

Payal Kho Gayi (Payal has gone missing)

A review by Shefalee Jain



Weak discoloured sunlight, a lichen green sky with a lichen coloured pond underneath, scraps of paper, rags, children, covered in shades of cement. Is one likely to find these colours in a paint box? Can one expect to find them in a book made especially for children?

Payal Kho Gayi is book that will not let you pass by unmoved. The book has been published by Muskaan and Eklavya , written by children from a basti and illustrated by Kanak Shashi. It was produced as part of a workshop conducted by Muskaan wherein six to eight year olds from a small basti were asked to respond to a

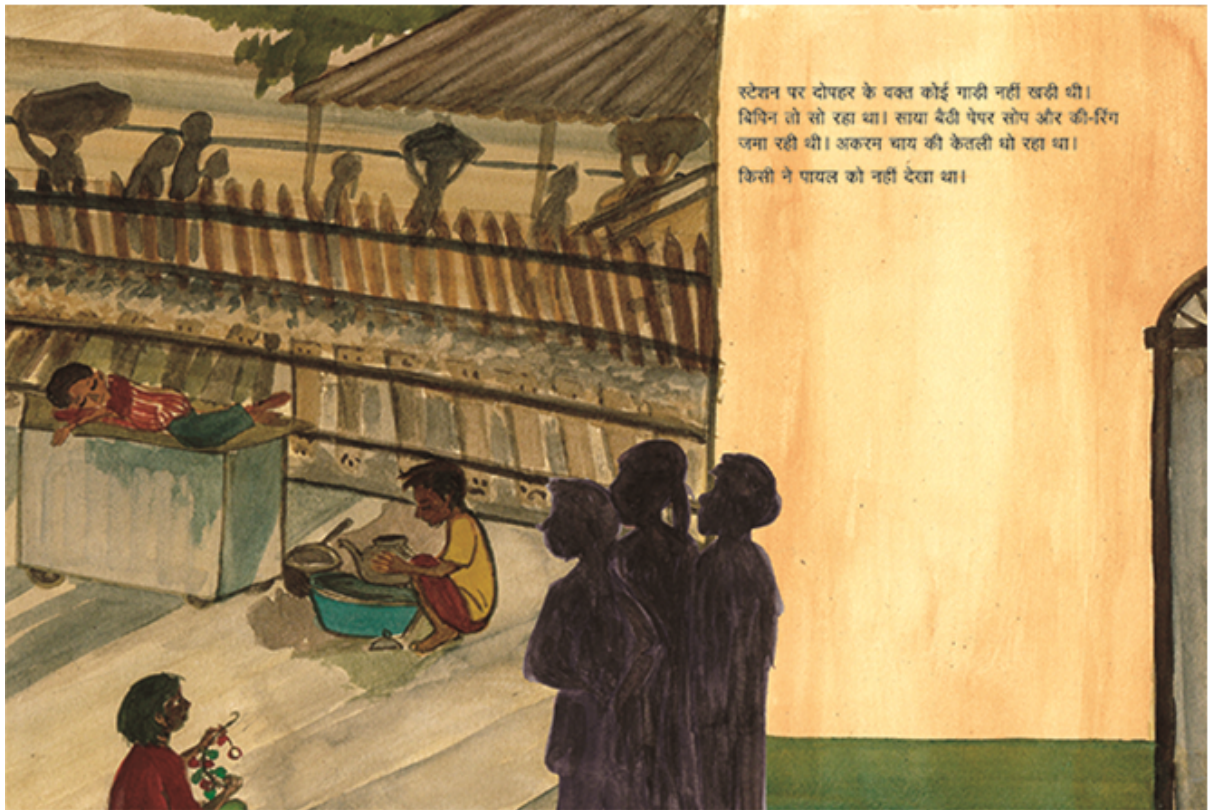
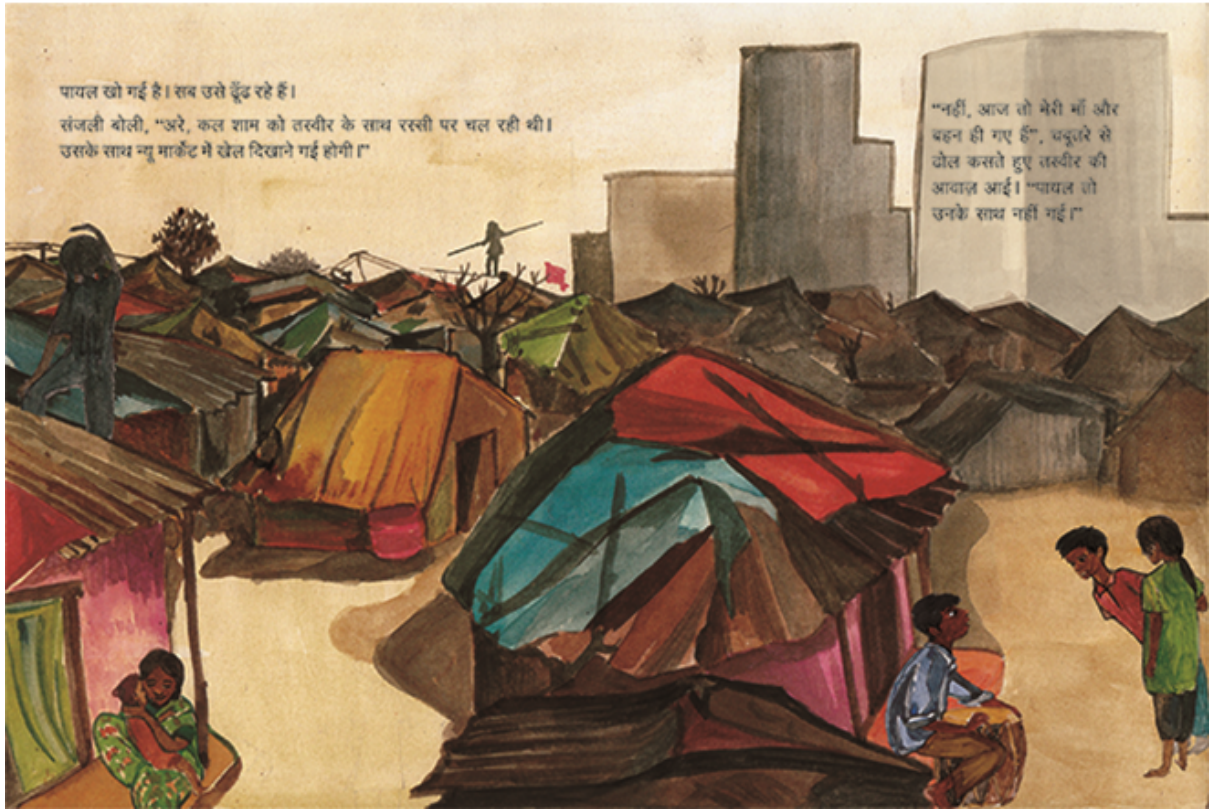
hypothetical situation. They were asked to imagine that their friend Payal had gone missing. Could they guess where she could be? Where would they look for her? The children thought over this and also made some drawings. Payal Kho Gayi was born out of these very thoughts and drawings of the children.

