

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS OF ORIENTALISM

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Abstract :

Children's Literature enables a child to develop his language skills and his critical thinking. Reading children's books would stimulate a child's imagination and provide him with a visual experience. However, it is of great significance that these books are also written by adults and thus, convey an adult perspective on things. Orientalism, the concept of determining the differences between the Occident and the Orient is also popularized by children's literature. Such notions of Orientalism can shape a child's perspective and outlook on how they perceive the world around themselves.

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1. Introduction

Edward Said, in his pioneering work, *Orientalism*, outlines it as the acceptance in the West of the “basic difference between the East and the West of the starting point of elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, mind, destiny and so on.” [1]. Orientalism became a way of defining the people of the Orient and it is thus a massive notion which occurs in anything which was presented to us by the Western cultures and even appears in fantasy and Children’s Literature. We normally tend to analyse children’s books and stories as if they just carry a moral voice and not a chorus. As Mikhail Bakhtin tell us, “Each word tastes of the context and the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions.” [2] As written by adults, children’s literature functions as an instrument of conveying the views of the adults to the children and their morals and opinions. And as literature is definitely a rich site for cultural values, children literature is no exception. As Clifton Fadiman, writes in his article, *The Case for Children’s Literature*, “We must not be too quick to pass from the dimensions of length and breadth to that of depth, and say that children’s books can never be as ‘deep’. The world of the child is smaller than the grown-up’s; but are we sure that it is shallower?”[3] In this paper, I aim to take some particular works of children’s literature and analyse them through the postcolonial element of orientalism and show how they gave an understanding of the orient to the children.

2. The Secret Garden - Frances Hodgson Burnett

“When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle, everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face, and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression. Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another.” (Frances H. Burnett, *The Secret Garden*)

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett gives us an insight into the aspect of orientalism. It is a narrative of a nine-year old girl, Mary Lennox. She is described in the beginning of the story as a “yellow-faced, sickly, bored and wretched child”, who is a native of India for all of her British heritage, and by the end of the book, she becomes a proper English “blush-rose”. Mary is a cold, defiant, uncaring and a rebellious child, who is spoiled at the hands of her Indian servants and she must return to England in order to

become a civil, well-behaved, courteous English girl. England is shown to possess some healing powers which will help Mary get back to her identity. The depiction of India in the novel contains a discriminating attitude and prejudice towards the country. Mary expects to treat her Indian servants in an ill-behaved way and without their objecting to this because they were “obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals” where as English people, not even the servants would accept this behaviour of Mary. And also there is another reference to India in the statement of Martha when she says, “Eh! I can see [India is] different,” [Martha] answered almost warmly. “I dare say it's because there's such a lot o'blacks there instead o' respectable white people. When I heard you was comin' from India I thought you was a black too.” Mary on hearing this gets angry and defiantly calls out her names and in a rage reply, “You thought I was a native! You dared! You don't know anything about natives! They are not people- they're servants who must salaam to you. You know nothing about India. You know nothing about anything!”

2. The Story of Dr. Dolittle- Hugh Lofting

“Listen,” whispered the parrot, when John Dolittle's face appeared: “Prince Bumpo is coming here to-night to see you. And you've got to find some way to turn him white”... “But it isn't so easy to turn a black man white. You speak as though he were a dress to be re-dyed. It's not so simple. ‘Shall the leopard change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin,’ you know?”

(The Story of Dr, Dolittle, H. Lofting)

Hugh Lofting's, *The Story of Dr. Dolittle*, deals with the hues of colonialism and racism. In one of the chapters, African Prince Bumpo wants Dr. Dolittle, to bleach his black skin, white, in order to fulfill his greatest desire of acting as a European fairy-tale prince and subsequently to marry the Sleeping Beauty.

3. Gulliver's Travels- Jonathan Swift

“Their Heads and Breasts were covered with a thick Hair, some frizzled and others lank; they had Beards like Goats, and a Long Ridge of Hair down their Backs, and the fore Parts of their Legs and Feet; but the rest of their Bodies were bare, so that I might see their Skins, which were of a brown Buff Colour.” (Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*)

Jonathan Swift's popular work is an amalgam of two notably celebrated 18th-century genres: the exotic expedition travelogue, and the satirical account of human nature. The book that we read is given to as a version of Lemuel Gulliver's diaries that were passed onto his publisher after spending many years travelling the world. During this journey Gulliver encounters both colossal giant and bite-sized people, horses who not only speak, but are more civilised and cultured than humans, a debauched depraved form of mankind known as yahoos, and a host of other odd and absolutely enlightening being. Yahoo's appearance is seen in the light of the racist discourse which ruled through the eighteenth-century England. An awareness of the demographics of eighteenth-century England lends a new connotation to Swift's descriptions of the Yahoo:

A further depiction of the Yahoo is even more suggestive: a perfect human Figure; the Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide. But these disparities are ordinary and common to all savage and barbaric Nations. With the exception of the Yahoo's hairiness and its claws, as both seems like mere exaggerations and fabrication of human physical characteristics, these accounts of the Yahoo's appearance arouse typical eighteenth-century depictions of the African. These descriptions from Gulliver's Travels are constant with details and descriptions about the Africans from such sources as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the writings of Linnaeus, which also concentrate on the shape of the face, proportion of the lips and mouth, and texture of the hair, along with the skin-colour.

