

Breaking the Fictional Stereotypes of Growing Up: British Children's Literature Today

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Abstract: Harvey Darton's definition of children's books as "works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure and not merely to teach them" no longer holds good in contemporary children's literature today since the emphasis in contemporary children's literature has shifted from merely giving pleasure to offering children insights into the complexities of life. Till the 1970's, Britain's writers of children's fiction have been creating comfort zones for their readers by basing their books on pure fantasy. The paper seeks to establish how the new children's narrative is cognate in form and style with the modern psychological novel with its complex techniques and its emphasis on the inner workings of the mind and the character's search for his/her identity. This has become the preferred form of children's narrative today.

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If we were to explore children's literature in Britain after the 1990s, then Harvey Darton's definition of children's books as "works produced ostensibly to give children pleasure, and not merely to teach them" would no longer hold good since the emphasis in contemporary children's literature has shifted from merely giving pleasure to offering children insights into the complexities of life. Since the Middle Ages, the conception of childhood was based on certain specific assumptions by the adults – that children are weak and vulnerable and therefore need protection; that they are pure and innocent and thus need to be sheltered from the corrupting influences of the adult world. These attitudes led to a need to isolate children from adult society and provide them with a literature defined by what adults feel should be left out rather than what should be included.

The history of children's literature expresses the vast difference in the ideas of childhood of different cultures and times. The early texts were purely didactic. Aesop's Tales by Caxton had been used since the 15th century with its animal stories and morals for the education of children. Locke and Newbery recommended the study of these tales "which being stories apt to delight and entertain a child, may yet afford useful reflections to a grown man" (Darton 17). Influenced by Locke and Rousseau, many writers produced books with the central characters as

wise adult teachers who guide children to the truth by making them realize the difference between good and evil. Children's literature was invented on these principles. In the nineteenth century, a new idea of childhood emerged which was based on the assumption that the difference or "otherness" of children from adults was not so much of a limitation as a blessing. Wordsworth talks of children in his "Ode to Intimations of Immortality in Early Childhood" (1807) as a "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!" (1114). Similarly, Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland (1865) and Lear's absurd limericks in Book of Nonsense (1846) represents a celebration of the positive power of childishness.

By the middle of the nineteenth century attitudes towards childhood were a balance of praise of childishness along with a consciousness of the values of reason and maturity. Child psychologists of the early twentieth century, Piaget, Erik Erickson and Lawrence Kohlberg contributed to the field of child psychology by their theories which reinforced the notion of the inflexibility of children in their inability to act in ways uncharacteristic of their current age.

From our reading of children's literature till the 1970s, it is evident that children were considered opposite to adults, in their thinking as well as feeling. As Bronwyn Davies rightly observes, "children are defined as *other* to adults in much the same way that women are other to men" (4). Jacqueline Rose very insightfully comments that children's literature represents a massive effort by adults to colonize children into being or becoming what they want them to be or become. These observations seem to be correct in the light of the quality of children's fiction produced in Great Britain till the 1970s when Britain's writers of children's fiction continued to create comfort zones for their readers by basing their works on pure fantasy and reveling in escapism.

Enid Blyton (1897 -1969), Britain's most beloved writer for children, wrote according to a formulaic structure. She understood what children wanted – they were not interested in atmosphere, mood or authentic characters that realistic fiction demanded. They wanted action and she provided it through a very strong story line with little emphasis on character. By this device she established a safe haven and a comfortable and predictable life for her children characters. In Blyton's world, characters were either good or bad, there were no shades of grey. Therefore, the children in her stories are flat characters who do not grow, change or evolve as individuals. They live in a perfect, uncomplicated, make-believe England which is far removed from reality.

Contemporary children's literature assumes that children live with adults in a world full of conflicts and dissonances. Rather than protect the reader from these, it takes the child headlong in confrontation with the multiple social and political problems of the world. Unlike children's literature prior to the 1990s, contemporary children's literature assumes that children's lives are inextricably joined with adults and their existential problems which inevitably affect them. There is a dominant

note of realism with a strong emphasis on psychologically complex characters in children's fiction today which makes it very alike, in style and form, to adult works. Books on children's literature now delve deep into a child's consciousness and describe her thoughts and motivations in very much the same way a landscape or event is described. The majority of children's fiction focuses on character and use the same strategies pioneered by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf to study the human mind. The stream-of-consciousness technique with its flashbacks and interior monologues are employed to illustrate the child's subjectivity – its inner life, its mood swings, feelings, dreams and fears – and they are now taken with as much seriousness as an adult's. Thus the typical carefree Blytonish child- extrovert is replaced by the care-ridden introvert child of today's world. Most of Britain's writers of children's fiction base their works on psychological realism and follow the techniques which had come to be associated with this genre in the latter half of the nineteenth century, thus being no different in principle from that of adult writing.

