

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Toy Industry and its Circumvention: A Critique on Indian Toy Industry and its Eco-friendliness.

Abstract: Children are the highest demand community as far as consumerism is concerned. Toys and a heap of allied products are an unalienable spectacle of any middle class house with children around. Although sensitizing about the need for sustainable development and the use of eco-friendly objects has been in academic discourses for a long time, when it comes to children, establishing the green protocol is a subject of speculation. Green Protocol and its norms were made mandatory by the Govt. of Kerala as part of Shuchitwa mission and to a limited extent it was implemented successfully but the question of wiping out roots of such production remains as a question. This paper attempts to look into the politics of toys and its ancillary products and the presence of eco-friendliness in these objects and what possible alternatives are currently in use and what can be thought of.

Keywords: Eco-friendliness, Green Protocol, Material culture, Plastic pollution, Toys,

Children, with their education and their play time in today's fast-changing world, make up a highly lucrative market for commercial exploitation and manipulative advertisement campaigns. Starting from preschools to kindergartens to schools, all around the premises, one can see how a consumerist society is in the making as early as the child's first step into public space. Children's products are both the greatest market and the greatest

producers of plastic trash because of children's shortened attention span. The globalized world, filled with interconnected devices like iPad and smartphones, has completely replaced and restructured the attention span of children with eye-catching, fast-moving and mindboggling games and toys. However, this rise in technological sophistication, though beneficial to the marketing campaigns of large toy companies, has come at a devastating environmental cost which can no longer be ignored. Pollution from discarded plastic materials has already reached unsustainable levels and serious efforts to reverse the growing trend have thus far failed to arrive. Further, it is all too easy to surrender to the illusion that returning to more traditional toys would deprive children of the "excitement of modern innovation" by forcing them to adopt "boring" and "obsolete" relics from the past. I argue that this is thoroughly fallacious, however, because it is entirely possible to pursue sustainable ways of producing toys with environmentally-friendly materials such as clay and cloth, resulting in toys that are in fact more aesthetically pleasing and more enjoyable to use than their plastic counterparts, while avoiding the undesirable environmental damage of plastic waste. In this paper I sketch out both the scope of the current problem and the reliability of its possible solutions.

The term 'toy' dates back to the 16th century, deriving from Middle English origin but with an otherwise unknown Etymology. Originally, it was applied to anything and everything that appeared to be trivial objects. Though its original meaning was quite broad, the objects that are treated as toys in each generation have a close association with the culture of the society and offer a uniquely valuable insight into the characteristics of a given culture. Toys vary from the simplest to the most complex things, from the stick selected by a child and imagined to be a horse to immensely sophisticated and complex mechanical devices, including even modern robots. From the earliest of its forms, toys as playthings for children have undergone tremendous changes over the decades. Indus Valley Civilization, for

example, provided proof that even the earliest children loved toy carts and animals made of baked clay, wooden toy monkeys that could slide down the rope, wooden squirrels, bird whistles, and rattles, all made from terracotta (Marshall 549). The Harrapan civilization also saw buffalo-drawn carts made of clay and other animal puppets (Pruthi 154). From the invention of roller skates in Scandinavia to jigsaw puzzles in London, the concept of the toy has evolved and flourished in unimaginable ways and across all cultures (DeMello 292). Its nature of instruction and interaction developed in bounty, resulting in the production of a multitudinous variety of playthings, including crayons, building blocks, sketching pads, Barbie dolls, teddy bears, and video games. With the advent of the technology-incorporated development of playthings, the market was further revolutionized. Though the earliest toys were made of clay, glass, and sticks, contemporary toys allow children to design, build and program their own robots, employing special sensors, motors, and microcomputers to customize their behaviour in previously unimaginable ways.

