

Of Boochandis, Rakshasas and Asuras: Reimagining the Monster in Select Indian Picturebooks in English

¹**B. Sai Harshitha**, Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Languages & Literature - English, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur Andhra Pradesh, India.

bsaiharshitha@sssihl.edu.in

²**Dr Sowmya Srinivasan**, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Languages & Literature - English, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Anantapur, A.P.), India.

sowmyasrinivasan@sssihl.edu.in

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.27.1.49>

Abstract

For a long time, children's stories have incorporated mythical monsters and magical creatures that are a product of the imagination. In contemporary Indian children's picturebooks, there has been a paradigmatic shift in the characterization of such monstrous entities created as empathetic, friendly companions of amusement and fun in contrast to the traditional figures of fear and repulsion. Considering this trend shift, the paper analyses three picturebooks that feature three uniquely Indian monster-figures, namely the boochandi, the rakshasa and the asura, as their protagonists. Through a close examination of these representations, the paper aims to establish the progressive and inclusive humanitarian leanings found in the contemporary Indian picturebooks that reimagine these monsters, pointing to a change in the adult-child power dynamics wherein the child is given autonomy and agency to develop emotional resilience through these narratives.

Keywords: Monsters, Asura, Rakshasa, Emotional Resilience, Adult-Child Dynamics, Indian Picturebooks in English.

Introduction

Since ancient times of oral legends and mythological tales, monsters have been considered the antithesis of anything human, sometimes as rivals and enemies. They are imaginary beings stereotypically portrayed as ugly, scary, and repulsive. Looking at the spectrum of children's literature, it has been post-human in the many ways monsters and humans mingle, cooperate and coexist in these imagined orders. In folktales, fairy stories, legends, and myths, ghastly creatures and monstrous beings have been used to represent the virtues and vices of human beings. However, the trend of children's tales representing such monster characters has shifted into a new direction with contemporary texts. Many scholars note that contemporary children's genres, such as picturebooks and plays, subvert the traditional idea of monsters as gory beings by introducing friendly, empathetic beasts (Christie 3; Bayoumy 4; Zhao). Looking at this constructed world of monsters in the Indian context, this paper attempts to study how contemporary Indian picturebooks in English narrate tales of monsters that help children create ideas that reshape the existing image of them as negative entities. The paper analyses three Indian picturebooks that feature three Indian monsters, namely the *boochandi*, the *rakshasa* and the

asura, as their protagonists in an attempt to study how they revise the intent of these characters from being perpetrators of fear to champions of positivity. While Indian picturebooks such as *Lachmi's War*, *The Night Monster*, and *Pintoo and the Giant* contain fearful depictions of monsters, the selected picturebooks present the monster-characters in a positive and non-threatening light. These picturebooks serve as representative texts that exemplify the shift in contemporary Indian children's literature revising the conventionally negative monstrous representations as empathetic, humorous and positive beings. The study looks at how such reimagined tales of monstrous creatures also reveal the adult authors' underlying motive to restructure the power dynamics of the adult-child relationship through character representations and storytelling that subvert traditional ideas and expectations. The paper adopts a qualitative analysis of how Indian picturebooks reimagine monsters through an in-depth interpretive close reading of the verbal and visual elements that contribute to the construction of the monster figure within the picturebook. According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration, and so, the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threaten to smash distinctions" (6). The term has emerged from the Latin words *monstrare*(to show) and *monere*(to warn), pointing to its connection with the idea of a physical aberration. A monstrous character was seen as a spectacle and a warning. As the definition points out, physical incoherence and, probably, deviant behaviours position them as manifestations of the Other. From a postcolonial theoretical lens, the monsters embody Homi Bhabha's idea of 'the Other': exotic, threatening, both desired and despised. When seen as literary constructs, monsters represent both external fears and internal anxieties of human existence. These figures stimulate children to explore their fantasies, fears and, in general, the unknown.

The idea of the monster has evolved. Different periods in literary history have represented monsters according to the prevailing social, historical and cultural traditions. Andrew Mangham, the author of *We Are All Monsters*, in an interview, asserts that "the science of monsters goes back at least as far as Aristotle and was legitimized, to a large extent, by Renaissance philosopher Francis Bacon who, like his Greek forebear, believed that to understand nature we need to have a sense of where and how it errs". With Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the genre of Gothic horror introduced a new image of the monster as a result of human deviation from societal standards and ethical considerations. Further into the 19th century, the trend of the freak show was reflected in Charles Dickens' characters such as Daniel Quilp and Sally Brass, who stood out as the Other (Mangham). In the 20th and 21st centuries, advances in science have led writers to imagine hybrid and alien creatures, dystopian worlds, and intriguing beasts. In modern times, the boom in fantasy fiction, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Harry Potter series, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the Percy Jackson Series, has created text worlds that skillfully integrate monstrous entities into the narrative. In general, one can find that goblins, vampires, and werewolves are stock figures in fairy and folk tales from around the world.

