saddles, their dizzying vertical ascents on narrow paths at over 17,000 feet in bitter wind and cold, their sure-footed foul-tempered yaks, their sheep, and ponies—we enter the psyche of Debu, who responds to every trial with tender measures of courage and doubt. At one point, early in the story, remembering back to when his father was still home, he wanted to ask him a question but did not do so. “There were things children were supposed not to know about,” Agarwal writes, and this rivets the reader to the page with its verisimilitude because, of course, what she is implying is that not only do children know there are things they are not supposed to know but, even beyond this, children comprehend that they are not even supposed to be aware that they are not supposed to know! In her understated way, she shows us how richly she understands not just the history, geography, and local culture of her region, but also the inner life of her child characters. Yet she forbears to knit together all her threads: a malevolent character continues to lurk, which is exactly as it should be, a dangling strand for curiosity to wind itself around after the book is closed.

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