Despite the media's tendency to praise this rise in technological complexity in the toy market as a sign of "progress" which is ultimately beneficial to the child, a healthy discussion about children's playthings, digital games, and cartridges warrants its connection with a culture that is reflective of the community and the multimedia which functioned in promoting, advertising, and commoditizing that experience. Abstract notions of "progress" in the toy industry still ignore the serious consequences that this very "progress" has generated in the form of environmental damage, pollution, and, of course, devaluation of the children's imaginations and attention spans for the sake of making profits through a philosophy that prioritizes clever marketing over enduring substance of products meant to be discarded in time for the next big release, rather than cherished over generations. The toy market is a billion-dollar industry which produces, quite literally, tons of toys each year. India's toy industry's market is estimated to be worth around a thousand crores, where 10 percent

contributes to the organized sector and 90 percent contributes to the unorganized sector (Misra and Gupta 9). With numbers of this magnitude, the toy industry is not simply a regional concern of, say, children and their parents. It has instead become a public concern that affects the entire nation and its wellbeing.

The history of games in India, of course, features a long and impressive trajectory in its own right, dating back to archaic origins and featuring globally-renowned titles. The earliest games that exclusively evolved in India such as Chaturanga, popularly known as chess; Indian Pachisi, known as Ludo; and Vaikuntapaali or ParamapadaSopanam, known as Snake and Ladder, have started appearing in today's toy market in highly mechanized and modernized forms, as though these timeless traditional classics could be supplemented by some modern gimmickry. What earlier appeared in the form of wooden plates and glass pebbles, for example, has gotten its new plastic garb and digital, virtual platform as well. Although early toys were made to function perfectly well according to the fastest processor available to children at that time, their own imaginations, contemporary toys have become flashier and more challenging by being developed after immense investments into research in Child Psychology and the science of sensory appeal. With the arrival of plastic age, things seem to have taken on a new, perhaps unalterable change.

Starting from potty training chairs to a list of many other items, including rattles, cradles, walkers, diapers and teethingers, plastic has encroached upon every lived experience of the child. The vinyl toys started giving the real-life appearance to toys and technology-incorporated toys became the hottest selling commodity in the toy market. Three decades ago, half of this was unseen and unheard of, at least in rural and semi-urban areas of India. At that time, toys were limited in number and were shared amongst members and reused over time in almost all families. Manufactured toys were rare and children more or less took care of their toys for the long term, regardless of whether the toys were fully functional or not.

In her work *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*, Susan Freinkel talks at length about how plastic toys evolved and how it was primarily the low cost of production, a factor linked to the temporary situation of low petroleum prices allowing plastic manufacturing to outcompete other modes of production, which accentuated heightened production and increased the availability of plastic toys. Following the invention of Bakelite, in the early fifties, chemical companies quickly started building factories to produce polyethylene, which was seen as the most promising new plastic. Polypropylene followed next, providing the familiar material used in plastic cups, yogurt cans, disposable diapers, and cars. This was, in turn, followed by acrylonitrile, which was made into the acrylic fibre used in sweaters, tracksuits, boots, and gloves, furnishing fabrics and carpets (7). Naturally, these new industrial methods, coupled with new technologies, resulted in a sea change in the development of toys as well.

The amount of plastic the world consumes annually has steadily increased from almost nil in 1940 to six hundred billion pounds today (7). Unfortunately, most of the plastics that we have produced over many past years are still with us today as detriments in ocean or as landfills. Norman Mailer has called plastic “a malign force loose in the universe... a social equivalent of cancer” (as qtd in Freinkel 9). This abundance of industrial material goods, especially plastic, found its way into the life of human beings in a short span of time, often by way of abrupt changes that have occurred with inadequate planning and grave short-sightedness about their long-term results. With the coming of supermarkets and shopping malls as new venues for the distribution of craftily marketed manufactured goods, a significant number of toys and allied accessories meant for children started gaining wide acceptance and capitalists from all over the world have made India their preferred market by devoting large spaces for children’s products in these places. In fact, whole aisles in supermarkets are being devoted just for new-borns, followed by aisles marketed to the tastes

of children progressively up to the age of twelve. Yet this proliferation of cheap commodities for children has resulted in changes in the young consumers themselves, such as shortened attention spans and an insatiable craving for new and improved toys.

