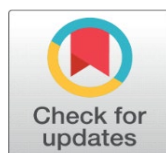


REFLECTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NEW HISTORICISM IN THE WORKS OF SUDHA MURTHY

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ABSTRACT

Indian children's literature has a prolonged history of rich traditions and oral storytelling, filled with myths and folklore. Sudha Murthy's simple yet relatable storytelling is drawn mostly from her real-life experience spicing it up with Indian folklore. She integrates cultural heritage with modern relevance and helps young readers understand their roots. By drawing on New Historicist strategies - like reading the text alongside its historical background, examining the text's engagement with dominant cultural ideologies, and examining the operation of power and identity through storytelling - children's literature can be viewed in a new light and not just as innocent or neutral storytelling. This paper examines Sudha Murthy's contribution to children's literature and their role in constructing national identity from a New Historicist perspective. Her use of different symbolic tools to portray the Indian rural culture and the traditions followed and practised by the people can be seen throughout her work.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Cultural Heritage, Traditions, New Historicism, National Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

While children's literature as a genre has a longstanding history, it was not created with children as the primary audience, and slowly over time, the target audience became more specific. This became more evident with the publication of abridged or adapted versions of the original texts, like Aesop's fables, to make them more age-appropriate. What began with a strong didactic approach with no room for enjoyment slowly shifted towards stories that were more engaging and entertained the young readers, sometimes imparting the same lesson and sometimes just for pure enjoyment and to tickle the minds of young readers. Once sidelined as a frivolous canon, it has come a long way to being studied across various academic disciplines. Jacqueline Rose commented that children's literature was never theirs to begin with, but a representation of how the adults want childhood to be. It was a means for them to control their thought process and perception of the world. What has been disguised as naive storytelling has led to the discovery of unending historical studies, textual analysis, and more. In *Inventing the Child*, Joseph Zornardo claims that children's stories are not innocent but an ideological projection of their innocence. The stories and themes in children's literature are shaped by external

cultural forces, such as societal norms, politics, and economic conditions. Literature, in turn, affects young readers' moral and psychological development and engages in broader cultural discussions, either reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The potential that this canon holds is immeasurable. There is a common misconception that writing for children's books is an undemanding task, but what they tend to ignore is the fact that these books are meant to engage an audience known for its ever-changing interests and short attention span. In an article¹ published on Friday, September 2, 2016 in *The Irish Times*, Una Lehane, quoting Roald Dahl, a prominent children's book writer, stated, "Every year probably twenty first-rate novels are written in English. I think the answer lies in the fact that during that year there are no more than one or two first-rate children's books written. And of course, children read a book they like ten times; we read a novel once. Children, once they fall in love with a book, read it again and again." The impact a good book leaves on the mind of a young reader is everlasting. If we consider John Locke's tabula rasa theory, the books we choose to introduce in their formative years will play a significant role in deciding who they'll become. This genre has long been subject to critical judgement and scholarly skepticism, with critics arguing that children, being young, may not retain or fully comprehend the content. Let's just put this adult mask down for a second and think about this. Many of us still recall the nursery rhymes we learnt in our early years, despite not fully understanding their meanings at the time; yet, we enjoyed it and the process of learning it, and fortunately for many of us, we enjoyed this process and grew to love the idea of accepting and learning new things. Rousseau emphasised that children would learn more if they enjoyed their reading process.

Contemporary children's literature is actively evolving to capture the attention of both readers and publishers. With its creativity and engaging, morally conscious narratives, the focus on this genre has more than tripled since the 1990s. The popularity of children's literature is driven by a clear and engaging style, the rich nuances of traditional heritage and culture, and a straightforward narrative technique that embodies the local atmosphere. In India, universal education has catalyzed a significant shift in society, enabling individuals to articulate their experiences in written form. These documented narratives are crucial evidence of the dynamic culture that is unfolding in our time. Children's literature is a reservoir for the collective memories of national, regional, or ethnic groups. It can be considered a seedbed for change in the areas of equality and diversity. In the handbook "Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook," the importance of conducting thorough research in the field of children's literature is emphasized. J Emer O'Sullivan's 'Theory of Children's Literature' presents it as a body of literature that belongs simultaneously to the field of literature and the field of education.

