

The Child in Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

The development of children's literature as an independent genre is of comparatively current origin. Until lately, children were mostly dependent on simplified versions of adult books to provide their reading needs. The emergence of a separate amount of literature specifically written with the child reader in mind may be linked to contemporary transformation in attitudes and perspectives regarding the role and status of the child as a member of society. These advancements in children's literature started in Western countries in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the depiction of the child characters in contemporary Indian English literature for children that will show the operation of an ideology that seeks to perpetuate and revalidate certain middle class values and attitudes, highlighting the definition and origin of children's literature as well as the determination of its status and value in society. The development of a body of coherent criticism in the field of children's literature in India will ensure the continual interrogation of such trends and make meaningful contributions to the growth of this genre by providing fresh perspectives. By providing attractive alternatives to foreign books in an Indian context and catering to the emotional and imaginative demands of today's children, it should be possible to create a niche market for English books for children.

Key Words: *Child, Children's Literature, Definition and Origin, Status and Value, Criticism.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of children's literature as an independent genre is of comparatively current origin. Until lately, children were mostly dependent on simplified versions of adult books to provide their reading needs. The emergence of a separate amount of literature specifically written with the child reader in mind may be linked to contemporary transformation in attitudes and perspectives regarding the role and status of the child as a member of society. These advancements in children's literature started in Western countries in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Contemporary Indian English children's literature appears ultimately to be coming of age. The abundance of books for children of all ages by Indian writers in English proves the acknowledgment of children as a worthwhile potential market by the publishing industry. Today, children in India are the targets of the media, mainly in the fields of advertising and mass

communication. The improved purchasing power of the middle and upper classes of society, coupled with growing consumerist attitudes, have made them the major audience towards whom most campaigns are addressed. Socio- economic factors such as the increased percentage of working mothers, the growth and advancement of nuclear families and the contact to Western lifestyles via television have interacted in complex ways, the consequence of which is a better focus on the needs and demands of children. Little wonder then that publishers have capitalised on these developments by producing and marketing children's literature in English on a huge scale.

The most considerable progress in the field of children's literature in India occurred after Independence. The creation of organisations like the Children's Book Trust in 1957 and the launching of the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya series for children by the National Book Trust in 1969 certified that particular attention was provided to the production of books that distinctively catered to the child's needs. Declarations such as the International Year of the Child in 1979, SAARC Year of the Girl Child in 1990 and the International Year of the Girl Child in 1991 have directed world attention on the needs and rights of children. These declarations have translated into concerted efforts by Indian publishing houses such as Harper Collins, Penguin, Vikas Publishers, NBT, CBT and Tulika to provide entertaining and meaningful literature for children. The setting up of the National Centre for Children's Literature in 1993 bore witness to government dedication to the cause of children. Established as a separate wing of the National Book Trust, the NCCL is devoted to the advancement of balanced literature for children in all languages, the endorsement of reading among children and launching of research in children's literature. The Association of Writers and illustrators for children (AWIC), set up in 1981, is equally occupied in promoting the construction of innovative literature for children.

Even though it is heartening to observe the current surge of attention given to children's literature in India, it is essential to go over the developments in this field. Ironically, many of the Indian writers who have established a reputation in writing for children in English are critical of the present state of children's literature in India.

DEFINITION AND ORIGIN OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The meaning of childhood is reliant on and affected by the intention for which childhood is being termed. Hunt terms children's literature as "books read by, especially suitable for, or especially satisfying for, members of the group currently defined as children."ⁱ The genre of children's literature is hardly a couple of centuries old, yet it has become an important field of literature today.

There are various points of view as regards to the precise time which children's literature may be said to have begun. Peter Hunt argues that children's books "have been a recognizably discrete 'type' of text since the mid-eighteenth century."ⁱⁱ PremaSrinivasan observes that though Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket Book*, regarded as the first of particularly secular literature for children, was issued in 1744, the accredited classics for children such as *The Jungle Book*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *Treasure Island* were written in the period between 1850 and 1932. This has encouraged researchers to consider the last decades of the nineteenth century the golden age of children's literature.ⁱⁱⁱ

