



## Decoding Children's Fiction

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Received : November 2018

Accepted : March 2019

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**Abstract :** *The present study is related to the complexities in children's fiction. It seeks to find out the seriousness in children's fiction ranging from the established gender roles to the disturbing portrayal of the harshness of life. These seemingly innocent books deal with racism, stereotypes, capitalism, identity crisis, child abuse, poverty and the like. This study also aims to find out the varying perceptions of a child and an adult; the way they view the fantasy world and their respective response towards different aspects of children's fiction. Unlike the adult readers, the young readers tend to miss out on the various allegories, metaphors and symbols. They*

*also find it difficult to grasp the satires, either social or political. The study also presents the concept of happiness in children's fiction usually depicted as a permanent and obvious ending. The books thus provide escapism into a treacherous world disguised in happiness.*

**Keywords:** *Children's Fiction, Adult's Perception, Child's Perception, Happiness, Serious Issues*

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### Introduction:

A Child is any human being below the age of puberty. Children's fiction includes books written or read primarily keeping children and young adults in mind. While books like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* were written specifically for little girls, but it is enjoyed thoroughly by an adult reader as well. On the other hand, we have *Gulliver's Travels*, a scathing satire on the political and social scenario of the age which is a quintessential book for children. Children's fiction thus have a wide appeal because they enthrall both the young and the old, and are "*apt to delight and entertain a child. . . yet afford useful reflection to a grown man.*" (Locke 256) Serious issues are often presented in a less confrontational manner, and "*allow readers to experiment with different ways of seeing the world.*" (Flanagan) through the use of fantastical elements and exaggerated reality.

This research paper thus aims to decode the intricacies in children's fiction, and present various perceptions that are otherwise overlooked by a casual reader. We also aim to show how relative a concept happiness is, and how in children's fiction, both reality and illusion of happiness go side by side.

**Objective:**

Our main objective is to scrutinise and evaluate children's literature.

This project would specifically explore and investigate:

1. The dominance of serious issues in children's fiction.
2. The clash between a child's perception and an adult's perception in children's fiction.
3. The idea of happiness dichotomised into illusion and reality.

The project is based on the study of the following works:

- a. ***The Giving Tree*** by Shel Silverstein
- b. ***Jataka Tales***
- c. ***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*** by Lewis Carroll
- d. ***Andersen's Fairy Tales*** by Hans Christian Andersen
- e. ***Grimms's Fairy Tales*** by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm
- f. ***The Jungle Book*** by Rudyard Kipling
- g. ***Charlotte's Web*** by E. B. White
- h. ***The Chronicles of Narnia*** by C. S. Lewis
- i. ***The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*** by L. Frank Baum
- j. ***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*** by Roald Dahl

***The Giving Tree, Fairy Tales*** by Andersen and Grimms Brothers and ***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*** will be scrutinised in detail to meet the objectives.

**Serious Issues in Children's Fiction:** Children's fiction is often wrongly viewed as a genre that promotes escapism. However, most of them have hidden political and religious allegories or are bitter satires on the society.

Morality, the most celebrated feature of children's fiction, not only forms the base of a child's development but also ends up teaching them the ideals of a particular society to which they are blindly expected to submit. The moral codes are highly paradoxical, and their imposition is often an attempt to proliferate, propagate, and protect the authority of the prevailing structure in which we live with complacency.

Another serious issue is the stereotyping of the marginalised groups in children's fiction. Calormen from Narnia are depicted as Turks simply because they are into slave business (a misconception of the 19th century stated that all Turks engaged in slavery.) Mowgli, the 'brown boy' is considered to be uncivilized, largely because of his colour and background. The undercurrent of racial and gender superiority in the books negatively affects the young readers in their mental and emotional growth.

Lack of female protagonists and the strict adherence to the roles assigned to them is often attributed to the "***truism in publishing that girls will read books that have boy heroes, whereas boys won't read books that have girl heroes***". (Flood) This attitude reflects not only the budding superiority or inferiority complex in young children, but also their intolerance towards the 'weaker' sex. Even animals, often portrayed as gender neutral assume a particular gender based on their virtues: heroism for male, selflessness for females.

**Another important issue is anthropomorphism.**

Since children relate more with fantastical things, authors unconsciously impose their ideologies by giving human attributes to creatures. Templeton the rat is shown to be a greedy and selfish creature, although all he is doing is sustaining himself. At the same time, Wilbur who only knows how to throw a tantrum is loved because he is a good pig. This goodness is essentially a human attribute, something that the children would like to see.

