

## The Politics of Childhood and Children's Literature: A Critique

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**ABSTRACT** This paper critiques the politics of childhood and children's literature by arguing that childhood is a construct by the adults that disavows the materiality of children in society. In consequence, children's literature assumes the structure and function of a myth to dehistoricize the reality it presents and, in so doing, reinforces the dominant class ideologies. The paper suggests a corrective to the conventional children's literature and also calls for an agenda to break the "culture of silence" enveloping the construction of children and the literature for them.

To most of us, the literate and privileged among the masses, the volume of writings for children produced in India since Independence would not seem all-too-hopeless. We look admiringly at the colourful print-stuff for our children and feel gratified at the ever-increasing rate of their production. We wax eloquent on the need to promote the virtuous habit of reading among the youngsters. To prove this point to our kids and work out the fantasies of our own cultural improvement and elitist status, we splurge on children's encyclopaedias, volumes of folk and fairy tales, coffee-table books and the like. We feel concerned when children do not take to this virtue and find television entertainment, computer games and net-surfing more engrossing. We take up this matter in seminars, define it as a cultural crisis in the contemporary world and rack our brains for solutions such as pedagogic reforms, qualitative improvement of children's books and enforcement of censorship on the media. All of us look dreamily forward to a rosy future of our children, blithely ignoring what lies at our back: a grim reality of deprivation and illiteracy of millions of poor children.

### CULTURE OF SILENCE

According to an official estimate only 64 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women in this country are literate. Worse still, only half of all the children enrolled in Class I are able to complete Class V since the drop-out rates for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes stand at 51 per cent and 65 per cent respectively. These statistical figures point not merely to a dismal cultural and economic scenario of gross inequality, but also to a "culture of silence" which promotes our indifference to such inequality. Our discourses shut the marginal people off the mainstream; our children's texts do not represent them; and all our theories on pedagogic reforms and improvement of reading do not address their needs. In other words, we create the "culture of silence" around us to make these people invisible and voiceless.

### Childhood: An Adult-Construct and Children's Literature: A Mythical Order

The awareness of the presence of the epistemically invisible people is perhaps the first step towards a critique of the politics of childhood and children's literature. The awareness leads us to deduce that there is nothing natural or inevitable about childhood. It is culturally defined and constructed by the dominant classes in a society around their own expectations, values and practices. Further, "childhood" is a concept that adults formulate. All the semantic associations of the word and the cultural nuances are also creations of the adult in terms of which the child is defined socially. As the semantic associations and cultural nuances represent the interests of the adults of the dominant classes and their ideology of "adulthood", childhood

does not therefore include all children on earth; nor does children's literature target all classes of children. For all intents and purposes, "childhood" boils down to a sanitized identity of the child, the young member of the dominant political and cultural sections of society, who should be protected from the sickening and degrading realities of life. As a consequence, the text that the child reads ought not to contain realist images of violence, oppression, suffering and different forms of social evil<sup>2</sup>.

The epithet "realist" as mentioned above does not mean so much the fidelity to verisimilitude of objects, people and events suggesting violence as the mode of their representation in the narrative. It means that they appear in the narrative just the way we perceive them in real life and mentally record their presence with feelings of shock, sorrow and outrage. The discontinuities, contingencies and contradictions, which render our sense of the "real world" complex and disturbing, are never allowed into the narrative of children's literature in contrast with the "adult" stuff where we find a surfeit of them. The narrative of children's literature moves forward unidirectionally through the phases such as beginning, middle and end to a formal and thematic closure. The story begins with order, which is upset in the middle. But in the end the disorder yields to order, which prevails ever after; and the cyclic pattern of order-disorder-order repeats itself through story after story to give rise to a myth in the sense Ronald Barthes (1986) understands it as a self-enclosed and self-governing system of signification with a central signified controlling the signifiers. It constructs a dubious epistemic order that erases both history and politics, which are inscribed in the dynamic interaction between the subject and the object, or rather the self and the other (143). The formulaic closure of a fairy-tale - "And they lived happily ever after" - is in underpinned by a static moral order that apportions happiness and sorrow to the characters to the extent as they have been predetermined to be or prejudged as good or bad.