The fact that an effort was made to think of a book, not necessarily merely for children, as much as, by them, struck me as something rather significant. Besides it is a book imagined by children belonging to a specific class and community. It is a book that is written by children living in a basti, speaking to us of their particular experiences and the life world they inhabit. Very often, among the many questions that nag publishers, writers and illustrators are, what kind of books should one write for children, what colours would be appropriate for them? Many a times, these questions are asked without them being contextualized in any way. As if there was one right way or universal rule to go about this. However, the illustrator and publisher of Payal Kho Gayi seem to have taken these questions seriously.

Both the protagonists and the imagined audience for this book are not the usual upper middle or upper class. By addressing the particular experience of under privileged children belonging to a basti, the publishers have challenged the homogenized Modern Western liberal understanding of the category of the child. In her essay titled 'Different Tales and Different Lives' [\(1\)](#) about another such interesting venture [\(2\)](#) in the context of children's books in India, Naomi Wood writes- 'Formerly colonized countries of the Global South such as India have a particularly fraught relation to Western generated statements about universal rights.' She goes on to elaborate that the assertion of the idea of universal rights, and through it the assertion of a normative idea of childhood, as carefree, protected and innocent, does deep violence to the existing notions of childhood amongst different castes, classes and religious minorities. In Wood's words, it 'institutionalizes structural

and representational inequality'. In post Independence India, this universal idea of the child has mostly taken shape as an 'urban, middle- and upper-caste child' reflecting 'his or her economic resources, family relationships, beliefs, school experiences, food habits and language'.⁽³⁾ It is in this context that the Muskaan venture becomes important and necessary for its attempt to redress the consequences of this systemic violence.

