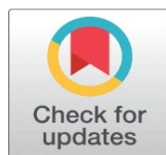


BEYOND SURFACE: EXPLORING POLITICS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Jyotika ¹, Dr. Swati Singh ²

¹ PhD Scholar, GD Goenka University, Sohna, Gurgaon Haryana, India

² Assistant professor, GD Goenka University, Sohna, Gurgaon, Haryana, India



Corresponding Author

Jyotika, jyotikasnook@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex interplay between body politics and children's literature across cultures and time. By analyzing accounts from assorted social and cultural settings and historical periods, the paper validates how these apparently naive stories replicate and form societal standards, outlooks, and power undercurrents associated with the human body. From traditional folk tales to present-day literature, the analysis highlights how children's literature can both strengthen and challenge societal typecasts, endorse body positivity, and sanction young readers to critically participate in cultural representations. The paper also considers the role of neuroscience in understanding how children's brains process and respond to narratives about the body, emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches to children's literature.

Keywords: Body Politics, Children's Literature, Cultural Narratives, Societal Norms, Historical Evolution

1. INTRODUCTION

So often idealized as a pastel-coloured playground of innocence, children's literature conceals a far more complex reality within. At play with the superficiality of the playful rhymes and fables, we meet a heady brew of cultural narratives where human bodies become the battleground of societal norms and expectations. The intricate dance of body politics first unfolded in its crib with the whispers of folklore and oral traditions that form a whole world within the pages and young minds absorbing its ink. Unravelling the body politic within children's literature is not an exercise in isolation. These stories do not exist hermetically sealed in a box; they thrum with the vibrations of the cultures from which they emerge, and they mirror crises, desires, and the relationships of power with which the contexts they reflect have invested them to give a peephole into the complex tapestry that intertwines literature, culture, and identity. These narratives can have a deep influence on children's thought processes. Recurrent experience can affect societal norms and

outlooks, determining children's perceptions of self and their understanding of the world around them. For example, a child who is constantly exposed to literature that emphasizes the importance of physical beauty may develop a negative body image.

On the other hand, stories that contest societal norms and rejoice in variety can encourage critical thinking and self-reflection. By exploring different viewpoints and practices, children may be more likely to question their assumptions and develop a more enhanced understanding of the world.

2. BODY POLITICS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ACROSS CULTURES AND TIME

From ancient folk tales that whisper secrets of inner strength to futuristic narratives wrestling with body control, children's literature performs as a vibrant tapestry woven with diverse threads of body politics. This paper examines how young readers come across and negotiate representations of bodies and ideals of beauty within this fascinating world, through cultures and historical periods.

3. FOLK TALES AND INDIGENOUS LORE

Cherokee tales are the myths, legends and other stories about the Cherokee, who are the North American Indians of Iroquoian lineage who constituted one of the largest politically integrated tribes at the time of European colonization of the Americas. The physical strength in Cherokee stories is not just about athleticism but means one has leadership potential. One finds inner strength beyond appearances within the people in Chinese fables. Maori legends by the indigenous people of New Zealand etch tattoos like maps of ancestral connection and resilience. Such narratives provide alternative notions of beauty, breaking the Western norm. Colonial Legacies and Shifting Power Dynamics

One must revisit Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book" with critical eyes, the characterization of Mowgli is very significant in discovering Oriental stereotypes in the text. Largely speaking, the animals and the humans represent the oppressed and the oppressor in the story as is apparent from the rebellion of animals against the villagers commanded by Mowgli that acts as a comparison for the Indian Revolt of 1857 against the English foreign powers which provides the historical context to the book. As Jane Hotchkiss, a prominent critic of Kipling, emphasizes: "Kipling's colonial world is India, and his creation of a wolf-boy protagonist reflects the complexities of England's longest relationship of imperial domination." Writers today, like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian author from former colonial regions, restore agency and festivity to diverse body norms through their children's literature (Adichie, 2019). Her works have enthralled people and ignited conversations on race, feminism and identity.

4. CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS CELEBRATED

From Brazilian capoeira stories full of bodily acrobatics and cultural pride to Japanese kimono stories whispering secrets of both identity and social hierarchy, the literature representative of specific cultures reverberates with body-infused traditions and practices. Maori haka stories, powerful movements that expressed defiance and ancestral connection, have played a significant role in Maori culture (King, 2003; Beattie, 1996).

5. UNMASKING BODY POLITICS IN NURSERY RHYMES ACROSS CENTURIES

Our early years are rocked by play songs and lullabies, simple rhymes that trip lightly on young tongues. Yet cloaked within these rhymes—purveyors of the spoken word—lie subtle realities in the way we feel and perceive our bodies and place in the world. Nursery rhymes, seemingly simple and childlike, can offer insights into the evolving societal norms and expectations related to gender (Lurie, 2004; Erikson, 1963). These rhymes often reflect the underlying power dynamics that shape our understanding of bodies and gender roles, contributing to the complex web of "body politics" (Erikson, 1963).

6. THE SUBTERRANEAN SCULPTING OF MINDS: NURSERY RHYMES AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

All sugar and spice, nursery rhymes and lullabies have an agenda—to insidiously shape little minds to society's expectations and gender stereotypes with their breezy rhythms and somnolent melodies. These innocent-sounding verses that have been handed down generation by generation aren't just bedtime stories; they're miniature renditions of the world, reinforcing compliance, physical beauty as currency, and very rigid gender roles. As such, this very early exposure to the politics of the body shapes children's understanding of themselves, their bodies, and their place within the social fabric—a stamp, almost indelible, on self-esteem, body image, and future aspirations. Think of the classic fairy tales that always depicted the damsels in distress waiting endlessly for the many princes to come and save them, or the pink princesses and blue warriors which peppered the books and reinforced ideas about what a girl or boy could be. Even seemingly harmless rhymes, such as "Mary Had a Little Lamb," may subtly reinforce stereotypes—passive, gentle Mary contrasted with the aggressive "Jack Horner," who "puts in his thumb" and takes what he wants (Lurie, 2004). These inconsequential stories, heard since nursery infancy, become the very building blocks of a child's internalized world, which delineate the parameters of self and potential within a given hierarchy. Such representations have an impact that goes beyond mere surface-level conformity. Notice the insidious link between physical attractiveness and societal worth, a connection woven sometimes into even the lullabies, such as "Rock-a-Bye Baby," with lyrics that whisper to the baby, "Birdie in a tree, top branch so high, / When the wind blows the cradle will rock. / When the bough breaks the cradle will fall, / And down will come baby, cradle and all"; there shall be a "birdie in a tree" and "gold will come to thee" only if the baby sleeps and awakens "pretty as can be" (Lurie, 2004; Erikson, 1963). Such messages subtly ingrain into the tender minds of children the seed for insecurity and anxiety about body image that fuels a relentless pursuit of external validation at the cost of self-acceptance.

Not all nursery rhymes, however, are injurious by their very nature. Indeed, amidst the traditional repertoire, we have some real gems that beat out stereotypes and laud diversity. Take the inclusive message of "We Are the World" or the empowering spirit of "The Wheels on the Bus," whereby vehicles traditionally associated with the masculine, such as a train or a fire truck, are driven by female figures. These stories of today bring with them hope for the possibility of being able to construct rhymes that empower children to break free from the chains of society and be who they want to be.

7. FAIRY TALES AS CULTURAL MİRRORED GLASS

Beyond the indulgent façade of princesses and dragons, fairy tales whisper stories far more intricate than mere morals. They are cultural time capsules that hold mirrors of the evolution of societal anxieties and aspirations within fantastic narratives—particularly those linked to the human body. From nursery rhymes to fairy tales, children travel through landscapes in which the body is a canvas where intricate issues, such as beauty, disability, and transformation, are painted.