Be it Cinderella or Ugly Duckling, each seems to deserve a happy outcome of events and circumstances that have afflicted her for long. Her virtue has to be awarded in the end and all her travails have to be richly compensated. The logic

of children's stories demands virtue-existing *a priori* as a valorized moral category-to be circumstantially privileged from the beginning so that it can assert itself effectively in the end.

In an Oriya story for children, a boy is praised for sharing with his friends some cakes he has received from his mother, while two other boys in similar circumstances are reproved. One of them gluts himself with all his cakes until he falls sick, and the other just hoards his and throws them away when they go bad. In this nicely crafted story what is overlooked is the fact that the cakes are different in each case. The boy who is made out to be good and generous can afford to extend his generosity simply because his cakes are of a kind that would normally stay fresh for days. The other boys are not as fortunate as him, for their cakes would go bad in any case.

What we find in the above story is the myth that fortune favours the good and virtuous. It has certainly a didactic purpose to serve. But what it negates is history. In the absence of history the moral categories of good and bad are not allowed to be relativized and problematized. History is not so much a chronology of events as a material process through which social and moral values are constructed and the knowledge of truth is controlled. Also, the sense of history of a certain set of events involves knowledge of their materiality. The knowledge of the materiality of the events narrated and values articulated in the above story are that the quality of the cakes ultimately determines whether the boys in question are generous, greedy or miserly. It also suggests to us yet another fact: the mothers of the greedy and miserly boys ought to be blamed, although they escape the harsh moral judgement to which their boys are subjected<sup>3</sup>. The subterfuge on the part of the adults is an instance of their childhood-politics.

An ideology of protectionism and its imperatives of psychic and moral hygiene guide all policies of writing children's books. What this ideology masks is the refusal on the part of the adult to admit into the child's world-view such forms of knowledge as can be dangerous for the dominant political and cultural order. In effect, children's literature turns out to be an apologist of the established order and an instrument of the colonization of the child's mind by the adult<sup>4</sup>.

### A LOST UTOPIA

Let us take the example of fairy-tales. It is in their ambience of magic, romance, myths and fantasies that a young reader's instincts and her/his demands on life are fully released. It is in these tales that the child's innocence and sense of wonder are celebrated, not in real life. In real life children are judged negatively by the adult standards of maturity, power and productivity. In real life what we celebrate is but the idea of childhood, not the child - the immature, weak and unproductive miniature or even caricature, of the adult. In this context Ashis Nandy says: "In its extreme form, the child is appreciated when he or she is least genuinely childlike or authentic - in fact, only when he or she meets the adult's concept of childhood" (1987: 67).

To youngsters fairy tales offer an escape from a traumatic adult reality, a compensatory means of wish fulfilment and their imaginative engagement with childhood which Lloyd de Mause (1975) aptly calls a "lost utopia". Childhood is also no less a lost utopia for the adults when it comes to nursery rhyme. Parents recollect their childhood as they recite to their children the little songs they remember hearing in their younger days. It is always made to be distanced from reality and history as a marginal space<sup>5</sup> and thereby made pliable and serviceable for the dominant discourse. The sexist and racist overtones of some popular rhymes like "Georgie Porgie..." and "Ena, mena deka mo/ Catch a nigger by his toe..." are all-too-obvious to everyone. Also, as the feminists have shown us, in the stories like "Sleeping Beauty" and "Cinderella", gender construction is totally controlled by a patriarchal ideology.

### Colonialism, Class and Control

In the adult world of promethean activism and productivity, children's stories and songs function not so much for the satisfaction of the child's psychological needs as for the protection of the so called healthy adult social order from the freaks and whims of the child, or rather his childishness, which is considered subversive. The adult world ensures the child's unqualified submission to authority, mostly of a patriarchal form, and its code of discipline

through children's literature. The regimen of adult power and authority as also the hegemony of the privileged classes become all the more conspicuous when children's literature is enshrined in the class-room syllabus.