Children's fiction often deals with the negative effects of industrialisation and capitalism, mainly through the portrayal of slavery, poverty and the priority given to wealth over human life. The books often show how the miserable condition of a family or a community is largely due to the greed and inconsideration of another. Several children's books, including *The Giving*

*Tree* and *The Jungle Book*, deal with issues of deforestation and senseless killing of wild animals.

Identity is another important issue in children's fiction. The protagonists often go through an emotional dilemma which isolates them from who they actually are. Children connect to such characters more, largely because, they too are often caught between a desire to act their age and a desire to adopt a more mature outlook to fit in with the adults. Mowgli voices out this desperation when he says, "***I am two Mowglis...My heart is heavy with the things that I do not understand.***" (Kipling 61)

**Clash between a Child's and an Adult's Perception:** Children's fiction is perceived differently by the young and the adult. Aslan who is only a kind lion to a child, becomes a symbol of Christ for the adults. Similarly, adult readers see Oz not as a fantasy land, but as a representation of the socio-economic structure of the 19th century America.

**The reaction to working class in children's fiction often receives mixed responses.** Children usually hate characters like Mr. Zuckerman for planning to kill Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*. However, the adult readers know that for Mr. Zuckerman, Wilbur is only a livestock who can feed his family. The adult readers also see through the poor treatment of the Oompa-Loompas in Wonka's factory. They are more sensitive to exploitation of the working class and do not need a character who gets chocolate only once a year to know that he is among the unfortunate who are the fuel to the capitalist society.

In works like *The Jataka Tales*, the ideas of fixed laws and rules are usually grounded in morality and fed to the young reader's as a must. However, the adult reader sees through the carefully crafted strategy aimed to force people into a herd mindedness.

Depiction of characters like Oompa-Loompas and munchkins as inferior dark-skinned group to the white lord often cultivates a sense of either superiority or inferiority complex in young readers. Unless the author clarifies it as a bad thing, children might form the opinion that all brown skinned people are uncivilised like Mowgli or the Oompa-Loompas who are no better than slaves.

Greed, often coupled with selfishness, is the root cause of evil in children's fiction. Those who can control

themselves are often rewarded, with the exception of selfless females like Charlotte, the spider. While children are easily deceived by the idea of reward, the adult readers realise that not every Charlie gets his own factory.

To children, the characters in the book are either good or bad. Any character who they can relate to is good and the character who is a foil to their hero becomes a villain. However, the readers perceive the characters according to their nature. They realise that in all of the cases, the antagonists are not evil because of their nature but because they are sketched to exhaust the protagonist.

To the children, the world in children's fiction serves as an escape from the mundane realities. They delight in simple tales of fairies and dwarfs, and chocolate rivers. There is also a charm of forbidden attached to hundreds of magical creatures and secret rendezvous that make up the fictional world. However, to the adults **this utopic world is only an illusion**, an attempt to gloss over the harsh realities of life. The optimistic and the hopeful attitude of a child towards the idea of "and everybody lived happily ever after", becomes ironic for the adult readers for whom the stories are no more than temporary reliefs from daily drudgery.

**The Idea of Happiness:** Children's fiction, which mostly ends on a happy note, makes a child optimistic and allows him to hope that however grave a situation might be, happiness at the end is assured, if not by magic then by the rarest of the rare fate. Charlie's financial problem is solved as he ends up inheriting a chocolate factory. Readers, especially children do not realise that poverty cannot be cured by chance and they need to work to support themselves financially.

Unhappiness is always a source of conflict in the protagonist's life. It comes in the form of poverty, hunger, evil mothers or an unaccepting society. However, they are always removed by the concluding scene, thus giving the idea that unhappiness is always temporary and happiness is ultimate. Happiness is often presented as a gift to the good protagonists who end up "*...happily ever after.*"

Such an ending often presents a desire in the readers to create and inhabit a world where happiness is both reachable and permanent. It comes across as a protest against the workings of this world where happiness comes once in a blue moon.

While happiness presented in children's books cannot be outrightly termed as a false hope, it cannot be denied that ignorance of ideas of death and deceit only make the happy endings a compelling diversion from the reality. They also allow the readers to realise that they too have virtues like determination, courage and hope that can help them overcome any obstruction in life.