8. RENAISSANCE REVELATIONS: TRANSFIGURATION AND INNER BEAUTY

With the Renaissance, Europe entered a new phase of soul-searching and humanistic ideals and thus began to love the very potential of metamorphosis—outward and inward—in the human body. The Ugly Duckling, as interpreted by Marina Warner, a literary scholar, rejected a one-way outlook towards beauty; for awkwardness might suddenly turn into grace, as the inner self is more important than what faces the world outside (Warner, 1994). This is the case similarly in stories like Beauty and the Beast, in which physical transformations act as metaphors for deep inner journeys, a cultural turn toward compassion and acceptance and away from perfectionist, outward values according to folklorist Jack Zipes (Zipes, 2022).

9. ECHOES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT: INTELLECT AND EMPATHY AS CHAMPIONS

The Enlightenment period focused on reason and logic, which led to more progress in the fairy tale tradition. Intellectual and philosophical ideas took a higher ranking compared to physical attributes. Take the tale of "The Swan Princess," where the focus shifts from physical transformation to the protagonist's kindness and wisdom. According to Maria Tatar, a cultural critic, stories like these reflected the Enlightenment focus on character and morality, valuing inner worth and empathy over traditional notions of beauty. These stories of inner beauty and intellectual powers were a cultural counterpoint to former ones placing an almost absolute value on physical appearance.

10. BEAUTY AND DIVERSITY EMBRACING UNIQUENESS: CONTEMPORARY METAMORPHOSES

In the contemporary scene, fairy tales undergo a further evolution mirroring, but also challenging, mainstream values with ever greater subtlety. Indeed, while the reverberations of conventional images of beauty exist, it is a symphony of unique voices that sing in praise of self-acceptance and uniqueness. Stories such as "The Paper Bag Princess" and "Anyia and the Dragon," according to Rudine Sims Bishop, whose work primarily focuses on multiculturalism, diversity, and representation in children's literature, her scholarship can also be applied to understanding how certain narratives can empower children to challenge expectations and celebrate their strengths and identities (Bishop, 1982, 1990, 1994, 2007). Such stories, deeply interspersed with cultural diversity and inclusiveness, strikingly contrast the narrow characterizations found in earlier times and therefore contribute to building a fairer and more tolerant future. If we peer through the cultural yarn that these

fairy tales are drenched in, we see there are so many valuable insights into how societies grappled and dealt with such issues as beauty and disability, and their manifestations in the human body as it changes. These stories, spanning centuries and cultures, are momentary glimpses into the anxieties of society; their aspiration serves to define tools for the next generation. By critically looking at these stories, we can celebrate how far we have come while recognizing the remnants of prejudice that persist to clear a pathway forward—into a future where our cultural mirrors reflect a world that values acceptance, individuality, and diverse beauty in everybody.

11. DECONSTRUCTING BEAUTY STANDARDS: INTERSECTIONAL LENSES AGAINST COLONIAL CONSTRUCTS

There is an increasingly complex interplay of race, ethnicity, and class in shaping social expectations, moving beyond the dismantling of Eurocentric beauty ideals within contemporary literature. In "Aru Shah and the End of Time" by Roshani Chokshi, the traditional Hindu iconography of the goddess is challenged, leading to a celebration of South Asian beauty in all its diverse hues (Chokshi, 2017). Meanwhile, some books, such as "I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter" by Erika Sánchez, have told the story of cultural pressure on young Latinas and spurred important discussions on beauty standards and what society expects. These stories, through an intersectional lens, provide nuanced portrayals of beauty standards that break down colonial constructs and empower the child from marginalized communities to celebrate their unique cultural features.

