



## **Kahani Literacy Project: Culturally Efficacious Story Writing**

**Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar<sup>1</sup>, Howard L. Smith<sup>2</sup>**

Department of Bicultural Bilingual Studies, The University of Texas at San Antonio, USA<sup>1,2</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This article describes a literacy approach for teaching Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge (TCRK). A review of traditional curricula for literacy and the Language Arts indicates a paucity of focus and opportunities for diasporic Asian Indian American children (AIA) (or any minoritized youth) to learn about their heritage culture to an appreciable degree. The first author conceptualized and designed the Kahani Literacy Project model (i.e., a multimodal, multilingual literacy experience centered on the Indic cultures), to enable young writers to create within a habitus that privileged and honored the epistemologies and perspectives of India. Thematic analysis of the Kahani narratives demonstrated the students' appreciation and deepened understanding of heritage culture and practices. It was posited that the opportunity for students to engage with ideas from home, in a pedagogic space without fear of disparagement, would foster respect. As the Funds of Knowledge [1] are recognized and incorporated into literacy instruction, the adolescent writer acquires TCRK.*

**Keywords:** *Diasporic Asian Indian American, Kahani, Literacy, Teaching Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge*

### **1. Introduction**

Despite the richness or literary heritage of countless language groups, English language instruction is often dominated by an Anglocentric, Eurocentric, or Americentric worldview. When this perspective is applied to writing, learners may be required to write on topics that are culturally distal, unknown or meaningless. Even stories penned as non-fiction may become fiction or fantasy in the absence of cultural connection or prior knowledge of the focus topic.

### **2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Articles that attempt to explain the academic achievement of diasporic AIA in schools customarily omit issues of cultural dissonance or the lack of authentic cultural representation within the curriculum. The cause for their absence may be attributable to their generalizable school success in comparison to other marginalized groups (e.g., African Americans, Latinos). To address this cultural disconnect between writing and diasporic AIA youth, the first researcher, designed the *Kahani Literacy Project* (KLP). Informed by various biliteracy researchers [2] [3] [4], the *Kahani Writing Project* (KWP) was offered as an example of a culturally embedded approach to student-centered creative writing. This writing experience, modeled after the National Council of Teachers of English (USA) was designed to provide AIA students an opportunity to explore their heritage through literacy activities. As with other culturally infused iterations of the Writing Workshop (e.g., *Cuentos*, *Eyagi*), the goal was to support literacy development in marginalized students.

The *raison d'être* of this study on the KLP [5] was three-fold: 1) to bear witness to scaffolded writing development, 2) to harvest evidence to suggest that bicultural AIA students would utilize literacy events to examine (e.g., investigate, extol, celebrate, affirm) their heritage, and 3) to identify those elements or aspects of their cultural heritage that they chose to explore in writing when given topic freedom.



### 3. Methodology

The first researcher designed and distributed a multilingual flyer for *Barathanatyam* dance schools, *Carnatic* music classes, and *Balavikas* schools. Since 2008, the KLP has recruited approximately 275 AIA students to date, with an average of 23 students per year, representing the four major regions of India (i.e., North, South, East, West) and fifteen heritage languages. This study focuses on the literacy experiences of middle class, diasporic AIA children with at least one parent holding a college degree. There were a total of 275 *Kahanis* in the data

### 4. Thematic Analysis

To appreciate their writings, it is important to remember that the diasporic AIA children are writing from memory [6]. They reveal the features or characteristics of their culture that carry meaning for them. In the excerpts below, the superficial or most obvious theme would be “holidays and festivities.” Within this short narrative, however, we observe how the participant mentions the human connections, i.e., family and friends, that are part of the nature of Indian cultures.

#### 4.1 Theme: Connections to family and friends

Because Indian culture is characterized as collectivistic culture versus individualistic [5], it was no surprise that the *Kahani*'s contained multiple references to gatherings (e.g., *vethalai pak*, *Diwali*.) The text that follows is one example.

*During these festivals it is customary for people to invite others to their houses for 'vetthalaipak'... It is considered auspicious. I remember how my mom used to invite our neighbors and relatives to our house and how we used to accompany her to other peoples' houses. It was a lot of fun, especially because of the yummy Prasad we used to get!* (SY 0026)

As the previous example demonstrates, a sense of community permeates the Indic cultures [5]. Applying the same logic, AIA families often engage in ethnic clustering in search of ethnic unanimity or acceptance. In the *Kahani* cited above, it is reasonable to assume that the adventure for sugar cane was accomplished in the company of friends or family.

#### 4.2 Theme: Identity construction

For many of the diasporic, AIA writers, the KLP offered a *Trishanku World* [8], that is, a space in which to reflect on and venerate the characteristics of their two cultural worlds.

*I would never ever go back and change my visiting [SIC] the village. India is my home, my history, and the US is just the same [sic] my home, my future. Both are equally important, and neither has made me who I am more than the other. They'll both be in my heart, and I can't imagine blossoming into who I am today without these two places that've made growing up so worthwhile. I couldn't be more proud [sic] to be Indian, to have that colorful heritage, and I couldn't be more proud to be in the US, to have all the opportunities I could want. So [sic] here's to being culturally diverse—Indian and American, a perfect balance.....(MV 0018).*

The *Kahani* narratives reveal the challenges that diasporic AIA children face as they form a *dual frame of reference* [16]. In the excerpt above, the writer claims allegiance to two countries and states her reasoning, heritage vs future aspirations. Using their two cultural worlds, diasporic AIA learners construct a transnational [7], bicultural identity. The *Kahani* narratives often revealed the challenges with their identity construction and resolution. This reinforces the benefits of a psychological or metaphoric space, like *Trishanku World* [8].

