Resistance, Imagination and the Power of Story in Kashmira Sheth’s *Boys without Names*

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Abstract

In *Boys without Names*, Kashmira Sheth demonstrates the power of story not only for imagination but as a means of resistance and agent for change. Young Gopal is kidnapped in Mumbai, India and forced to work in a sweatshop, where the boss forbids the boys to use their names or even communicate. As his environment grows increasingly oppressive, stories or *kananis* provide a window of escape to his inner life. His stories connect him to his imagination by imparting meaning to physical objects, and they inspire the courage needed to survive. The potential of storytelling grows, however, when Gopal transfers the power of story to the other boys. The forbidden act of storytelling becomes a means of resistance, and the boys are empowered to reclaim their identities by sharing their own stories. They begin to narrate their secret dreams as well as their painful histories. When they relate to one another on a deeper level, they face their past traumas as a necessary step in their re-humanization. The revelation of the power of stories in *Boys without Names* inspires readers to be agents in telling their own stories in order to discover the potential of imagination and hope.
Resistance, Imagination and the Power of Story in Kashmira Sheth’s *Boys without Names*

In Kashmira Sheth’s *Boys Without Names* young Gopal is kidnapped in Mumbai, India and forced to work in a sweatshop. The abusive kidnapper does not allow the boys to use their names or even talk with one another, and as the story progresses, Gopal loses hope that he will see his family again. From the beginning of the novel, Gopal is a storyteller, spinning tales or *kahanis* for his brother and sister and writing ideas in his notebook. As he meets trouble, he tells stories to give himself courage or to inspire a strategy to deal with a difficult situation. He narrates: “Kahanis are like the sky. There is no end to them. You can always retell the old one, make a new one up, or twist the old one to make it funnier, scarier, or sweeter” (158). In his darkest moments he remembers how his mother would tell him that “Kahanis are your best friends because they never leave you” (158).

Sheth first considered writing this book at the request of friends concerned about the welfare of children in India, but it soon became a deeper narrative, probing the significance of stories. She chose to narrate the novel through the eyes of a young boy caught in child bondage so that the readers could share Gopal’s experience. Sheth writes in the present tense to place the reader within the story, facing the same challenges and possibilities that Gopal faces. Wolfgang Iser describes reading as a process in which the reader builds on the implications of the story so that “these implications, worked out by the reader’s imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own” (276). Sheth combines the richness of a new culture with the yearnings and impressions common to all children to stimulate the imagination of her readers. In the process she embodies the power of story.
Stories as resistance in the context of culture

For Sheth, stories impart the power of resistance. The inspiration for this theme flows naturally from the literature in her life. Just as *Boys without Names* follows the struggle of Gopal and five other boys to re-gain their names and their freedom, so Sheth grew up reading twentieth-century Indian writing about the struggle for freedom. Sheth shares on her blog that the Indian language of Gujarati was her first language and she still enjoys Gujarati poetry as an adult. This literary tradition reaches back over a thousand years, and the modern literature is heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. In *Boys without Names*, Gopal’s quest aligns with some of Gandhi’s writings, as in this quote: *The greatest power in the world is that of the Soul.* (Gandhi qtd. by Kamala 1). When the kidnapper denies the boys the use of their names, he takes away their identities. Gopal must overcome this deprivation in an essential struggle for his own soul.

Another favorite Indian author of Sheth, is Rabindranath Tagore, who opposed imperialism and supported Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century. He is known as the *Bard of Bengal* and was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for his poetry collection entitled *Gitanjali* (গীতাঞ্জলি). For Tagore as well, the soul is the foundation of personhood. Here is a translated quote from Song XII in *Gitanjali*:

The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!'