12. CULTURAL CONTEXTS AND EMBODIED LITERACIES: FROM FOLKTALES TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

Since body politics varies from culture to culture, it necessarily entails a sensitivity towards intricate historical and social contexts. Whether it is tricksters dandling them with large bellies as they speak to cultural notions of abundance and resilience in Japanese folktales, such as "Tanuki and the Rice Dumplings," or Indigenous Australian narratives about Dreaming Ancestral Beings that couple bodies to land and spiritual beliefs, offering unique angles on embodiment and self-perception, the body becomes an important, malleable place for articulating meanings. Such diverse meanings of the body in culture are considered when one looks at literature with anthropological eyes, extending the debate beyond mere Western frameworks and acknowledging the richness of bodily knowledge in various societies. The increased popularity of graphic novels, such as "Moonstruck" by Grace Ellis and "Nimona" by Noelle Stevenson, has provided additional platforms for exploring body politics (Ellis, 2018; Stevenson, 2015). Through the use of visual storytelling and vibrant imagery, graphic novels can discuss complex issues such as body dysmorphia and trans-ness effectively and clearly.

This enables subtle representations of various forms of the body and dismantles the ideal of the "heroic" body form for young readers to attain inspiration from in the form of visual role models.

13. BOOKS THAT EMPOWER CRITICAL READERS AND ENVISION BODY-POSITIVE FUTURES

Media study tools allow for the deconstruction of meanings in the illustrations, language, and narrative structures. Diverse body types and ableist language used in the representation of power dynamics are things we will break down so students can be empowered to beat back stereotypes and represent inclusivity. Educational research places educators and parents at the forefront of facilitating such conversations; it begins the process of building safe spaces for expressive dialogue and encourages children to reflect on their perceptions of both the body and the world around them. Embodiment and Ancestral Connections: Indigenous Australian Perspectives Indigenous Australian storytelling allows for a significant counterpoint to Eurocentric norms, highlighting an intrinsic connection between the body, the land, and ancestors.

Books such as "My Dreaming" by Ezekiel Kwaymullina weave dreamtime narratives of bodies as vessels of ancestral knowledge and stories, contesting Westernized separations between mind and body. Anthropological studies can help us to better understand how these stories condition Indigenous children's self-perception about themselves and their place in relationship to the natural world, a world central to embodied knowledge and cultural traditions. **Visual Metaphors and Playful Transgressions: The Picture Book Lens**

Picture books, with vivid illustrations and succinct narratives, give a very unique lens with which to interrogate body politics. "All Bodies Are Beautiful" by Anthony Browne playfully deconstructs traditional beauty standards, using flaps and layers to reveal the diversity of human shapes and sizes (Browne, 2019). In the "Hair Love" series by Matthew A. Cherry is enthralled by magnifying every detail of Black hair and allows young readers from early on to appreciate themselves despite societal expectations. Exploring visual imagery and discussing how text and image combine can help make apparent how picture books can disrupt stereotypes and support the development of body positivity in very young children through the use of visual metaphor and playful narrative. "The Paper Bag Princess," by Robert Munsch: In this iconic picture book, the physical strength and intellect of Princess Winnifred subliminally undermine more traditional gender roles. Image after image of her victorious battle with the dragon—all while dressed in a paper bag—contradicts any kind of expectation of the dainty princess, and enlivens the unexpected body in celebration. Working through the dichotomy of Winnifred's physical actions with the clothing that projects femininity underlines the reality that inner strength and feats of bravery are not channelled through outward appearance.

14. REIMAGINING FUTURES AND CYBORG BODIES

A Science Fiction Contribution. The unending creativity of science fiction enables the exploration of body politics in an unimaginable setting. Works like "Scythe" by Neal Shusterman dive deep into not only the moral concerns of cyborg bodies and gender fluidity but also those of the right to your flesh and the perceptions of society towards difference. Neuroscience studies on how fiction impacts empathy and critical-thinking strategies can describe how these visions guide young readers toward a conception of the relationship between their bodies and the place they hold in society.