Children's literature in India owes its origin to the colonial experience. Most researchers agree that though animal stories and folk tales have been a component of the Indian oral tradition for thousands of years, the notion of children's literature as an independent genre has been imported from the West. The effect of colonialism and the extension of formal education by the missionaries produced the formation of a specific corpus of literature likely to be clearly educational and instructive in maintaining its definite function of educating its child readers. Navin Menon observes that the drive of culture allowed a transformation from the compilation of texts designed to educate, to the creation of original literature designed to entertain.^{iv} Manorama Jafa outlines three stages in the expansion of children's literature in India. The first stage comprised of the transcription of traditional and oral literature into written form. In the second stage, select adult literature was translated and edited for the assistance of the child reader. The third stage has been the publication of creative and original literature over the last century. While traditional literature was characterised by the presentation of the adult perspective and tended to be didactic, modern literature is more child-oriented.^v

The expansion of an independent genre of children's literature in India has also been associated with the formation of a pan Indian identity and the consequent development of the identity of the child as an entity separate from his/her family. Mohini Rao examines the influence of social transformations on developing trends in literature. She notes that the appearance of a new society affected by liberated Western modes of thought led to an improvement of the rights and status of women, and it became indispensable to cast these social transformations in stories written for children. The publication of ancient Indian classics like the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales was carried out with the particular goal of creating among Indian children an awareness of their rich heritage. She observes:

Post-Independence, the development of an Indian identity made it imperative that this identity be communicated in children's literature to instil in them a sense of national pride.^{vi}

Likewise, Jafa notes that the growing awareness of the child being an independent member of the family led to particular interest devoted to his/her distinctive needs. This awareness, along with the development of formal schooling, required the growth of a literature that particularly catered to the child reader. Hence, the origin of children's literature in India lay in the textbooks and supplementary readers written for children.^{vii}

STATUS AND VALUE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature has generally been assessed largely in terms of its use. In the majority of cultures, oral and written stories for children were written with the precise purpose of familiarising the child with the social customs and traditions in action within that culture and starting the process of socialisation. Contemporary concepts of childhood identify the child's necessity for a literature that does not preach, and that explores and shows a world where the child is supreme and free from the harsh demands of adults. In spite of this acknowledgement, the value of a book for children is still regularly adjudged by adults in terms of its worth and value in assisting the socialisation process.

Peter Hunt indicates that new modes of critical thinking have guaranteed that texts are no more evaluated as better or worse, but only in terms of their differences. He affirms that the status of a

text is a function of group power, and the dominant group in a society determines what kinds of texts are assigned value.^{viii} Hunt adds further that the grading of books compiled for children is often inflected with the critic's concepts of what is good for the child:

There is, I think, a tension between what is 'good' in the exploded abstract, what is good for the child socially, intellectually, and educationally, and what we, really, honestly think is a good book.^{ix}

Yet, the fact remains that adult opinion with regard to the value of a text quite often deviates from the point of view of the child reader, who is, after all, the targeted audience. Tucker observes that the books of Enid Blyton go on to be greatly accepted and pleasing to child readers, although adults do not subscribe to this opinion. Even among children, view with regard to the appeal of a book is expected to be divided, since children react in an entirely subjective manner to books, and are unable of self-conscious criticism. Therefore the determination of the value of children's literature remains a subject laden with complications, and the status of a text is always dependent on current socio-cultural trends.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

The concept of childhood has gone through significant changes in the last few centuries, particularly in the West. Peter Hunt observes that in the past, there have been great versions of childhood ranging from "the Romantic noble-savage child who is nearest to God, to the child seen as having been born evil as a result of original sin"^x. He notes that in medieval times, there was little notion of childhood as a distinct developmental phase, and in Elizabethan times, there was hardly any notion of the differing needs of the child. That childhood is a culture-specific concept is obvious from the differing ideas of children and childhood across cultures and over a period of time. While it is beyond the scope of this study to try a synchronic and diachronic analysis of the different concepts of childhood, a comparison of the Indian viewpoint as depicted in traditional Indian literature, with its counterpart as represented in Western philosophy, will highlight the differences regarding what constitutes childhood.

Children's literature has a distinctive set of power relations to negotiate, because there is no one-to-one equation between producer and consumer. The writer/publisher of a book for children apparently produces a book for the child reader, but the norms that govern the kind of book that is written and published are dictated by the group of adults who are the persons who buy the books that the child reads. Producers of children's literature frequently aim at the potential consumer (the adult) rather than the real or eventual consumer (the child). These difficult market factors are expected to distort any analysis of the effect and value of children's books.

