

Ashok ki Kahani: An Analysis

Devika Sharma^{1*}

ABSTRACT

In the paper, the story *Ashok ki Kahani*, written by Krishna Kumar (2008), is framed within the New Literacy Studies to begin thinking of literacy as a social practice, by which it means it is contested and negotiated, therefore not neutral and universal. One of the fundamental questions that the story raises is – Who should be blamed for Ashok's failure? The paper attempts to respond to this question by trying to understand Ashok's literacy journey within the socio-political context? Three primary characters are closely examined – Ashok, the teacher as well as the surveyors from education department – but the paper also looks at the role of Ashok's father who is mentioned in passing to argue that literacy cannot be seen without the power relations that operate on all those engaged in the given context. *Ashok ki Kahani* offers a window to study present classroom practices in the socio-historical political context.

Keywords: *New Literacy Studies, ideological model of literacy, early literacy, pedagogy of reading and writing, drop out.*

National Education Policy 2020 refers to 'learning crisis' in India wherein around 5 crores children have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy (p.8). The scale of learning crisis demands that we study the problem in greater depth and look at different aspects. In this context, I examine Krishna Kumar's *Ashok ki Kahani* (Kumar, 2008). It offers a narrative which problematises literacy learning in classrooms and brings focus on reporting by the state departments. By employing the theoretical framework of New Literacy Studies (NLS) in probing the narrative it helps us understand the complexity and inter-relatedness of the problem of literacy and learning. Rather than rendering literacy as a unique individual problem, NLS views literacy saturated with ideologies of power embedded within the larger socio-historical and political context.

According to NLS (Street, 1995, 2003; Gee, 2008) all literacy practices are socially embedded. By virtue of it being a social practice literacy is framed by the values, beliefs, knowledge systems of the people. As literacy is socially situated, NLS engages with the questions of power in its historicity. Therefore, literacy is contested and negotiated. Brian Street coined the term ideological model of literacy (Street, 1984) to suggest that there are various literacy practices available in a given society at any point of time but there are some which get favoured and become the dominant forms, in the process some are at an advantageous position and others get marginalised. So the question that needs to be asked is what is the dominant and

favoured literacy practice at any given time? Who decides what is appropriate literacy practice and its goals? Who is denied or kept in the margins and why?

The paper is divided into three sections. The first part summarises the story of *Ashok ki Kahani*. Krishna Kumar locates the problem of mass drop out in early grades in (a) the teacher's pedagogy and (b) the surveyors' apathy in understanding the issue in hand. In the second section, Ashok's story is contextualised and read in conjunction with other essays in the book. By doing so it helps in understanding that literacy cannot be seen as a standalone activity, rather it has to do with social arrangement of power. In the next section, different characters from the story are situated in the given context – Ashok, Ashok's father and family, the teacher as well as the surveyors from education department – in the socio-political context. It is to argue that Ashok's journey into literacy cannot be understood fully by looking at and blaming one or two characters in the story without examining the power relations that operate on all those engaged in the literacy practice. The local, national and global political tensions that guide relations amongst people in the society and in/on education remind us that the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984), which locates literacy in the cognitive structures within the individual, is problematic. The tendencies giving rise to schooled literacy shape and design Ashok's failure. In conclusion, the paper summarises the argument and offers some ways forward

1. PhD Scholar, Dr. K.R. Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

* Corresponding Author ✉ devikavangogh@gmail.com

Received: 9 June, 2023

Available online: 20 September, 2023

with specific focus on research in literacy studies, especially in various Indian languages.

