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AN INTERESTING ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS OF BRITISH
CHILDREN THROUGH THE LENS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
- An Indian perspective

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins with the love for English literature cultivated from childhood among Indian readers and how it matures itself into a more critical and analytical reading crowd; how a study of British Children's Literature can help them understand the building of the psyche of the British children, their collective unconscious and make them grow to fantasize and explore opportunities to venture on impossible overseas adventures.

Key words: Folk literature, Cinderella, Snowwhite, Rapunzel, Enid Blyton, horror themes, socio-economic conditions, fantasy, deprivation, freedom, collective unconscious

Children's literature, teen literature, Mills and Boon, thriller and fiction are some of the papers that have found avid readership in India among the elite, in post modern India. The love of English language begins with British folk tales. The traditional fillip of reading begins with children's literature- Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. It has been an unwritten practice of the Indian reading crowd to start the sojourn in reading with Enid Blyton and they graduate to Nancy Drew, Hardy boys and move on to Sherlock Holmes. By the early twenties, boys would move on to Sidney Sheldon and Harold Robbins and stay there forever. With girls, the final in the list would be Mills and Boon fiction romance for a long time. Then the reading steadily works up to Sidney Sheldon and Harold Robbins at late middle age, finally staying on there. Indian children with this kind of reading culture eventually take up English language and literature in colleges and look for an opening as English professors. Ideally speaking, that is how it ought to be.

To elaborate, love of English literature is nurtured by several Indian upper middle class families ardently. It is the parents who decide that readership begins at the age of five. It is not exactly readership but picture gazing. The books handed over to them are thickly bounded with thick, fat, shiny pages. Why do these books come with hardbound pages that glint with a rare thickness and sheen? It is so, so that they don't get torn at the hands of stubby fingers; or get stained by chocolate creams and custard apple puddings. As for the language, it is the language of the simple folk tales. There is a singsong repetition of the words to din the language, culture and lifestyle of English fantasy. The tales don't have much of a theme so to say. But a ray of steady moralizing is visible in them when closely observed.

Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Beauty and the Beast have the same moral- pretty girls who are humble and hardworking will get rewarded while lazy girls like Cinderella's sisters get a hand punch on their

noses. There is no change in the theme that wickedness gets punished and innocence gets elevated. Cinderella, Rapunzel, Snow White, Beauty are the fantasy children who are an integral part of the British folk tales. Russian folk tales are centred on similar genre for children where girls like Vasalisa suffer untold misery; her brothers get converted into goats; they get pushed into rivers; tied astride wooden logs and sunk into water by hideous women; while they get rescued to life and glory by knights in shining armour.

A PSYCHO-ANALYSIS OF THE HORROR THEMES IN EUROPEAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

There are still more baby forms of folk tales are about adventurous children getting into trouble. The socio-economic condition is primarily of the penniless poor. The background of the tales is around the livelihood of poor men like carpenters and wood cutters, remarried to cruel women, children with nasty step mothers, parents living in the forests, – it is all there; the cruelty, deprivation and yet the goodness that keeps them fortunate because they are protected by the innocence of childhood. There are parents leaving their children all to themselves while they are off to work. Apparently to keep the children good and to make them stay indoors, these stories were woven. There are tales that are told at bed times, where hints are dropped that if children venture out in the absence of the parents, they are in for trouble. The Russian folk tales have the traditional witch called baba-yaga. The German folk tales have witches who are as wicked and can roast human children in giant ovens and have them for supper.

Here the English folk tales differ in their rationality. The children confront animals. Goldilocks confronts the three bears who do nothing to her. Little Red Riding Hood meets the wolf who hogs her. But there is an improved version of the young carpenter who sees the ogre through the window kills the wolf and marries Riding Hood. Cinderella and Snowwhite have cruel step mothers who are worse than monsters. They are all same- frightfully larger than life. Their purpose is to frighten children and give them nightmares. The saving grace is that there is always an angel waiting to protect them. The ending is never sad.

THE DIFFERENCE IN THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS OF EUROPEAN AND INDIAN PSYCHE

The collective unconscious, a term borrowed from Jung, of European parents living in the middle age, is the fear of losing their children to wicked second wives and strangers. The stories invariably carry these themes and form the basis of the social conditioning of the western children. It shows the European culture as something that rests on the necessity of the children to be on the path of good even if they are neglected. They are not children who live in Indian joint families; rolled in the love of grandmothers and doting grand fathers. They are children who are told that they will be uncared and left to themselves, isolated in shanties, away from parents, anyway too pre-occupied to baby-sit them. But if they stay good, they would be protected by guardian angels. The transformation of these stories into bigger fantasies of Ronald Dahl, Enid Blyton and JK Rowling are important milestones in British literary culture. Technological improvement might have taken them from oral tradition to print media, but the collective unconscious of the White man remains the same; the fears are the same.

