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REVISITING THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes an effort to include all the aspects about children's literature in a platter. The ideas discussed here throw light on the debates on the definitions of children's literature, history and features, Indian Children's literature, Theories and Fantasy related to children's literature. The issues like, interference of the adults in constructing the children's literature, the social framing of child and the childhood demand notice and clarification. Imposing of fantasy in children's literature raises many questions about the existence of reality in children's literature. However, fantasy helps the child readers to become creative and understand the lessons of life in an easy way. This paper juxtaposes the different trajectories of children's literature from history to contemporary.

Introduction

Debates and Issues

Defining children's literature has been an old debate which remains unresolved till date. The debate is on the definitions of children's literature that it is defined and written by adults for children. The question of children's literature not written by children but by adults has been discussed since the inception of Children's literature. The definitions and views of dominant writers and thinkers like Townsend, Darton, Locke, Hunt, Nodleman and many others are contemplated in this chapter. Till date there is no literature available or termed as Children's literature written by children. The definitions on children's literature are so bizarre and obscured that one cannot nail it in a concrete fixed state. Some of the critics try to define this genre according to its features and some others according to an adult's point of view. The point here is that this genre lacks child in primary position, for whom it is created. The child is situated in the secondary position in children's literature. Children are considered as a mute audience. There can also be a disagreement about an adult's writing for children as he/she cannot take the position of a child and create literature having a child's mindset. Children's literature can also be defined as an escape for the adults.

Peter Hunt, one of the prominent critics in domain of children's literature opines that childhood is such a phase that every adult wishes of being a child again. He also comments on defining children's literature that, "defining children's literature is so overdone that oceans of ink have been spilt on this matter" (Hunt 4). Another critic of children's literature observes that, "A defining characteristic of children's literature is that it intends to teach what it means for girls to be girls and boys to be boys" (Nodleman 43).

Before the establishment of children's literature, there had to be a serious discourse on children, the childhood and the psychology of children. In the past, reading children's literature was considered to be childish and unnecessary. But children's literature gradually developed as a means to education. Children's literature stands apart from all other literatures as it has some uncommon features. It is simple and candid which has children as protagonists and where fantasy rules the fiction.

### History and Features

The history of children's literature began in Europe in the seventeenth century. Townsend in his book of history on children's literature discusses that proper children's literature came into fruition during the reign of Queen Victoria with the publication of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Philosophers like Locke and Rousseau began speculating on what is child and childhood with their ideologies. Another reason for the inception of children's literature was Puritanism. There were gradual publications taking place throughout the world in the name of children. It was in the nineteenth century that there was a flourishing growth of children's literature and the age was also known as the golden age. In the history, though children's literature was anticipated and considered as a literature which was not academic and scholarly, presently children's literature is acclaiming its significance and existence.

The features of children's literature are unique in nature. It is these features which construct the children's literature. In children's literature, child is the protagonist and children are discovered. Its independent nature renders children's literature a different dimension. This literature recognizes the child where the writer presents a beautiful world for the child reader. Children's literature juxtaposes imagination, fancy, fantasy, creativity and magic. It is usually constructed in a simple style and narration as the children are a primary audience here. Children's literature is generally dominated by the fiction. It includes tales and short stories especially fairy and folk tales. Therefore, it is also claimed by the critics that *Panchatantra* and *Aesop's fables* were the first books for children. Children's literature adopts a wide and wild range of fantasy, especially animal, toy and fairy fantasies. Basically children's literature is meant for children's psychological and moral growth. A child can have a pilot study or a mock study of life through children's literature as the real life examples are discussed using fantasy. A child's development, growth and childhood can be structured in a better way through children's literature. Therefore children's literature should be given a deserving position in the world of literature.

Children and Fantasy are made for each other as these genres have common attributes. Fantasy like children's literature is underestimated and degraded. Nevertheless, in the present times both the genres are on a full swing. Fantasy generates and induces the habit of imagining and thinking out of the box in the minds of children. It is analyzed by the critics of children's literature that every child's fantasy is to be an adult and whereas every adult wishes to be a child again.

### Indian Children's Literature

Indian children's literature was basically established in the regional literatures. Indian literature is abundantly rich in creation of tales like *Kathasaritsagar*, *Jataka Tales*, *Panchatantra* etc. All these tales aimed at teaching morals and ethics. The credit of genesis of children's literature goes to Bengali literature. Writers like Ishwarchand Vidyasagar, Toru Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore are considered as the founders of children's literature in India. Most of the writers adopted the short story form for the creation of children's literature. But the proper Indian children's literature and specifically in English came into existence only after independence. Manorama Jafa, a writer and critic, mentions that the concept of childhood came into existence in India through the West and English language. Thereafter children's literature was considered as a serious discipline. In 1817, books for children were published in Calcutta. In the later stage, many publishing houses were introduced for the growth of children's literature.

