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THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the tenuous link between stories, literature and child development. While stories have long been acknowledged as a vital literary and cultural legacy, they have in the modern world been unfortunately relegated to the realm of entertainment alone.

Children's Literature condemned to lead a peripheral existence was for a long time denied academic respectability. It made inroads into the world of the American academia as recently as the 1970's. In India the amount of critical scholarship on Children's literature continues to remain scarce.

Attitudes to Children's literature often reflect adult wariness to the world of imagination and the modern adult has been taught to downgrade imagination. We forget that the ability to imagine and the faculty of imagination both need nurturing and are vital milestones in a child's emotional and intellectual development.

By emphasizing the role of language and stories both heard and read in the impressionable years of one's life, this paper hopes to also modestly contribute to the growing awareness regarding Children's Literature in India.

Key Words- Children's Literature, language, stories, intellectual, emotional, reading, imagination etc

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I. INTRODUCTION

We dream in narrative, day dream in narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

-Barbara Hardy

Stories have long been universally acknowledged as a vital cultural, literary social legacy and an integral part of childhood. As regards language, developmental psychology informs us that the acquisition of language is a prerequisite to the acquisition of any other form of knowledge. The link between positive social behavior and language skills has been established by Dr. Leslie Gutman, of University College, London whose studies led him to the observation that, "[i]t may be that aspects of development associated with English such as communication skills and sociability, promote positive behavior"(Mumbai Mirror Feb 2, 2008: 21).

The power of the written word as a powerful tool of knowledge transmission, is undisputed. Undoubtedly books impart knowledge but stories perform dual important functions that of imparting knowledge as well as fostering within the child reader/ listener, the vital quality of imagination. There is after all, even in our digital age, no substitute for imagination. To quote Eisner, "all learning requires the translation of human imagination into some public, stable form, something that can be shared with others"(qtd. in Fisher, *Teaching Thinking* 101). Indeed progress itself necessarily demands the spark of imagination in some human mind valiantly forging ahead and paving the way.

Not only can the complex gamut that is human experience be best organized through narrative comprehension called stories, they have also been the primary means of teaching in almost every human society. The *Pancatantra* and *Aesop's Fables* are but two illustrations of this function. The word 'story' itself comes from the Greek "istoria", meaning inquiry.

To a young mind attempting to navigate through the world stories are challenging. Yet, strangely, they are also comforting insofar as they help the child to understand the world around. More importantly, stories help the child to find meaning. Bruno Bettelheim identifies the human quest for meaning as our greatest need and achievement. This view is shared by Jerome Bruner who says, "[a]ll human beings no matter what their ages, respond to the world according to how they define the situation in which they find themselves" (qtd.in Grieve and Hughes x).According to Bettelheim, this kind of wisdom "does not burst forth fully developed like Athena out of Zeus' head, it is built up step by small step from most irrational beginnings"(4). In other words an achievement of this kind is the result of a long process of development at each and every age congruent with an effort to find meaning.

One of the many challenges posed by childhood is the difficult necessity of learning to understand the self, then others and later relating to them in mutually harmonious and beneficial ways. This is no easy a task. A young child's attempt at the acquisition of speech is in many ways a ferocious effort to 'make sense' of the world around. Language helps the child primarily because it is directly related to the experiences in which the child is immersed. We know that if children eventually have to take their rightful place in society purposively then, this would necessarily imply a mastering of what John Stephens in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* calls, "the various signifying codes used by society to order itself" (8). Language is the dominant code and also the most widely used form of social communication. Language also serves as the principal medium through which a society exemplifies and inculcates its values and beliefs through the recording of stories. Language learning and familiarizing with stories, then becomes for a child a necessary tool of/ for living. Can stories function as a tool for living? Such a claim may sound ambitiously farfetched or a trifle fantastic.

The listening to or reading of a story necessarily demands a mental space for thinking through repeated acts of focused attention and attempts at comprehension. The listener or reader also experiences a sense of identification with the characters imaginatively, thus, not only fostering the spirit of empathy but also a realization that a single situation may have many perspectives. Multiplicity of views and perspectives requires a guided prodding with young readers/ listeners in case of stories that overtly lack them. Unfortunately in most cases, though children are fascinated by stories there is little or no opportunity provided to them for contemplation or reaction of any kind. In case of schools that observe the library hour, children are rushed to the next activity of the preplanned school timetable, thus diluting the impression of the story.

