

# BREAKING CHAINS: EMPOWERING YOUNG MINDS THROUGH DIVERSE NARRATIVES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT:

Children's literature emerged in the eighteenth century, initially aiming to inform, entertain, and instill morality. Over time, it evolved into a tool for social conditioning, fostering stoic acceptance of adult-imposed values. This article explores the potential of children's literature in shaping identities and fostering critical thinking. Analysing biases in traditional stories, it emphasizes the role of education in promoting inclusivity and broad thinking. Highlighting diverse narratives, it delves into attachment theory, illustrating characters' impact on emotional bonds. The article also underscores literature's capacity for logical analysis, urging authors to empower rather than dictate. It calls for concerted efforts to combat biases, championing education embodying trust, love, and an inquisitive outlook, guiding children toward a borderless, colourful world.

**Keywords:** social conditioning, identity, critical thinking, inclusivity, Attachment theory, logical analysis, inquisitive outlook.

## INTRODUCTION:

"Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten" - Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* (4).

This profound insight, rooted in the timeless appeal of storytelling, resonates with the Narrative Identity theory. G K Chesterton's original text in *Tremendous Trifles*, which inspired Gaiman's quote, delves into the symbolic transformation of darkness into "one negro giant taller than heaven." (4). This narrative, while reflecting the cultural context of its time, underscores the dynamic nature of storytelling and its influence on identity formation. Beyond the fantastical content of stories, it is essential to recognize that the narratives we present to children, and the way we analyze and discuss them, contribute significantly to the construction of their narrative identities.

The narrative identity theory posits that individuals weave their sense of self through the stories they encounter. Children, immersed in familial, social, and educational environments, absorb narratives not only from fairy tales but also from interactions with family, friends, teachers, and media. As children question the conditioning imposed by societal norms and

narratives, they embark on a journey of self-discovery. While challenging the tales presented to them, they navigate the complexities of their evolving identities. As Roald Dahl aptly observed, children realize that "grown-ups are complicated creatures, full of quirks and secrets." (*Danny*, 63) but as they grow into adults, these early encounters with stories continue to shape their outlooks, beliefs, and decision-making processes.

Many books that are available to our children through the education system or cultural history harbour deep-seated prejudices from the ages in which they were written. The reader's mind, quick to dismiss fantastical elements like the ten heads of Ravana or the Garden of Eden's forbidden fruit, transports them to the realm of imagination. However, underlying prejudices, subtly aligned with social messages, insidiously embed themselves as truths in young minds. Take, for instance, the seemingly innocuous tale of Cinderella, which, far from being harmless, reinforces prevalent stereotypes about 'weak women.' The narrative perpetuates the notion that women must shoulder household chores, patiently awaiting a male savior, valuing their beauty—attributed to a genetic lottery—above other forms of success. In the context of Indian literature, *Panchatantra*, considered essential reading for children, consistently fails to depict strong female characters, relegating them primarily to maternal roles. Moreover, biases are perpetuated through retelling, exemplified by *Amar Chitra Katha* comics transforming the dark complexions of characters like Radha in *Gita Govinda* into white caricatures. Similarly, television adaptations of Ramayana and Mahabharata, consumed by recent generations, contribute to this distortion, alongside advertisements promoting products like 'Fair and Lovely.' By analyzing these instances through the lens of 'Cultural studies', the intricate web of biases woven into the fabric of children's literature, perpetuating and reinforcing societal norms and stereotypes is unveiled.

Education, through the implementation of critical pedagogy, can play a crucial role in fostering liberal and broad thinking in children. In the present educational scenario, the children are exposed to various techniques that strive to train them to think critically, identify biases, challenge assumptions, and suspend belief where evidence is lacking. Teachers can also add meaningful commentary to older texts and suggest additional material such that students are exposed to diverse perspectives and historical narratives. In addition, they can expose children to classroom scenarios that showcase the underlying humanity in tales from diverse cultures and languages. They can also actively challenge gender stereotypes in practice by addressing and confronting sexist remarks and expressions, like the dismissive phrase "boys will be boys," as they arise in everyday situations. Additionally, they can actively promote gender equality by intentionally subverting traditional gender roles and expectations, illustrating that capabilities and responsibilities are not confined by gender.

Despite efforts, these initiatives often remain isolated within the expanse of our education system. While educational boards have endeavoured to tackle these issues through updated textbooks and guidelines, the translation of these changes into classroom practices encounters substantial challenges. The attainment of substantial reform in education demands a

multifaceted approach, necessitating collaboration among policymakers, educators, parents, and the broader community.

