

Through the Looking Glass

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Abstract

Stories are important in every culture. It is through stories that perceptions, values and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to the other. They are used as an educational tool mainly because they are easily understood and enjoyed. This is especially true while taking into consideration the area of children's literature. Children's literature is a remarkable area of writing and it is one of the roots of every culture. Children's literature is one of the most important areas of study though it is generally considered as trivial. Children's literature finds its position in an adult world. Adult's belief is that children's literature is didactic literature. Important genre among this is hero and quest tales. In the critical hierarchy children's literatures are considered to be trivial. Actually what is written for children is a powerful literature and such power cannot be neutral, innocent or trivial.

Key Words

Children's literature – hero stories – re-reading – binary oppositions – gender - subversions

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Children's literature is an enticing field of study. Children's books have and had a direct and indirect influence – socially, culturally and historically. They are important educationally and commercially. It has consequences across the culture and from language to politics. Children's literature is more complex than it seems mainly because of the position it finds in itself – in between adult writers, illustrators, publishers and child readers. In children's literature one has to deal with the straightforward act of communication which is amazingly intricate. But this communication and understanding between adults and children is more complex. It is a universally acknowledged fact that childhood is an important phase in everyone's life and also children are vulnerable, susceptible, and must be protected from manipulation. Thus children's literature is much more important than it is. The connection between children and books is seen in many ways – literature and literacy, day to day teaching, or as a stepping stone to “adult” or “great” literature. Jonathan Culler considers literature as an institutional label that gives one a reason to expect that the results of reading efforts should be ‘worth it’.

The members of a culture who are in a position to accord values want to know what is good in children's literature. This is a fundamental question regarding children's books and other productions for them. The word good itself creates so many problems. The argument about what is good very often collapses and leads to the point that it is all a matter of taste. Jack Zipes and Peter Hunt points out this and they add an interesting remark that there is a very common situation that people will privately like, talk and value one type of book where publicly recommend something others. The classics are always talked, taught, prescribed and written about.

Children's books are different from adults' books. They are written for a different audience, with different skills and needs. Children's ways of reading are equally different and the experience that they have are at times unknowable too. Literature is a useful concept in educating children in a particular kind of culture but it can be misleading or pernicious if the text is used in other ways. Children's books have a long history around the world, and they have absorbed into themselves elements of folk, fairy tale and the oral tradition. In many places like Africa and India books for children have a postcolonial tinge and an uneasy relationship with indigenous culture.

The earliest books for children were based on traditional materials and they were largely didactic. Children's literature in its modern form is largely a nineteenth century phenomenon.

Histories of children's books go through a tension between educational, religious and political power. At the same time there are various concepts associated with freedom such as fantasy and imagination. History shows that adults can and do control the production of children's literature. Censorship from adults affects the process both before and after the production of texts. Mark I. West in his essay "Censorship" observes that people all over the world share a romantic view about the power of books. He says' "... books are such a major influence in the formation of children's values and attitudes that adults need to monitor nearly every word that children read." (499)

Censorship is relative and books are often withdrawn from classrooms and markets. Either it becomes protective or restrictive. Adults think that books have so much power and it is the adult's duty to protect the innocent children and work for the society. *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Wizard of Oz* have been banned locally earlier and now it is widely read by children all over the world.

It is always difficult to understand what has been perceived and understood. The mechanisms by which these understanding are produced are crucial. There is a power structure within children's books and adult writers try to influence child readers. It is known that the reader's understanding of a text will be conditional by what he or she already knows. It also depends on the availability of that existing knowledge during the reading process. It is an accepted fact that different readers will interpret texts in different ways. That is there are as many interpretations as there are readers. Yet it is unsatisfying to claim that a text can mean anything to any reader. To some extent texts condition the nature of the understanding that the reader constructs.

The children are now successful consumers in a free world dictated by market conditions. Now the study of children's fiction and other products like television, CDs, video games or even symbols or pictures target on how a story is communicated. It can be spoken or written word. It can be any medium – audio or visual. The circumstances of that communication and possible effects of it are now taken into consideration. Children's literature which is perceived to be innocent is constituted by myth, legend, folk and fairy tales. Usually these tales are crude, violent and sexually-charged texts.