The criticism of children's literature is loaded with similar complications. Books for children are usually written by adults, published by adults and very often purchased by adults. The criticism of children's literature is also for the most part an adult activity. Therefore, there are likely to be some reservations while accepting a particular crucial point of view, since the critic inevitably stands in a position of power regarding his/her material, and may possibly be accused of misrepresentation. However, it is not possible to dismiss the criticism of children's literature altogether, because self-conscious and logical criticism founded on theoretical principles is vital

in deconstructing the power relations that constitute the text, and facing the ideological assumptions underlying the production of texts.

Peter Hunt supports a critical approach which he terms ‘childist’ criticism^{xi}, for which texts written for children are assessed in terms of their appeal to the child reader, and an endeavour is made to see how meaning is made from the text. He admits that practitioners of children’s literature confront inbuilt prejudices with regard to the value and status of their work. Therefore they are frequently denied the appreciation and acknowledgment due to them. This demeaning attitude also extends to critics of children’s literature. Hunt mentions Frank Eyre’s opinion that “writers about children’s books are still regarded, consciously or unconsciously, as a kind of sub-species of critic” and argues for a more respectable and responsible status to be accorded to the field of children’s literature.^{xii}

In India, criticism of children’s literature has been, till lately, mostly limited to reviews of children’s books in the weekend editions of newspapers, or interviews with writers and articles in journals on themes and trends. This is still a promising and emerging area with scope for the growth of a praxis that connects both critical and theoretical principles. Since children’s literature as a subject of serious study is of modern origin in India, there is a scarcity of in-depth studies in this field. Most research is limited to academic institutions, a trend critiqued by Hunt:

Certainly, children’s literature is sometimes seen as a new and promising field for literary studies, a new vein to be mined, when so many academic lodes are becoming rather thin.^{xiii}

There is therefore a necessity for critics, researchers and practitioners of children’s literature to work interactively in this field to facilitate the production of important, pleasant and meaningful books for children.

THE CHILD IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Since Indian philosophy does not attach much importance to childhood as a period of development, the solely other existing source for depictions of childhood is the traditional literature of the period. In his ultimate study of Indian childhood *The Inner World*, SudhirKakar notes that the conceptualisation of the human life cycle embodies in the scheme of *ashramadharma* in Indian philosophy that concentrates largely on the period of youth and adulthood.^{xiv} For this reason, a study of ancient Indian texts becomes necessary so as to reconstruct traditional concepts of childhood in India historically.

Kakar observes that the references to children and childhood in classical Sanskrit literature seldom represent children as individuals in their own right. They are more often depicted as the fulfilment of a wish, highlighting the parent’s happiness on having a child. In the *Mahabharata*, there are casual references to children, most of which are constructive and demonstrate a feeling of affection and compassion for children. On the other hand, Kakar makes clear that even where children engage in centre stage, the limelight is on the boy child, and the birth of a girl is given cold and subdued reception. Kakar quotes Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* as an exception, where a child, and a girl child at that, is given the key role and Rishi Kanva’s love for his daughter is thoughtfully and delicately portrayed.^{xv} It is in the literature of Bhakti movement that childhood and its experiences become vital. According to Kakar, accounts of Krishna’s childhood in Surdas’ poems and Rama’s childhood in Tulsidas’ poems assisted in constructing a “culturally

approved utopia of childhood”^{xvi}. He recommends that verses written in honour of the childhood of Rama and Krishna are unconscious manifestations of a desire of childhood that is shared not only by the poets, but by the audience as well, that is accessible to and enthusiastically maintains these fantasies.

DeepthaAchar claims that childhood developed as a category in the West around the mid-seventeenth century, and this notion of childhood showed a change in thinking from the earlier view that considered children as proto-adults. She notes:

“The transformation of the status of the child as Foucault suggests was a part of the massive epistemological shift of the Classical age. The child was now located in a series of material practices, in a set of relations and discourses which effectively constituted it as distinct from the adult.”^{xvii}