Ashok ki Kahani

Ashok ki Kahani is a four-page long story about a spirited village boy who is excited about going to school. Ashok talks to his mother and somehow manages to convince his hesitant father to getting him admitted to grade I in the village primary school. For the first three months the teacher writes alphabets in Hindi on the board which children repeat after her and draw the letters on their slates and then in their notebooks sometimes even 20 times a day. After the teacher is satisfied that now children are ready to learn to read words, she tells them to open their textbooks. The teacher teaches them from the book that the letter *ka* begins the word *kabutar* and look at the appropriate picture to the word. Ashok thinks that letter *ka* stands for *kabutar* and he affirmed by the picture given next to the letter. Their perspectives differed, but Krishna Kumar pauses to wonder if the teacher thought that Ashok could have a perspective at all. The reader needs to pause further and ask—did he mean whether Ashok in particular could have a perspective or did he mean children like Ashok who were struggling in studies could have a perspective or did he mean children on the whole could have a perspective? By these questions, one can understand the teacher's perspectives on who is a learner, and what is learning. These beliefs and perceptions held by the teachers specifically about who can learn and who cannot, predict their school journeys and mark their identities as students. By grade I, Ashok learns all the alphabets. Every time he reads a word, he breaks the word in different sounds and the memorised association with the sound such as the word '*kamal*' would be read as '*kabutar ka'ka', matar ka ma, langur ka la*'. So, to get to the word *kamal*, it would take him a long time or he would get stuck as he would forget the sounds identified by the time he reached the end of the word and it was time to join all the sounds together to form the word. The result was that he struggled to read a complete sentence and make meaning of it. By the end of Grade II he reads out the poem out of memory by opening to the wrong page of the textbook. He is happy with his memory, but his teacher is quite upset. In grade III his struggle becomes jarringly noticeable with introduction of new subjects. In these three years he faces the wrath of his teacher and gets humiliated in front of the class but by the third year of his schooling his teacher stops calling on him to read. Subsequently, by mid of grade III after Diwali break he does not go back to school. In the school records the reason for his drop out is documented as poor economic condition of his father. At the end of the story we get to know that Ashok works as a child labour.

Ashok ki Kahani is in a book which is a compilation of essays and anecdotes written over more than two decades probably between late 1980s and 2008. In that period

education sector saw several changes owing to economic reforms. There were major changes such as funding in education, special focus on literacy, emergence of para teachers across the country. We also saw large scale quality intensive programmes in primary schools across India such as District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which ensured a huge number of children like Ashok come into the folds of schooling.

The short essays in the book are anecdotes, snippets or reflections from classrooms/ schools that give insights to deeper social and political maladies in education which have roots in the state and society. There are several essays in the book specifically written on literacy. I would like to pick up two interlinked issues: myth of literacy, and secondly, literacy as a trope to colonise and dominate the 'economically and socially' dalits (Kumar, 2008).

According to Gee (2008) illiteracy is presented as the cause of poverty, superstition, uncouth behaviour, etc by the dominant and privileged. In converse, literacy is the path to rationality, civility, knowledge and development. This myth dehumanises the humanity and disrespects the culture of those who come from less dominant literate contexts. Gee explains:

The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self-interest or group interest to do so. (p.61)

Literacy myth is constructed to manipulate and maintain social hierarchies. Krishna Kumar (2008) argues that in the given neoliberal market economy literacy is a mode to manage, control and supervise people and distract them from knowing intentions of those wielding power. Literacy is not innocent of the interests and intentions of those who propagate a particular kind of literacy to help them dominate over the disenfranchised. In the new hyper competitive, science and technology-driven global capitalism (Gee, 2008) points out that literacy is used to produce three tier of students who serve at three levels in the economy: service workers who are poorly paid at the lowest rung, knowledge workers in the middle rung, and at the top are the leaders and "symbol analysts". The highest percentage of population is prepared for the first level of the hierarchy. Through literacy a class of docile, disciplined, meek class is created who aspire for the values and beliefs which are held by the powerful on the highest level. Unlike the earlier days when the socially and economically marginalised were denied literacy for the fear of being overthrown owing to the enlightenment by words, the elites today in the given market economy believe that with literacy a whole set of values and behaviours are

inculcated that help them control and manage them easily maintaining the social hierarchy.

Analysis of Characters: Contextualising *Ashok ki Kahani*

One can easily mistake Ashok's failure to individual incapability or to the teacher's poor pedagogy of reading and writing or to the administration's indifference in diagnosing the problem of drop out. All the three levels of failure are not incorrect—Ashok could not learn to read and write when some others managed to; his teacher did not engage in modern and meaningful pedagogies of reading and writing that enabled every child on the path to literacy; and the administration did not bother to get to the bottom of his dropping out in the middle of grade III. But, it does not help in understanding the larger and deeper issues related to failures of children especially from rural, marginalised and minorities groups in acquiring literacy and continuing their education in schools.

The ideological model of literacy helps us study the questions of power relations in determining the fate of Ashok's literacy journey. What are the beliefs held by Ashok and his father; his teacher, neighbours and other dominant people of the village, officials across the educational administration on what is knowledge, knowledge to what end, who is a learner, who must learn what, conceptions of child and childhoods.

Ashok

Who could this child be? We know in the story Ashok is a male child in a very poor family in a village located most probably in the northern part of India. In the story, there is no mention of Ashok's surname. We do not know his caste. It could be that the author wants to suggest that Ashok's case is not a unique one, he represents, irrespective of caste and economic conditions, many of those who are struggling in our education system to survive but are pushed out. Usually a surname is appended to a name of an upper caste person in the northern part of India. So, it may not be wrong to speculate that a child who is referred by only his first name may belong to lower caste or scheduled caste.