The study of children's literature brings forth the very fundamental concerns like the need of reading and why an individual is actually reading a book. Generally the answer may be as Chambers have put it "a liberal humanist faith in the book and in human civilization" (qtd. in Hunt.10, 2010) The books may be pleasant and can be for leisure time reading. But essentially the books have to be useful in conveying values and attitudes to generations of children throughout the world. Children's books are not always viewed as good books- instead they are viewed as "good for". Hunt says:

Children's books are used for different purposes at different times – for more things than most books are. Some are 'good' time-fillers; others 'good' for

acquiring literacy; others ‘good’ for expanding the imagination or ‘good’ for inculcating general (or specific) social attitudes, or ‘good’ for dealing with issues or coping with problems, or ‘good’ for reading in that ‘literary’ way which is a small part of adult culture, or ‘good’ for dealing with racism... and most books do several of these things. (10)

The tension has always been between instruction and entertainment. Now it is ‘infotainment’ – a portmanteau of information and entertainment, referring to a type of media which provides a combination of information and entertainment. Often the theoreticians imagine the child as growing from an original autistic state to adult rationality. Since the child has no voice in the hierarchies of a society because adults either silence or create that voice actually helps to construct the child as a helpless, powerless being, and contributes to the culturally hegemonic norm. Children are always seen as playing a key role in the civilizing process and often described as the citizens of tomorrow. John Locke in his landmark book titled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* puts forward the idea of giving proper education to the children. To Locke:

The well Educating of their Children is so much the Duty and Concern of Parents, and the Welfare and Prosperity of the Nation So much depends on it, that I would have everyone lay it seriously to Heart: and after having well examin’d and distinguish’d what Fancy, Custom, or Reason advises in the Case, set his helping Hand to promote everywhere that Way of training up Youth, with Regard to their several Conditions, which is the easiest, shortest and likeliest to produce virtuous, useful and able Men in their distinct Callings; tho’ that most to be taken care of is the Gentleman’s calling. For if those of that Rank are by their Education once set right, they will quickly bring all the rest into Order. (73)

What children acquired through education or through entertainment has been the concern in every culture and at every age. Locke also mentions how “minds of children can easily be turned this or that way as water is”. (133)

Children’s literature encompasses almost all genres in adult literature. It is a category comprising prose, verse, drama, facts as well as fiction and texts that are composed of pictures or digital images. The area of children’s literature cuts across most of the genres like myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, realistic stories, adventures, science fiction, self-help books, religious stories, romance, comics and so on. It has its own canon of classics and it has become a cultural commodity which is profitable. Many of the characters like Pooh Bear, Piglet, Barbie Doll, Dora, Superman, Spiderman and Poke man characters have become the most celebrated and recognizable international icons.

In the tales addressed for children generally there are hero tales which are in popular. Hero tales and adventure stories are the all time favourite of young children. They are fascinated by the heroic qualities like power, skill, courage, aggression, determination and dominance. The

hero in the stories is constantly engaged with his enemy. Hero is brave, strong and rational. His heroic qualities and dedication help him in overcoming his enemies. It is the same qualities that help him in conquering the wildness of the nature and wild animals on his journey. After all he is a man of action. Women in hero stories generally appear only in relation to the hero. Women don't enjoy any type of dominance. Politically, socially, physically and sexually they are subjugated and treated like objects. The women characters in the heroic stories generally help to define the manhood of the hero. There are dangerous opponents like witches and vampires, devoted assistants who help the heroes in achieving their goals and beautiful princesses the hero gets in reward for his bravery. Famous fairy tales like "Sleeping Beauty", "Rapunzel", "Beauty and the Beast" are examples of these.

The hero stories have dominated children's literature than any other genre and it is generally assumed that hero tales are good for children. Hero tales benefits the children morally and mentally. The hero stories convey the message that goodness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. Children absorb these types of tales and the stories are agents of cultural transmission. But the values inherent in these stories are problematic.

The hero's triumph over the wild things puts forward the oppositions like civilized and wild, order and chaos, and good and evil. The kind of goodness that is rewarded is for controlling the wild beings. These tales justify the killing of wild animals and we have many endangered species in our list. There were genocidal killing of indigenous people and all these were unquestioned till the rereading of hero tales. The texts for children still reflect these ideas and the hero is admired for his strength and valour. He defeats the opponents and acquires wealth and power. Hero stories define animals as appropriate targets for human violence by killing them.

