

Taboo, Guilt and Shame: A Reading of Select juvenile literature

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Abstract:

The paper examines how juvenile literature has become a construct in the hands of patriarchy that manipulates the different realms of the child psyche and instills in them the concepts like shame, guilt, taboo etc. The child's psyche is like a tabula rasa and the concept of guilt is thrust upon them at the early age of 3 to 5 through compelling fairy tales. Guilt is first and foremost, an emotion. One may think of guilt as a good way to get someone to do something for you out of a sense of obligation. It includes a cluster of multifarious emotions like agony, grief, and loneliness as its accompaniment according to one's comprehensive framework.

From time immemorial psychologists have tried to distinguish the developmental stages of a child. Freud, Pavlov, John Watson, Guthrie, Hebb, Hull and many others have tried to explain the various stages in which a child is conditioned by different methods like reinforcements and punishments. Literature also stands out as a medium through which the behavioural pattern of an individual is framed. The psychodynamic theory of Freud proposes that we build a defense mechanism to protect us from guilt as we would experience if we knew just how awful our awful desires really are. Freud links the feeling of guilt, and its related emotions of anxiety to the oedipal stage of psychosexual development which finds its expression in many literary works. This might be the reason for the witches' attraction towards Hansel than Gretel. Snow White in the company of the seven dwarfs also becomes a victim of such an oedipal dilemma where she had to serve as the mother figure.

Erik Erikson opines that guilt first emerges in life at about the age of 3-5 as the negative outcome to a period he calls "Initiative-Guilt." According to him this is the stage when the child gets confused in front of the basic existential question "IS IT OK FOR ME TO DO, MOVE AND ACT?" Introducing books at the early age makes them conditioned. Society-imposed attitudes and values incarcerate them in a cocoon. The whole world becomes a

panopticon where they are under constant surveillance. They delve under this basic existential dilemma, "Will I be punished?" The paper tries to deconstruct the set patterns in fairy tales which act as an external factor shaping the behavior of a child at a very early age.

"Social development is the process of learning to conform to group standards" says Freeman and Showel.

Right from the conception, the beginning of life in the mother's womb, growth and development of an individual is influenced by varieties of external and internal factors. Internal factors pertain mainly to hereditary factors, biological make up, intelligence, emotional factors and social nature. The external factors are multifarious. Any factor which lies outside the child and his environment influences his growth and development. These factors begin their influence from the early age of the child, right from the moment of conception. As the child grows up he is exposed to the outside world in the form of books, and parental guidance. The child's psyche being a tabula rasa is vulnerable to outward exposure. The parent's guide their child at those early age by providing them books like fairy tales Aesop fables, the Panchatantra and Moral stories. This paper examines the hidden politics behind such seemingly innocuous stories and their effects on child's psycho-social development. The study draws strength largely from the developmental theory of Eric Erickson.

Erik Erickson is credited with developing the theory of psycho-social development which covers normal development over the entire lifespan of human beings. He postulated that the development of an individual is the result of his interaction with his social environment. Right from his birth, his social environment puts him under specific pressures or conflicts called crises by making specific demands at different ages or developmental stages of life. The individual tries to meet these specific demands or resolve the crises by reacting psychologically in his own way, depending upon his circumstances. The complexity of the demands from society increase as the child advances on the ladder of growth and development. So at each stage of his development, the child faces a new crisis that needs to be resolved at that particular stage. The way in which these crises are resolved has a major bearing on the development of one's personality. The crises may be myriad; it may be posed in different way either through 'Do's' and 'Don'ts' theories of the adult world which are imposed upon the young ones through make belief stories. They foreground the stories of the essentially good and the evil. The child gets caught up in the existential fight to win the battle

of conquering and resolving the crisis creating a positive or negative outlook on his temperament. Erik Erickson discovers eight crises or issues of life arising at different ages of one's development and linked them with the eight stages of one's psychosocial development covering one's entire lifespan.

The stage of psycho-social development identifies the personality trait likely to be developed in a particular stage. For example, one may go on acquiring positive traits like trust, independence, initiative, industry and identity etc; to develop a holistic personality. On the other hand, one can also develop into a troublesome, confused and doomed personality, failing to successfully resolve the crises of an age and developing negative traits like mistrust, shame, doubt, guilt feeling, inferiority and the like. Since these behavior traits, modes of adjustments or psychological build-up are acquired through one's active interaction with the social environment, the stages of development are called psycho-social development. Each stage of development evolves into another through the whole life cycle determining the individual and his development. If the crises remain unresolved at a particular stage it is carried on to the later stage deterring individual growth.