The Monster in Picturebooks

Monsters are found galore in children's picturebooks, often having deep connections to children's social, cultural and emotional experiences. From a child psychology perspective, monsters enable the visualisation of children's fears, such as loneliness, darkness, separation, and punishment. David H. Bauer notes that Teraphobia, the fear of ghosts and monsters, is predominantly seen in pre-school and early elementary school children, at 74% and 53% respectively (557). When children read stories of monsters in picturebooks, more so their positive depictions, they learn to handle fear, through projection and identification, with the emotional distance that the imaginative space offers. Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy points out that "monsters help children go through

a process of introspection; they learn to reflect, analyze their needs/fears, and eventually come up with a new understanding of themselves and others” (2). In many traditional narratives with monster characters, the hero inevitably slays the evil monster and returns victoriously. This prevalent cultural trope instils in children the understanding that obstacles and challenges can be overcome with courage and positivity. However, recent children’s tales subvert this hierarchy by constructing monsters that promote positive thoughts and behaviour in children.

Another interesting aspect of picturebooks with monsters is linked to the perception of the monster as the Other. These monsters represent difference and deviation from standards. When such portrayals are confronted in picturebooks, children question set standards and orient themselves towards an accepting and inclusive mindset. Often, through certain behaviours depicted, children may see their reflections and perceive the monster as an extension of themselves. Usually, children’s unruly behaviour can become the impetus for the adult’s imagination of monstrous figures with disgusting attitudes and gross manners. Therefore, these monstrous figures become the displaced projection of an adult’s perception of a child without proper social conditioning. A different approach to the representation of monsters has become popular in contemporary picturebooks, with authors attempting to portray monstrous characters as empathetic, kind and curious. Christie notes that a monster in twenty-first-century children’s literature “can often be found championing good over evil, one that can help a child through turbulent issues, or as a comrade setting out to accompany them on great adventures” (2). Yet it must be acknowledged that most adult authors still work around the original image of the monster as a scary and abominable entity. However, through various hilarious, witty and heartwarming narratives, these novel picturebooks attempt to alter cultural schemas, leading to an attitudinal shift in the child readers’ perception of the monster figure. Seminal picturebooks from the West, such as Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and Julia Donaldson’s *The Gruffalo*, play with the idea of the grotesque monster but circumvent fear in the child reader through amusing plots.

This reimagination by adult authors can also be read as a reflection of the broader shift in parenting practices that emphasises restructuring the adult-child relationship from control-based to one of mutual respect and autonomy. Adults of the current generation are invested in raising children who are emotionally secure, empowered and critically aware. Picturebooks with monsters situated in amusing plots or created with funny characteristics enable children to think and rethink their ideas of what a monster is. By doing so, such subversive monster representations help children question authority, norms and standards of good and bad set by traditional thought processes. From a developmental perspective, such positive depictions of monsters in picturebooks and pop-up books also help children associate them with happy endings, improve their imaginative capabilities, and tackle social and emotional anxieties (Christie 2-5). Such reimaging does not just demystify monsters but equips children with tools to navigate fear and reframe their agency. Picturebooks in India are a recent phenomenon and, in the last decade, have garnered attention for engaging kids with novel ideas and new stories. Specifically, Indian picturebooks with monsters are inventive, playful and subtly subvert traditional depictions and question conventional ideas. In the Indian scenario, diverse folklore and mythology are rich with monsters and supernatural beings. In the country’s mythological stories, one may find a range of monsters, from the *Grama Devatas*, *Asuras*, *Rakshasas*, to *Prets*, *Nagas*, and *Bhoots*. Many monstrous characters are intrinsic to the narratives in popular epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The stories of these epics are populated with *asuras*, *rakshasas*, *nagas* and many other monstrous entities. The length and breadth of India also have many regional folktales and oral narratives that feature uniquely Indian monsters, such as the story of Vikram and Betaal, stories of *Kalliyankattu Neeli Yakshi* and tales of *Brahmarakshasas* abducting cattle and young children. Speaking on how stereotypes are embedded in these timeless tales, Radhika Menon, publishing director of