Ashok's Father

Ashok's father is economically poor. His father worked in the fields on a small plot of land. How did he acquire that land? What does he grow? It does not seem the crop grown on the land is adequate for his family. Firstly because Ashok wants to finish schooling and begin earning. Secondly, we are told that Ashok after dropping out of school he is now a child labour. Ashok's father cannot read and write; he is *unpadh* or illiterate. It means that Ashok cannot be helped in school activities by his father, nor any other family member. We also know that Ashok's father is not interested in sending him to school despite Ashok coming of school age. It is only on Ashok's insistence that he agrees to admit him to school. Why is that so? Can there

be some thing more significant than assuming that Ashok's father was not invested in and ignorant of education or he was wanting Ashok to help in earning money to run their family? What beliefs did Ashok's father have about education and schooling? Did he believe in the ascribed notions of who could and could not enter school and learn? What were his experiences and stories related to schooling, learning, books? Did he ever go to school? What is his story?

The questions related to Ashok, his father, and his family are critical. The author maybe cautions the readers of 'the danger of a single story' (Adichie, 2009). He tries to tell the readers the problems of creating, maintaining and propagating a single narrative of Ashok's family that his father is poor and *unpadh*. Apparently, the teacher and the surveyors fall into this trap.

Ashok's Teacher and Administrators

To understand Ashok's story it may also be helpful to locate the internal dominations. I tried to locate Ashok earlier, but here it becomes important to situate the teacher who teaches Ashok through these three years. What is her age, does she live in the same village or she is located outside in a nearby village or town, which caste does she belong to, what is the nature of her appointment to the school, what was her training, who trained her. It is also important to situate the school in the village. Which part of the village is the school located in, what is the caste and gender composition of students and teachers in the school, how many permanent and on contract teachers including vacant positions are there. On internal dominations, Street (2013) writes:

The primary dimensions of this new power structure involve hegemony of urban areas over rural, of men over women and of central elites over local populations. In order to understand the processes of literacy transmission in these contexts it is not enough simply to analyze the role of colonialism or of neocolonialism; it is also necessary to develop ways of knowing about these local power structures and cultures. (p. 45)

Who is teaching whom, who makes the textbooks, curriculum, and who documents information on children and schooling etc are laden with questions of power. The central assumption by all in the positions of power is that literacy is that which is taught in school, it is universal and neutral. If we ignore the apathy of the teacher and the district documentation officials, who are filling up the data including data on drop outs it should be noted that their method is maintaining a safe distance from the subject. In fact, the author writes that the teacher in third grade begins to distance herself from him by not calling on him to read and ignoring him. It is interesting that the data collectors who obviously do not stay in the same village and most probably do not stay in the nearby town as well take a very

distant approach. For them Ashok is a number in the drop outs. An ethnographic curiosity may have taken them beyond the simplistic story. Street (2013) comments that the literacy that the school attempts to pass on to Ashok and first generation learners is not merely a transfer of some skill sets but it is an absolute new ways of thinking and being.

The transfer of literacy from a dominant group to those who previously had little experience of reading and writing, involves more than simply the passing on of some technical, surface skills. Rather, for those receiving the new literacy, the impact of the culture and of the politico-economic structures of those bringing it is likely to be more significant than the impact of the technical skills associated with reading and writing. The shifts in meaning associated with such transfers are located at deep, epistemo-logical levels, raising questions about what is truth, what is knowledge and what are appropriate sources of authority. (p. 23)

Brian Street reminds us that the shifts in the practices of those who have 'little experience of reading and writing' are not merely in the skill sets that they acquire but at a very deep level of how we understand our world and existence. On the act of reading, Eva Maria-Simms (2011) writes, 'reading is a mind technology' (Maria-Simms, 2011, p.). She explains that reading abstracts from the present and intensifies the experience of world of the book. There is a fear that emerges from this abstraction and intensification: 'it is only when a culture shifts its participation to these printed letters that the stones fall silent. It maybe this very fear of losing touch with the world of senses and the world around them.' Literacy or specifically writing is believed to be a colonial and preemptive project that takes everything within itself. Therefore, the resistances such as Ashok's father's needs to be unpacked.