All of this was not accidental or by chance. A closer scrutiny of toy companies like Lego, Hasbro, Nintendo, Mattel, Funskool, and Hot Wheels shows the excellence of the research and development wings of these companies in developing toys which have paid utmost attention to children's development in order to discover their tastes, likes, and dislikes. A lot of care is given to improve child's cognitive development, motor development, and sensitivity towards social circumstances. A careful analysis of American toys reveals a host of practices incorporated into these which intends to develop a chronic addiction towards all things Western.

Further detailed research on the kind of corporate social responsibility these companies have revealed a list of practices to be questioned and given attention. As part of their corporate social responsibility, these multinational corporates have had to pay immense attention to the environmental problems their manufacturing practices generate, such as problems of carbon emissions, water consumption, and energy efficiency. Yet one needs to have a serious look at how they intend to reduce plastic pollution, primarily in the form of landfills and ocean deposits, a problem they show little sincerity in solving. From the corporate social responsibility files it can be seen that Hasbro, Lego, and Mattel have faced constant criticism over the decades and have raised their bar higher regarding eco-friendliness only as a result of public scrutiny over their unsustainable practices.

To take one example, Hasbro has admittedly reduced its packing material and has reduced its use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). They have also reduced the number of plastic bags in which game instructions were wrapped, removing 800,000 pounds of material from

its stream worldwide (Desmarais par.7). At the same time, Lego and Mattel have contributed significantly to removing PVCs and have effectively contributed to sustainable energy and greener packing options (Desmarais par.9). The question that remains is how far these materials are recycled and how green their packaging is. The American toy industry giants have at least raised this concern and have at least thought of achieving greener options by the year 2030 but the Indian toy industry, which is estimated to be worth 400 million U.S. dollars (Misra and Gupta 9), has not even shown signs of considering the aspect of plastic pollution that it has set rolling. Although almost 40 Indian toy companies have occupied the market, all the research and development of Indian companies are completely focussed on marketing and sales, completely neglecting the dire need for solutions in environmental damage and long-term sustainability. Further, the desire for cheap budget toys has led to the opening of a huge import market in India. A quick glimpse into the websites of Indian companies unveils the lack of corporate social responsibility files. In fact, nowhere in the websites do they mention the kind of raw materials they use or the way they manage their waste, both very important elements which any ethical participant in a serious movement towards sustainability would surely take the time to provide. The social responsibility that they focus on is instead based on the hopelessly vague idea of 'A toy for every child,' a phrase which widens the aspect of non-biodegradable plastic pollution by cloaking environmentally irresponsible practices in the sentimental garb of democratizing access to craftily marketed plastic gimmickry.

Compared to the global toy industry, which is worth 88.8 billion USD, the Indian toy manufacturing industry is still in its nascent stages and will need more resources and support from government to develop and upgrade its technology. A large share of the production comes from the unorganized sector, which contributes 70 percent of the total demand (Misra and Gupta 12). The statistics of import of toys in India during the last few years shows how

China significantly contributes to the larger share, which is roughly around 75 percent, followed by the U.S.A and Italy.

At any rate, with the arrival of plastic toys, earlier modes of play time and games were completely revolutionized. Ironically enough, the politics of proliferation of markets for toys and its ever-high graph of consumption have its roots in the progressive politics of the nation. The lack of quality time for parents to spend with their children led to a demand for more varied consumer products to keep the children engaged in the absence of meaningful interaction with parents. At the same time, the substantial increase in per capita income of the country has given more opportunities to develop the society into an increasingly consumerist one by channelling this rise in monetary prosperity into the unproductive avenues of clever marketing and short-lived, disposable plastic waste.

