

artetc.

Special issue
Vol 1 No.3 Rs. 200

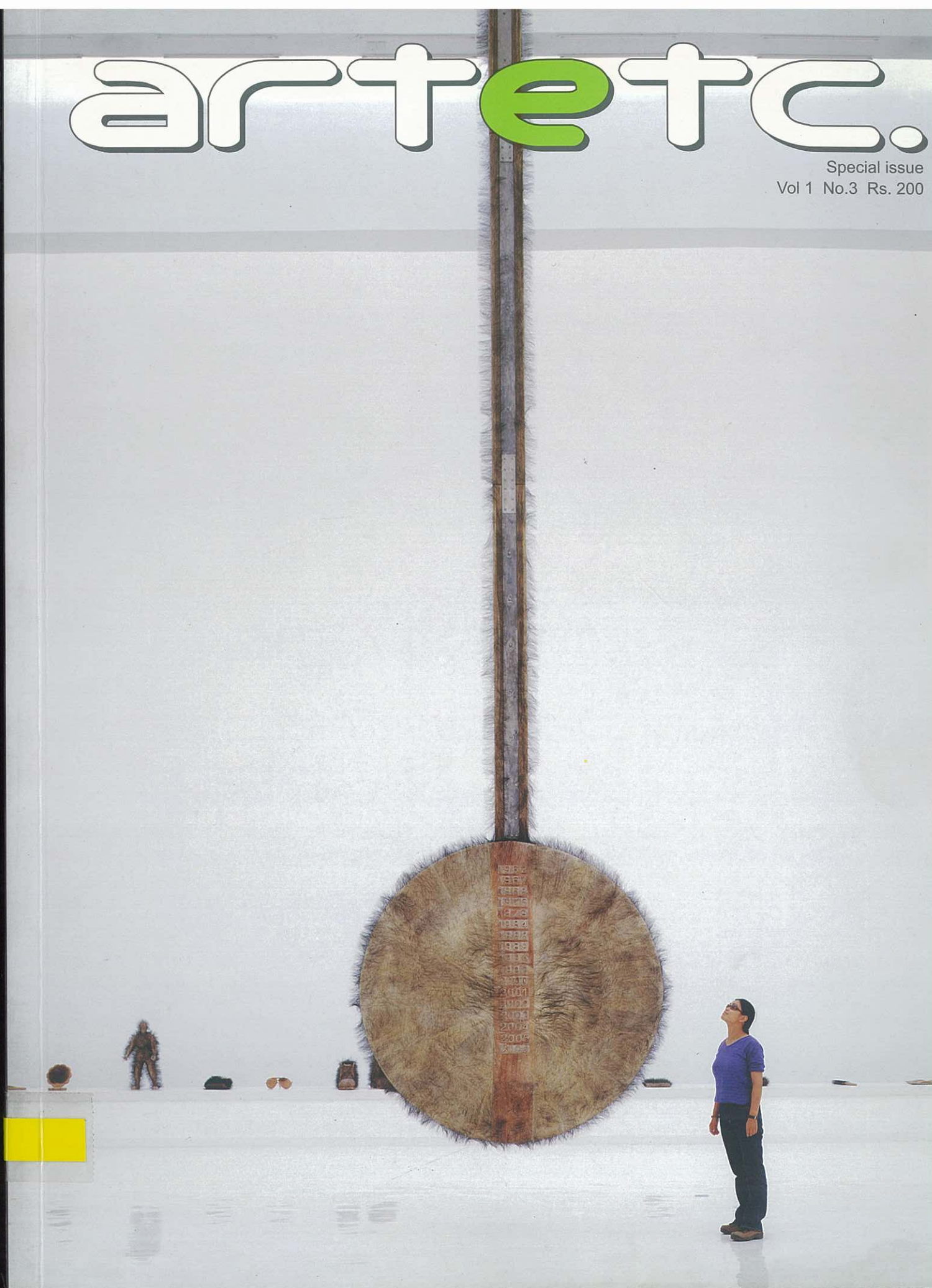




Illustration by Gulammohammed Sheikh, Illustration from the story 'Head Curry' written by Mohammed Khadeer Babu

