

Children's Literature : A Dilemma

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Abstract. Several scholars have tried to define the term children's literature from different angles to provide a universal definition but as childhood is not a static condition and in turn a child is also the product of a particular culture. Thus children's literature is also the product of a particular culture. One definition is right in one particular context and another one is in another context but a common one that crosses cultural barriers does not almost exist. All active persons in this particular field have tried to reach at a common conclusion and have attempted to make children's literature a universal concept. There exists a lack of a universal definition of this term. The present research paper is a fruitful attempt to browse almost all the definitions by different scholars active in this particular field and an attempt has been made to observe all the angles through which the definitions are made. Actually different scholars have defined the term from different perspectives and that's why one universal definition is not possible. Sometimes cultural barriers and sometimes different perspectives have made this term vague rather vivid and this very vagueness has made it in vogue. The present paper is a scholarly attempt to provide a more universal definition irrespective of cultural barriers and previously shaped perspectives by browsing and observing previously held utterances on children's literature.

Keywords : Childhood; Children's Literature; culture; universal concept.

Kimberley Reynolds asserts, "children's literature has traditionally been written by adults for children; it is a commonplace of children's literature criticism that unlike other forms of writing, children's literature is defined by its audience rather than such things as genre, period, approach, or who writes it"(24).

Myles McDowell observes :

Children's books are usually shorter, they tend to favour an active rather than a passive treatment, with dialogue and incident rather than description; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism... children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order; probability is often discarded; and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, fantasy, simplicity, and adventure (Hunt, 63).

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There exists varieties of definitions of children's literature that need attention. First, childhood is a dynamic concept. It is not static. It varies from culture to culture and age to age. Sometimes within the same culture it varies accordingly. As the concept of childhood is not stable, the concept of children's literature, too is not. It is tried to fix the movement of a child but in vain and in the same manner it is tried to establish a universal definition of children's literature despite knowing the fact that even a single moment one cannot control a child's movement but it is tried to do so. Children's literature is a dynamic field that encompasses almost everything. Really asserting like the uncontrolled movement of a child, it is quite unmanageable to bind under one head but it is attempted. Reynolds asserts :

Currently everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes – many of which date back to preliterate epochs – to such embodiments of our transliterate age as e-books, fun, fiction and computer games may come under the umbrella of children's literature. Additionally, as an area of research and teaching, children's literature encompasses all genres, formats and media; all periods, movements and kinds of writing from any part of the world, and often related to ephemera and merchandise too (2).

There is not a fixed body of literature that is called children's literature but it is a multi-layered concept that contains several episodes within itself. One single word is not enough to define this term. Reynolds says that, there is no single, coherent, fixed body of work that makes up children's literature but instead many children's literatures produced at different times in different ways for different purposes by different kinds of people using different formats and media. The dynamicity of childhood makes children's literature a dynamic field. It is asserted that it encompasses several concepts and formats and that's why to bind it with one thread is quite impossible but different scholars have attempted in this direction accordingly.

Children's literature encompasses lots of contents and concepts and to bind it with one thread is quite impossible. It is attempted and all the attempts done previously are unique but need attention, too. Prema Srinivasan states:

Children's books are shorter, favouring action and dialogue rather than passive introspection. Among the distinct characteristics of children's stories are recurring plot elements(as in early folk and fairy tales), greater flexibility of narrative events and the presence of child protagonists. Characters in children's books tend to be slightly larger than life,

more colourful and romantic than one may find in the everyday world (6).

The definition based on size and shape also matters much. Sometimes it looks that this one is good, sometimes that one is better and sometimes that very one is best but all these as soon as leave the particular context, everything is blank and the wandering starts for another utterance. Kimberley Reynolds asserts;

From newspapers and other media to schools and in government documents, it is understood to refer to the materials written to be read by children and young people, published by children's publishers and stocked and shelved in the children's and or young adult sections of libraries and bookshops (1).

Actually the term 'culture' determine the different definitions of children's literature. Under different cultural constraints a scholar interprets a discourse. One is a slave to one's culture. The cultural connectivity determine the psyche of a critic who may take an objective angle but unconsciously it determines the result. Several cultural upbringing determines the characteristics of children and in turn children's literature. After all a child is culture specific. In fact the nature of a child is determined by cultural bearings. Nature and culture are two different characteristics that determine a child's psyche but out of these two, culture superimposes on one's nature. To differentiate between these two is not easy; actually both are strongly intertwined with each other but culture surpasses nature.

Different scholars have attempted to highlight the role of culture in one's characteristics making. Thus the role of culture cannot be underestimated in the making of one's psyche that creates a work that characterises the text. Different scholars under different cultural constraints have defined children's literature. Thus children's literature is a cultural product. It has been and is created under a particular culture and its creation under a particular culture negates its universality and in turn a more universal definition is not possible but it continues on searching, observing and generating a universal definition. Hunt asserts :

Children's books have a long history around the world and they have absorbed in themselves elements of folk and fairy tales and the oral tradition. (Hunt, 5)

Navin Menon points out in his article "Historical Survey of Children's Literature", "every publisher looking for material to publish draws upon this unquestioned resource material so that the Indian epics, ancient tales, folk tales, the Panchatantra form the bulk of children's literature today" (24). Heike Wrenn claims in his article "The Woman in Modernism" that for centuries, women were defined by men; the

world was male-centred and male-dominated, which is reflected in the traditional literature (9). Manorama Jafa points out :

The present day children's literature in India in all languages continues to draw largely on the traditional literature... The value system that dominated the themes was oriented to the upper class, contemptuous of women other than the traditional roles like mother, wife and daughter. The male-oriented stories with adults themes dominated the theme. Child's perspective is totally missing (34).

