

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE RECLAIMING ITS VISIBILITY THROUGH THE PROCESS OF BLURRING BOUNDARIES

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Abstract

Art reflects life, experience, and perspective. Literature as an art provides both personal entertainment and political knowledge. A reading of a text is enjoyable in personal space. In an academic structure a text becomes political. So, within that academic structure, the authenticity of a text becomes important. As these structures could lead to a universal reading of a literary text. Literature cannot have universalism as structuralism problematize boundaries. So, the concept of blurring the boundaries helps in viewing art as a vehicle of inclusion which destroys marginalization, creates visibility, and encourage representation as visibility is power and representation is a source of empowerment. One such genre which was initially rejected as not so serious genre is now claiming its visibility through the process of blurring boundaries is Children's Literature. To affirm the significance of visibility in Children's literature, and identify the importance of studying this genre, this paper uses various concepts such as definition of Children's literature, difference between Children's and Adult literature, reason for taking Children's literature seriously and History of Children's Literature. (Lynch-Brown, 2004).

Keywords: Children's Literature, Children's vs Adult Literature, Visibility, History of Children's Literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Before understanding the significance of Children's literature, it is important to identify what is Children's literature and what makes a text to be categorized under this genre. There is various definition for Children's literature. One such way it being defined as good-quality trade books for children from birth to adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interest to children of those ages, through prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction (Lynch-Brown, et.al 2004). This definition signifies that it is any kind of literary text which has been written for the benefits of children. If a text is specifically made for the benefits of Children's, then the question who gets to enjoy a Children's text arises. In an essay entitled "On Three ways of writing for Children" by C.S. Lewis while he discusses about the various children's novels he enjoys, states that "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good one last. A waltz which you can like only when you are waltzing is bad waltz" (Lewis, 2020). This refers that a children's story that can only be enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest. C.S. Lewis postulates that a good Children's book is something that is enjoyed by everyone irrespective of their age group. If a text could be read by everyone then questioning the purpose of categorizing certain texts under Children's literature arises.

In the predominant Children's literature, the protagonist is in the age group of 0-14 and above. Some examples would be *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett

which revolves around 10-year-old Mary Lennox and *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri which revolves around five-year-old Heidi and considered as Children's classics. If age of a protagonist signifies a text as Children's literature, in the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by R.R. Martin, some main characters are significantly younger such as nine-year-old Arya Stark, seven-year-old Brandon Stark, eleven-year-old Sansa Stark, thirteen-year-old Daenerys Targaryen and many more. The plot of the series is narrated from the above-mentioned younger characters perspective and the series is categorized under Adult literature. Critics may argue One of the reasons for categorizing the series under Adult literature could be that there are several adult main characters as well in the series and the plot is not predominantly dominated by the young characters. So, this could be one of the reasons for the series to be categorized under Adult literature. On the hand, if we take novels such as *Pan Labyrinth: The Labyrinth of the Faun* by Guillermo del Toro and Cornelia Funke which talks about the Spanish Civil War through the lens of eleven-year-old Ophelia, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne which talks about Holocaust from the eyes of nine-year-old Bruno predominantly has young narrators but they are not predominantly recommended for children's reading. The novels and the movies of *Pan Labyrinth* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* contains horror images and tragic ending.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are various studies on understanding Children's Literature. In an essay called "Introduction: The World of Children's literature studies" by Peter hunt published in 1999 states the intellectual and cultural impact of children's literature in the world. In an essay titled "Essentials: What is Children's literature? What is Childhood?" by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein published in 1999 defines the characteristics of children's literature and childhood. In a book titled *Children's Literature - A Readers History from Aesop to Harry Potter* by a Professor of Humanities in Stanford University, Seth Lerer published in 2008 provides a deeper history and understanding of children's literature. These research work provides extensive research on the subject, but the novelty of this paper is to elucidate the various ways through which children's literature provides visibility, hope and representation to its readers.

3. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHILDREN'S AND ADULT LITERATURE

In a work titled *Children's Literature an Introduction* from Igno University, there is an essay titled "essay titled "A Brief History of Children's Literature" stating that

A distinction between adult literature or writing for adults and writing for children was never made. It was a world where it was an unknown for adults to be writing for children – an unheard of and un-thought of thing. Hence, no real distinctions were made between the two relationships. (Masters, 2012).