Shibaji Bandyopadhyay (1991) makes an interesting study of Bengali children's literature in the 19th and early 20th centuries as part of colonial discourse. He aptly argues that children's literature was an instrument of ideological inducement through which children's assent was secured to the upper class interests of the national bourgeoisie. The engagement of the national bourgeoisie with colonial rule involved a contradiction. On the one hand their nationalist agenda sought to achieve independence in the framework of a liberal, welfare polity while, on the other hand, they tacitly supported the British colonial policy that had left untouched the feudal and casteist social order in the colony. Children's literature became a site of national culture, which many men of letters belonging to the national bourgeoisie revived. This is because their notion of national culture was intended to privilege their class interests. Critiquing Rabindranath Tagore's praise for *Thakurmaar Jhuli* [Granny's Slingbag]<sup>6</sup> as a glorious token of authentic native culture and tradition Bandyopadhyay writes:

It should be hardly surprising that Rabindranath was charmed by the delectable simplicity of *Thakurmaar Jhuli*. But his belief that its pristine simplicity bore the impress of eternity and Bengali authenticity, and served as an anodyne to the affliction of the *bhadralok* under quotidian stress and strain alerts us to the politics of his sense of wonder. That his aesthetics assimilated the text into another context and imposed on it an altogether new hermeneutic order becomes well evident (translation mine: 44)

Rabindranath's aesthetics of children's literature surely gestured towards not only a mythical order of eternity, into which the stories could be assimilated, but also towards a notion of "purity" that sought to dehistoricize characters and events, and legitimize, much to the interest of the upper classes, the socially dominant values and opinions as immanent, natural

and timeless. Indeed, as Bandyopadhyay shows (344-47), in Rabindranath's own *Sahaj Path* [Lessons Made Easy] (1930), a primer, the narrator is unmistakably a boy belonging to the upper-class and epistemically controlling the world view in which hierarchy of social positions and inequality are made to appear as natural, universal and abiding. It is the illusion or the myth of the timelessness and the universality of hierarchy and inequality through which upper class interests could be protected.

To recapitulate the main points discussed so far as regards the politics of childhood: childhood is a heterogeneous reality, divided in terms of class and cultural boundaries, although an image of homogeneous childhood manufactured by the adult is transmitted through children's literature. This image is exclusive/exclusionist with its upper class markers and its homogeneity is repressive in so far as it silences the disturbing images of childhood. The homogeneity is a myth in that it refuses to acknowledge its historical materiality and the politics in which it is implicated. Further, childhood is made out to be a highly valorized ideal of innocence and purity in the adult discourse in terms of which the real child is negatively judged. In effect, as a "lost utopia" childhood haunts the real child as an indictment and fixes her/him in a moral straightjacket.

Amidst all the above points gels yet another important point: children's literature demarcates the lines between adult-stuff and kid stuff and formalizes itself as a genre different from those of literature in the conventional sense. In so doing it absolves the adult from the responsibility of making accessible to the child's level of understanding the radical objects and forms of knowledge that are considered far too progressive at best and far too subversive at worst. For example, the picture-perfect image of the world purveyed through children's literature has an under-side darkened by realities such as child marriage, gender discrimination against girl child, female foeticide, domestic violence against children, child labour, sexual abuse of children, commoditization of children in the media, their vulnerability to drugs and pornography, and the like. The list of evils affecting children can be long, but how many authors of children's literature in India address these as themes? How many

among them have broken the "culture of silence" to write for children about children who live on the fringes of the society? Very few, indeed.

In recent years one finds postcolonial literary theory demanding discursive space for marginal entities like women and the subaltern to articulate their needs and aspirations. Children can surely come into this space since they too are marginal. If women in India can articulate their issues and experiences in their own perspectives and voices in discursive sites like "Kali for Women" and "Stree", so can children. It was heartening to learn from a review<sup>7</sup> of eight volumes of *Yuvakatha* [Stories for Youngsters] (1996) that some stories in them deal with taboo subjects like man-woman relationship, and another story "Fire Works" by Cho Dharman is about child exploitation. In fact, publishing stories should take a leaf out of *Yuvakatha* books and allow children to write for themselves.

