

Delights of Childhood: Exploring Indian English Children's Literature

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Abstract:

Childhood is a vital phase in the development of human life. This is a time of limitless imagination and amazement. A kid faces numerous challenges in life. With age, a feeling of uncertainty surrounds him. Insecurity results in a feeling of deprivation. The writers experiences a sense of isolation from those around him. And faces issues related to his or her identity. Jacques Lacan refers to this as the "mirror stage" in his work Literary Theory. He traces the origins of identity to the instant the child recognizes his reflection in the mirror. From this, the writers displayed profound empathy for the inner world of the child, because it was not until 1979, the Year of the Child, that Indian publishers, writers, and scholars began to pay serious attention to the psychological and emotional needs of the child.

Key Words: Lacan, insecurity, childhood, children literature

The examination of children's literature remains limited without acknowledging the fact that it is created, chosen, purchased, and presented by an adult for the child. Clearly, the interests, needs, and values of an adult remain linked to the artwork, and the narrative thus embodies what an adult desires the child to understand. In this manner, the field of children's literature prepares both the 'adult' and the 'child'. Weaving together two distinct personas of existence, the realm of children's literature has continually been defined and redefined, thus lacking any definitive settled description.

To anchor the study, it is essential to understand the rhetoric of the phrase 'Children's Literature' by dividing it into the two components, 'children' and 'literature'. The phrase 'children' before the word 'literature' signifies that the literature created for children is truly literature for children. In straightforward terms, children's literature is a

work created by an adult intended for reading, comprehension, and enjoyment by a 'child.' As stated by Jan Susina in her article "Children's Literature," "Children's literature has been written, illustrated, published, marketed, and sold consistently by adults to be provided to children for their education and enjoyment."

Primarily because it is fundamentally a socio-cultural creation, its interpretation and representation vary from individual to individual and culture to culture. Secondly, it symbolizes a 'child' who is certainly not the same and differs according to age, class, caste, and location. Both existing in a perpetual state of change, the definition of this discipline remains just as adaptable and variable, evolving with the shifts of time, location, and genre. When we look at it broadly, children's literature includes the moral tales told by court poets in medieval periods, as well as storybooks, board books, baby touch-and-feel cloth books, eBooks, and all materials written and sold for a 'child.' In this context, Kimberley Reynolds, in the book *Children's Literature; A Very Short Introduction*, effectively remarks:

Currently, everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes – many of which date back to preliterate epochs- to such embodiments of our transliterate age as e-books, fan fiction, and computer games may come under the umbrella of children's literature. Additionally, as an area of research and teaching, children's literature encompasses all genres, formats, and media; all periods, movements, and kinds of writing from any part of the world, and often related ephemera and merchandise too. It addresses works that were specifically directed at the young, those that came to be regarded as children's literature by being appropriated by young readers, and those that were once read by children but are now almost exclusively read by scholars. (Reynolds 2)

However, if we offer a deep glance at the growth and nature of this field we will find that akin to the mainstream literature, children's literature also voyages through the oral tradition, but the mainstream literature holds the upper hand. After analyzing the existent route, Peter Hunt in the introduction to the book *Understanding Children's Literature* delineates "The books have, none the less, been marginalized" and in the same tone lends a possible explanation for the same saying "Childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from, while children's books – from writing to publication to interaction with children – are the province of that culturally marginalized group, females" (1).

The primary reason for this area being underrated can be the fact that it deals with

the life and times of a ‘child’ who in itself is ‘incomplete’ and is journeying on the road of becoming a ‘human’. The books dealing with them are considered to be equally incomplete, repeating what we have encountered already thus omitting most need of the hour facts. Abiding by the aforementioned facts, Hunt asserts

“Yet these may be the same people who accept that childhood is an important phase in our lives (as is almost universally acknowledged), and that children are vulnerable, susceptible, and must be protected from manipulation. Children Literature is important – yet it is not” (2).

Furthermore, we have all been raised listening to the phrase ‘A child is the future of the nation’ nearly every time in every speech or discourse, so the question arises: why is this area, which is intended for the improvement of that ‘child,’ overlooked? Aiming to educate, entertain, and guide a child, children's literature is not restricted to any specific shape, size, format, or genre. The meadow also appears to be as unrestricted as kids are. The essential point that must be acknowledged is that children's literature tirelessly aims to aid children, weaving various morals, lessons, and values into the narrative to convey fundamental goodness through a protagonist that may be either a human or a non-human character. In the piece “Contemporary Children’s Literature: Resurgence of Experience from Innocence,” Anil K Prasad details:

The fables, parables, fairy tales and nursery rhymes invariably attempt to imbibe the different aspects of human behavior into children’s personality. The subtle aesthetic blend of delight and instruction will be expected to bring about edification in terms of moral understanding and physical and psychological well-being of children. (Prasad 3)

It was during the seventeenth century that the concepts of ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ were recognized as a separate category in human development. Previously, there was no distinct necessity to classify a human infant, a ‘mere apple of the eye’, entirely reliant on caregivers or to define its period and condition as ‘childhood’. Childhood was seen as a phase of life that should be traversed with innocence and little concern, but as time passed and literacy rates rose, adults acknowledged it as a foundational state that shapes the future. Writers, philosophers, psychologists, and critics quickly accepted the grey area between binary white and black, not only valuing this state but also understanding it in all its potential. Philippe Aries' "Centuries of Childhood; A Social History of Family Line" (1962), Peter Hunt's Understanding Children's Literature, Children's Literature; A Very Short Introduction

by Kimberley Reynolds and Children's Literature: New Approaches by Karin Lesnik Oberstein added much energy to the field.