Since consumer products associated with children have become increasingly linked with animation films' characters and objects, even children who are too young to be able to comprehend these films still end up consuming toys based upon imagery from them. Not coincidentally, an intimate familiarity with the associated animated character is developed through constant interaction with their object of play, even at an age that predates comprehension of the narrative or themes of the film as such. This generates a self-perpetuating feedback loop in which this bond between the child and the object of his desire, in the form of a beloved plaything he or she has devoted many hours to bonding with, is again reinforced by parents when they feel pressured into buying the child even more consumer products that have that pre-associated image in different shape and sizes. Thus, by the circular reasoning which has been engineered by marketing agencies for precisely this purpose, the child's desire for a very specific brand or image manufactured by corporate interests restricts the child's preferences for future toy purchases by requiring that they be stamped with the familiar image of a favourite character. Tragically, this places traditional

games like Chess at a disadvantage if they fail to fulfil the arbitrary requirement of containing a mass-marketed cartoon image, despite having a far more substantial quality as enduring pastimes.

The patristic relationship between the film industry and the children's toy industry is just one instance in a wider problematic trend of consumerist globalization. The promotional franchise of successful films, television programmes, books and sports teams makes use of this dynamic social change in society brought about by the consumer capitalism on a larger scale and in this way, it changes the very nature of the film, sport or book by making it an instance in a wider commercial system of objects. For example, we have promotional merchandise of the Star Wars science fiction film series, the Arsenal English football team, the Harry Potter novel series, ChotaBheem, and many others. When reduced to advertising techniques, content from the original context, such as the book or film's characters and concepts, simply become reference points for people who may never have seen the initial film or read the book to still be induced into purchasing unrelated commodities simply on the basis of a familiar image. These commodities, in turn, function as advertisement technologies for films, books, and sports team franchises by getting their foothold in both public and private spaces through different forms and figures, even including media that held no intrinsic relation or relevance to the original content of the series. For example, a set of plastic cups with the image of Harry Potter have only the most ad-hoc and haphazard relation to the series of novels but will still fulfil their purpose of inducing the consumer to make an irrational purchase on the basis of a sentimental reaction.

Inevitably, these prolonged and habitual interactions that takeplace between children and commodities will, quite literally, buy the hegemonic supremacy endorsed by American and Chinese capitalists, resulting simultaneously in both a massive transfer of material wealth to these nations and a massive increase in ideological influence from them. Although each

person is unique and the mode of interaction between consumer and commodity will be slightly different in each individual case, these disposable products are still likely to act as mobile teaching machines which contain uniformly encoded messages, reinforcing dominant ideological beliefs and the large-scale systems which fix and re-establish dominant ideologies of patriarchal supremacy, religion, value systems. Therefore, buying, quite literally, into globalized systems of commodification establishes a channel by which material wealth is exported and ideological influence is imported, weakening the consumer nation and strengthening the producer nation. Although a full treatment of this massive issue is beyond the scope of the present issue, acknowledging its unspoken role in the otherwise innocuous issue of children's toy trends is a massively important fact which cannot be afforded to be neglected.

In addition to troubling issues of ideology, the purely material problem of generating enormous heaps of waste which have no logical space to be deposited are enough of an issue on their own to merit our attention. Recent statistics and news report on plastic garbage have raised alarm and concern about the improper dispersal of discarded toys and allied accessories, along with other plastic waste which have entered landfills and water bodies and have created the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which is now estimated to be three times the size of France (Newman 50). Ocean Cleanup Foundation found that 92 percent of the mass is comprised of larger objects and it gave a new challenge about the scope of debris and the kind of corrective measures that people should be concerned about (Lasker par. 8).

