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DECODING THE NUANCES OF CHILDREN'S FICTION: AN EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

This article is a pursuit on Children's literature and fiction, trying to decode the subtle nuances, debates and dilemmas present in the genre. The article investigates aspects like childhood, child, characteristics of children's fiction, magic and imagination etc. The notions of child towards children's books and adult as a writer of children's fiction are persistent as antagonistic ideas. Children's literature has not been provided with the deserving space on the platform of world literature.

Keywords: Children's literature, Children's fiction, Concepts

Children's Literature

Children's literature is mostly a fictional genre including fable, fantasy, and folklore, involving many sub genres. The encounter with texts is inclined to be active and entertaining one. All literature, all texts produced before the eighteenth century were, in the modern sense, not written for children; children, most probably, were a part of the audience in a primarily oral and aural society. Children's books are now being taken seriously, though the level of criticism may not be as high as some commentators would wish. However, serious attention is being paid to children's literature in the contemporary times.

The texts in this area are culturally formative, and of massive importance educationally, intellectually and socially. They reflect society as it wishes to be. The criticism of children's literature has become a rational discipline only because children's literature has emerged as a coherent field of study on its own. It was clear to many writers and critics that children's literature needed some special approach. As a phenomenon, both text and audience presented a new challenge. The perception is that children's literature is not lesser but different. Critics of Children's literature had to attend philosophical and methodological questions which have been ignored for too long. Only very recently, literary theory has approached most of the consumers of children's literature and the deliberate obvious position of necessary plurality of meaning and response.

Children's literature studies have been academically cross-disciplinary. The basic function of children's literature has always raised many intense questions like, Why is the writer of Children's literature an adult? Who should be in control? Is the view of the psychologist more valid than that of the bibliographer? Dose the lay parent know more than the academic? Which of the participants has the higher status? Serious criticism of children's literature sounds as if it is a contradiction in terms and therefore had to be evangelical. But in reality it needs to be practical. Rather, the previous years of Children's literature have seen a revolution in critical thinking in universities, which has paradoxically thrust children's books into the limelight. There is a lot of literary

criticism on children's literature which is actually not meant for children. To substantiate, Sarah Trimmer observes,

The utmost circumspection is therefore requisite in making a proper selection; and children should not be permitted to make their own choice, or to read any books that may accidentally be thrown in their way, or offered for their perusal; but should be taught to consider it as a *duty*, to consult their parents in this momentous concern. (Trimmer 407)

Child's perception in Children's Fiction

The real secret of a child's book consists not merely in its being less difficult, but more rich in interest more true to nature, more exquisite in art and abundant in every quality that replies to childhood's keen perceptions. Such being the case, the best of children's reading will be found in libraries belonging to their elders. *Robinson Crusoe*, the standing masterpiece of a century, was not originally written for children. This is ironical too.

In fact, the association of children and fairy stories is an accident in our domestic history. Fairy stories in the modern world have been reduced to the nursery. They are shabby or old fashioned furniture-like. They are not the choice of children. Children as a class lack experience. They are young and growing who normally have appetites of curiosity, so the fairy stories as a rule go down well enough.

In case of stories and other nursery traditions, there is another factor. Wealthier families employed women to look after their children and the stories were provided by these nurses who were sometimes in touch with rustic and traditional lore forgotten by their betters. It has been a long time since such sources have dried up. The belief in magic runs through so many fairy tales may also be in accordance with how younger children themselves think certain events in the outside world. Until then, fairy stories in particular may be essentially in tune with earlier modes of thought and far from confusing children.

Children should know how to laugh, not how to mock; and when they laugh, it should not be at the faults of others. This should be taught. They should be sensitive to wrong acts, and to smile at it too; and too humble to constitute themselves its judges. Just as we all like tales because there is an instinct of curiosity, we all like astonishing tales. A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But the child, a true citizen of fairyland is obeying something that s/he does not understand at all. In the fairy tale an inconceivable happiness rests in compressible condition. A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten and cities perish. A lamp is lit and love flies away. A flower is plucked and human lives are destroyed. This is the style and rule of fairyland.