Literacy Programmes and Global Economic Structures

According to Street (2013), the way the literacy programmes in the developing nations are structured, designed and transacted they are fashioned much in the same 'colonial' model. He goes on to say:

'at a structural level, these countries are often economically dependent on the western economic order, through multinationals, export dependency, loans and aid. Very often, then, literacy is being introduced along with a whole range of features of western society—forms of industrialization, bureaucracy, formal schooling, medicine, and so forth.' (p. 45)

School education is undergoing rearrangement. One of the emerging trends in school education in India is three kinds of schools (Kumar, 2022) that cater largely to three classes of services which plug into the global market economy. The first kinds are the government schools

where only children of the poor and marginalised read. They are taught in regional or Hindi medium where there are hardly any choice. The second kinds of schools are CBSE affiliated private schools where children learn in English medium and learn other foreign languages too. Within the given fixed curriculum these students have some choice. The third kind are the schools which are affiliated to foreign boards, speak in English, learn foreign languages and have a variety of choice in terms of courses and develop higher order thinking skills.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The paper has tried to argue through Ashok's story that literacy is not neutral and universal, therefore not a set of skills that one acquires without the mediation of values and beliefs embedded in schooled literacy. Ashok fails to read not because he is incapable. He did not drop out due to economic pressures on him to support family. There was pressure, but he was determined to complete school. He wanted to be among those who persevered and continued their studies to ultimately be *bade aadmi* (Kumar, 2008, p. 57) and earn money. Ashok was failed by the ideologies that framed schooled literacy. Ashok's journey into literacy tells us that the assumptions of literacy as neutral and universal skill sets do not stand on firm ground, it is more likely to disfavour those who are on the margins of our society.

When we assume that literacy is simply decoding and locate it in the individual we will maintain the 'learning crisis' and continue to disfavour children like Ashok. On the other hand, those who learn to decode may learn to be a consumer as literacy is embedded within the neoliberal hyper competitive market economy. Therefore, some of the questions that we need to contemplate and explore are (a) how does a neutral and universal notion of literacy benefit some and marginalise others, (b) in whose interest does Ashok's failure in schooling and subsequent drop out lie, and (c) whose literacy practice is promoted over other literacy practices? How can other literacies support and extend schooled literacy and build on their skills and knowledge?

Literacy studies in India is in a nascent stage. We depend much on the western literature which is undeniably helpful to discuss and debate literacy learning in the Indian contexts, but research on language and literacy especially in Indian languages, will help in designing policies and curriculum that suits learners in particular contexts. Therefore, we need to invest more in research.

As literacy is not conceptualised as a specialised area of study, it is still thought of as a cognitive problem and a set of skills. Some government departments, Trusts and NGOs are working in this area, but largely their aim is to find approaches and methods that work best with children. In that direction, innovative approaches to literacy learning

developed by Reading Cell (NCERT), Pragat Shikshan Sanstha, Phaltan and Organisation for Early Literacy Project, Rajasthan are worth mentioning. Some approaches in engaging children with books are The Community Library Project, Tata Trusts, Eklavya. These are approaches and experiments which we can benefit from as best practices, but they are too less in number, small in scale and most importantly they are practice based organisations which make it difficult for them to engage in research if it does not feed into their practice immediately. Given the researches from other developed nations, we know that to deepen classroom practices in literacy we need to broaden our research base in terms of literacy practice in different languages and regions; engage in comparative studies of literacy learning in different languages; teacher's role and her beliefs; classroom practices, etc. Along with such researches, socio-historical studies of literacy; ethnographies of social practice of literacies; employing philosophical approaches to literacies etc. are important. Without sufficient commitment and investment in research in literacy, which is a yawning gap in the Indian context where diversity in terms of languages, scripts, geographies, histories; inequities in terms of caste, gender, school systems exist, it may not be able to address 'learning crisis' which unfortunately has further severed after two years of disruption due to COVID-19.

References

1. Adichie, C.N. (2009, October 8). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
2. Gee, J.P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. New York: Routledge.
3. Kumar, A. (2022, May 03). *India's school education now has three layers. Blame political meddling in syllabus*. The Print. <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-school-education-now-has-three-class-layers-blame-political-meddling-in-syllabus/940716/>
4. Kumar, K. (2008). *Ashok ki kahani. Deewar ka istemaal aur anya lekh*. Bhopal: Eklavya.
5. Maria-Simms, E. (2011). Questioning the value of literacy: A phenomenology of speaking and reading in children. In S. Wolf, K. Coats, P. Enciso, & C.A. Jenkins (Eds.), *Handbook of research on children's and young adult literature* (pp. 20-31). New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
6. Ministry of Human Resource and Development. (2020). *The New Education Policy 2020*. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
7. Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Street, B. (1995). *Social literacies*. London: Longman.
9. Street, B. (2003). What's new in new literacy studies? *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 1-14.
10. Street, B. (2013). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. New York: Routledge.

