



**The Grand Plan to Fix Everything**

Written by Uma Krishnaswami

Illustrated by Abigail Halpin

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*There it is again, that thing that most people would call coincidence. Lal prefers to think of it as kismet. Some people would say kismet means fate, but really it is a far more beautiful idea—it is the idea that in spite of all the obstacles, some things are meant to be. (p. 119)*

This contemporary realistic fiction novel focuses on eleven-year-old Dini’s journey from Maryland to Swapnagiri, India and her experience of writing a movie script and finding a Bollywood movie star, Dolly. The protagonist, Dini, and her best friend Maddie are big fans of Dolly, watching her movies and listening to her singing. They are excited about attending a Bollywood dance camp, but then Dini’s mother, a physician, announces that the family is moving to India for two years for a clinical position. As a fan of Bollywood movies, Dini should be excited about moving, yet the fact that she cannot locate the little town, Swapnagiri, where they are to live on a map worries her. Most of all, it is hard for Dini to leave her best friend, Maddie. The inevitable journey begins with a stroke of good luck as, on the way from the airport, a Quali (van) driver tells Dini’s family that the Bollywood star, Dolly, is in Swapnagiri. Dini is excited and repeats one of Dolly’s lines from a movie, “Kismet ki baat hai. . . It is just a matter of kismet, which some people think of as fate, but it’s so much more. It is about things that were just meant to be, like Dolly being in Swapnagiri” (p. 54).

The entire story focuses on the theme of “kismet,” the meaningful meant-to-be, which may look like a coincidence but is something deeper. There are a wide range of characters in the book—Quali drivers, movie producer, baker, postman, new neighbor, school principal, mechanic, goatherd, cottage manager, and even monkeys—who contribute to “the kismet” that leads to Dini meeting Dolly and helping her with a problem. The story is unique in a sense that the number of characters and their individual stories appear to be too random to grow into a coherent story until near the end. Finally all of the multiple characters participate in unpacking the entangled miscommunications and misunderstandings. Due to the complications of multiple characters that weave into a final resolution, this book is one that may need re-reading and literature discussion.

*The Grand Plan to Fix Everything* informs its audience about changes in modern India through Dini’s journey. For example, Mumbai is noted as the most popular city in India and is recognized as the former Bombay. Also the book reminds readers that India is a

nation with rich diversity in language, nature, and regions through the different characters. “Vanakkam,” says his wife in Tamil, “Here in Swapnagiri, just by listening to people around her, Dini is learning a third language, after Hindi and English” (p.177). “People think India is all hot and dusty. But here is Swapnagiri and it is singing out to Dini to come take a look at it” (p. 82). “Very fine buses here in Swapnagiri, madam,” Veeran offers, “on time and all. Not like the big city, where everything is one big mess” (p. 99). Another important insight of the book regarding India is that the author does not just use a well-known city like Mumbai to create an authentic context; she positions the story in a small town like Swapnagiri without exoticizing it as a mystic far away place. She introduces also provides an understanding of time in relation to the U.S. “Dini wonders what time it is in Maryland right now this minute. It’s two in the afternoon here, and the sun is bright and beamy quite unlike what Dini is feeling. . . it’s nine and a half hours difference” (p. 91).

In the U.S., children’s literature of South Asian cultures tends to focus on traditional cultural practices with a focus on old traditions and customs in many realistic fiction books about India and South Asia. Additionally, traditional tales frequently dominate collections of this literature. For example, folklore icons such as monkey god, snake, elephants, and tigers and traditional icons like sari, diwali, wedding ceremonies, and henna often appear. Such iconic dominance can create stereotypical cultural understanding. Thus, illustrating Indian-American and Indian culture around contemporary childhood themes, such as pop cultures, celebrities, mass media, friendship and peer pressure, underscores connections to universal contemporary childhood experiences as relevant within India. The narrative does not focus on seemingly exotic animals like monkey and peacocks, but on events involving local wildlife, such as raccoons and bunnies, in a similar perspective as readers might find in many areas of the U.S.

Another theme within the story is agency and dream. Dini demonstrates what it is to honor one’s passion and dream. Dini is serious about writing a script respecting her passion and interest in Bollywood movies. It is matter of constructing agency to witness a child who casts her idolized Bollywood star for her future movie and continues working towards her dream by taking notes, imagining, writing, and believing in “the kismet.” Focusing on the contemporary interest of a child who happens to be an Indian-American brings universal connections to the book. At the same time, these universal connections to childhood and agency are set within the unique cultural setting and lifestyle of a small village in India.

The author Uma Krishnaswami was born in India and is one of the significant authors whose books focus on universal cultural experiences instead of only portraying the traditional cultural values of India. Many of Krishnaswami’s books have balanced cultural portrayals between old and new through the embedded cultural values and mindset that reflect contemporary life where communities, emotional connections, ecological and cultural locality, and internal diversity are centering factors. Yet Indian

heritage is interwoven with contemporary reflections. The illustrator, Abigail Halpin, adds a rich contemporary personality through her illustrations.

This book could be read alongside books about journeys of enhancing cultural identity and sense of place—*Naming Maya* (Uma Krishnaswami, 2004), *Habibi* (Naomi Shahib Nye, 1997), *What the Moon Saw* (Laura Resau 2006), and *Tea with Milk* (Allen Say, 1999). In *Naming Maya* the protagonist travels back to Chennai, India and learns to cope through the support of family. *Habibi* is a story of relocating in Jerusalem where Palestinian relatives and Jewish friends help the protagonist to rediscover her culture—a process that becomes personally complicated due to historical complexity. *What the Moon Saw* finds the main character visiting her father’s land, Oaxaca, Mexico, yet her grandparents are the ones who support her learning about herself. *Tea and Milk* features a Japanese-American protagonist experiencing cultural shock and adjustment in moving back to Japan.

Yoo Kyung Sung, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

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