Erickson defines the first stage of development as **The Period of Trust V/S Mistrust**. The stage surrounds the initial one and a half years of the child. In this stage the infant completely depends on his mother for development. His way of feeling secure or insecure depends mainly on the way it is nourished, and taken care of. The second being a period of **Autonomy V/S Shame and Doubt** poses a great challenge to the child. He should be given the autonomy to explore his environment. A child who is denied this opportunity develop a sense of independence by over protective, harsh, restrictive parents begin to doubt their ability and ultimately begin to feel embarrassed in the presence of others. During the third stage the child goes through a period called **Initiative V/S Guilt** stage. The fourth stage revolves around the child's pursuit to develop a sense of achievement. During this stage of **Industry V/S Inferiority** the child's development is concentrated around his school premises. The school becomes a platform where his success and failures are defined. The fifth is a matured stage **Identity V/S Role Confusion** where the individual tries integrating many roles (as a child, sibling, student, athlete and worker) into self image under the role model and peer pressure. The adolescent's craving for identity must be fully recognized and it should be clearly understood that adolescent wants to be identified as an adult. During early adulthood the period of **Intimacy V/S Isolation** an individual leads a comfortable relationship and sense of

commitment followed by middle age which is a period of **Creativity or Stagnation**. During the final stage the paramount factor becomes one's integrity. As all these stages are interconnected, a certain lag at any stage results in the overall development of the individual.

Equipped with a sense of trust and autonomy, the child is susceptible to his environment. He takes the initiative to interact with his environment ceaselessly and engages planning and carrying out activities of various kinds. The extent to which the initiative for carrying out physical and mental exploration is encouraged and discouraged by the parents and the available social environment goes a long way in developing ability in the child to initiate plan and carry out these activities in later life. According to Bee (1992) it is a "time of vigor of action and of behaviors that the parents may see as aggressive." Central to this stage is play, as it provides children with the opportunity to explore their interpersonal skills through initiating activities. Children begin to plan activities, make up games, and initiate activities with others. If given this opportunity, children develop a sense of initiative, and feel secure in their ability to lead others and make decisions. Conversely, if this tendency is squelched, either through criticism or control, children develop a sense of guilt. They may feel like a nuisance to others and will therefore remain followers, lacking in self-initiative.

Parents consider this age a crucial age for introducing books as books allow free play of imagination. Fairy tales, Aesop fables, moral stories and religious stories invariably represent a subverted reality to the child. The text becomes a medium through which children are exposed to the social environment and determines how he conceives it. The fairy land presents simulacra before the child who considers it the ideal and the real. Furthermore, such stories serve as a basic means of child understanding of the real world and they provide them with the essential conception of the good and the evil. Thus conditioned by the ubiquitous binaries of good and evil the child develops a sense of doubt. Tossed by the existential question, "Is it ok for me to Do, Move or Act?" he develops a sense of doubt which prevents him from taking initiatives. For him the whole world is like a panopticon, where he is under constant surveillance by an omnipresent entity. The bed time stories narrated to them in a way become that unknown power which shapes the conscience. For example, these are the titles of some bed time stories 'Greed-A curse', 'Nobody Believes a liar', 'Say the truth, but don't hurt others feelings' and 'Crave more; lose what you have'. These titles represent all those qualities which parents try to impose on their children.

Fairy tales represent a glossy picture of reality and tell us that the good always triumphs. Sally Goddard Blythe, a child development expert argues “When you don’t give your children these stereotypes of good and bad, you don’t give them moral codes on which to start develop their lives.” These stereotypes in no way help the child for a positive development, and hence are detrimental. The stereotypes presented in fairy tales demand certain qualities. The male characters are supposed to be strong, brave, and smart whereas the women to be virtuous, obedient, and passive. The assigned roles for young boys were to be brave and rambunctious. They need to learn to be a complete man at a young age. Young girls need to be intelligent and mature. The child, if fails to achieve this role develop a sense of guilt which makes them vulnerable to shame.