3. NEW HISTORICIST APPROACH TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Mitzi Myers proposed a New Historicist approach to children's literature, which differs from traditional literary analysis by treating literature and history as interconnected rather than separate. In 'Missed Opportunities and Critical Malpractices: New Historicism and Children's Literature', she wrote, "A New Historicism of children's literature would integrate text and socio-historic context, demonstrating on the one hand how extraliterary cultural formations shape literary discourse and, on the other hand, how literary practices are actions that make things happen" (Myers, 1981). This means children's books created in a particular time or place are influenced by the values, culture, or tradition of writing governing during that period. Religion, economics, gender conditions, gender roles, or major historical events shape the way stories are narrated and recorded. The new historicists approach literary texts as equally important as other historical texts, viewing them both as evidence to describe and examine the linguistic, cultural, social, and political conditions of particular historical moments (Brannigan, 42). Young readers act as active participants, and their performances are heavily influenced by the text they are introduced to. Some Indian children's book writers have taken it upon themselves to utilise this genre attempting to portray a version of an ideal Indian nation, its multicultural identity, and the hardships faced by societies and, in them, children are portrayed as agents of resolution. The hardships faced by the marginalised sections, the caste-based inequalities are incorporated in the narratives. The concept of "imagined

¹ Roald Dahl: 'Children only read for fun; you've got to hold their attention'

From the archive: Roald Dahl speaks to the *Irish Times* in 1982 about writing for children, his inventions and becoming an accidental art collector.

communities” by Benedict Anderson considers the whole nation as a community. Even in the absence of mutual familiarity, there exists a certain connection, a collective identity that unites everyone despite their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. For India, the notion of simply being an ‘Indian’ ties everyone together. Regardless of the variations in quality of life, everyone has a sense of deep comradeship within. Preserving this bond and strengthening it is what keeps the community or the nation strong. Literature is an important part of this nation-building and preserving process. This includes children’s literature in creating the concept of a nation and instilling in them a sense of comradeship from a very young age. Parallel realities are constructed that reflect the concerns of the current world. Characters in these narratives function as role models. Authors create certain characters in the narrative that empower young readers with empathy, confidence, etc., and through the choices they make, the behaviour they project, and their reactions to specific issues, they play a role in unfolding the way of the world.

4. REFLECTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SUDHA MURTHY’S STORIES

Sudha Murthy, a woman of many accomplishments, was born in Shiggaon, Karnataka. Well known for her humble and down-to-earth personality and unmatched oratory skills, she has written multiple books in Kannada and English and gained widespread popularity among readers of all age groups. What sets her works apart from other writers is her ability to incorporate her personal experiences, sometimes interwoven with a hint of mythology, and narrate a simple tale people can learn from and enjoy. Her writings contain stories from her childhood, her relationship with grandparents, and her own children and grandchildren who have been fictionalised. In works like *How I Taught my Grandmother to Read* and other stories, *The Magic of the Lost Temple* and many more, the influence of her personal experiences can be seen. Carol Fox defines national identity as “whatever cultural characteristics a society (or nation) feels its members share that distinguish it from other groups.” (Superle, 86). In Sudha Murthy’s *The Magic of the Lost Story*, the depiction of the Indian village serves as a miniature model of a nation, inviting readers to see the local as reflective of the nation. The values, relationships, and traditions within the village mirror broader ideals associated with Indian identity, like respecting elders, communal cooperation, handing down traditions, and cultural continuity. By grounding the narrative in a rural setting, Sudha Murthy not only preserves the authenticity of regional life but also shows how national identity is constructed through shared local experiences. The village becomes a symbolic space through which young readers can explore and internalise national values.

In *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, Nooni, the protagonist, acts as an agent to restore the missing elements of their family heritage. Her family’s tradition of going to Belapura and performing puja has kept them in touch with their ancestors. She is portrayed as a literary agent of cultural recovery, participating in the broader ideological work of preserving and reaffirming familial and cultural continuity in a rapidly modernising society. The difference in how far the gap has widened between the city and the village is shown throughout the story. One such instance is showcased through Nooni’s father’s reluctance to visit the village and reminisce about his childhood. All the while, Nooni’s journey towards recovering the lost and forgotten story mirrors the larger societal impulse to reconnect with local histories and inherited practices. The story explores many ancestral traditions that are meaningful sources of identity. The annual puja held by the family acted as a symbolic anchor, bringing the family together and reinforcing a sense of belonging among individuals who have not interacted regularly and are at risk of losing touch but still imagine themselves as part of a cohesive lineage. From a New Historicist perspective, this familial tradition reflects broader ideological structures, particularly in postcolonial India, where literature often serves to reconstruct fragmented histories and reaffirm cultural identity. By embedding cultural rituals, ancestral memory, and moral values within a narrative accessible to young readers, the text contributes to the formation of a shared cultural consciousness. Such stories function ideologically; they instill in young readers a sense of responsibility toward their culture and position them as inheritors of a diverse but unified national identity. This nurtures the imagination of a nation through the everyday acts of memory, tradition, and storytelling. Another important symbol used by Sudha Murthy in this work is ‘rivers’. The river functions as a powerful symbol of memory, continuity, and cultural rootedness. In Wordsworth’s *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, the river Wye is portrayed as a triggering factor to the poet’s childhood recollection and symbolises the continuity of life. Similarly, rivers in Murthy’s story also often represent the continuity of civilisation, cultural memory, and sacred geography. Every river mentioned in the story carries its own legacy. Aji told Nooni, “Ganga snan, Tunga paan,” which meant enjoy River Ganga by taking a dip and River Tunga by tasting the sweet water (Murthy, 29). In the story uncovered by Nooni, River Tunga’s strength was tested by Yashoda and the queen as they were evading the war, similar to Lord Krishna’s birth story, where Basudeva struggled in the river to save Krishna while evading Kamsa. Just as rivers in Indian