4. Alice in Wonderland- Lewis Carroll

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly. “I-I hardly know, Sir, just at the present- at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” (Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

In *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, the journey of Alice to some strange land exhibits colonialism. It exemplifies the idea of an Imperial Britain actively engaging with its exotic colonies, trying to handle the tumult and the chaos of conflicting cultures in the name of Empire. The hookah-smoking caterpillar is one of the most persistent image and also, it symbolizes the caterpillar as an exotic other being. This Wonderland and Looking-Glass land are both populated by an array of animal-

like horrifying creatures, and even the more human characters, such as the Queen of Hearts and the “savage” Duchess, are shown to have ferocious, ugly, and brutish features. This is in absolute disparity to Alice, who is depicted as an ideal Victorian child, with blonde hair, a high forehead, fair and smooth features.

According to the descriptions, it seems like as if Alice is the only proper human there, and all other creatures are the representatives of the exotic other and there is a continual identity flux in the mind of the Alice which goes through the story.

5. Sherlock Holmes- Arthur Conan Doyle

“They are naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small, fierce eyes, and distorted features. Their feet and hands, however, are remarkably small. So intractable and fierce are they that all the efforts of the British official have failed to win them over in any degree. They have always been a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs, or shooting them with their poisoned arrows.” (Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*)

Arthur Conan Doyle’s magnificent detective fiction also features examples of racism. In the second novel, *The Sign of the Four* is evocative of the contemporary attitude held by people in response to the Indian Mutiny. This novel provides a channel through which the societal attitude towards the British colonies could be investigated. The sensual and the exciting appeal of the exotic is clear from the fact that Miss Morstan’s Indian accessories, including “a small turban of the small dull [grey] hue, relieved only by the suspicion of a white feather in the side”, immediately arrests the attention of Watson. There is an innuendo of Indian artifacts with exoticism and luxury. Watson’s description of Thaddeus Sholto’s apartment suggests the Western tendency to attach foreign objects with decadence as he states, “The carpet was of amber and black, so soft and so thick that the foot sank pleasantly into it, as into a bed of moss.” Watson further emphasis this inclination when he describes “a lamp in the fashion of a silver dove,” stating that it, “[hangs] from an almost invisible golden wire in the centre of the room. As it burned it filled the air with a subtle and aromatic odour”. Doyle’s consistent pairing of India with the exotic implicates that British society remained allured and fascinated by Eastern colonies.

After the Mutiny, British society began to refer to Eastern cultures with degeneracy,

ruthlessness, savagery, and brutality, all of which were ascriptions that encouraged continual fear of the colonies and of their inhabitants. *The Sign of Four* reflects Victorian society's prevalent suspicion towards Eastern culture, as Doyle confines to popular beliefs which emphasized the relationship between foreign essence and criminality. This can be seen most seemingly in Doyle's description of a character, named Tonga, as Watson says that, "His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with half animal fury". Doyle's portrayal of Tonga as primitive, animal-like, brutal and frightening is illustrative of suitable conceptualizations of foreign tones during the nineteenth century, as the Britishers usually looked down upon the colonies with aspects of fear and dismay.

6. Curious George- Margaret and H.A. Rey

"One day George saw a man. He had a large yellow straw hat. The man saw George too. "What a nice little monkey", he thought. "I would like to take him home with me". He put his hat on the ground and, of course, George was curious. He came down from the tree to look at the large yellow hat." (Margaret & H.A. Rey, *Curious George*)

In *Curious George*, Margaret and H.A. Rey, draw an association between George and the slaves, which allow us to consider him as a colonial subject. It can be further assumed that since George parallels with slaves, the Man in the Yellow Hat can be paralleled with the colonizers or he can be considered the slave master. In every story of *Curious George*, George gets into trouble because of his behavior because he is still uncivilized, uncontrolled and undisciplined. The book seems to justify colonialism that it is the job of the master or the colonizers to civilize the colonized or the slaves, which calls for the intervention from the side of the man in the yellow hat.

7. Kim- Rudyard Kipling

"Though he was burned black as any native; though he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song; though he consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small boys of the bazar; Kim was white--a poor white of the poorest". (Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*)

In Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, there is a theme of colonialism which prevails through the story. It also deals with the issue of identity and how being born to Irish parents in India,

creates such a constant flux of Irish-Indian identity for Kim O'Hara. Here, there can be a reference to another similar character, Mogli from *The Jungle Book*, who also faces this question of identity being both a man and a wolf. Kim's racial ambiguity can be traced to the initial chapter of the novel, when it states, "Though he was burned black as any native; though he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song; though he consorted on terms of perfect equality with the small boys of the bazaar; Kim was white--a poor white of the poorest". Another quote that shows, the ambiguity of his race states, "Kim, too, held views of his own." As he reached the years of indiscretion, he learned to avoid missionaries and white men of serious aspect who asked who he was, and what he did...and he lived in a life wild as that of the Arabian Nights, but missionaries and secretaries of charitable societies could not see the beauty of it". This shows how he holds relevance for the Indian culture more than the colonizers.

References

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