A critical factor contributing to the educational system's shortcomings is the harsh reality that our world is currently witnessing the rise of nationalism, coupled with the deployment of 'ancient culture' in various forms to substantiate presumed superiority. This blind exaltation of cultural history fosters an environment where gender, racial, caste, and ethnic biases, which were previously challenged by social movements, are now being reinforced under the guise of cultural justification. Such parochialism not only diminishes the space available for safe interaction and discourse but also cultivates a toxic atmosphere where technological and economic progress paradoxically consolidates prejudice into social consciousness. This progression is paradoxically hailed as a consequence of cultural superiority, and the strides made in promoting respect for diversity are, regrettably, being eroded.

Adding to the complexity of combating prejudice is the multifaceted nature of the struggle, which doesn't conform to the familiar 'friend vs. foe' paradigm. A poignant example is the incongruity between the fight against caste prejudice and the battle against gender bias, as evidenced by discourses on Dalit patriarchy.

Amidst the intricate milieu in which contemporary children are nurtured, the significance of 'Children's literature' emerges as a potent instrument, not only fostering diverse perspectives but also empowering the next generation to appreciate and celebrate the richness of distinctions among individuals. Its unique position as a cultural influencer enables it to act as a protective barrier, counteracting regressive elements present in the traditional education system. Through narratives that promote inclusivity and understanding, children's literature becomes a guiding force, helping shape a generation with an open-minded and appreciative worldview.

Attachment theory in psychology, pioneered by John Bowlby, posits that the mental health and behaviour of adults can be traced back to early childhood experiences. Emphasizing the innate drive for children to form attachments for survival, this theory extends beyond human relationships to explain the emotional connections children form with characters in literature. In the realm of stories, children may establish secure, avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized attachment bonds with characters, mirroring the attachment styles identified in the theory.

For instance, literature offers children the opportunity to develop secure attachment bonds with beloved cartoon characters like Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse, and Arthur Read. These characters, embodying positive traits and providing comfort, instill a sense of reliability, nurturing children into positive, caring individuals. On the other hand, children with avoidant attachment styles may resonate with characters such as Batman, Matilda Wormwood, Harry Potter, and Alice (*Alice in Wonderland*). Independent, self-reliant, and emotionally distant, these characters appeal to a child's desire for autonomy, shaping them into smart, adventurous, and determined individuals in adulthood. Similarly, children with ambivalent attachment styles might form bonds with characters like Eeyore (the gloomy

donkey in *Winnie the Pooh*) or Peter Pan (the conflicted boy reluctant to embrace adulthood in J.M Barrie's *Peter Pan*). These characters, representing unpredictability or complexity, contribute to the development of individuals with ambivalent attachment styles who navigate adulthood with a similar unpredictability. In literature, characters facing internal conflicts, moral dilemmas, or unpredictable storylines captivate children with disorganized attachment styles. These narratives provide a mirror to the internal struggles and complexities these children may face, fostering a deeper understanding of their own experiences and emotions.

Literature, with its immersive and interactive nature, facilitates a profound connection between the reader and the characters, inviting them into the emotional and ethical journey portrayed. This engagement allows questions to evolve gradually, fostering deep introspection. As a valuable vehicle for interacting with children, literature's potential is contingent on addressing challenges related to distribution, access, and attention span. Nevertheless, the increasing penetration of the internet, expanded access to mobile devices, and the emergence of interactive hyper-text experiences hold promise in alleviating these issues significantly.

In the contemporary landscape, there is a discernible shift towards increasing censorship, whether official or social, targeting materials deemed inconvenient by those in authority. Literature, with its unique ability to navigate beneath the radar of such scrutiny, emerges as a potent force capable of challenging prevailing thought patterns by prompting critical questions. This subversive potential gains particular significance in the realm of children's literature, given the limited freedom young readers have in patriarchal environments where their choices are often dictated. However, it is crucial to strike a delicate balance in inducing the right amount of cognitive dissonance without alienating the young audience. A well-crafted story should encourage readers to identify with characters, foster empathy, question their circumstances, and reach unexpected realizations, connecting these insights to their own environments. Whether featuring a politically correct protagonist grappling with uncomfortable questions, a tribe of mythical zombies as symbols of blind conformity, a band of brigands representing resistance, or a character like Morgiana displaying intelligence surpassing her master, a seemingly simple narrative can serve as a powerful tool. The hierarchical structure of the school system, with its imposition of a specific mode of thinking, provides an ideal breeding ground for countercultural narratives, making it an opportune space for subverting children's stories. A note of caution is warranted, however, as the use of literary devices like irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, euphemisms, and rhetorical questions should be carefully calibrated based on children's age and cognitive abilities.