#### 4.3 Theme: Artistic Expressions of Culture

Interwoven in the *Kahanis* were references to various forms of entertainment and enjoyment. There were two important tool sets or resources in the *KLP*. One source was the memories the writers had from their trips to India. The other, more concrete, resources were the books, stories, videos and live presentations incorporated into the *KLP* experience. The *KLP* writers described these resources, through whatever modality, as enjoyable, a positive influence on their lives and or a contributing factor to their constructed identities. When considered at an aesthetic, or superficial level, the reason for their appreciation of the



Indic-centric expressions (e.g., music, dance) is pure enjoyment. When considered at a deeper level, the Indic-centric memories and multimedia connect them to their heritage.

#### **4.3.1 Theme: Music**

Several Kahani signaled enjoyment of music and its effects on emotions.

*Music affects our everyday lives by connecting us to our emotions and our roots. There are many different reasons for why people use music. Most of the reasons are for pleasure but I believe that music should be used to help you attach to your family roots. Your family roots are what keep you attached to reality (AR 0017).*

This was an example from the data to address cultural expressions (e.g., music) as a tool for the KLP writers to have an aesthetic (i.e., emotions, imagery) experience with the text and simultaneously experience a deeper purpose for music. While the writers discussed their enjoyment, they also acknowledged another purpose - to “connect to traditional roots.”

#### **4.3.2 Theme: Dance**

The writers spoke about the importance of dance to their socialization and as a mechanism for teaching *rhetorical cultural knowledge*. The casual observer notes the turns and the stamping of the dancers. When children participate in staged dance productions, as most performances are, there are countless support members (i.e., aunts and uncles) who chauffeur, dress, and style the participants. As the elders make adjustments or attenuate imperfections, they share their culturally grounded experiences, thus enriching any dance performance with cultural funds of knowledge. From their own performances from their youth or similar personal connections. Cultural neophytes acquire new knowledge as cultural elders witness the transmission of epistemologies and world views of the community.

*As a dancer, I have been exposed to more languages through Bharatanatyam than when I had traveled to India or go to different Indian festivals. Exposure to more languages has given me a stronger foundation to the Indian culture... Bharatanatyam has also connected me to the Indian culture through social gatherings and acquaintances. I perform at many Indian festivals and community programs, such as Diwali and Pongal. By performing at these events, I am able to meet and make friends with people who are part of my culture. (MV, 0018)*

As described in the data, dance could be understood as a metaphorical space, in which kinesthetics, language acquisition, socialization, heritage, and aesthetics (e.g., sensibilities) amalgamate into an interstitial, socio-cultural experience.

#### **4.3.3 Theme: Celebrations**

Many writers spoke of their enjoyment and cultural festivals. Swathed in lights, music, and foods were the histories of millennia. In the excerpts to follow, from two different writers, what becomes immediately apparent is the wonder and joy found in cultural celebrations.

*I remember that we went to India during the time of Diwali. This is the “festival of light.” Diwali celebrates the victory of good over evil.... There is a festival called Holi, which is the “festival of colors” (AP 0018).*

#### **4.3.4 Theme: Customs and tradition**

As a component of their worldview, the diaspora AIA Kahani writers:

*Next the priest did Kumarabhojanam which is when my brother and his five friends were served a feast with no flavor. My brother and my mom had shared a plate together [which is called matrubhojanam], is when my mom and brother share a plate to signify that that [sic] is the last meal he will have with my mom as a child (AP. 0018).*



## 5. Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that diasporic, AIA writers, when afforded opportunities, will engage in literacy activities (i.e. reading, writing) that reveal an appreciation for their heritage. As the KLP demonstrates, culturally framed literacy instruction is possible and beneficial. Instructional approaches like the KLP provide for literacy development and cultural scaffolding. Educators who strive for culturally efficacious pedagogies need not forfeit meaningful, rigorous instruction to address culture. As they compose original texts, students leverage their available cultural resources to engage in writing development and a deepened understanding of their heritage and familial connections.

## References

- [1] Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- [2] Clark, E. R., Flores, B. B., Smith, H. L., & González, D. A. (2015). *Multicultural literature for Latino bilingual children: Their words, their worlds*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [3] Iyengar, K. M., & Smith, H. L. (2016). Asian Indian American Children's Creative Writing: An Approach for Cultural Preservation. *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 52(2), 95-118.
- [4] Smith, H. L., & Riojas-Cortez, M. (2010). Cartitas de cariño: Little notes to say you care. *Language Arts*, 88(2), 125-133.
- [5] Iyengar, K. M., & Henkin, R. (2020). Gopal's Mesosystem: Asian Indian Culture and American Dualities. *South Asian Review*, 41(1), 36-49.
- [6] Cohen, R. L. (1989). Memory for action events: The power of enactment. *Educational psychology review*, 1(1), 57-80.
- [7] Sánchez, P. (2007). Cultural authenticity and transnational Latina youth: Constructing a meta-narrative across borders. *Linguistics and Education*, 18(3-4), 258-282.
- [8] Das, A. C., & Singh, S. (2013). Experiencing Trishanku State: Liminality in Colonial America in MG Vassanji's *Amriika*.