The unpacking of the ideology of hero stories is done only by examining the binary oppositions that is central to them. The qualities of the hero are much valued and it is superior to the evil qualities that are attributed to his opponents. What is back grounded or what is omitted from these hero stories throws light on the ideas and philosophy of life which constructed these stories. The patriarchal hierarchy of stories is revealed in most of the stories.

Analyzing the representation of gender in children's literature, it is seen that womanhood is defined as inferior to manhood. There are benevolent mothers who appear to support the hero in his adventures or in his journey through the wild. In "Jack and the Beanstalk" the benevolent mother is there in the beginning of the story. But as the story progresses it is only jack who encounters with the giant. The story naturalizes the perception that a woman's place is her home looking after the child and fulfilling other domestic roles. Gentle and benevolent mother is not exclusive to hero tales of the past. It can be seen in the brand new advertisements of twenty first century. It should be noted that it is the era where everyone talks about gender equality. The stereotype of the "ideal" mother abounds in children's literature of all kinds. This portrayal of women is functioning as an important social tool for conditioning. Generally mothers are

depicted in a home maker's role. Portrayal of women in an indeterminate role where the professional and home maker's role meet up is very less.

Women are also portrayed as goddesses who appear to help the hero or to protect him. Of course there are witches and vampires representing darkness and chaos and they are the dangerous opponents. Looking at this it is also seen that there are bad and good femininity. It inscribes the subordinate place of women through all the hero stories. The hero is master over all others and his destiny doesn't allow him to share his duties with the women. The women are inferior and they are in the group of 'other' like savages, aliens and wild animals. Feminist writers have extensively studied about fairy tales and tried to give attentions to issues pertaining to the representation of gender, class, ethnicity, power, social and moral values.

Donna Jo Napoli's *Zel* was published in 1996 and it is a retelling of German fairytale "Rapunzel" by Brothers Grimm. *Zel* is framed as a novel with the witch as a first person narrator. It is multi focalized by representing Rapunzel and her lover. By positioning the narrator as witch, who had the role of villain or 'other' in the "pre-text" Napoli tried to dismantle good-evil dichotomies. It also highlights the conflicting desires of her character. There were many possible reasons why the witch of the original tale traps Rapunzel. She takes the baby from the couple because Rapunzel's father has been accused of stealing rapunzel plants from the witch's garden. In the Disney's version it is the greed for Rapunzel's magical hair which is golden. Napoli tries to give a simple, believable and sympathizing reason. The witch is a mother who is afraid of losing her only child. Witch being mother simply wants Zel to love her and wants to be happy with the quiet country life. But Zel is in deep love with Konrad and she starts to lose her own mind. Konrad is possessive about Zel and lives his life in search of her though he became blind by falling from the tower. Every character had their own versions to tell in Napoli's *Zel*. There are references about sex, nudity, madness and menstruation and some consider this as a young adult fiction and not a kid's book. Such narrative styles help to rework relationships within the text such as social and cultural values, gender and power structure.

Regarding *Rumpelstiltskin* the miller's daughter is victimized by all three men in the story. None of the characters behave ethically and Rumpelstiltskin is depicted almost as a non-human or alien. The miller never cares what will happen to his daughter while boasting and he never interferes once the king makes his presence in the text. The King doesn't even mind to ask the consent of the miller's daughter before marrying her. Whether she likes him or not, was not at all a point and not even considered this in any of the retold versions. Rumpelstiltskin asks for the only child that miller's daughter had and she struggles hard to keep the child with him. Vivian Vande Veld retells the fairytale *Rumpelstiltskin* in her collection *The Rumpelstiltskin Problem* (2000) in six different versions. William J Brooke in *Teller of Tales* (1994) tries an entirely different method to retell the story. He tells an abbreviated version of Grimm's rendering and then ponders on the tale's gaps. He tries to study the gaps and the lack of convincing motivation. The teller in *Teller of Tales* addresses these gaps and then tells the tale addressing these problems.

Subverting the dualities and filling the gaps in the age old fairy tales is promising. The silenced characters have their own versions of tales now. The subversion of dualities like man/woman, goddesses/witches etc is the most demanding tool to deconstruct the fairy tales which celebrated manhood and viewed women as subsidiary characters. The anonymous narrative view point which implied that the narrator is a male is also changing gradually. As in Napoli's *Zel* the "other" also has its voice and its own versions of tales to tell the world.

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