**The Giving Tree: "Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy."** (Silverstein 5) opens the story to what can rightly be considered as one of the most controversial tales for children.

The lack of any serious issues in the book maintains a kind of ambiguity and at the same time, gives it a wide appeal. **As an allegory, the book not only talks "...about the responsibilities a human being has for living organisms in the environment,"** (Fredericks 28) but also acts as a moral tale upholding the **"the Christian ideal of unconditional love."** (Marcus) **The tree thus becomes a godly figure with her selflessness and is likened to Christ.** In the Churches, the story was **"...hailed as a parable on the joys of giving."** (Cole 394)

The Boy's exploitation of the tree also raises the issue of **deforestation**. From a religious perspective, **the Boy's change in affection towards the Tree is symbolic of the spiritual regression in man:** his growth with the beliefs, a period of doubt, and the final acceptance during his old age when he is tired and doesn't **"...need very much...just a quiet place to sit and rest."** (Silverstein 46)

However, the **sadomasochistic relationship** between the boy and the tree raises several issues; the selflessness of the tree becomes a woman's unquestioning submission to patriarchy and the boy's lack of concern represents the attitude of modern man in this material era. The boy resembles every man for whom the female is the 'other', and who believe that their actions are justified because they are born as a supposedly 'superior' gender. The boy's attitude towards the tree is also that of a heartless colonizer who focuses only on draining the resources without any concern for the colonized.

While children are unanimously seen to hate the boy for 'killing' the tree, the adult readers are often divided in their opinions. Most applaud the tree for her selflessness, and consider her as a model of good-parenting. However, to others, it only perpetuates **"...the myth of the selfless, all-giving mother who exists only to be used and the image of a male child who can offer no reciprocity, express no gratitude, feel no empathy — an insatiable creature who encounters no limits for his demands."** (Spitz) To the children, the book is **"a nursery tale for the 'me' generation, a primer of narcissism, a catechism of exploitation."** (Glendon)

**Tree's actions also reflect on the social and cultural idea that true happiness comes from sacrificing to the point of self-immolation.** The sentence **"And the tree was happy."** (Silverstein 54) is repeated to the point that it becomes a mantra. Tree's happiness when contrasted with her letting the boy take advantage of her, arouses pity and shows how disturbing her concept of happiness is. While her idea of happiness is a crafty illusion, the boy's temporal pleasure is another illusion; one that many of us willingly give in to. The story shows how the quest for materialistic pleasure brings only dissatisfaction and often leads to a loss of true happiness.

**Fairy Tales:** Andersen and Grimms's **Fairy Tales** are the most biased of fantasy fiction and bring clear divisions of black and white aspects: eternally malign or eternally benign.

**Gender hierarchy is always maintained in fairy tales, where females are weak and males have to come to their rescue. The idea of power and female is always accompanied with evil,** whether it is the mother in **Hansel and Gretel** or the witch in **Rapunzel**.

**Stereotyping is rampant in fairy tales. Females are portrayed as submissive and dependent, while the boys are portrayed as powerful, brave and strong.** The mermaid is sheltered by the prince and Cinderella is rescued by Prince Charming. Fairy tales also stereotype physical appearances and perpetuate the eurocentric idea of beauty. There is also "a



correlation between a loveable face and a loveable character" (Lieberman 3). In rare cases, if the protagonist is ugly, like the initially hideous frog in *The Frog King*, they later turn out to be good looking. **Fairy tales stereotype ideas like marriage and courtship. The female's acceptance to a marriage proposal being quite cliched .**

Lieberman has argued that **females' horizon of occupation is grossly limited.** They have to either support themselves by being a rich man's daughter or by marrying a rich prince. If not so they can always be evil enchantresses!

**Fairy Tales** are usually rich in allusions, metaphors and symbols. In works like *The Snow Queen*, Andersen uses metaphor of flowers to express that as one grows, one's innocence and love for small things are replaced by reason, intellect and cleverness, which in many cases may freeze hearts and distort visions. Works like *Little Snow White* have biblical allusions in form of the Satan-like step-mother and symbols of innocence (lamb), peace (white dove) and evil (the woods) that are often used.