Tulika publishers, notes that

These stories reflect the times and cultures in which they are set. And they are timeless – the good vs evil, the wise vs foolish, the strong vs weak concepts and images are universal to stories, from the classics to folktales. And overriding all this are notions of beauty and gender, which continue even today. Very often writers and illustrators unconsciously reinforce these stereotypes even while the stories or illustrations try to break free of it. Which is why we find that even today we have books that reinforce stereotypes. It requires skill and understanding to change or subvert stereotypes in children's books. (Vachharajani)

Following this vision to subvert stereotypes, creators of contemporary Indian children's literature are attempting to break free and reinvent problematic representations as friendly avatars. The traditional narratives serve as the base from which contemporary creators of Indian picture-books choose monstrous characters and create tales that shed a positive light on these mostly negatively represented figures. These books bring wonderfully reimagined monster characters to child readers that reflect children's developmental emotional states, anxieties, and behaviours.

Discussing *Boochandis*, *Rakshasas* and *Asuras*

The first picturebook in consideration is *The Big Book of Boochandis*, written by Pavithra Sankaran and illustrated by Rucha Dhayarkar. The picturebook centres around the *boochandi*, an archetypal monster in the households of South India, imagined with no specific form or as a dubious male figure with dark, ghastly features. The term *Boochandi* is a combination of two Tamil words: *Poosu* (smeared ash) and *Aandi* (a wandering mendicant). They are fabricated as creatures who gobble up troublesome kids and capture those who throw tantrums in huge sack bags. From the constructed image of the *boochandi*, it can be inferred that these monstrous creatures are a convenient tool used by adults to discipline difficult children. The *boochandi* is constructed with forms and shapes convenient to the context, which the creator of the narrative exploits in the picturebook.

In *The Big Book of Boochandis*, the mysterious monstrous sheen of a *boochandi* is dismantled at the beginning of the book by making it a commonplace entity. The opening lines, "Boochandis are everywhere/ Boochandis are here, there and in your hair", uncover the familiar dislodged places where the *boochandis* thrive, making them objects of everyday interaction. By doing so, they have implicitly attempted to restructure the adult-created idea of control through fear and bring forth an experience that fosters imagination, critical thinking and empowerment as children engage with these reimagined *boochandis* that are so very ordinary. The illustrations in the picturebook play a significant role in restructuring the ghastly image of the *boochandi*. Instead of a fixed, singular scary image of a *boochandi*, the picturebook presents the *boochandis* as adorable and comical clay models in different colours, shapes, sizes and with various characteristic features. The diversity of *boochandi* characters seen in the picturebook introduces a range of character types that reflect the variety of personalities and persons a child might encounter in real life. By engaging with such diverse characters, similar to children, in various ways, the *boochandis* allow them to make sense of complex character traits in a playful, imaginative way. The *boochandis* are described as possessing monstrous characteristics, such as claws and paws, a huge appetite, and even stealth techniques. Yet the *boochandis* engage in child-like behaviours that resonate with the readers, reflecting common childhood experiences. Their actions, such as hiding behind the cupboards, having runny noses, experiencing toileting mishaps, peeping through the window and playing in the dark, reflect typical childlike behaviour. Thus, the *boochandis* can be read as implicit reflections of children themselves, facilitating a deeper connection between the text and its young audience.

This picturebook also has a digitised version on Pratham's StoryWeaver platform, wherein the