Across the line Jean Piaget theory of Cognitive Development also marked its way in widening the domain of child psychology. In order to understand the relevance of children's literature today it becomes crucial to look back at the seeding and budding history of children's literature. David L. Russell in his book "Literature for Children: A Short Introduction" (1946) averred that before printing press came in vogue the stories were handed down and preserved from generation to generation in the oral form thereby beginning its journey along with the main stream literature. Their nature had sometimes been didactic and moralistic, and sometimes heroic or religious. Long before a child could read and write an English child knew well the tales of Homer, "Ovid" or the adventures of the epical hero, "Beowulf", whereas an Indian child knew well the tales of Lord Rama, the tomfoolery of Lord Krishna, and other tell-tales from the Panchatantra most certainly from their parents or grandparents. However it is recognized that the earliest form of Children's Literature was in the form of fables. Keeping coherence with "A Handbook of Literary Terms" by M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham a fable is:

A short narrative, in prose or verse, that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behavior; usually, at its conclusion, either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an epigram. Most common is the beast fable, in which animals talk and act like human types they represent. (Abrams and Harpham 17)

It is an interesting genre which engages personified animal characters that tether to certain qualities and demeanors, in a plot line meant to lend moral lesson in the end. It is believed that fable as an initial form of children's literature owes much to the Neolithic and primitive ways of men. Furthermore, each country had its own share of fable stories that are transmitted, styled and preserved even today and are meant for both children and adults. In his book Children's Literature, M.O Grenby initiates his tenor by the chapter 'Fables' wherein he emboldens: "However sophisticated the fable has become it remains fundamentally a didactic form, designed to draw in its readers through a compelling story and appealing, even cute, characters, and to teach important lessons through allegory" (Grenby 11). He furthers:

They were written down as early as two thousand years BCE on the cuneiform tablets used by the Sumerians in what is now Iraq and Iran. . .

Fables were used for education from a very early period in India too. A collection called Panchatantra had been composed at least as early as the sixth century BCE, and certain fables were later extracted into a separate collection for use by children, usually known as the Fables of Bidpai (or Pilpay). . . . Most famous in the West are the fables associated with the name Aesop. (11)

Famously called as Aesop's "Fables", the tales have passed all the tests of time and are still read today. They have been compiled and re-compiled by authors like Denetrius Phaedrus in the first century CE, Babrius also in first century CE, and Avianus in 400 A.D. These fables are known to have been taught as a part of elementary education during renaissance. Grenby also quotes Sir Roger L'Estrange who said "the Delight and Genius of children, lies much toward the Hearing, Learning and Telling of Little stories" (13). With printing now easy, children's literature seemingly took a new shape with books such as "The Boke Named the Governor" by Sir Thomas Elyot and "Book of Martyrs" by John Foxe. In tracing down the pioneering works of children's literature John Amos Comenius's "Orbis Sensualium Pictus" (1658) cannot be surpassed. Originally written in German language, the work has been translated in many European languages and is considered to be the first book meant for educating the child by coherently portraying the picture and alphabet. During the same time with Locke's "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" (1693) the notion of 'child' started to evolve.

However, both Locke and L'Estrange advocated the belief that a child enters the world in a blank state of mind. Locke favored books in the process of good upbringing and rearing of a child's mind. The philosophical essay steered the talk of concern about child, about the malleable mind of child and child education. The essay influenced a number of thinkers and philosophers including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose eminent work of art, Emile stressed on the conscious development of a child's mind.

Meanwhile in late nineteenth and twentieth century, the torch bearers of Children's Literature experimented with new subjects, styles and content. The school stories, adventure stories, family stories and the most prominent, fantasy stories entered the orbit of children's books thus making it a blend of the real and fantastic elements. With the advent of psychologists and behaviorists like Sigmund Freud, the exploration of a child's mind was also exercised. With Britain now a world power, cultures and characters of different colonized worlds also emerged in the works of literature. Charles Kingsley's "The Water-babies" (1863), Lewis Carroll's Alice's "Adventures in Wonderland" (1865), Louis May

Alcott's "Little Women" (1869), R.L Stevenson's "Treasure Island" (1883), L. Frank Baum's "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" (1900) and Beatrix Potter's "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" (1902) are some of the well-known works which appeared in late nineteenth and twentieth century.

Following the trajectory, crossover fiction also entered the trend where works meant for children also became a source of delight for adults. Reynolds views, "but just as late 20th-century adults were drawn to the Harry Potter books and His Dark Materials, so many books for children during the 19th had a large and unapologetic following among adults" (17). No sooner the field of children's literature was identified, a necessity was felt to line down it in period to period history consequently giving way to a number of famous histories such as Gillian Avery's "Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books" (1621-1922) in 1994, F.J.H Darton's "Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life" in 1982, J.R Townsend's "Written for Children: An outline of English-Language".

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