The illustrator of the book, Kanak Shashi, has posed a challenge to this violent norming in the visual field of illustrations, by denaturalizing the associations we have uncritically come to absorb, between colours and feelings, or colours and 'types' of characters. At first look, the illustrations of Payal Kho Gayi leave one unsettled. I felt there was a kind of muddiness to them. Colours seep into each other and become dark and greyish in tone. Each element, whether it is a tree, the children, a pond, the sky or the huts, stand by themselves and yet their forms and colours seem to collapse any definite boundaries. Slowly these images took a hold on me and I started liking them a lot. I hadn't seen these colours very often in children's books, in fact I was surprised that the publishers had agreed to print these images. As far as my experience goes, most publishers seem to believe that only bright or pastel shades should be used for children's books because apparently, these colours evoke feelings of joy and enthusiasm in children.



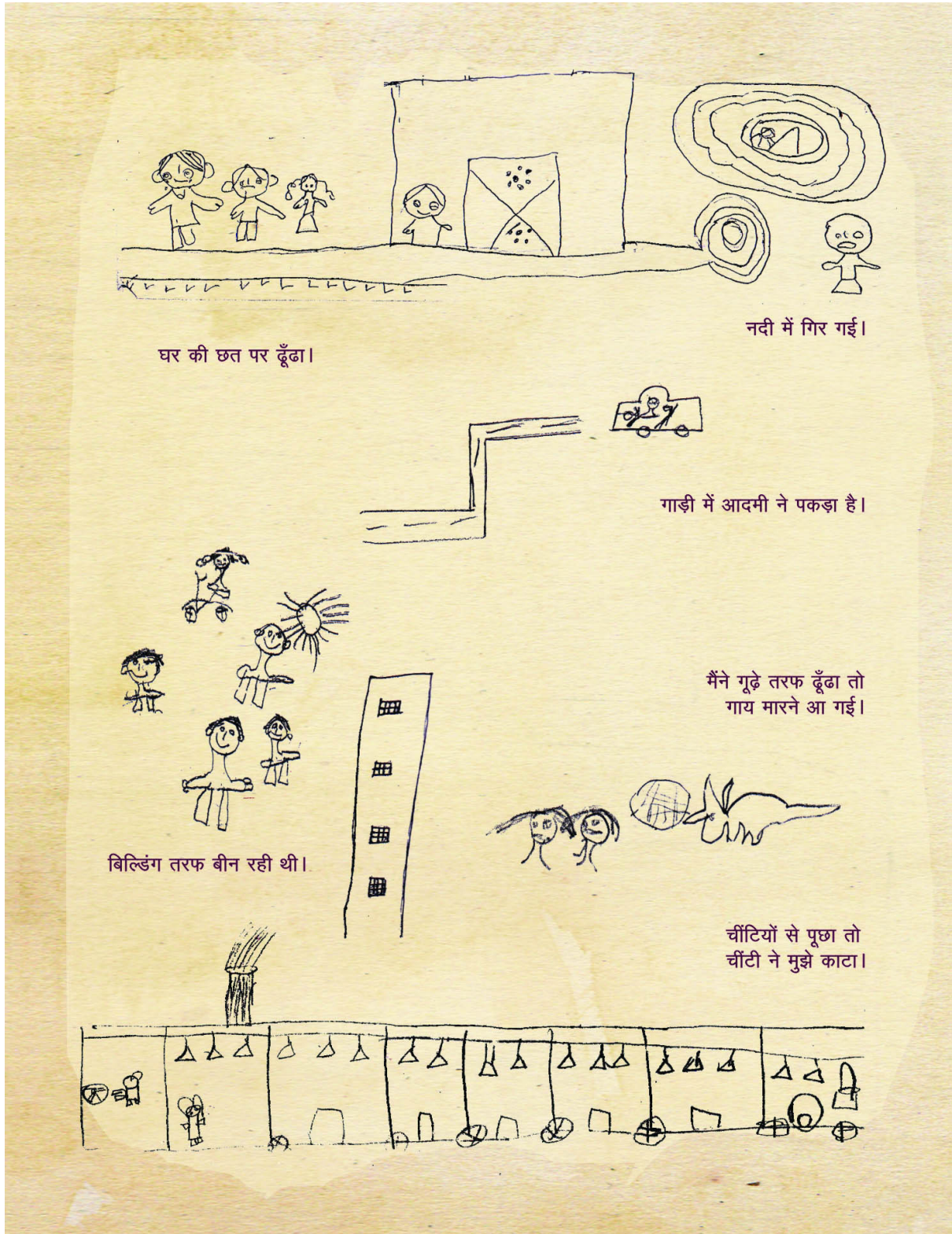
So, I was taken aback when I saw the colours used in this book and I felt forced to think about them. These are the colours I see every day on dusty city streets, the colours that I try and wipe out from the

surfaces of my table, laptop, T.V. and windows. Yet every day they return with an insistence. These are the colours we want to drive out of cities, the ones we label dirty, untouchable, stupid and worthless, the ones we demolish with our bulldozers. Even if these colours do make an appearance in children's books, they are usually associated with negativity of some kind. Kanak has foregrounded these 'grey' muddied shades and used these colours to depict many different kinds of situations (not merely negative), both full of love and hope, as well as of fear and injustice. This simple yet vital decision of hers to denaturalize the associations between colours and the monolithic meanings they supposedly evoke has raised important questions for us as viewers.