The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'— *Song XII, Gitanjali*, 1913
Gopal’s story parallels the Gitanjali as he strays far before he can find his way home, and the ultimate means is a re-discovery of “I am” for himself and each of the boys. Sheth addresses similar struggles in her earlier book Keeping Corner, the story of a young girl’s struggle for independence within a culture of child marriage and child widowhood. Sheth weaves India’s struggle for independence from British rule in 1947 into this novel, and the narrative is based on the life of her great-aunt. The stories in Sheth’s life become the background fabric upon which she embroiders Gopal’s story, but in an interview with Sheth, she said that the most significant influence on the stories used in this novel was Indian folklore.

According to Kamal Sheoran, “India has the greatest living oral narrative tradition in the world. It fulfils and feeds the needs of every young and growing child in that he gets his complete ‘story’ quota orally” (127). Oral Indian folklore, like the Panchatantra, remains the largest source of children’s literature for the majority of children in India. The Panchatantra are animal fables written in Sanskrit in 200 B.C., which crossed into many regional languages. Sheth has Gopal make-up a similar story about ants to show how the weak can overcome the strong when they band together. Gopal also recalls several folktales about the hero Birbal, who uses his wits to outsmart his enemies, often in a humorous manner. Antonio Gramsci, writing on political theory, sociology and linguistics, suggests that folklore represents a “conception of the world and life …in opposition … to official conceptions of the world” (361). Sheth makes Birbil an inspiration to the young protagonist who models his own opposition to authority on the wily character. Maria Nikolajeva has identified the impact of folk stories on children’s literature through “narrative, characterization and the use of symbols” (15), but Sheth extends the use of stories beyond this basic use. While Boys without Names is an example of the use of folktales to inspire resistance, the novel pushes the power of story farther. In crafting Gopal’s story, Sheth
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reveals the power of stories to connect us to the meaning of material objects, to give us courage, to humanize us, and in the end, to transcend cultures.

**Stories connect us to the meaning of objects**

Sheth employs material objects to make connections through stories. Similar to the phenomenon in children’s picture books in which the pictures tell half the story, the imagery in books for older children connects the reader to the meaning of physical objects. In *Boys without Names* the contrast in imagery between the country and the city creates a series of objects with deeper meaning. In the country Gopal sees “the stars are packed together like people crowded in the temple courtyard at festival time” (12), but in the city, “[t]he stink of everything mixes together; chemicals from tanning hides, melting plastic, people and animal waste, and rotting plants. They all mask the heavenly scent of the rain-soaked earth” (100). Stars and rain-soaked earth become symbols of the country and its goodness, while the stink of tanning hides and animal waste tell their own story about the city. This dynamic adds to the vividness of interpretations, as when Gopal narrates: “He reminds me of the pond in monsoon—you never know where it is deep enough to suck you in, shallow enough to splash in. I don’t trust him and it is best to stay away from him” (255). Sheth leads the readers to make their own connections through the stories behind the objects she describes. Though the novel crosses geographical boundaries for most of her readers, the physical objects become a common language for everyone.

One of the strongest examples of using a material object to connect readers to the meaning of the story is Sheth’s use of the nimba tree throughout the novel. In one of the first scenes, Gopal climbs his favorite nimba tree, whose branches extend over a pond. Sheth describes the shadowy sunshine and the “swollen green beads of nimba fruits” (9). In this tree
Gopal has dreamed up stories and drawn pictures. The nimba tree has become a symbol of his secret life. He narrates: “I have a view of the world through the curtain of lacy leaves, but the world can’t see me” (9).

After he is kidnapped, a nimba tree sustains him. The first day he catches sight of it through the window bars. When the relentless pace of work slows for a moment, he snatches a look at the tree, which reminds him of the tree at home. He narrates:

If I was able to build air palaces there, I can build them now. In my imagination I can visit the pond and see the sunsets in Matheran and the hills that surround our village. Scar and Thick Fingers can’t stop me from doing that—or from planning my escape. (123)

Later, the nimba tree scratches against the building in a breeze, and Gopal uses the sound to convince the boys there might be a rat. He is inspired by a folktale of Birbal, who used a trick to save himself. The boys are afraid of the rat, and Gopal bargains with the head boy for food and a promise not to complain to the boss about any of the boys in return for scaring away the rat. He lets another boy into the secret that the rat is not real, and in this way forges his first bond of friendship. The nimba tree has provided a tool Gopal uses for an initial step in overcoming the fear and distrust among the boys.