Children's literature holds the power to instill concepts of privilege and agency without resorting to explicit preaching. Drawing from traditional folk literature and mythology provides a rich array of characters that can be rediscovered and reimagined through the creative freedom offered by fantasy. Examples such as Mahabali, the gender-flippable animals of *Panchatantra*, asuras, ogres, spirits from the underworld, Shoorpanakha, Tadaka, Ahalya, Sita, and Urmila serve as illustrations. Several regions in the country, notably

Bengali, Malayalam, and Marathi, have taken the lead in producing high-quality, modern vernacular children's literature. A standout example is 'Kabuliwala,' illustrating how exceptional children's literature can transcend the limits of parochialism. A child reading this story today can still relate the eponymous kind-hearted man to a migrant vegetable vendor at her door, sparking contemplation about a daughter waiting for him in his village amid conflict and poverty—transcending boundaries of culture, religions, or nations. This empathetic connection becomes a valuable tool for fostering compassion and inclusivity. Recent endeavors like Manjula Padmanabhan's *Unprincess* and Soumya Rajendran's *Girls to the Rescue* offer refreshing perspectives on gender. However, the call is for more contemporary Indian stories akin to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, emphasizing the need for narratives that address complex societal issues and contribute to broader conversations on inclusivity and social change.

Children's stories serve as a powerful medium for imparting the key skill of logical analysis, utilizing the thoughts and conversations of characters to introduce diverse arguments and viewpoints. This approach effectively illustrates how different lines of reasoning are employed to shape opinions. In a world where logical fallacies such as 'ad hominem' attacks and appeals to faith, authority, or emotion are common, children often encounter these challenges, making it crucial to enhance their ability to evaluate arguments and assess evidence—a potent antidote to prejudices.

Richard Dawkins' simple exercise, as mentioned in *The God Delusion*, underscores this point:

“A child is not a Christian child, not a Muslim child, but a child of Christian parents or a child of Muslim parents. This latter nomenclature, by the way, would be an excellent piece of consciousness-raising for the children themselves. A child who is told she is a 'child of Muslim parents' will immediately realize that religion is something for her to choose -or reject- when she becomes old enough to do so”.  
(382)

This realisation prompts her to pose the question, "What does it mean to be a Muslim?" setting the stage for a profound journey of self-discovery and spiritual growth. This inquiry not only fosters critical thinking but also has the potential to lead to a more enlightened and discerning understanding of one's faith, shielding the individual from blind acceptance of religious teachings and authority.

In navigating these aspects, it is paramount to regard the child as an independent agent, steering clear of didactic approaches. Embracing the wisdom captured by Gibran in his poem 'On Children,' which advises, "You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts"(9), emphasizes the importance of allowing the child to interpret the world created by the story autonomously. Authors should refrain from 'adultsplaining,' recognizing that children possess the capacity to grapple with complex concepts. It is imperative to present situations that may not be perfectly culturally sensitive, granting children the space to contemplate and draw their own conclusions.



Boldly crafting scenarios that prompt children to ponder diverse perspectives, whether imagining themselves as aliens on a distant planet, the daughter of a slum-dwelling Dalit, or a Muslim boy returning to school after a communal riot, encourages them to step into the shoes of others and empathize with their experiences. This approach, although imperfect, mirrors Pocahontas's warning in the eponymous animation, cautioning against the belief that only those who resemble and share one's thoughts are genuine people, illustrating how such a perspective can limit understanding. Exploring the unfamiliar journeys of others becomes a conduit for unveiling previously undiscovered insights.

The emphasis should be on prompting thought-provoking questions and enabling children to uncover their answers rather than on explicitly teaching the moral of the story. Allowing children to independently glean moral lessons empowers them to make informed decisions. When stories present intricate characters and situations, readers are compelled to contemplate diverse perspectives and potential outcomes. This cognitive process aids in the development of children's moral compass and decision-making skills, crucial for navigating life's challenges.

Furthermore, narratives that foster inquiry and exploration tend to captivate young readers more effectively. Children are inherently curious, and when a story encourages them to reflect, discuss, and explore, it enhances their overall enjoyment of the reading experience. This engagement has the potential to instill a lifelong love for reading and learning.

As long as humans exist, biases will persist; the key lies in training individuals to recognize, challenge, and eliminate their own biases. The paramount goal of education should be the removal of prejudice, fostering harmony among diverse groups. This education, symbolized by the act of "not leaving," as eloquently expressed by Marcus Zusak in *The Book Thief*, is an embodiment of trust and love.

“A DEFINITION NOT FOUND

IN THE DICTIONARY

Not leaving: an act of trust and love,

often deciphered by children”. (27)

This principle of 'not-leaving' can be actualized through childhood stories that impart confidence, self-respect, love, compassion, responsibility toward others, and, most importantly, an inquisitive and liberal outlook. It is our duty as adults to present a world without borders, filled with diverse colours and excitement, and to inspire them to step up without waiting, contrary to the traditional princess narratives they encounter.

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