There was not much difference emphasized between children and adult literature. But later, in terms of sorting and identifying on the variation between Children and Adult literature and the importance of children's literature in the academic world, in a lecture titled "Children's Literature and the Golden World" by Children's author Daniel McInerney says that in a literary sense it is a mistake to see the difference between Children's and Adult literature. It is the same phenomenon as they are from the same kind in terms of narratives and moral transformation witnessed in the writing. Through this, he adheres to the enduring appeal of Children's literature to the adults. But he

continues to state that, it does not mean children get to read every book from the adult world. It mostly works the other way around. Apart from the literary sense, he points out that there could be some differences between Children's and Adult Literature. First, he states that there is a huge difference in psychological complexity. He indicates that the examination of characters is on a different level in reference to Children's literature and Adult literature of any value and gives the example that "*Harry Potter* is not Henry James" (McInery, 2014). Secondly, he highlights that the kind of evil faced is different in a Children's literature is not similar to the adult literature. He gives an example of the difference in intensity of the evil faced by *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and how Tolkien softens the evil through his writing. The third difference is the linguistic complexity, he gives the example of *Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss which only has 236 distinctive words compared to any adult literary work of value. Further he talks about the role of innocence in Children's Literature and the ways through which it is fought for and achieved and promotes 'happy ending' to its readers. Through these elements he defines that "Children's literature is about the adventures into the "golden world" in which innocence is fought for and achieved" (McInery, 2014). The other major difference is that the adults get to choose and control the kind of book they want to read to a certain extent. But children do not get as much freedom to choose their texts as the adults.

4. IMPORTANCE OF TAKING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE SERIOUSLY

In an essay called "Introduction: The World of Children's literature studies" by Peter Hunt states that

'children's literature' has not been a property of any group of discipline: it does not 'belong' to the Department of literature or the library School, or local parents' organization. It is attractive and interesting to students (official or unofficial) of literature, education, library studies, history, psychology, art, popular culture, media, the caring professions, and so on, and it can be approached from any specialist viewpoint... This means just as children's books does not exist in a vacuum-they have real, argumentative readers and visible, practical, consequential uses-so the theory of children's literature constantly blends into the practice of bringing books and readers together (Hunt, 1999).

Every kind of literature is defined by the person who writes it but Children's literature as a genre is defined by who reads it rather than who writes it. In an essay called "Essentials: What is Children's literature? What is Childhood?" by Karin Lesnik-Oberstein states that

The definition of 'children's literature' lies in the heart of its endeavor: it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationship with a particular reading audience: children. The definition of 'children's literature' therefore is underpinned by purpose: it wants to be something in particular, because this is supposed to connect it with that particular audience-'children' (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999).

The writers of children's literature often promote a moral or a religious value aiming specifically at children through their literary texts. In the academy world with reference to Studies of Literature in English, predominantly, Children's literature is not considered as serious literature or treated with same status compared to other literary texts or genres such as Eco-literature, Feminist-literature, Post-colonial literature,

African-American literature, etc. despite of its great expertise. Because of 'intrinsic conservatism' in Children's literature as most of the books has a happy ending or postulates hope. The adult reading looks down on this trait, as "happy endings" in fictions are categorised for entertainment and recommends truth and abrade for concrete writing. (M.S. & B, 2023) Therefore children's literature is considered to be less significant compared to other forms of literary divisions. In the end, the adult world trivialize children but not their own intrinsic childhood. So the more children's literature is isolated from the mainstream studies, the more it is away from critical discussion and understanding of childhood experience and problems.

Many critics claim that there is never a children's book (good) they read in their childhood that they do not want to revisit or reread during their adult life. Therefore, this argument manifest that a good children's book is something that is enjoyed by all age group. Hence the idea that reading children's literature is childish is vague and indefinite, as children's literature has many significance and complexities as any adult literature.

5. HISTORY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In an article titled "A Brief History of Children's Literature" by Kristin Masters states that Just as other forms of literature, children's literature grew from stories passed down orally from generation to generation. Irish folk tales can be traced back as early as 400BCE, while the earliest written folk tales are arguably the *Panchatantra*, from India, written around 200AD. The earliest version of Aesop's Fables appeared on papyrus scrolls around 400AD. (Masters, 2012).

In terms of History of Children's literature, the 2008 book titled *Children's Literature - A Readers History from Aesop to Harry Potter* by a Professor of Humanities in Stanford University, Seth Lerer begins her book with the statement that "Ever since there were children, there has been Children's Literature" (01). She also claims that "The history of children's literature is inseparable from the history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studies, heard, and told back. Learning how to read is a lifetime, and a life-defining experience" (Lerer, 2009). This led to the question, What is Childhood? Lerer states that

Ever Since Philippe Aries sought to define its modern form, scholars have sought to write its history. For Aries, childhood was not some essential or eternal quality in human life but was instead a category of existence shaped by social mores and historical experience. In his *Centuries of Childhood* (first published in France in 1960), he argued that the periods before the modern age had no concept of childhood as we understand it: that the child as an emotional, or economic, investment is a modern phenomenon, not in keeping with earlier periods' neglect, abuse, or indifference to children as individual being (Lerer, 2009).