It may be worthwhile here to reflect on how naturalizations, such as those that establish unthinking and monolithic associations between colours and meanings, work on us. For example the obsession with pink that most little girls around us today have as a result of the relentless marketing of toys, clothes, books 'for girls' in pink. What this marketing strategy does is not only reinforce gender stereotyping but also set a certain 'standard' in terms of taste and therefore class. Anyone who deviates from this norm, because of financial, political or cultural differences is mostly seen as a misfit. Similarly, most evil characters in children's books are shown as dark, pockmarked, often with some marked physical impairment making problematic associations between darkness, poverty, disability, disease, deception and deviance.

What most mainstream children's books give us is this 'norming' of the world which desensitizes us to difference and therefore erases a whole varied world of experience and knowledge that exists around us. In such a scenario, Kanak's use of 'grey' shades is important in that it makes one stop and consider. The story is about under privileged children, however there is no single value judgement attached to this largely 'grey' world. It is a delightful mix of camaraderie and care in the midst of hard labour and meagre means. Kanak makes greyness speak to many emotions. Her use of muddiness and greyness eschews a world understood merely in terms of 'black and white' (metaphorically speaking!).

The children of Payal Kho Gayi have different challenges, different means of happiness and different perceptions based on the life-worlds they inhabit. It is interesting to note how the children from the basti have visualized their own story. Among the many possibilities that the children thought of, regarding where Payal could be, two can be seen on the inner side of the front and back covers of the book in the form of drawings. One shows Payal could be in prison and another shows a man abducting Payal in a car. All these experiences are mostly out of bounds when it comes to decisions regarding books for children. We have simply turned a blind eye to these realities and closed our children's eyes to these as well. But children are very perceptive of and sensitive to any threat to their selves and do not hesitate to express it. Sadly, it is us adults who silence their voices and in doing that make them even more vulnerable.



When I was growing up, all the good and lovable characters in the books I had were healthy and beautiful. I was ill most of the time as a child. Also, my illness was chronic. So it wasn't the kind that a character in a storybook might have from which she recovers

quickly and easily. I could never see myself in the stories from my childhood. I kept wishing I were as healthy and beautiful as the heroine of my storybooks. For a long time I hated my own body. When I think back to that time now, I realize the enormity of the violence done to my own sense of self, my difference from others.

Muskaan has opened another much needed space where children from a particular context can bring their own realities and experiences to the fore in storybooks and Kanak has given these stories their diverse shades and intensities. No child should ever feel that her life is not worth living or worth speaking about and none of us should presume that we know what is not worth speaking of to a child. During a seminar organized in 1979 by UGC on children's literature, renowned artist and writer K. G. Subramanian said 'I do not think all children's books should be strictly tailored to a child's developmental stages, making them all soft, harmless and aseptic... I would like the graphics of children's book to enliven their perception. It should prod them to look around, to be observant, to watch how things interact; to explore to wonder, to dream.'⁽⁴⁾

The illustrations of *Payal Kho Gayi* do exactly this. Kanak employs a certain amount of realism to achieve this, but there may be other ways to do this as well. I am not concerned so much with how realistically one can speak of differences but more with how can one represent without normativizing and being reductive of the world we inhabit. The illustrations of *Payal Kho Gayi* are not mere representations of a world; instead they provoke thoughts and questions about the world we live in.

Shefalee Jain

Endnotes:

⁽¹⁾ The essay is published in *Little Red Readings, Historical Materialist Perspectives on Children's Literature*, edited by Angela E. Hubler, 2014, University Press of Mississippi.

(2) Different Tales: Stories from Marginal Cultures and Regional Languages, Series editor Deepa Srinivas. Kottayam Kerala, DC Books, 2008

(3) Beyond the 'national child' By Deepa Sreenivas & Deeptha Achar, Himal, May 2010.

(4) Excerpt from An illustrator's point of view, K.G. Subramanyan, UGC seminar paper, M.S.U Baroda, 1979, Asia Art Archive collection