



## A Glimpse of "Child Abuse" in the History of English Literature

### KEYWORDS

childhood, innocence, victimization, abuse,

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**ABSTRACT** *Children are visualized as angels and most innocent creation of god. Despite this fact they are most victimized, exploited, marginalized and abused members of the society. The lively, happy and jovial picture of children is quite visible in the folk tales, children's stories, fairy tales and fables. It has always been assumed that all the children on earth are safe and sound in the very hands of caregivers and caretakers. But the darker side of reality is that the protectors are actually the violators. This truth is quite implicit even in the happiest and world renowned tales like Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast and Hansel and Gretel, etc. This is true not only in the case of female children but also applicable in the case of male children. Literature is the mirror of the society and a vent to those hidden realities of culture, religion and society which never come to surface or which are not sanctioned by the constructors of the social norms until triggered. It is only possible through the pathway of literature that these realities come out consciously or unconsciously in the wrap of aesthetic vocabulary in acceptable way. One of such theme pertaining to childhood is "child abuse" which has never been talked about so openly due to orthodoxy, patriarchy, societal taboos, religious restraints and psychological constraints. The present paper seeks to trace the brief history of child abuse in literature.*

During the 1600s, the concept of childhood began to emerge in Europe and adults started viewing children as separate beings. Earlier they were treated as innocent beings, in need of protection and training by the adults around them. The English philosopher John Lock was influential in defining this new attitude towards children with regard to his theory of the 'Tabula Rasa'. In the later years, Puritanism too stressed the importance of individual salvation and concern for the spiritual welfare of the children. In the Romantic period J.J Rousseau formulated romantic attitudes towards children in his famous 1762 novel *Emile*: or *On Education*. "Child is the father of man" (Wordsworth), was the kind of notion propagated by romantic poets assigning celebratory status to childhood.

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s, concern was primarily centered on the protection of society in terms of prevention of the crime and anti social behaviour. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the industrial revolution, child neglect became recognized as a societal concern throughout most of the western world, with initial concerns for abandoned and physically neglected children resulting in the formation of the 1<sup>st</sup> child protection societies in 1888. The increasing awareness of child abuse as a problem and the emergence of child as an individual began with an article published in the journal of the American Medical Association in 1962 by Kempe and his colleagues where the term "Battered Child Syndrome" was first used to recognize the incidence of injuries intentionally inflicted on young children.

The novels of Charles Dickens' revealed an intense concern about the vulnerability of children. His novels are full of neglected, exploited and abused children, the orphaned Oliver Twist, the crippled Tiny Tim, stunted Smike and doomed tykes like Paul Dombey and little Nell present a gallery of children suffering for being at the receiving end of the society. As the century wore on, people started accepting the idea that childhood should be protected and children's literature blossomed into what critics called its "Golden Age". Charles' fictional children raised readers'

consciousness about the society's neglect and mistreatment of its youngest, innocent, and vulnerable members.

"In medieval and early modern texts from 1200 to 1700, there was neglect of childhood, and if there were any characters portrayed predominantly in connection with religion and a sense of sinfulness with training and instructions towards adulthood... and as victims of actual or threatened adult violence and brutality" (Gavin).

But in both medieval and early modern literature children were frequently subjected to threats and acts of violence. They were the victims of the atrocities done in the name of punishment, religion and superstitions in one way or the other. They were sacrificed, abused and tortured since the times immemorial though in an acceptable way. It is in the Victorian age that literature produced, provoked social thought and raised voice against the victimization of children however in a meek voice. Various writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, portrayed child characters in their works and revolutionized the whole concept of innocent and chaste kingdom of childhood.

"20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century literature depicted victimized, psychological and sexualized portrayals of child" (Gavin).

Freud's three essays on the theory of Sexuality, particularly essay on infantile sexuality gave a new dimension to the myth of childhood innocence and revolutionized the whole world of child literature giving it new direction, different perspective and psychological insights. Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Richard Hughes, Elizabeth Bowell and Katherine Mansfield ushered a new era by writing about childhood experiences in the form of family relations and individual needs. After World War II, the adult betrayal of innocence, change in society and themes related to fragile innocence were demonstrated in William Golding's depiction of children's descent into violence and persecution in *Lord of Flies* in 1954.

Contemporary literature about the child deals with anxieties, dilemmas, queries represented in adult child relationship through young adult genre. It has entered into a phenomenon to tackle, reflect and redefine the issues pertaining to child sexuality, criminalization, and victimization. All this has been possible under the rubrics of feminism, lesbianism and other prominent postcolonial theories. Fictional and non fictional accounts in the form of memoirs, novels plays, short stories are helping providing a canvas to the writers to express various views and interpretations about child and child abuse. The broadened aspects of child literature including both the sides appeared on such a large scale for the first time in the history of English literature. The credit of this kind of openness goes not only to the writers but to the readers as well. The stories of victimization have been pictured, shared and narrated to arouse the social consciousness, justice, awareness and revolution. The predicaments of the children, the attitudes of society towards children and children's notion towards sexuality have undergone transformation .It is searching for new perspectives and critical concerns in the new millennium. Little literary space was accorded to the needs and requirements of the childhood in the literature produced in the past but new vistas are in waiting for exploration, interpretation, consideration towards children in the future with an optimism to provide a voice to child abuse.