mythology often symbolise spiritual purification and historical depth, here the river represents a channel through which lost cultural narratives are recovered and restored. The process of returning to the river is not simply a physical journey but a symbolic act of reclaiming a cultural past that modernity threatens to erode. By locating the lost story near the river, the narrative positions tradition as something buried yet flowing just beneath the surface of contemporary life, awaiting rediscovery. Thus, the river becomes both a literal and symbolic force that links past and present, individual and community, personal memory and collective identity. Noonni, in the story, realised that the concept of the river is so great. It flows from the origin without knowing where it goes, depending on the inclination of the land. It serves all beings on Earth - humans, birds, animals, reptiles, farmlands, and much more. (ibid, 51). The rivers functioned as a medium to cultivate a deeper understanding of what it means to be part of a diverse yet unified nation. It has been used as a literary device that ties local tradition to national identity, offering young readers an imaginative route to understanding their place within the broader context of India's cultural heritage. The theme of unity in diversity has been subtle but conveyed powerfully throughout the interactions and relationships among characters from different social, regional, and generational backgrounds.

Talking about national values and identity, we cannot leave out Gandhian philosophies, which help shape the nation we know today. Children's literature often reflects the ideologies of Gandhi and embeds his ideas into the narratives. His philosophy of cooperation echoes his belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings. Cooperation is used as a defining trait for child characters. Noonni, with the help of her friends and the village elders, uncovers the history of the ancient stepwell, highlighting the power of teamwork inspired by curiosity, respect, and shared purpose, leading to the rediscovery of cultural heritage. While the emphasis on cooperation in children's stories may seem overtly idealistic, it actually has roots in historical experience. India's freedom struggle is a lived example of how people from all walks of life came together for a single goal, and their cooperation led to our freedom, which we enjoy today. This grand concept of unity in diversity is manifested by building on friendships between different characters from different cultures and backgrounds. They serve as models for intercultural understanding, showing young readers that differences in language, religion, caste, or class don't have to be barriers to connection. Like in the story, instead of waiting for the adults or leaving the story forgotten, Noonni, with the help of her cousins and others, takes matters into their own hands, and they collaborate, gather clues, and work as a team to uncover the forgotten history of the temple and their village. In the story, children are portrayed as agents who act collectively and contribute to broader social transformation. In almost all her works, protagonists are often depicted as dutiful, courageous, and morally upright, embodying values that closely aligned with the nation's ideal citizen. These heroic portrayals serve a didactic function: by presenting child characters who uphold virtues like honesty, responsibility, and spirit of togetherness, authors aim to inspire young readers to imitate such behaviour. Sudha Murthy subtly incorporates Gandhian values of inclusiveness and cooperation. The willingness of people from different walks of life, regardless of caste or class, to help the children echoes post-independence ideals of social unity and egalitarianism. In the lost story, Yashoda was helped by Mohammad, a poor Muslim man. Later, his kind gestures were celebrated as the beginning of a beautiful relationship with a tradition called the car festival, which was continued by their future generations. This responds to the socio-historical ideal realities that the nation strives for. The text not only acknowledges cultural, social, or regional differences but also handles them with care, neither ignoring nor overstating them, while building a broader message of unity.

5. CONCLUSION

Identifying Sudha Murthy's children's stories as an agent to foster national identity can be seen from a New Historicist perspective. Her use of symbolic anchors like rivers, friendships etc. to present the culture and traditions of India is a testament of how her writings when read critically can function as a source of cultural discourse. Through the integration of cultural rituals, ancestral memories, and moral principles into narratives that are relatable to young audiences, Sudha Murthy's works play a significant role in shaping a collective cultural awareness. These narratives serve an ideological purpose, fostering in young readers a sense of duty towards their heritage and establishing them as bearers of a rich yet cohesive national identity. This process cultivates the imagination of a nation by means of daily practices of memory, tradition, and storytelling. Her narratives are the prime example of how cultural narratives shape young minds. The stories interpellate children into specific moral and social roles, reinforcing values like honesty, kindness, and respect. While her works mostly align with traditional ideologies, they also offer moments of questioning and rethinking, especially regarding gender roles and education. Many Indian children's books emphasize values like

respect for elders, family loyalty, selflessness, and obedience. While these are seen as universal virtues, they also serve to maintain existing social hierarchies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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