As day follows day, Gopal looks for “the sliver of sky and a branch of the nimba tree” (152) every time he pauses from work. Though his body is trapped behind the window bars, his thoughts roam as he works. The captivity worsens, however, and when the tree is struck during a lightning storm, it becomes a symbol of his grief. Gopal narrates: “In the daylight I stare at the nimba trunk with a gash where the big branch broke off many weeks ago. It has left a hole in the tree. I have a same kind of wound in my heart since I got separated from my family” (213).
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Later monsoon weather brings mosquitoes, and the nimba tree provides relief again. Gopal uses a fan to blow on a pail of nimba branches to drive the mosquitoes away, and he imagines he is “sitting on a tree branch on a breezy day” (215). At night the boys sneak the tiny nimba fruits from the branches. Earlier Gopal told them the fruits would make them healthy, but the goodness the tree imparts seems to go deeper than physical health. The act of sharing a meal, however sparse, builds their friendship and deepens the bond they will need if they will successfully escape.

Sheth makes connections to the nimba tree throughout the novel; it begins as a symbol of Gopal’s imaginative life, but by the end of the book, the nimba tree becomes a symbol of hope. The stories connected to a single object creates a transitive property of A=B=C, so that the reader comes to understand that imagination equals hope. Sheth extends this precept to demonstrate that stories have the power to impart courage.

**Stories Impart Courage**

As the book progresses, Gopal succumbs to circumstances that are increasingly oppressive. He must live and work in an airless room, and he is deprived of everything that makes him human: his name, his friendships and his family. Gopal overcomes oppression by drawing courage from stories. He remembers the account of Annasaheb Kotwal (134), who was a freedom fighter and martyr for his region of India in 1942. His statue has a place of honor in the Kapadia Market in Matheran, the nearest town to Gopal’s farm and the place where he and his friends earned money in the summers by helping tourists.

The memory of Kotwal’s revolutionary patriotism and his selfless work for the poor and downtrodden strengthens Gopal’s resolve. Even when the boys won’t reveal their names, he pursues his own form of resistance by creating names for them and later declaring them so that
they become official nicknames. Each name contains the microcosm of a story; there are Night Chatterer, Rocking Boy, Dimpled Chin, Thick Fingers, and GC, short for Gray Cloud, like his eyes (139). In addition, Gopal asserts his name and tries to convince the other boys to reveal their real names. The first boy to share his name is Roshan, whom Gopal has nicknamed Night Chatterer. He was so fearful that he never spoke until the night of a storm that knocks out their single light bulb, and in the darkness he whispers his name.

Gopal realizes that “If I want the group’s help I must know their names and make them my friends” (194). He confronts Rocking Boy, who was the first to be his friend, saying, “I want to call you by your real name. That is who you really are” (194). Once Rocking Boy tells him that his name is Sahil, the youngest boy blurts that his name is Amar and he wants to share a story about his life. This is a significant breakthrough for Gopal. The stories are following the names. Some of the stories tell about the past, while others reveal hopes for the future. GC, however, condemns the story-telling as “nonsense and lies” (199). Gopal gains an ally when Roshan sticks up for him and says, “We-we listen be-be-because the lies are better th-than the truth we have” (199). Gopal challenges GC: “Still it is better to have dreams, because then someday they can come true. But if you don’t have them, then you have nothing. So tell me. Is it better to have nothing or have something?” (200). By this point in the novel, the stories are not only inspiring courage, but the act of sharing them is a form of resistance that imparts more courage.