Despite the outrageous scope we have allowed this problem to reach, it is absolutely fallacious to argue that nothing can be done to reverse these troubling trends. Since children occupy one-third of the population in India, a lot of meaningful changes can be brought about if we curb or minimize the use of plastic accessories that are meant for children. Children survived without many material possessions during past decades by effectively utilizing their

play time in outdoor games and games that increased their motor and cognition capacity, providing vital exercise for both the body and the imagination. Plastic was out of this loop completely. Today an average child up to the age of twelve produces huge amounts of plastic trash which were previously unimaginable. Their little impressionable minds can be amused and influenced in multiple ways, so it's better to influence them in an organic way by buying them eco-friendly objects and toys so that we can avoid chemical, mechanical, physical, electrical hazard that these objects pose and can make our environment a better place for generations to come. To argue that the current addiction to plastic gimmickry is simply a natural given that cannot be overcome would amount to a grossly illogical disregard for millennia of historical evidence that children led perfectly happy and fulfilling lives in the absence of any of the commodities which are today portrayed as "absolutely necessary."

Fortunately, crucial first steps have been taken to begin the process of reversing these unsustainable trends. The green protocol implemented by the Government of Kerala is one example of a crucial first step towards curbing plastic pollution. Effective implementation has resulted in curbing plastic carry bags to a large extent. Similarly, if governments at both Centre and State can make the necessary regulatory authorities bring the unorganized sector of the toy industry under control, then children will be safe and pollution caused by non-biodegradable objects can also be mitigated. Imposing high GST or import duty on Chinese toys that do not meet safety standards would result in curbing the proliferation of low quality plastic products and would support Indian toy industries as well. The supermarkets which devote floors for children's toy sections can contribute equally to reduce the plastic trash. Since the plastic that's used for children's accessories is made of high-quality plastic (by standard companies) these high-quality plastics can be collected at collection points at supermarkets themselves and can be recycled for further use. The peculiarity of all plastic recycling methods is that they can only be downgraded. Highly quality plastic can only be

recycled into a low-quality one. The plastic pellets that are crushed are used as shredded plastic and are used to make carpets, mats, plastic locks, and other trivial objects. Phasing out certain plastic accessories that do not meet safety and quality standards can also lessen the proliferation of hazardous plastic waste

In addition to implementing more intelligent methods for recycling plastic and avoiding unbridled plastic waste generation, one of the most promising yet underrated options available to us is to simply avoid the option of plastic altogether. Although the plastic industry infiltrated the toy market and achieved temporary hegemony over the industry by outcompeting other material media of production, largely on the basis of a temporary trend of low petroleum prices, it would be remarkably short-sighted to not realize that plastic's temporary ascendancy based on past trends in petroleum prices will not continue into the indefinite future (Greer 7). Plastic was a material medium that made financial sense at the height of the era of cheap petroleum in the latter 20th Century, but it simply fails the test of sustainability into a future which will witness dramatically higher prices and drastically lower availability in reliable fossil fuels (114). Providing a viable alternative for the future will not be optional; given its necessity, it is arguably best to begin the process of transition to alternative materials now.

Fortunately, the alternatives are anything but inferior to plastic. In fact, they almost always defeat their plastic counterparts comfortably in the areas of aesthetic value and ease of use, as well as durability and reliability into future years of use. By opting for cloth toys, soft toys, clay modelling toys, puzzles, and by giving children irreplaceable and inimitable real-life experiences in the form of visits to parks, amusement parks, zoos and museums, public gaming platforms can make our environment a better place and will help de-clutter homes from unwanted plastic waste. The new type of green toys which are made from corn starch and other eco-friendly raw materials are also a new way to engage children towards a greener

future. One can also opt gifting such green toys during celebrations so that the little world of children can be in harmony with nature.

One cannot oversee the effect of consciousness-raising programmes, eco-friendly camps, and environment-friendly lessons which are remoulded to suit the changing needs of the time. Sensitizing individuals and children can bring about significant changes in desire for things that harm the environment. As no solution is conclusive enough, resorting to tried and tested methods of changing mind-sets through awareness programmes, celebrity endorsements, and campaigns that have life beyond environment-day celebrations need to be in the larger discourse for a significant amount of time to make childhood less disposable.

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