This Concerns Us

'Different Tales' and
New Paradigms of
Children's Book Illustrations

Sneha Ragavan

The genre of children's story books is slowly emerging as a sizeable, important and challenging terrain for book publishing houses in India. A majority of children's books published prior to the last decade comprised tales from Euro-American continents, stories in the vernacular or English, comic books, urban legends, mythological tales, fables, and biographies of legendary figures from national histories and epics. Needless to state, most of these stories revolve around the upper caste/class protagonist – human or mythical; and in rare instances, 'exceptional' rebellious figures from the margins of society. However, in the recent past, there has emerged a shift in focus towards story books that engender a curious form of folk-exoticism; be it through region-specific themes, quasi-ethnographic illustrations or reinventions of local folk/mythic tales. Although this genre has reconfigured its representative strategies in ways that they appeal to urban middle/upper class children, the underlying currents running through these books are consistent with moral and ethical thematics of most children's books; with the represented subject and modalities of representation remaining unchanged. In other words, the crisis of illustrated children's story books in India today is a crisis of representation – a crisis brought on by subaltern discourses on history, culture and in general social science as such.

Against this backdrop, *Different Tales* emerges as a carefully conceptualized collection of illustrations and stories that brings to fore new protagonists - children whose life-worlds have been largely unrepresented within the paradigm of story books in India.¹ Interwoven within stories that engage so subtly with the everyday experiences of the children from marginalized communities are larger issues that confront them in unassuming and minute ways - predominantly questions of caste, gender, religion, class and community. Most children's story books in India have maintained a studied silence indicating that the aforementioned issues do not

infect the lives of children; with subalterns being accorded their *apriori* place on the margins of the narratives. *Different Tales* in no way attempts a simplistic reversal of this presupposed order by replacing the central middle/upper-caste/class figure with that of the subaltern. Rather, positioned from the margins, the project is predicated upon a necessity to engage with society and culture in a manner that makes visible ways in which systems of exclusion, repression and suppression achieve their operativeness. All the same, it is not an accommodative project to the grand canon of children's story books but rather emphasizes the need to re-visit and re-think some of the very fundamental notions about representation – particularly representation as it circulates within the visual repertoire made available to children. For instance, where stories in Amar Chitra Katha or Chandamama work with established narrative and representative schemata, in *Different Tales* there exists a reconfiguration of their linearity (Mother; Head Curry; Three Fourth, Half Price, *Bajji Bajji*) and their absence of sense of community (Braveheart Badeyya; Tataki Wins Again; Smells and Stenches). In that sense, each narrative is an embodiment of the challenges in traversing established representational limits in order to gesture towards a possibility of newer strategies of representation.

In this context, it would be pertinent to note that *Different Tales* consists of illustrations by various practicing artists in India – which in itself is atypical since a story book series is normatively illustrated by a single person (often assigned to select illustrators associated with a publishing house) to maintain stylistic and narrative consistency in/through the illustrations. So also, practicing artists being entrusted with the task of illustration may be read as an attempt at thinking through the preexisting watertight compartmentalization between 'high-art' and the 'skilled craft' of illustration. Artists involved in this project include Saumya Ananthakrishna, Shefalee Jain, Chithra K.S., Rashmi Mala, Lavanya