The world is bewitched by magic as much as music. The children need it more. Magic to most of children is out of reach. It fills their imagination and thoughts. Because of the limitations of these approaches towards the discussion of children's books, a third approach, although not yet clearly articulated, is gradually appearing based upon the recognition of children's books as a literary genre. This approach regards children's books as a sub division of literature proper, with its own conventions and characteristics.

Concepts of Children's Fiction

Among the characteristics of the genre of children's fiction are such obvious factors as the presence of child protagonists, greater flexibility about the probability of narrative events, and recurrent plot elements such as the quest, the journey motif time, rises and falls of fortune, and various kinds of initiation into adult life. However, because of children's immaturity, some linguistic, emotional and intellectual limitations are inherent in the genre.

Children's books are usually short. They tend to favor an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incidents rather than description and introspection. Child characters rule and conventions are used. The story develops within clear cut moral schematics. Children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive. Language in children's literature is child oriented. Plots are of a distinctive order. One could go on

endlessly talking about magic, fantasy, simplicity and adventure. The point is not to legislate for essential differences but simply to note observable general orders of differences.

Children's literature is not a temporary replacement for something. It is in its own way a specific literature. Critics formulate criticism on children's literature through their writings. There has always been an inclination among the critics of children's books to summon the response of particular children to support their assessment. This may seem a perfectly acceptable practice. Further, it has been observed that the children's book reviewer survives in a slightly unreal world, where the child is not properly considered. There are two reasons for this. Brian Alderson in an article in *Children's Book News* thinks that "everyone in the children's book business subsists in a slightly unreal world, where time, brains and energy are expended on behalf of a vast and largely nonparticipating audience" (Alderson 34). It is pointed out that children's books are written by adults. The whole process is carried out at one, two, three, or more moves from the ultimate consumer. The second confusion is that children's literature is a part of the field. Few critics opine that children's literature is not central in literature within one working lifetime and cannot master sufficient knowledge of the related fields.

What historians of children's literature call the first real children's book, Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book*, was published within a decade of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Similar social conditions are conducive to both. The development of a separate body of literature addressed to children has been significantly associated with that of the novel, and the critical fortunes of the one have been strongly influenced by those of the other. The separation of adult's and children's literature is rationalized and even practiced. It has assumed the status of a fact, a piece of knowledge about the world, that children read books in a different way.

The outcome of this de facto segregation of children's literature from the rest can be seen in general aesthetic theory. One of the most striking features of English children's literature is the amount and quality of fantasy offered to them. Children's fiction is impossible, because children themselves cannot write literature. Children's fiction is obviously about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which hardly ever talks of. Aries, the critic of children's literature opined,

There is no children's book market which does not, on closer scrutiny, crumble under just such a set of divisions- of class, culture and literacy – divisions which undermine any generalized concept of the child. And there is no language for children which can be described independently of divisions in the institution of schooling, the institution out of which modern childhood has more or less been produced. (Aries 13)

Literature for children first became an independent commercial project in England in the mid to late eighteenth century. This was because of the critics like Locke and Rousseau. This is a fact which is known, but its implications for thinking about children's fiction have not been fully recognized. Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy of both subject and form properly. Locke believed in children's education. But it was Rousseau's idea that it was sexuality which mostly harms the child's correct use of language and its exact knowledge of the world. Rousseau's ideologies influenced many writers. It began with Rousseau's territorial certainty that both sexuality and social inequality were realities that the child somehow should get out of. Above all, for both Locke and Rousseau, the child can be seen, observed and known exactly the same way as the world can be grasped.