illustrations have been converted into Graphic Interchange Format (GIF) - short, repetitive videos. The *boochandis* come to life and their animated movements further dull their mythical sheen, allowing children to understand monstrosity through a lens of amusement and contemplate the traditional stories with a new perspective where fear is eliminated. The transformation of the *boochandi* from a monstrous character to a child-friendly entity is not just a narrative technique. It can be seen as an act of restructuring the traditional adult-child hierarchy, where these monsters become the ignition point for children to rethink their perceptions about the world around them. The second Indian monster figure in discussion is a *rakshasa*, a mythical monster with supernatural powers, generally used for evil. To define this Indian monster, “the rakshasas, are described as violent beings who disturb the meditation and rituals of rishis... Rakshasas are also carnal beings who do not respect marriage... the rakshasas follow the law of the jungle” (Pattanaik). Sowmya Rajendran’s *The Pleasant Rakshasa* subverts this traditional image of a *rakshasa*. Karimuga, when translated, means the dark-faced one. He is a gentle and empathetic *rakshasa* with purple skin, red eyes, yellow crooked teeth, two horns, and hairy legs. The gory features of the *rakshasa* are glorified in the picturebook, which disrupts the child reader’s perception of beauty and elegance and promotes a dialogue on body positivity. Through the depiction of the monstrous body of Karimuga, the picturebook professes acceptance and appreciation of creation. Even after losing all the features that made him look admirable to his *rakshasa* friends, he found happiness and contentment when he saw that he still had his yellow teeth. The subtle implication for the reader is that everyone is unique and needs to embrace it without any self-doubt, as Karimuga does. The variety of *rakshasas* depicted in the book again adds to the character range and helps children map these imaginary characters to themselves in reality. In the pictures, the egocentric child reader can identify monsters that are small, massive, tall, short and in an assortment of shapes and sizes. Dimakos points out that such subversive narratives, through fantasy and imagination, can “be a non-threatening, fun way for children to see the world from a different view” (11). The selfish, cruel, and malevolent iconic *rakshasa* is replaced by a saintly figure in Karimuga, preaching kindness, compassion, and empathy despite the ugly demeanour. The picturebook uses subtle humour in the dialogue. The sentence “Don’t ask for immortality, invincibility, or idlis” (Rajendran) uses humorous juxtaposition of the rule of three as a rhetorical device. The dialogue subverts the popular mythological trope of seeking boons by including “idlis” alongside grand, unattainable states of immortality and invincibility, suggesting the absurdity of the entire system. *The Pleasant Rakshasa* revises the age-old representation of monstrous *rakshasas* to suit the contemporary audience. The picturebook encourages constructive everyday conversations among children regarding difference and individuality through the bodies of the monsters. Through Karimuga’s spirit, the child is also introduced to the attitude of sacrifice and gratitude while highlighting the value of companionship. The adult creators behind the picturebook have created Karimuga with a vision to reimagine *rakshasas* as empathetic beings, dismantling historical portrayals of them as selfish and aberrant. The picturebook instead presents Karimuga as a model for children to emulate, not as a cautionary symbol, thereby deconstructing the fear-inducing *rakshasa* image popularised by traditional adults. Discussing the third monster figure, *Junior Kumbhakarna* by Arundhati Venkatesan and Shreya Sen reimagines the famous tale of Kumbhakarna of the *Asura* clan through the playful eyes of a young boy, Kukku. The story of Kumbhakarna is from the Indian epic, *Ramayana*. He is the brother of the *asura* king Ravana and is infamous for the misspelt boon, which put him into a deep slumber for six months. The attempts to wake him were a gargantuan effort. In the *Ramayana*, Robert P. Goldman notes “the heroic efforts required of the *rakshasas* to wake him - the blaring of trumpets, the beating of drums, the assault with fists, feet and various weapons and the trampling with herds of elephants - are elaborately and amusingly described at length by

Valmiki"(121). This event of rousing Kumbhakarna has been adopted and depicted as Kukku's dream in the picturebook.

The exaggerated, brightly coloured pictures in this book lighten the gigantic, monstrous appearance of Kumbhakarna. He is not presented as a demonic, fearsome warrior but as a lethargic giant who eats and sleeps without care. This counterframing of the character shifts the perception from fear and repulsion towards humour and amusement for the child reader. It is seen that the people around Kumbhakarna try different creative ways to wake him up. In line with the *Ramayana*, the reader finds elephants trampling him and drums playing nearby as part of the various methods to wake him up. But in a childlike twist, the picturebook also mentions that "Mountains of laddus were brought...But even that didn't wake him" and "They pulled his moustache. They tickled his nose"(Venkatesh). These actions colour the entire repertoire with playfulness and amusement in the book.

Kumbhakarna's depiction in the picturebook can be interpreted as a projection of Kukku, who also struggles to wake up in the morning, a situation relatable to many young kids. Through this projection, the mythical *Asura* is removed from the grand scheme of an epic narrative and placed in a child's everyday context. This blurs boundaries for child readers by blending the grand and the mundane in an accessible and enjoyable format, as the picturebook. Also, the picturebook depicts Kukku's habit of listening to bedtime stories, which is a common practice at many Indian homes. *Junior Kumbhakarna* transforms the mythological Kumbhakarna's story of war and violence into a playful exploration of childhood imagination. The picturebook provides a jolly space for children to think about traditional narratives from novel perspectives and engage with them. The narrative also provides the necessary emotional distance for child readers to contemplate their actions and behaviours, thereby kindling self-introspection. From a larger cultural perspective, the picturebook shifts the adult-child dynamic towards a point wherein the child reader is allowed to question, enjoy and feel good on experiencing the narrative as opposed to the earlier models of child conditioning that relied on fear, obedience and didacticism.