Among Britain's most prolific and popular writers of children's books today is Jacqueline Wilson whose works are representative of the new strand of British children's literature today. Her fiction deals with difficult subjects such as mental illness, divorce, dysfunctional families, the child in foster care, the father's alcoholism and aggressiveness and even death. Wilson believes that children are more aware nowadays and they have developed a taste for contemporary problems. But, despite the seriousness of her themes, most of her stories are informed by comedy and humour lending her stories a positive flavour. The Story of Tracy Beaker is an instance of how Wilson makes deft use of the first person narrative by telling the story of Tracy from a child's viewpoint. Tracy is an aspiring ten-year- old who tells her own story of her experiences in the children's home where she resides. By effectively capturing the “voice” of Tracy, Wilson is able to bring out, not only her insecurity under a false cover of bravado and brashness, but also the girl's grit and the indomitable spirit of a survivor. The Suitcase Kid is yet another of Wilson's prize- winning books told in diary form by a ten-year-old protagonist which narrates the emotional tug-of-war of Andrea as she shuttles back and forth between her mom and dad. Added to this is the presence of her step- siblings and a new half- sister to make her life totally confusing. The book is a brilliant example of how Wilson handles with great sensitivity and sympathy the ever- growing menace of divorce and its disastrous consequences on children. In yet another extremely popular book called The Double Act, Wilson explores the trials and tribulations of being identical twins in the story of ten-year-olds Garnet and Ruby. While Garnet is shy and withdrawn, Ruby is brash and rude. The story makes for very interesting reading as they take turns in narrating their story with their father and his new girl-friend (their mother having died long back) in their diary. The book is an insightful study of the psychology of twins, their moods, emotional upheavals and the pain of separation. The narrative device of the diary or journal form

employed by Wilson in these books helps her to give expression to the most private thoughts and emotions of her child characters. Wilson's *The Lottie Project* is another tragic and traumatic tale of a girl called Charlie whose life with her single parent mother suddenly crumbles when her mother loses her job and she starts dating a man with a five-year-old son. Wilson employs a unique strategy in her narration by mixing reality with fiction when Charlie develops a fictional journal of a girl living in Victorian times. These entries mix with Charlie's life to add another dimension to the story. In all these works, it is Wilson's sensitivity and her positive approach coupled with her chatty style and her resorting to some of the narrative strategies of the psychological novel which make her, in the words of Lisa Allardice of *Daily Telegraph*, "an astute chronicler of contemporary childhood". The clever picture illustrations by Nick Sharrat are yet another innovative device she employs to endear her readers.

Writing in a similar vein is Anne Fine (1947-) Britain's second Children's Laureate (2001-2003). She writes for both children and adults and her books are witty and thought-provoking. She mostly writes in first person with an instinctive understanding and acute sensitivity of children's needs and problems. In her narratives she mainly concentrates on children from broken homes and strongly feels that "divorce may be good for the parents, but it is one of the worst things you can do to your children...Somebody always pays for divorce and it is often the children...who pay". In her earlier novels like *The Stone Menagerie*, Fine condemns adults quite harshly but in subsequent books like *The Granny Project* she develops a morally ambiguous tone displaying sympathy for, and criticism of, both parents and children. Her most famous novel *Madame Doubtfire* (1987) is the story of a couple who are in the process of separating and the underhand methods they use in the fight for their children's affections. Fine very subtly seems to suggest that it is normal for both parents and children to experience extremes of emotion particularly under stress but that we should try to come to terms with the imperfections in ourselves and others by mutual compromise. In her strict economy of words and a shrewd ironic humour, Fine is undoubtedly, in the words of Anthea Bell, ".....one of the sharpest and humourous observers of the human condition writing today for the young". Thus, the new children's narrative is cognate in form and style with the modern novel with its predominance of interior events and its themes of self-searching and self identity. This has become the preferred narrative of children's literature not only in Britain but all over the world. British children's literature has come a long way – from the assumptions that children are innocent creatures in need of protection to a strong belief in their strength to face the challenges of life and their capacity to cope with and even overcome very difficult situations. From these changed notions about children has emerged what we now recognize the stereotypical children's narrative.

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Force of Life

Sony Dalia

Chiming bells
 Winter night
 Chill without, warm within
 Heavenly Descent
 Frozen feelings flow
 Time to meet and greet!

Violence foreseen
 Suffering sensed
 Betrayal in the air
 Faithful helpless
 Prayers on lips
 Saving grace!

Change of millennium
 Untouched human nature
 Corroded Nature
 Who impacted who?
 Manipulative man mortal
 Immortal Nature succumbs.

Reason slams faith
 Yet, faith force of life
 Blooming rainbow life
 Bright vistas beckon!

Sony Dalia is the pseudonym of T.S.Chandra Mouli. He has published 12 books of literary criticism on Indian English Literature, Commonwealth Literature, Multi-culturalism, ELT and Translation Studies. *Delightful Dawn* is his first book of poems in English.