Beliefs about childhood before the age of Enlightenment, people thought that children were smaller versions of adults. They did not see children's as being different from adults. In this context, In the Medieval Era, text were written based on Morality, Miracle and Mystery Plays. There were no separate texts for Adults and Children as Children were seen as mini-adults. In 1400-1450 the Printing Press was invented by John Gutenberg. Before that books were handwritten and only wealthy people could afford those books. Therefore children from wealthy family had handwritten books. In 1440s there were the emergence of hornbooks or lesson paddles. These are wooden paddle

that typically had the alphabets or primers or Bible verses printed on them where children were taught to read (Sachdeva, 2020).

The Aesopica was always there but now new genres entered into school and home. The emergence of distinctive social structures-feudalism, courtly service, urban mercantile ambition, civic consciousness-fostered forms of children's literature difference from those of classical inheritance. In particular, courtesy and conduct manuals instructed children in proper behaviour and speech and helped boys and girls take on social and familial roles (Lerer, 2009).

During the 1600-1800 there were some children books that were available. But they were not meant for entertainment or instruct rather used to indoctrinate children with social values. The agenda of indoctrinating children with good value was derived from Puritans who believed that children's were wicked and had to be saved.

Under the aegis of the Puritans, children's books became a new and a separate kind of literature. They emerged as an expression of Puritan culture itself, an extension of larger publication projects keyed to spiritual education and moral growth. These were stories of redemption and conversion, tales designed to teach that, even during childhood, life has a spiritual goal... Children were the future of the family, but they were also the future of the Puritan movement itself (Lerer, 2009).

The Puritans had a set agenda in terms of children and their education. An essay titled "Children's Literature in the 16th and 17th Centuries" states that

The old strict and rigid Puritanical ideas gave way to more enlightened ideas in art, literature, culture and the ways children came to be understood was largely influenced by the writings of thinkers like **John Locke** (1632 – 1704). Locke's concept of the "*tabula rasa*"/ a "*blank slate*" or the thinking that people/children are born without any preconceived notion or ideas, and that all knowledge that they acquire comes about as a result of the lived experiences and their own perceptions marked a notable way in which people/ educationalist/ writers came to understand children. Hence, stories with moral lessons/ values, fables, riddle books, rhymes, and games began to find a place in the books for children (Masters, 2012)

This led to question the purpose of Children's Literature. Also, the question of whether Children's literature should be used to inform or entertain arises.

6. PURPOSE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Many critics such as John Clarke, John Locke tried to address this issue. John Locke has commented on children's education in his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692).

Locke offered a philosophically grounded theory of education. With its governing convictions that the human being has no innate ideas at birth; that the child learns from the experience of external words and concepts; and, finally that the goal of education should be both instruct and delight-with all this, Locke has had perhaps more impact on tutoring and teaching than that of any educator in the past three hundred years...If his writing helped shape children's schooling, they helped too to shape their literature (Masters, 2012).

Many critics consent with Locke's view. For example, in a Faculty Development Program on Children's Literature Conducted by NIT Trichy, in July 2023, on the topic

“Introduction to Children’s Literature: Education or Entertainment?”, the resource person was the Writer, Ms. Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan, stating that Children books are not static, they are spring boards for further discussions. Therefore, Children’s book led to both entertainment and information. She also comments that Children’s books could be to use to both educate children and help them with critical thinking. As Children’s literature is not something one read once and keeps it away. They hold so many dimensions.

The different dimension in Children stories could help in making it a serious literature in the adult world. Ms. Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan brings in the quote of Milan Kundera to emphasizes the importance of studying Children’s Literature. Czech-born French writer Milan Kundera, from an interview published in Paris Review in 1984

My lifelong ambition has been to unite the utmost seriousness of question with the utmost lightness of form. The combination of a frivolous form and a serious subject immediately unmask the truth about our dramas (those that occur in our beds as well as those that we play out on the great stage of History) and their awful insignificance. We experience the unbearable lightness of being (Kundera, 2023).

Kundera is discussing about the ways through which literature could become better. His comments represents Children’s literature as many serious topics such as Disability, Homosexuality, etc are represented through the lightness from of writing.

7. CONCLUSION

In the current trend of Children’s literature, emphasis on diversity continues to increase. There are a lot of non-profit organization to improve the quality of Children’s literature and education such as “We Need Diverse Books” campaign dedicated to publishing outstanding diverse books in Children’s literature, “Own Voices” campaign is created where the author creates works based on their own experiences and background in producing authentic multicultural and diverse works for children. E-books are becoming more popular in this decade and there is lot of demand for YA books and middle grade books. Visuals are becoming increasingly important as graphic novels are well liked by their audience (Sachdeva, 2020). Literature may or may not be universal but children stories could be universal as every children are interested in listening to various stories across culture.

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