15. FROM PERCEPTION TO COGNITION: NEUROSCIENCE AND THE EMBODIED READER

It is in neuroscience that some fascinating insights are located regarding how children's brains process and respond to such narratives about the body. For instance, in readers engaging with stories about characters overcoming self-doubt or troubled body image, it has been demonstrated that the brain regions associated with self-compassion and self-esteem are activated. On the other hand, harmful stereotypes activate negative biases and further entrench negative social constructions. Understanding the neural mechanisms by which these narratives are digested will assist us in composing a curriculum and curating literature that sustains positive body image and fosters inclusive attitudes in young readers.

16. CULTURAL VIEWS IN MANGA AND SUPERHERO COMICS:

Comparing Japanese manga—Moyoco Anno's *Sakamoto Days*—with American superhero comics like Greg Pak's *War of the Realms* shows how the cultural expectations bend the body representations in the graph novel. "*Sakamoto Days*" focuses on a protagonist, Taro Sakamoto, whose rather average and slightly chubby physique goes in sharp contrast to the muscle-laden superheroes of Western comics (Anno, 2018). Drawing away from this physical perfection, the manga, in its main character Sakamoto, uses his strength and resourcefulness as a way to celebrate his strength, giving relevance to other skills and abilities as much as other values besides those held for conventional masculinity. This unbundles the narrow body image represented by superhero narratives in Western comics. Although *War of the Realms* is dominated by super-muscly and idealized physiques, which can be connected with the archetype of American superheroes, one must analyse the meaning this description can convey: reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards and pressing young readers to conform to specified body types. Compared to *Sakamoto Days*, it opens a real pool of representation of diversity in cultural expectation and how, after that, it configures superheroes' discourses.

17. MULTICULTURAL STORIES

"My Hair is a Garden," by Cozbi A. Domingo: This is a lavishly illustrated picture book in which Black hair is portrayed in all its varied glory. Rich depictions of braids, dreadlocks, and afros are likened to living gardens, teeming with flowers and butterflies. Visual metaphor gives pigment to Eurocentric beauty standards and licenses young children of colour to feel proud of their variegated cultural heritages and their hair. "A is for Activist" by Innosanto Nagara: This is an ABC rhyming book with illustrations and active pictures with children of all ethnic backgrounds while asserting ideas of social justice. Starting from A is for Advocate and finishing with Z is for Zero Tolerance, we shadow kids of various races and ethnicities, working in pursuit of equality, to challenge the status quo. This spirited portrayal of activism inspires young readers to know and express their identity while taking a strong stand for righteousness. Think about non-binary and gender-neutral portrayals: Books like "*Julián is a Mermaid*" by Jessica Love and "*Red: A Crayon's Story*" by Michael Hall challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote a broader understanding of bodies beyond the binary (Love, 2019; Hall, 2017). Disability representation: "*We Dream in Code*" by Robin Brooks or "*A Different Pond*" by Bao Phi showcases counter-narratives to societal assumptions of disability and celebrates differently abled bodies. Body Size and Acceptance: Books like "*Bodies*

Are Cool" by Tyler Feder or "A Big Bed for Little Me" by Jess Walton mirror the variety of shapes and sizes of bodies in a way that nurtures self-love and creates a positive outlook towards one's body image.

To conclude, Children's literature, including stories, lullabies, graphic novels and the more contemporary pieces of literature plays a pivotal role in determining young perspectives. These narratives often serve as mirrors reflecting societal ideals and outlooks, delicately swaying children's sensitivities about themselves, their bodies, and their place in the world. From a young age, children grow up listening to folklore, lullabies and other forms of literature that often sow seeds of traditional gender roles, beauty standards, and societal expectations.

These exposures can shape children's understanding of gender-specific roles, societal standards of beauty, and societal hierarchy.

On the other hand, pieces of literature that contest outdated standards and rejoice diversity can empower children to embrace their unique identities. By encountering characters who defy stereotypes or possess unconventional qualities, children may feel more comfortable expressing their individuality and agency. These accounts can both buttress and contest societal rules, manipulating children's insights into themselves, their bodies, and their place in the world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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