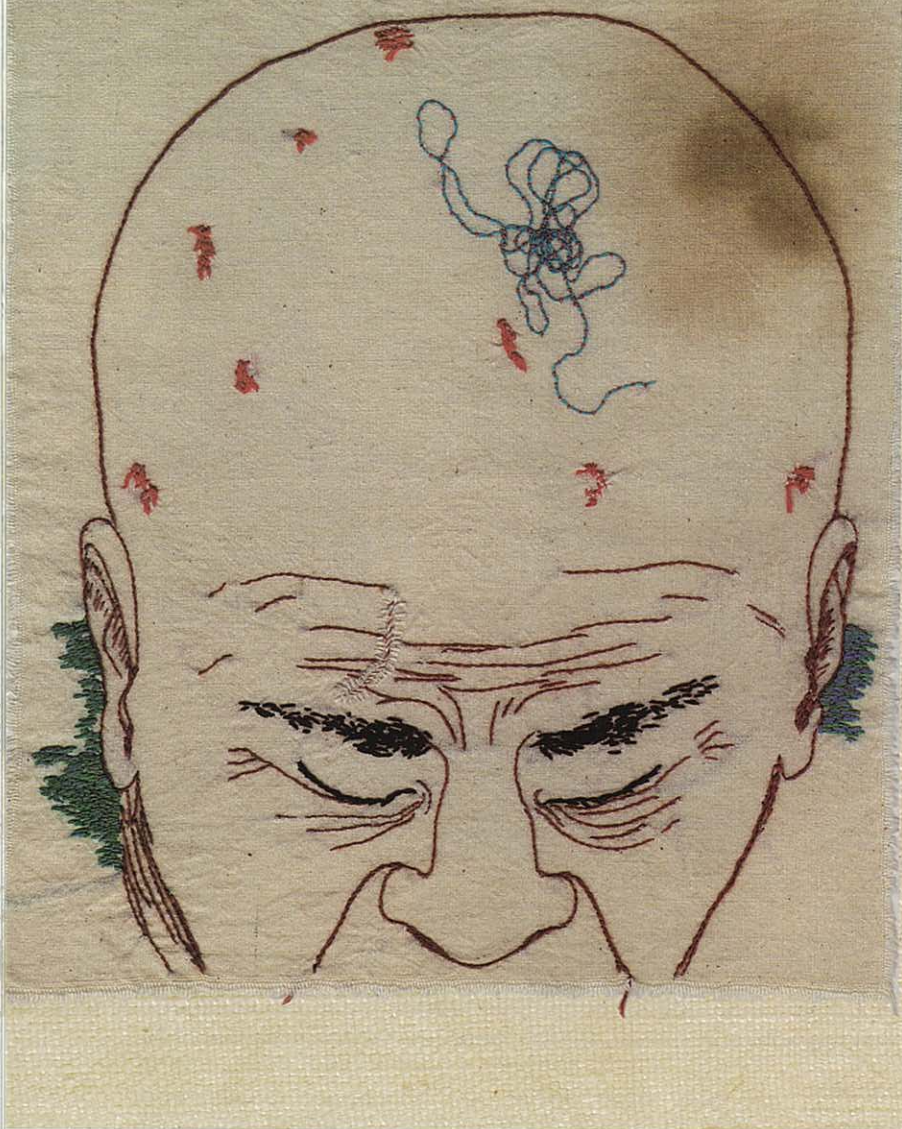




Illustration by Shefalee Jain & Lokesh Khodke, Illustration from the poem 'Mother' written by Kancha Ilaiah

Mani, Vasvi Oza, Rakhi Peswani, Nilima Sheikh, Puja Vaish, Ashutosh Bhardwaj, Sathyanand Mohan, Chinnan, Koonal Duggal, Chandan Kashyap, Lokesh Khodke, K.P. Reji, Gulammohammed Sheikh and B.V. Suresh. Though it is beyond the scope of this review to discuss each illustration project in detail, it does attempt to briefly chalk out some central facets. Given that illustration demands a specific semantic orientation, what is discernible within the illustrations in *Different Tales* is the tension between the ability to unlearn one's own practice and re-learn what is considered as outside the realm of their practices, retain aspects of it, orient oneself with the established illustrative tendencies, and explore possibilities of working through the interstices of multiple representative languages. All of this is done to be able to come to terms with the tension within the stories of a simultaneous normalcy/ everydayness and severity of the experiences of the children. And it is precisely this tension that unfolds within each narrative to arrive at illustrations that involve an attempt to re-think the established limits of illustrations; and illustrations that are as specific to the contexts of each narrative as the writings and translations are.