As Robert Fisher in *Teaching Thinking* then rightly puts it, "stories when comprehensible to children have the advantage of being embedded in human concerns such as characters, events and experiences and yet offer the child the chance to decentre from the immediacy of their own personal lives. They become able to look at themselves through looking at and thinking about others" (99).

Children are constantly engaged in attempts to reassess their relationships with the environment around them, and consequently their inner lives are rich. They parody the adult world they see around them through make – believe and play. This confluence of the fantastic and the real as encouraged in childhood is in many ways the essence of human experience. Their construct of ownership is displayed in their play with toys, and they can conjure stories with the simple stimulus of being shown a picture or painting.

1.1 Reading and Learning

Reading is undoubtedly one of the most complex tasks of human cognitive development. Unlike speech which is in Margaret Donaldson's terms 'embedded' in a context of relationships (Grieve and Hughes 72) the written language of books is devoid of contexts and the onus is on the reader to discover and construct context from the text and from any other existing knowledge that the reader brings to the text. Perhaps for this aspect of discovery, reading has been variously described as a private and lonely pleasure. Yet, pleasure is not the only objective (albeit an important one) it is also an act of empowerment. This is painfully true in a country which has failed to achieve complete literacy for its populace. There is, as Sandhya Rao, Editor, Tulika Publishers, rightly points out "an important distinction between the ability to read and the power of reading". The power of reading would necessarily include reading with comprehension, meaning, and discernment. As Rao adds, "we are often in danger of forgetting that reading is a fundamental right. It is a potent tool of empowerment because by examining, evaluating, judging we are able to visualize an alternative to that which exists, particularly in our encounters with injustice and discrimination Reading is thus an important tool of politically participative citizenship." She also quotes Zimbabwean writer Chiedza Musengzi who captures the political power of reading when he states, "Reading makes for better citizens because it makes it difficult to manipulate them". (Rao, "Reading is Power: But what happens if you are a girl?")

In the reading of fictional stories or listening of stories children have a strong belief in the structure of the story itself. They draw comfort from repetition and familiarity. Very young children for instance easily detect any change or variation of language/ words / tone in the narration of an often/ repeatedly heard story. Since the child is constantly engaged in attempts to make sense of the world around, she/he enjoys stories that mirror and confirm her / his perceptions of the environment. In the words of Cedric Cullingford in *Children's Literature and its Effects - The Formative Years* "[t]he telling of events like getting up and going to sleep are what young children seek out. It does not matter that the protagonists happen to be elephants or mice. What does matter is that they go through familiar experiences" (23). The child and the adult do not obviously share a common view of childhood. To a young child acquiring knowledge of the self equates with acquiring knowledge of the world, the two being seamlessly linked together. The quest for meaning to a child is then a very personal journey of exploration. The baby for instance pays careful attention to each sound around in a perceptual attempt to make sense of a complex world.

Babies are quick to discern the difference between irritability, annoyance and a soothing tone in parental voice, attributing emotional meaning to words. Voices may sound loving, or angry, or anxious. Naturally a child's first introduction to language is through the voice(s) of the people/ adults the child closely interacts with on a daily basis.

The quality of intellectual development in a child, then, is heavily dependent on the nature of the early dialogue with adults. The parent / adult-child relationship is, as is well known, neither purely intellectual nor emotional. Abraham Maslow in his *Motivation and Personality* states, "the child's emotional well being depends on the earliest of relationships" (qtd. in. Cullingford *The Nature of Learning* 75). The importance of a secure, emotional and soothing homely environment in child development is today common knowledge. In various studies on Mexican Americans, it was found that there was a causal link between parental attainment at school and the subsequent attainment of their children because of the quality of the interactions within the family (Cullingford, *The Nature Of Learning* 77). Another study conducted by Richman and his colleagues concluded that the crucial point in a child's growth, academic achievement and behavioral maturity is the relationship with an adult (Cullingford, *The Nature of Learning* 77). It is after all the child's relationship with adults that influences organization of ideas particularly through language. Learning also carries within itself other important corollaries like confidence, a spirit of optimism, a keen desire to learn, a sense of curiosity - which in turn are all related to the child's ability to organize ideas.

To a child, the listening of a story also functions as an introduction to new concepts which are then interpreted in her/ his own way. The listening experience provides the child with an experience in interpretation, an experience as important as acquiring the ability to discern between various sensory stimuli.