Stories Humanize Us

As the novel progresses, stories or kahanis become the stimulus for change and personal action as the boys open up to one another. When one boy threatens to tell Scar about the story-telling, Gopal realizes that without the stories, they will be voiceless and powerless. He stands
against the boy who would stifle the stories. The boys now begin to reveal their toughest stories, and the sharing empowers them to face their shame and guilt. They are regaining their humanity. Through Gopal’s eyes, we see the boys as people with stories. They not only have names, but they have a past. Story-telling is the mechanism for their re-humanization.

The novel ends with rescue and parting, and each boy gives Gopal a gift. Sahil gives him a string with six beads to remember their group of six boys. Roshan gives him the nimba leaves he kept to help him remember his family. But GC gives the best gift of all: he tells his story and his name. His grandmother raised him, but he got into trouble just before she died when he tried to steal in order to buy her medicine. He has never forgiven himself because he believes that he killed her. When he finally reveals his name, he says, "Once she died I didn't allow anyone to call me by that name. I should have told you my name long time ago." He has faced his guilt and reclaimed his name. Each of the boys is returned to safety, and as they make their final parting, Gopal narrates, "The way they call me by my name fills me with such joy that I can't reply" (305).

**Stories transcend cultures**

Gopal’s story transcends culture because children everywhere can empathize with his desire to gain his freedom and find his parents. He prays to Lord Ganesha, but as Gopal narrates: “[a]fter several days the festival of Lord Ganesha ends, but I am still here” (216). He realizes a second deep truth that children share: the necessity of acting for oneself.

I had the privilege of studying under Kashmira Sheth as I pursued a master of fine arts in writing for children. She taught me several important lessons, but perhaps the most significant was the value of children’s literature to cross cultural barriers. In a sense all children belong to the same people group, regardless of cultural affiliation, and they share a literature in which the
child protagonist is the prime agent of change. In real life, children have parents, teachers and other authority figures to help them solve problems, but even in real life, children must learn to take the first step to face obstacles. In children’s literature, this truth is expanded so that the small or weak can overcome the big and powerful, a significant theme throughout human existence. It is here, in the fragile threads of a story, that connections between cultures are woven.

Educators increasingly cite the importance of using stories to build bridges between cultures. According to Avis Masuda and Michele Ebersole cultural diversity within the population of our classrooms is rapidly increasing, and more than four out of ten students in the U.S. preschool through twelfth grade classrooms are members of cultural minorities. They claim that “culturally authentic books speak to nuances of their unique heritage, which insiders identify and recognize” (155). Sheth writes on her blog:

Today we need to have a body of literature that reflects our global society and its make-up. It is important for children with various ethnic backgrounds to see their culture, geography, and their immediate world reflected in stories, like an echo. It is equally important for children who are outside of that specific culture to read about something new and different, like gazing at the stars: they may be distant but they are awe-inspiring and we feel part of something bigger. (*Gazing at the Stars*)

Stories help us to feel part of the larger world so that we transcend our cultural boundaries. Through this process we find our connections to others. We understand their yearnings and fears. We understand our common struggle, and we can share our common triumphs. It is this essential humanity that we share across cultures. Sheth writes on her blog:
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To me a story is a story because it’s about who we are as people…It is that common bond that makes anyone relate to any story anywhere and makes the emotional connection to the character deeper and lasting. *(Gazing at the Stars)*

In *Boys without Names*, storytelling becomes liberation for the boys who overcome their limitations to work together. They find connections through stories that give them courage and help them find their souls, and in the end, their story connects them to us. Sheth wrote: “Books make us look at the world with fresh eyes and open our hearts. Ultimately, stories transcend all the specific details and link us all to the human journey” *(Gazing at the Stars)*. Through *Boys without Names*, Sheth invites readers to be agents in telling their own stories and facing their own past. In this way, she connects children all over the world to the power of imagination and hope.
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References