## CONCLUSION

The politics of childhood is inscribed in writings for children through its disavowal of politics and history. In the book *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (1996), edited by Peter Hunt, we find a comprehensive account of the evolution of the genre of children's literature in the West and the changes in its contours over two centuries in correlation with the changes in the moral codes of the society, political thoughts and pedagogic theories. What this book testifies to is the fact that writing for children is a purely ideological act which is controlled by history. This knowledge does not just make us wary of the age-old claptrap about the purity and glory of childhood in a timeless zone, it also makes us discerning enough to produce for our children and ourselves the right kind of writing that erases the line between adult-stuff and kid-stuff. In this connection, Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince* and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* from the West and *Kathasaritasagar*, *Panchatantra*, Sukumar Ray's Bengali poems like *Aboltabol* [Nonsense Verse] and Gopal Praharaj's Oriya stories in *Utkal Kahani* [Tales from Utkal] from the East can be our best models. These writings seem to revel in

a subversive joy as they question the dominant social mores and ideologies. And still more important, these writings turn out to be politically correct and ethically superior by revealing to the reader—in this case she/he is not necessarily young—their own material base and the limits of their own ideologies.

### NOTES

1. The "culture of silence", a phrase by Paulo Freire (1972), signifies an epistemic space or zone of visibility from which the economically and politically disadvantaged have been pushed out and rendered invisible. He also says: "In the culture of silence the masses are 'mute', that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being" (30).
2. It is not, however, always the case that violence is never introduced into children's literature. Although care is taken to protect children from scenes of gratuitous violence, or violence against the classes to which they belong, it still plays an important role in the adventures of Mickey Mouse and Tarzan stories in channeling the repressed desire for collective aggression. But the objects of such violence are always "the other". Frantz Fanon mentions that in the children's magazines produced in the 1950s in the Antilles by the white men for white children, the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage were symbolized by the Negroes and Indians (1967: 146). In such case violence against these entities was perfectly justified. The reader, whether a white boy or black boy, identified himself with the victor and joined him, with righteous feelings, in violence against the evil adversary.
3. How adults themselves elude the moral grid they construct for judging children may be an interesting line of inquiry in children's literature.
4. It is common knowledge that "child" and "childhood" are tropes that have been used much in the colonial discourse to describe the native, colonial subject. In this connection one recalls the statements of great European philosophers, historians and writers, namely Hegel, James Mill, Rudyard Kipling, Cecil Rhodes, etc. For an interesting discussion of the topic see the first chapter of Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* (1983). In his supreme arrogance the colonizer thought of himself as the representative of European civilization and enlightenment, and a father figure, whose responsibility it was to civilize and discipline the half-child and half-savage native.

Indeed, the associative meanings of underdevelopment, ignorance and formlessness, which the trope "childhood" acquired in colonial discourse, also served to underpin the adults agenda of colonizing the child's mind.

5. Few would link up the nursery rhyme "Hush-a-bye, baby..." with the Native American's ancient practice of hanging the babies from trees in wicker or wooden baskets while their mothers worked. During my visit to the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania I was told by the guide that it was necessary for American Indians to keep their babies hanging for protection from wild animals, although this practice was risk-prone and accidents of babies falling down from the trees were quite common. This struck me as a very revealing instance of the distance between the charmed world of rhymes and the harsh reality of history.
6. *Thakurmaar Jhuli* is a collection of folk-tales by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Mazumdar. He roamed far and wide through the villages of Bengal and phonographically recorded the stories that had been handed down from generation to generation in an oral form. With the help of Dinesh Chandra Sen, he got them published in 1907 in Calcutta along with a foreword by Rabindranath Tagore.
7. Diptiranjana Pattanaik. 1996. Rev. of *Yuvakatha*, Vols. 1-4. (ed.), Geeta Dharmarajan, and Vols 5-8. (ed.), Keerti Ramachandra in *Indian Review of Books* 5 (2): 19-20.

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