In the story ‘The Ugly Duckling’ the author makes the other ducklings comment on the ugly one asserting the concept of being black and ugly as a blotch to one’s personality. The ugly duckling out of shame for his appearance decides to end his life. The message conveyed through this story is a serious one. The child at a very early age starts discriminating people based on colour and he believes that one need to be bothered of his outward appearance rather than his intellect. We read: “I will fly near those royal birds, and they will peck me to death daring to bring my ugly self near them but that doesn’t matter in the least better to be killed by them than to be bitten by the ducks, pecked by the hens...and suffer untold agony of winter.”(The Ugly Duckling-125) Also, “There now have we got to have that crowd, too? As if there weren’t enough of us already. Ugh, what a dreadful looking creature that duckling is! We won’t put up with him.” (The Ugly Duckling-117)

Even though the story ends on a positive note the recurrent image of the ugly duckling and the pejorative remarks made by the society make the child dubious of his appearance and this prevents him from opening out from his cocoon.

Further, when we consider the text ‘The Goose Girl’, the essential violence it spreads gives chance for a second thought. When exposed to such form of violence the child recuperates on its sense of justice taking upon him a sense of responsibility to undo the wrong. While doing so he might face some serious trouble from the adult world, causing shame for his actions. This shame again comes as a hindrance for his development. “What said he, should be done to a certain person who has deceived everyone? Now that sentence should be passed? She deserves to be put naked into a barrel lined with sharp nails, which should be dragged by two white horses up and down the street till she is dead.”(The Goose Girl-258)

The little Red Riding Hood gives a strong message of obedience. Children are expected to obey their elders. “Lucky for her that the woodcutter chanced in, but you won’t be that lucky”. This is a serious threat put before the young mind that looks upon everything he meets with an element of doubt. Feeding such stories help the adults to condition the mind of the child from being disobedient.

“Come here Red Riding Hood! Take this cake and bottle of wine to grandmother. Don’t loiter by the way, or run or you will fall break the bottle...and when you reach her house don’t forget to say “Good morning” prettily to her without staring about you.”(The Red Riding Hood-204)

The societal manners are being taught and reiterated that she would never forget all these etiquettes.

Being a Cinderella is not easy, when you have step sisters who are always on the move to jeer at you. Caught between the evil clutches of the step mother and step sister Cinderella’s life is made as living hell. These stereotypes of the essential villainy in the step mothers and daughters make them empathize with her. The thought of even having a replacement for the mother makes their life troublesome. “It would make people laugh to see a cinderwench at a palace ball.” (Cinderella-76) “Lend my clothes to a dirty cinderwench! I should be a fool.” (Cinderella-79)

Fairy tales create a subverted picture of reality. It conditions the mind of children giving them specific ideas. They may teach children that all step mothers are invariably bad, all villains are ugly, ugly people are not accepted by the society so on and so forth. They teach children a sense of violence fixing on a romantic element of bravery in such acts, and ultimately the message, violence can solve problems is communicated.

For example, in Hansel and Gretel, Gretel burns the witch alive and is rewarded with the witches’ jewels. Children find it easy to fix their identities with their ideal characters and expect themselves to be in their shoes. Failing to achieve this kind of identity aggravated by the minor rebukes and punishment from the side of the parents develops a sense of shame leading to hesitation, indecision and lack of initiative in planning and carrying out his activities. They are victimized by the stereotypical characters who become the role models and set the standards of the social environment.

The red riding hood who falls into trouble for being disobedient, the prince who is cursed to be a beast for being vain and cruel, the girl who was consumed by the wolf for her careless

and stupid behavior, the giant who was selfish and had to suffer isolation, King Midas who turned his daughter to gold due to his greed, the queen who was jealous for her stepdaughters' beauty- they all foreground certain set type-characters who inhibit children to make an initiative. They are constantly reminded of the retribution which might befall them if they go astray.

To conclude, we may say that juvenile literature change and evolve depending on the preconceived notion of the interpreter. Starting from Brothers Grimm, Hans Anderson, changes occurred that replaced the traditional stereotypes into a more fashionable type. Disney went a further step giving the children an audio visual ideal of the beauty and such constructs. The psyche of the child is like fertile mud which is admissive and assimilative. Fairy tales plants an influential seed in the minds of children as they grow, morphing into them subtle concepts on their perspective of reality sotto voce.

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