But till date in Indian English Children's literature, there hasn't been much spectacular development. Manorama Jafa, in an interview states that,

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Given our 22 official languages and 1,652 dialects, we have a rich oral tradition in story telling as exemplified by the *Panchatantra*. However, production of children's books here leaves a lot to be desired. This is primarily because of small profit margins on children's books. So quality suffers. Hardly anybody takes children's literature seriously in India. I wanted to do research in children's literature because nobody in the country had done any serious research. The aim was to lay the theoretical foundation for children's writing in India. (Jafa 1)

Fundamentally, children and childhood are constructs. In the past, the children were considered to be a careless entity who did not specifically have their commanding identity. But through history, it is known that Greeks and Romans began their research on child and childhood. Children were the last and the least to be considered in family and society. The social philosophers like Locke and Rousseau who analyzed child and childhood and paved the way for the welfare of children. Thereafter, it was William Wordsworth and William Blake who discussed children. Another reason for the establishment of childhood was the introduction of printing press. With the introduction of press and television in the modern times, it is also interpreted that the child is disappearing into an adult.

### Theories

The theories suitable to analyse children's literature are Reader response and Psychoanalytical theories. This section speculates on child as a reader and the reactions in the child's mind. These theories help the critics and writers to understand the psychology of children. These theories are interdependent too. When a child reads it imagines a world in its mind and tries to interpret the text. This induces development and growth in the mind of the child. The psychoanalytical theory reveals how the psychology of the child is constructed. The views of Freud on child, childhood and infantile sexuality can be discussed under this theory. These theories also imply that childhood is an important stage and phase as the child is born with tabula rasa i.e. a blank state of mind and the incidents and experiences on childhood are printed in the child's mind which frame and structure the child.

### Fantasy and Children's Literature

The exploration of concepts like what is fantasy, the necessity of fantasy, the history, taxonomy and varieties of fantasy are connected to children's literature. Similar to children's literature, fantasy as a literary genre is difficult to pin down. Fantasy is sheerly and merely a psychological process that can happen in our minds. For many people fantasy acts as a catharsis. Compared to the past, fantasy has bloomed flourishingly full in the contemporary times. The recent discussion on fantasy reveals that,

As the world witnesses a fantasy boom- from Frodo's journey to Potter's Wand, Baahubali's strength to the fight for the Throne- we ask why stories of beasts, witches, fairies and magic, have always captivated the human mind? It is a tale well known that JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis, among other authors, used to meet at an Oxford pub called 'The Eagle and the Child' to discuss their respective books, 'The Lord of the Rings' and 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. The Inklings, as their small group of fantasy writers was called, sat at a corner of this pub to expand the narrative scope of fantasy, which, at that time (1930s) hadn't earned the respect of critics, or even thought to be serious literary works. In 2017 things have changed. In our post-nuclear family structure, our introduction to fantasy is mostly through video games, fantasy movie merchandise like Iron Mantees, creature theme parks, movies and books apart. ( Mukherjee 2 )

Fantasy is basically defined as imagination, fancy and dreaming. It is very difficult for anybody to imagine a world without imagination. Fantasy soothes and consoles the pain of improbability. Fantasy has the power to create the impossible. Fantasy is also defined as creative thinking. Fantasy as literature is totally dependent on the author's imagination and creativity. Writers like Coleridge and Shakespeare have discussed imagination and fantasy in their works. Many times the writers also use the real life instances but with a twist of supernatural or magical characters. Fantasy too is a construct based on the author's imagination.

The history of fantasy begins with the contribution of Greeks and Romans who used fantasy in their tales. Fantasy previously was present in orature. There were many forms of literature which implemented

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fantasy. There were many reasons for the usage of fantasy. One of them was romanticism. Romanticism paved the way for the growth of fantasy which is purely not based on reason and logic. Fantasy covers many other subgenres like folktales, mythology, fairy tales, fables etc. Fantasy has uncommon features like children's literature. It is full of surprises where the reader cannot anticipate the happenings. The reader creates a secondary world and tries to visualize fantasy.

The taxonomy of fantasy is divided into four types. They are the portal, the intrusive, the immersive and the liminal. These structures help the critics to classify fantasy. In the portal quest type the protagonist enters the fantastical world through a portal, in the intrusive, intrudes with the magical and supernatural, in immersive, completely situated in the fantastical world. In liminal, the protagonist has limited experience of fantasy. There are also varieties of fantasy. They are gothic, toy, quest, fairy, miniature, time, high, historical, visual, creative, bird, mythological etc. There are suitable characters found in each and every fantasy according to the nomenclature. In the gothic fantasy, the readers meet the ghosts and spirits whereas in toy fantasy, toys become the protagonists. In fairy fantasy, we visit the fairyland and in time fantasy, we are shifted either to the past or to the future. In visual and creative fantasies, the author visualizes fantasy.

It was explored that the children's literature is entangled in debates about the nature of literature, reading and values. Children's literature as a separate discipline has been established from the West. The gradual importance and recognition of children's literature was the result of the understanding that children are influenced by good books and were offered with entertainment, tradition and values.

India is known for its rich regional literature. However, the concept of Children's Literature in India as a genre and with sole emphasis on child as a protagonist is comparatively a recent phenomenon. It is certain that the Indian Children's literature is abundantly rich that thrives with wonderful and fascinating child characters, perspectives, platform and movement. But this writing flourished and came into existence only after independence. In order to understand the development of Indian English children's literature as a distinct branch of literature, we have to understand and analyze the position of its journey from history to the contemporary.

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