Their natural delight in stories reveals that their instinctive response to a story is an attempt at understanding, to seek a relationship / connection between their own view point and the world around them. "This is why" Cedric Cullingford in *The Nature of Learning* explains, "the very first stories children like are to do with the everyday world" (103). For a child a story about everyday, domestic events is indicative of an interest that goes beyond the routine. Not only does it help the child to make objective sense of a complex world, but also "of knowing what to interpret and of finding the means of interpretation" (105). The child does not always view the story world as an alternative to the real world, but, instead regards it as a reflection of the real world. The real world, as we painfully well know, is one in which evil and violence, however undesirable exist. Stories are as Bettelheim says, a powerful way of introducing the child to the unpleasantness of the world that she/ he is to be a part of and more importantly the story reassures the child that she/ he is not alone in experiencing complex feelings of jealousy, cruelty, hatred etc. Stories by virtue of their protective cover while permitting children an acknowledgement of uncomfortable feelings/ emotions within herself / himself and a corresponding reflection in the world around spare them the fear, guilt, sense of inadequacy that a direct encounter with such disturbing human attributes would necessarily imply. Significant here is Maria Pia Lara's observation in *Narrating Evil - A Post- Metaphysical Theory of Reflexive Judgment* that, "cruelty and suffering are the two dimensions of the human condition that we find difficult to describe with the use of conceptual tools"(16). German classrooms for instance have tried to acquaint children with the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi death camps at Auschwitz and Hitler's rise to power through a comic strip, *The Search* produced by the Dutch based Anne Frank centre (*Mumbai Mirror* Feb 2, 2008: 20).

The story world for children is also complete by itself. The story adheres to a structure of a beginning, middle and end. The words, 'and then,' becomes the connecting word linking world(s) and time(s), whether implied or written. To a child the story itself is a promise of a series of action/ events that have a definite ending. This definite sense of closure where all threads of the narrative are wound up momentarily or forever is an abiding feature of the story. The child's love for story does not merely stem from a desire to be entertained or as a deviation from boredom but, instead from a love of structure - the knowledge that the story world provides a clear progression of beginning, middle and end. More importantly the phrase 'happily ever after' infuses the child with not simply a sense of optimism, but with a belief that there is always the possibility of a solution. This optimism helps the child to retain a sense of justice and the necessity of a correct resolution. This desire for not any kind of resolution but a correct one is a manifestation of Jean Piaget's theory of children viewing the universe in terms of what he describes as "immanent justice" which ensures that the universe works "according to sound moral law with rewards for the good and punishment for the bad"(Tucker 5).

The unalterable paradox of children's literature is that it is literature written for children by adults/grown ups. It is also writing, edited, published, reviewed, recommended, bought and sold by adults. In terms of market functions, children's literature is also viewed as a specialised sub- sector within the culture industry created to suit an adult construct of what a child is or should be. Despite adult dominance and control, for a very long time the status of children's literature could be best described as a peripheral one. Academic respectability/ legitimacy was a long denied status. Considered to belong to the domains of education and library sciences, it was only in the 1970's that children's literature began to make its initial forays into the world of the American Academia. Today children's literature in America remains an interdisciplinary field. However if the status of children's literature is to be judged by the amount of critical scholarship on it, then in India the status is far from encouraging. Peter Hunt attributes adult wariness about a critical outlook towards children's literature to a fear of "loss of a valued part of childhood", while Ursula Le Guin suggests that "the modern adult has been taught to downgrade the imagination". In the words of Perry Nodelman, "people who take literature seriously (think that) children's literature can only be important if it is not for children at all, but actually secret pop Zen for fuzzy minded grown-ups" (Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature* 2). These views are representative of the difficulties and tensions that prove to be impediments in the sanctioning of legitimacy in the academic discourse on children's literature.

In defense of writers of children's literature one could surmise that the imaginative explorations of childhood (as a formative state of values) corresponds to a quest for human values in a world of perceived darkness.

II. Conclusion

In conclusion, to capture the essence of the reflective link between the child and the universe it is perhaps best to quote Joyce Cary in *Art and Reality : Ways of the Creative Process* who says, "[t]he innate feelings of a child may be said to belong to a world of universal forms. In mind and reason it is an individual, in fundamental sympathies it belongs to a universal community" (12).

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