Conclusion

From the above analysis of chosen picturebooks, it is seen that contemporary Indian picturebooks weave narratives of monstrous entities with a fresh perspective. Moving away from stereotypical negative representations of fearsome mythical monsters such as *rakshasas* and *asuras*, these picturebooks allow children to develop a positive attitude towards life, devoid of fear and anxiety. With a thrust for gentle parenting and holistic development of children in society, these picturebooks with reimagined monsters topple the older hierarchical order wherein the adult wielded the power over the child and intended to control through fear and manipulation. If implemented as everyday companions for children, these books will educate, empower, and subtly influence them to build empathy, compassion, acceptance, and ingenuity. The emotional distance these characters provide helps the child understand complex social attitudes and human conventions without confronting them in reality, but in the world of imagination, empowered by picturebooks. However, this study can be extended to an empirical observation of the impact of these books on the emotional quotient, and the refined responses of the child-readers to real-time situations that demand exhibition of courage and empathy towards those othered and stigmatised by society. In conclusion, these picturebooks subvert traditional depictions of monstrous beings by portraying amusing, enchanting and relatable beasts who appeal through their similarities with the child readers and their everyday life. Such picturebooks are examples of the movement to subtly change the social construct of the child as agency-less in an adult world into a scenario where children are transformed into empowered, emotionally resilient social beings.

Works Cited

- Bauer, David H. "Children's Fears: Reflections on Research." *Educational Leadership*, vol. 31, no. 6, Mar. 1974, pp. 555–60, Accessed 2026.
- Bayoumy, Heidi Mohamed. "Monsters Revisited: A Comparative Study of The Use Of Humor in Dramatizing Benevolent Monsters in *The Monsters Under The Bed* And *The Boy Who Loved Monsters* And *The Girl Who Loved Peas*." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, vol. 10, no. 1, 18 Nov. 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02361-y>, Accessed 2026.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse." *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, edited by K.M. Newton, Palgrave, London, 1997, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25934-2_54, Accessed 2026.
- Christie, Lauren. "The Evolution of Monsters in Children's Literature." *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 6, no. 1, 17 Mar. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0414-7>.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997, Accessed 2026.
- Dimakos, Christopher M. "The Effects of Using Children's Literature to Teach Positive Character Traits to Elementary Students." *Theses and Dissertations*, no. 864, 2006, <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/864>.
- Editors and Andrew Mangham. "How 'Monsters' Came to Define Us." *The MIT Reader Press*, 13 July 2023, Accessed 2026.
- Goldman, Robert P. "To Wake a Sleeping Giant: Valmiki's Account(s) of the Life and Death of Kumbhakarna." *Epic Undertakings*, Motilal Banarsidass Publisher, New Delhi, 2009, Accessed 2026.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. "Devils and Demons." *Indian Mythology Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*, Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont, 2003.
- Rajendran, Sowmya, and Niveditha Subramaniam. *The Pleasant Rakshasa*. Chennai: Tulika Publishers, 2012. Print.
- Sankaran, Pavithra, and Rucha Dhayarkar. *The Big Book of Boochandis*. Bengaluru: Pratham Books, 2021. Print.
- Venkatesh, Arundhati, and Shreya Sen. *Junior Kumbhakarna*. Tulika Publishers, 2013. Print.
- Vachharajani, Bijal. "Tell Me a Story about the Wonderful Witch." Interview with Radhika Menon. *The Indian Express*, July 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/books/tell-me-a-story-of-the-wonderful-witch-2889815/>, Accessed 2026.
- Zhao, Qianhui. "Monsters in Children's Picture Books and Childhood Fears: Do Stories Featuring Monsters in Children's Picture Books Play a Part in Managing Childhood Fears?" *Wintec Research Archive*, Waikato Institute of Technology, 2023, researcharchive.wintec.ac.nz/id/eprint/8006/2/89967_Qianhui_Zhao_dissertation_Monsters%20in%20childrens%20picture%20books.pdf, Accessed 2026.