THE LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

While the popularity of Enid Blyton continued to grow unabated through the eighties, it lays the foundation of English education in India. It talks in the language that children love to hear; in the language of chocolate tarts, apple pies, lemonades and marmalades. The vocabulary revolves around the same few hundred words- positive words like; excited voices, bewildered children, enchanting woods, surprises, good deeds deserving good turns; negative words like mothers getting cross, snooty snouts who should be taught a lesson, horrible people, rude words, horrid taste, weird gnomes, imps, elves, unkind fairies, dreary bushes and neutral words which can be funny and comic; bursting into peals of laughter, odd, jumpy golliwogs, forgetful Mr. Twiddle and Mr. Meddle's muddles. Food, adventure, feelings of joy and anger are all that children need to know and the range of words are just enough to get their little readers glued to their books.

THE INDIAN POINT OF VIEW

Themes of not being heard are not openly discussed but can be perceived in the nature of the stories as Alice wanders into a world of talking rabbits and Enid Blyton's children find their dolls come alive at midnight. It appears as if stories for children are about witches and monsters designed with the agenda to keep children well behaved. While on the other side is a representation of the collective unconscious of the British children - the fear of not being heard and the shift to the world of fantasy. The fantasies later mature

into Hollywood movies which is nothing but the evolution of these enchanted islands, wishing trees and imps and goblins created during the childhood of people as the children had turned to them to substitute parents who couldn't care less about their own children. In short, the folk tales, the chocolate factories, the seven 'o'clock tales, bed time stories, the red book, the green book are all the tales of children whose life with real human beings has become so remote that their dolls have to come to life at night to entertain them.

A little more advanced are the adventure books of famous five and the secret seven who seek adventure in society, unlocking mysteries and catching thieves for police. They get lost in deep woods, go for picnic in Kirrin islands and always have a dog for company. It is a masterful life with Blyton, whose children love to be away from parents so that they can enjoy a private life of their own. Yet strange enough these children have a life so apart from their parents that it almost becomes their character. What is their life with their parents is a chapter completely ignored. Their parents are stereotype figures who appear once in the opening chapter and once in the closing chapter with nothing much to say. This is so different from the childhood of Indian children for whom parents and grandparents and uncles and aunts are such a towering presence. Their stories are fashioned to prepare children for future. On the other hand, it can be said that British child literature is all about trying to accept existing realities of having to manage their loneliness. Little wonder, British children have their childhood so completely consecrated to fantasy as their children don't have real people to mingle with. It is quite natural that in a culture of such folk tales, the psychological conditioning of most of the children would be reticence, suppressed fears and reluctance to mingle. Therefore from the folktales and children's tales of the European culture the harsh reality of deprivation of love and care is clearly apparent. They don't meet friends' parents, they don't have festivals to look forward to, they don't have the innumerable marriages to attend. Neither do they have entertainer functions mainly focussed on children like Diwali, Dusshera and Rakhshabandan to keep them pre-occupied. Their grandmothers don't feed them with endless mythological stories under the moonlight with rice balls rolling down their gullets. However, British literature plays on the psyche of their children and invariably projects the two important aspects of English lifestyle- on one side the natural English love for freedom, adventure and exploration and on the other side the inevitability of being forced to loneliness in childhood that makes their children find succour in fantasy. This helps in understanding the British national character gloriously- the love for freedom and exploration of the unknown out of a sheer desire to escape from boredom. That is why reading children's literature is important for overseas student. It helps the average reader perceive the distinct difference of their own countries vis a vis Britain. Without reading Children's literature one would have missed out on the childhood of the British children and what built them to become the makers of the Empire.

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Dr.R.Srividya is a blogger at quora.com and responds to questions on culture and mythology. Her doctorate was on English language teaching. She has been working in Dr.Ambedkar govt Arts College, Vyasarpadi, Chennai- 39 for about five years. Of late she has begun *exploring the possibility of initiating undergraduate students to self-reading through giving those books that contain simple ideas and limited vocabulary*. Children's literature holds immense scope for keeping the interest of students because it makes communication possible without having to know too many things. On the other hand, it helps overseas students observe and understand the socio cultural background of British children.