Achar compares and contrasts the position of children in society and numerous eighteenth/nineteenth century European opinions of childhood. In her view, twentieth century meanings of children’s literature, that either favour the disparities between adult and children’s literature, or make invisible their features, owe their origin to these debates. She speaks out that though the Lockean secular notion of the child was in conflict with the Puritan notion of the child being intrinsically bad both sets of beliefs confirmed the need for adult control over the child. While Rousseau claimed the Lockean separation of the child and adult, he did not favour adult knowledge as Locke had done. The significance of continuous supervision of childhood was emphasised in Rousseau’s scheme. In the nineteenth century, children were mostly were seen as being in need of education to inculcate in them ‘universal’ values. This was done by means of children’s literature. Achar maintains that these values were actually a function of power relations, and sought to overpower the working class. Furthermore, they replicated the concern and apprehension of the middle class concerning what comprises of suitable behaviour among the lower classes.^{xviii}

It can be said that the notion of childhood in the West has gone through various transformations over the last few centuries. Kakar refers to the view of some Western scholars that, within the ideological conflict between refusing and acknowledging attitudes towards the child evident in Western philosophy, there has been a distinct progress of a humane ideology “which makes the child and its needs central to the caretaking process.”^{xix} In contrast with the evolutionary mode that characterises the development of a Western philosophy of childhood, Kakar observes that the Indian tradition of childhood has not at all times been a special and esteemed member of society.

Furthermore, “the Indian tradition subscribes to an ideology that downgrades the role of the environment and nurture in the development of a child, and instead emphasises a deterministic conception of mystical heredity.”^{xx} For this reason, in his point of view, the model of socialisation of the child is a Western construct that has affected current Indian outlook towards children. He indicates that there is a definite stream in the Indian tradition of childhood that values in particular those attributes of a child which have not been socialised, for example, vivaciousness, mercurial anger and the capacity for intense sorrow and delight.^{xxi}

Apart from various philosophic readings of childhood, differences as regards to the notion of childhood happened as a consequence of social and economic factors as well. For example, Hunt

notes that when there was high mortality rate, it was impossible to imagine of childhood as a protected developmental phase, particularly among the economically deprived sections of society.^{xxii} In the Indian milieu, a large section of the people live at or below subsistence level and therefore, the child is compelled to give up his/her childhood and take on quasi-adult roles to earn a living. For people belonging to deprived classes, there is little scope for permitting children the chance to grow at their own pace, or giving them the advantages linked with the stage of childhood. Consequently, any theory of childhood has inevitably to be qualified with reference to the culture, class and phase of development of the society under consideration.

There seems to be a common consensus that the child has to be defined in terms of a contrast to the adult, whether in terms of degree of kind. Hunt refers to Nicholas Tucker's definition in *What is a Child?* that depicts the trans-cultural and diachronic features of childhood. Some of these features are receptivity to the current culture, natural play, sexual immaturity and physiological constraints. Cognitive skills in children usually grow in a general sequence, even though the exact phases may not be precisely predicted or classified. In Hunt's point of view, children are differentiated by their various attitudes to subjects like sex, death, and fear at various phases of their childhood. They are likely to be more drastic and flexible than adults, and less bound by permanent and unchanging schemas. On account of their inadequate experience, their distinction between fantasy and fact is prone to instability.^{xxiii} Although individual children may quit these norms in explicit ways, it is probable to define certain features that are universal to children at different of phases of childhood.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary children's literature in India reveals the impact of globalisation and progress in communication. Today books written for children no longer represent a peaceful world untouched by reality. Subjects such as communal disharmony, drug addiction, environmental degradation, racial tensions and familial discord are being depicted and handled in a practical way by some Indian English authors. Writers have advanced from blindly replicating Western plots in an Indian setting, to creating stories whose action merge purely with the local environment and surrounding. Publishers have augmented demand by taking up strategies like appealingly packaged books, competitive pricing and aggressive marketing. The demographic profile is continuously changing and therefore there is a transformation in the nature of books required by the new reading public wing to the attempts of literary campaigns. Indian English authors and publishers have to be in touch with these changing needs and provide them accordingly.

The development of a body of coherent criticism in the field of children's literature in India will ensure the continual interrogation of such trends and make meaningful contributions to the growth of this genre by providing fresh perspectives. Recent trends show that publishers would become aware of the need to address audiences other than the middle and upper classes of urban society, thus acknowledging the relevance of issues such as drug addiction, divorce, death, communal tensions and gender inequities by publishing stories written on these themes. Indeed, by providing attractive alternatives to foreign books in an Indian context and catering to the emotional and imaginative demands of today's children, it should be possible to create a niche market for English books for children.

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