Some definitions are based on gender-centred ideas, some on traditional settings and some on other strata but overall fact is that all contribute to make it a rich heritage that rolls on, on and on. Peter Hunt has commented in his article "Introduction: The World of Children's Studies", "defining children's literature is so overdone that oceans of ink have been split on this matter"(4).

To bind a dynamic field with a straight thread is a complex task that is not possible and the only possibility is that it is impossible in search of a single rope to bind a complicated issue. The issue of an issue creates a functional issue that functionalises even a dead organ of literature that generates children's literature. Nancy Anderson defines children's literature in her book *Elementary Children's Literature: Infancy through Age 13* as all books written for children ... excluding works such as comic books, joke books, cartoon books and non-fiction works that are not intended to be read from front to back, such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias and other reference material (2).

The area of children's literature is not included in one way or another; it needs a rich canvas with colourful ideas and ideology that has been spreading from this corner to that corner. Perry Nodelman in his book *The Hidden Adult : Defining Children's Literature* says, "A defining characteristic of children's literature is that it intends to teach what it means for girls to be girls and boys to be boys". (43) Obviously a child is a hidden adult but doubtless to say an adult is also a hidden child and both one time or more or less exhibit their inner enthusiasm and energy. Deepa Agarwal observes that children's literature lies at the heart of its endeavour; it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience, children

The literature is for children and obviously it keeps children at its centre but at its periphery adult supervises and sometimes from a peripheral position, adults have a jump into the centre and cross-over literature starts but this very colourful mixing is the beauty of children's literature. Subir Roy elucidating the

importance of illustrations in an article, "Children's Book Illustrations in India" Says :

Illustrations in a children's book serve as a visual bridge that takes the child into the kingdom of the main story. Illustrations can entertain, educate, create a dream world for the child, build up the mood of the story, open up the aesthetic eyes of the child and provide the information clearly and graphically. (116)

The illustration plays a vital role, especially in children's literature. Some have attempted to document this very literature on this very basis but soon it is observed that it is the best one but have a look on another one.

Prema Srinivasan observing the characteristics of children's literature says that... recurrent plot elements, greater flexibility of narrative events and the presence of child protagonists. She further observes that characters in children's books tend to be slightly larger than life, more colourful and romantic than normal people. The recurrent themes in children's literature are quest motif and adventure(6). Really this very idea is simple but well in the context of the literature for children but not a concept that does not need another one. To have a unified definition is a hard nut to crack but others attempted, newly ones are attempting and it will be attempted.

All have accordingly attempted to define children's literature but a more universal definition is required. Some from one perspective but some from another. Some on one basis and some on another. But the basic thing is that a literature written from the perspective of a child is called children's literature. It may be that the writer is an adult. An adult selects the content and prepares the work for a child. An adult designs everything and then a child is given to read. After what to read, a child may be and necessarily is provided some tips and tools how to read and in such a case a controversy arises that an adult has done each and every thing. Actually an adult is between the work and the child and thus the work created is not children's literature but the thing is not so. Obviously a child is not hoped to do so because of some barriers and despite that the work prepared for a child by an adult is necessarily called a children's literature. The thing must be kept in mind here is that a work prepared by an adult must contain the perspective of a child. Actually almost all the definitions delivered by the writers depend on what, how, who and such other perspectives. Through different angles the literatures have been prepared by the writers and through different angles the definitions are set by the critics. The observation says that definitions set depend on different angles. Depending on the writer, the size of the book, the content selected, the form adopted and as such determine the canon of children's literature. The writer who has written belongs to a specific nature, nurtured in a specific culture and

such other things determine the context of the literatures prepared. The psyche of a writer plays a pivotal role here. Who has written this particular literature is the determinant. After that the size adopted plays a role. This particular size is good but that particular size is not good. This content is healthy but that particular content is not healthy. This specific style is good but that specific style is not good. All touching different strata have been attempted well to define children's literature but after some time the universality vanishes, if it becomes universal in that particular phase. It happens so. Actually in one culture this particular phenomenon is accepted but in another culture, it is not accepted and here the grip of a particular text and in turn the definition set vanishes but in other circumstances it exists. Once it looks universal but in another moment it becomes limited. Nothing is universal and if it is so, it exists in one culture not in another. The attempts taken by different scholars to define children's literature from a universal point of view are almost futile universally. As time passes the complete scenario changes and here the concept of universality becomes limited. The earlier definitions shrink and another one attempt to define universally but in that particular constraint it looks universal but the irony is that the universality exists with its own limitation and the definition falls in one or another particular place, not throughout the whole space. There are several reasons discussed as the lack of universality in the definition of children's literature but it is this very lack in universality that makes this very literature appealing and attractive. As it has been observed that childhood is culture-specific. A child is culture-specific. A writer, especially one writing literature for children, is culture-specific as all human beings are the products of specific cultures. An era survives in a particular culture.

Almost all the inconsistencies exist as culture is dynamic from one phase to another, from one class to another and as such and these very inconsistencies make the literatures produced for children dynamic and this very dynamicity makes children's literature less universal but more attractive. In fact the definition of children's literature sets a liberal universality.

The sources, resources, tools and techniques set for the literatures for children vary from one cycle to another as different angles browsed and observed here but the basic fact is that children's literature is a dynamic field and necessarily there is no need to bind it with the thread of universality and if it is attempted to do so, do but with a liberal universality rather conservative universality as the wings of childhood are spreading, spreading and spreading on and on...

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