In other words, the illustrations in each of the *Different Tales* stories do not merely accompany the narrative, but in fact are constitutive of it. For instance, in 'Mother', the complex narrative of Kancha Ilaiah's poem is paralleled by the simultaneous narrations and the usage of minute details of topography and everyday life within its illustrations by Shefalee Jain and Lokesh Khodke. So also, the illustrations in Jayasree Kalathil's 'Sackclothman' by Rakhi Peswani through the use of stitching and jute and cloth surfaces are interwoven within the multiple layers, terrains and textures of the narrative. Nilima Sheikh's sensitive portrayal of characters bathed in the atmospheric illuminates the limitless spaces explored in Gopini Karunakar's narrative 'Moon in the Pot'. And the lively and spirited narrative of Nuaiman's 'Textbook' is matched by the usage of humor in the witty and playful illustrations by B.V. Suresh. It is in this sense that *Different Tales* as a project has engendered a reciprocity in the contribution to the narrative by both writers and illustrators. Illustrations in story books have traditionally performed the function of supplementing the narrative, representing key characters and moments. Although there is often an established



*Illustration by Rakhi Peswani,
Illustration from the story 'Sackclothman' written by Jayasree Kalathil*

sense of order within the larger ambit of illustration, the semantics of illustrations is now widely recognized as inflected through diverse ideological standpoints of the illustrators, writers and publishers. Given the impetus of this project in re-thinking the very semantics of illustration in children's story books, it remains to be seen whether or not future projects will consider the involvement of practicing illustrators within its scope. Even a cursory overview of the history of story book illustrations in India reveals that there is an absence of language to represent subalterns. Indeed in an ironical sense the absence of existing stories would in itself be indicative of this crisis of illustration. However, if and when marginal figures have been represented, they have been typecast as smaller in size, dark complexion, unclean and submissive in gestures. It is against this backdrop, that the artists-as-illustrators in *Different Tales* have tread a delicate tightrope between employing established representative

modalities and exploring possibilities of representation. For instance, the stories and illustrations of 'Textbook', 'Braveheart Badeyya', 'My Friend, The Emperor' and others, in ways more than one are emblematic of the exclusion of subalterns not only from narrative or representational spaces, but also from the imagined nation-space.

Another critical feature in many illustrations involves the employment of specific sites and locations as motifs which are suggestive of the built environment of characters gestures to the ways in which the personal is always already inflected through the community. In fact, the larger hesitation to engage with the tropes of graphic realism can perhaps be read as a refusal to fix/contain the representative modalities of the characters in the stories. And yet through the trope of body in its gestures, poses and expressions emerge figures of strength, of tenacity, of character. So also, the illustrations do not only depict the climactic scenes, but also emphasize the pauses, silences and gaps, moments of contemplation, of resolve, of promise. In that sense, the illustrations are not simply the background upon which the narrative is foregrounded. Rather they can be seen to provide the visual frame through which the narratives can be imagined. *Different Tales* is a 'collection' only insofar as the common thread of concern that underpins all narratives. Each story and illustration is as distinct as the experiences of its writers, translators, artists and viewers.

The author would like to thank Deeptha Achar, Rupin Maitreyee and Santhosh S. for their critical suggestions.

References

'Different Tales: Stories from Marginal Cultures and Regional Languages' (Kottayam: DC Books, 2008) is an initiative of Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, supported by the 'Parag' initiative of Sir Ratan Tata Trust. The series involves stories written by Gogu Shyamala, Mohammed Khadeer Babu, Rekharaj, Nuaiman, Joopaka Subhadra among others; translated to English by A. Suneetha, M.T. Ansari, D. Vasanta, Uma Bhargubanda and others; apart from the vernacular writers and translators of editions in Telugu, Malayalam and forthcoming editions in Kannada and Urdu.