A child reader may derive moral values out of them: **"Dear child, be pious and good, and God will always take care of you,"** (Grimm 67). **The happy ending for the 'good' characters and the punishment for the 'bad' ones strengthen their want to adapt a 'good' living.**

Despite being widely read by children, fairy tales especially those by the Grimm brothers tend to be **racist.** Jews in particular are portrayed very negatively and it is even stated in *The Good Bargain* that **"What a Jew says is always false."** (Grimm 32)

Violence is prominent in some fairy tales. They are seen in the form of child abuse in works like *Little Snow White* and *Cinderella* or through the presence of **blood and gore** through chopping off of a finger, cutting off of one's own toes, heels and tongue. There are references to **cannibalism** in works like *The Robber Bridegroom*; **"they will cut thee to pieces without mercy, will cook thee, and eat thee, for they are eaters of human flesh..."** (Grimm 111)

**The concluding idea of "happily ever after" in fairy tales "...offer us hope that we can survive despite the odds that are against us"** (Zipes).

**Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:** *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* provides children with fanciful elements whereas a closer reading exposes the readers to the crudity and intricacies of Victorian England and also to **a defamiliarised version of their own existence.**

Carroll mocks at the educational system of the Victorian age by parodying several rhymes, and employing puns and malapropisms. The question of longitudes and latitudes and later capital of countries at irrelevant moments points out the hollowness of the educational institutions and their curriculum.

The portrayal of Queen of Hearts and Alice is quite stereotypical. Queen of Hearts is presented as a whimsical woman. Alice is presented as a girl who has no freedom of choice. There are cases of malapropism in the speech of wonderland creatures which shows how **language is used as a medium to emulate and not integrate , representing the class consciousness of the Victorian society.**

The trial scene of the stealing of the tarts is a direct satire on the Victorian government where the accused were often wrongly punished without being investigated first.

Despite the talking animals that Alice encounters, Wonderland is one of the cruellest places. The Queen blindly executes anyone whom she doesn't like. Her cruelty to animals is quite evident in the game of croquet where live hedgehogs are used as croquet balls and live flamingos act as mallets. Alice herself finds it **"queer"** (Carroll 31) that she's being ordered by the White Rabbit.

Throughout the story, the idea that the one whose behaviour is proper is only allowed into a particular group, is stressed upon.

Wonderland, a seemingly innocent place, veils underneath the innocence concepts that require mature perusal. The projection of child psyche and female psyche is presented in **the dilemma of identity and individuality.** Alice's bewilderment about her identity stems not only from her change in height and her knowledge, but it is also a result of her attempt at relating and differentiating herself from others.

**The view of the fantasy world is only a caricatured reality problematized by the passive child.** An awakening from this dreamland is an escape from reality into reality itself, a triumph of dull acceptance over questioning of the complacency.

**The philosophy of time is dichotomized in Wonderland.** While it is usually dynamic, for creatures like Hatter who waste it lavishly, it is always unchanging and this static time ensues both happiness and sadness.

The division of dream and reality is like a division of the two worlds- one forms an escape from the other when adversities aggravate in either of them. Alice escapes to the dreamland when she is bored from dull reality, but when the Queen orders Alice's execution, which is an adverse situation in the dream world, she resorts to the real world for her escape. Happiness in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* is therefore an ignorance of reality of all forms; it is the ignorance and escape from the complexities of reality and finally solace in the acceptance of it.

#### **Conclusion:**

Contrary to the popular belief that it propagates escape from realism, children's fiction often contains possibility for more interpretations because it is **"less confrontational than realism."** (Flanagan) While readers often brush it aside because of the humorous tone and the fantastical elements, children's fiction usually comments *"... on social reality through... (metaphor, allegory, parable) and can therefore deal with complex moral questions in a more playful and exaggerated manner."*(Flanagan)

Children's fiction has abundance of serious issues but owing to the fact that the projection of these is very subdued and understated; their appearance is based on the perception of readers. To a child, the fantastical characters and the imaginary world are both delight and an escape from reality. However the adult readers see beyond the superficial. Imposition of the paradoxical moral codes by the author, gender imbalance, racial superiority, identity crisis, man's ruthless treatment of nature and stereotyping are the major issues that come to the fore. The happy ending of children's fiction, that instills optimism and hope in the readers, ends up creating an untrue, unreal world. It comes across as a protest against the workings of the world where happiness is temporary and indefinite.

Children's fiction helps the young readers to see **"the world in different ways and accordingly teaches them to construct meaning by making connections between seemingly unrelated concepts or things."**(Flanagan)

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