

CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: REFLECTION OF SOCIETY

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Children’s literature is not just entertainment. It’s a vital tool says Manorama Jafa, a living treasure of children’s literature in India. Hardly anybody takes children literature seriously in India. In the West children literature is a serious discipline. Harry Potter books written by J.K. Rowling gained popularity the way no other author has gained. For past ten years its Harry Potter raj and no more dare step into that sacred territory. The character portrayal of adults and children seems so real in spite of it being magical. Rowling has created characters that are out of this world, Surlly aunt and Dursley or best friends like Ron and Hermione may have little or nothing in common with the 10-14 years old growing up in Indian middle class family, but these fictional British character have captured the imagination of local children.

Manorama Jafa in an interview with Rudroneal Ghosh says ‘through children’s literature a child learns to use imaginative powers to make sense of the world. Emotional development is another key facet. It’s not just about learning and passing on moral values but also about helping children get in touch with their feeling, making them inquisitive and giving them confidence to question the world. If 21st century is about new ideas, children’s literature is the spark for the process.

Children’s literature is one of the earliest ways in which the young encounter stories, it plays a powerful role in shaping how we think about and understand the world. Stories are key sources of images, vocabularies, attitudes, structure and explanation. We need to contemplate experience; because when directed to children they are often bound up with education of one kind or another, they can be important carriers of information about changes in culture, present and past. Indeed, its long history and the fact that writing for children straddles the domestic and institutional, official and unofficial, high and mass culture, and often includes visual elements, which means that material written for children can be a particularly valuable source of historical information about everything from how children in the past looked and the environment they occupied, to ships, servants, the treatment of disease, religion, wars, migration, scientific development exploration and much more.

Children’s literature link to the past work at multiple levels, too. Just as the children we once were continue to exists inside and to affect us, so writing produced for children continues to resonate overtime and to be implicated in the way societies are conceived organized and managed. This is not a straight forward process; traditional ideas may be preserved in earlier texts or deliberately promoted in conservative contemporary works or unconsciously perpetuated in those that uncritically hold up a mirror to current social trends. At the same time, many stories given to children today are retelling of traditional stories in which the writers and illustrators set out to expose, critique and over adjust the schemata by which we interpret the world. The dialogue they create between old and new ways of thinking can be another way both to sow and

nurture the seeds of social change, as seen in the way children's literature has contributed to developments in the areas of equality and diversity. This capacity was of particular interest to Walter Benjamin, who collected children's books and valued the potential of writing for the young to radicalize rising generation, encouraging them to resist established ways of thinking promoted through formal schooling. Whether radical or conservative, meritorious or meretricious, writing for children is a rich but for long undervalued source of information about culture as well as a contribution to it.

So far we can say that children's literature is a mirror of the society. Ancient texts also exhibit the culture and practices of those times.

In real life we observe that Adult's are supposed to behave in such a way that they should inspire or help in inculcating good habits in the younger generation: Ego, malice, dishonesty, lies, anger are some vices from which adults should keep themselves away. Parents are expected to sacrifice their health, wealth and everything to bring their children up. If Parents behavior is faulty then the same is reflected in their children. The lesson that is taught by the parents is the most important lesson. Home is the first school for any child. Children on the contrary are expected to be obedient and honest towards Adults. Teachers also play vital role in the behavior of a child. In real world money, status, education, class, society all plays a very important role in a person's life.

In Harry Potter novels we find that adults and children are not different from the real world. J. K. Rowling has introduced characters from the world of magic and her characters are not different from the real world of magic and witchcraft but they all seem to have the characteristics of humans only. Even in the magic world ego, money, gold, power plays vital role. These characters are no different from the real characters we see around us. Class distinction is also there muggle (i.e. humans) are looked down upon. They are considered inferior in every respect, this is a very human-like behavior. It is very difficult for a writer to think like an outsider after all she is also a muggle. So we find that the characters whether adult or children are not different from real or true character we see around us. Even as recently as 50 years ago people generally had no trouble with idea of 'do what you're told!' For example it never entered the heads of children at school to disobey their teachers, and that attitude prevailed until very recently. Obedience was installed during childhood and stayed during adulthood. "Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do or die." People were just very obedient and they didn't question the ways and wherefores of life.

It was the same thing in the churches. People were told what to think and the Priest or ministers knew what was right for his people. 'Don't ask question!' People in the middle ages could not read, and later when people started to learn or read, the Catholic Church activity discouraged people from reading the Bible until recently. That's our heritage: - ignorance, obedience, acceptance of authority.

It is necessary to understand that stories for children are written by elders. The role of adults in reading and mediating children's books has to be examined in terms of motivation, ideology (all the attitudes that constitute a culture) and the manipulation or idealizing of childhood. Should children's books be for instruction or delight? Words that might seem to have straightforward meanings, such as quality, value, literature and children need to be looked at closely. Things that might at first seem simple such as how children understand texts, what meanings they make from them, how these differ from the meaning that adults make and how children are affected, suddenly become problematical.

Portrayal of character in children's fiction is always soothing that is why people come to children's literature as a relief, as a rest from severity or harshness of 'adult' studies, and their image of the texts is often based on nostalgia or wistful thinking. Children's books are nice; they take us back to a golden world, one which we might also want to share with our children or grandchildren. Books that people enjoyed when they were children have a special and often very personal value and meaning (which is not surprising, considering the change that a single book may make to an inexperienced reader) and there is a perfectly natural urge to revisit them. But if we look a little more closely, problems arise. It might be that the books read as a child were actually an escape and that it is the escape, not the childhood that the reader wishes to relive; far from being a happy, lost state, many childhoods are difficult and many adults (and adult writers) have an ambivalent relationship with their own childhood. To reread a children's book from childhood, perhaps as an escape from the stresses of adulthood, evades both the real now and the real then. Sometimes a question haunts our mind. Is childhood innocent? Are the books innocent? As Judy Blume wrote, "I don't know what childhood innocence is supposed to mean. Children are inexperienced, but they are not innocent. Childhood can be a terrible time of life. No kid wants to stay a kid. It is only adults who have forgotten who say 'If only I could be a kid again.' The fantasy of childhood is to be an adult.

It may be that children's literature is being studied out of general cultural-literary, aesthetic interest, or as part of literacy studies, but even then, the need for a sharp, unsentimental eye remains. Similarly, if the focus of interest is in history or the history of childhood, it is as well to remember that texts for children do not portray childhood as it was or is, but portray childhood as the writers wished it to be seen for political, sociological or dramatic reasons. Fiction is fiction and children's books say a great deal to adults about the relationships of adults to childhood, or about the concept of childhood at a particular period, rather than portraying actual childhood.

Adults write, children read this means that like it or not, adults are exercising power, and children are either being manipulated or resisting manipulation, there is a tension between the reader implied by the writer, and the real readers. Children's books are thus inevitably didactic in some way; even the most children friendly is adopting some implicit attitudes. Jacqueline Rose proposed that because of the gulf between adults and children, a genuine, 100 percent children-owned-and-operated book is an impossibility and what is lurking behind the apparently innocent children's books is in fact something very intrusive, controlling and often downright sinister. Even those writers who claim to be nothing but entertainers have their own ideological stance, their own ideas of what is right and wrong. But whatever may be the argument, we can claim that Children's literature is reflection of the society.

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