Children's fiction emerges out of a formation of both i.e. the child and the world as known in a direct and unmediated way. It is this formation which has influenced children's writing and the way that it is thought today. We can see it, in differing forms, in such apparently varied types of writing as the fairy tale and the adventure story for boys. Linguistically and stylistically speaking children's literature has a common pattern, that is, a home away from home. Some critics have attended more to the style of narration. Barbara Wall, a critic,

takes the oral interaction of adult and child as her model. If we overheard someone speaking in an adjacent room we would know whether or not it was a child being addressed from 'the kinds of information and explanations being given; indeed, even without the words, she maintains, we could tell by 'adjustments in pitch and tone'. (Wall 3)

What is prominent about Wall's model is that the child is something constant to which authors over time, have to adapt. There is no notion of the child itself being constructed differently. Thus, before she begins her analysis, Wall has a pattern of what the child is and it is very much a romantic creation. Their tales are orally based and belonged originally to a wide popular audience. This is a strange move however allowing the genre, for once, to define the child and liberate the teller. With this dual address the child is no longer central, as a concern for something other than purely children's interest dominate, although this still has to be converted into language, concepts and tone. Wall's concept of the child seems most elastic as her use of the term adult.

Peter Hunt's criticism on children sounds more radical, presuming that the adult critic might divert himself of all adult preconceptions in order to read as a child. Childhood is here seen as a conceptual state.

As for childhood itself, it came into prominence with print technology. However, although these factors initially generated what was seen as the golden age of childhood. They have contributed to the current crisis over childhood. Children are newly targeted more directly by advertisers and the entertainment industry. Newer technologies have abetted this, one may say. In short, the crises over childhood, whether it is concern over the child's disappearance or becoming an adult, is part of a wider shift in society. But this area, where preteens and thirties aged often hang out together as those working in the related areas of film, comics and computer games have already realized the problem.

A number of oppositions emerge which have been critical in determining how children's fiction has been written since the eighteenth century. One needs to know the opposition between the child and adult, between the oral and written culture and between the innocence and decay. These are structural oppositions. They do not reflect an essential truth about the child. Childhood is seen as the place where an older form of culture is preserved and it is infantilized. At this level, children's fiction has a set of long established links with the colonialism which identified the new world with the infantile state of man.

Children's books in the late eighteenth century were only justified by the presence of the adult. Children's fiction started with a division between two different types of language and modes of address. One effect of this is that children's fiction has tended to inherit a very specific aesthetic theory.

There is a related supposition that children's fiction has become more progressive for children in direct proportion to its advance into this type of writing. However, given the way that this form of narrative is described in terms of its ability to secure the identification of the child with the story. The writing that is currently being promoted for children is that form of writing which asks its reader to enter into the story and to take its world as real. Even if it is not the intention, it is the effect of writing which presents itself as realistic. In relation to this type of writing, children are valued because of the ease with which they slip into the book and live the story. Children become the natural object par excellence. Innocence of the child and of the world is enthroned as the guarantee of safety in language. Therefore fiction becomes a central tool in the child's education.

In that case fantasy too belongs to the conventions of narrative, just as the preoccupation with realistic writing is a fully aesthetic and is of moral concern. It is the power of a work of fiction to draw the reader into this process of identification. Realism in children's writing cannot be opposed to what is literary or truly aesthetic. Realism is a fully literary convention. Writers for children must know who they are and for whom they are writing.

Writing for children becomes a battleground where the slightest challenge to identity has to be put down. What seems to be required of children's writing is something in the nature of a linguistic saving of face. Writing a book in order to confirm a place inside children's literature is not, however, the same thing as reading a children's book. Here the implied addressee is the child reader; in the second, it is children's literature itself. In reality, most of the times, there is no child behind the purpose of writing children's literature because the purposes are usually dishonest. According to psychoanalytical theory childhood is something which cannot

be left behind. The suppressed thoughts of childhood remain forever and reflect once a person is an adult. Children's fiction is a vague term as it is related to two questions. Is it a fiction that produces children or is it a fiction that is given to the children?.

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