



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literature

PICTUREBOOKS FOR PLEASURE OR EMPOWERMENT? READING MAHASHWETA DEVI'S *THE WHY-WHY GIRL* AND BELL HOOKS' *HAPPY TO BE NAPPY*.

KEY WORDS: children's literature, empowerment, identity, picturebooks

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature embodies a complex blend of fantastical adventures, young protagonists, and optimistic moral lessons designed to engage both children and adults. However, contemporary authors such as Mahasweta Devi and bell hooks approach children's literature differently. This paper looks at how Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* (2003) and hooks' *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999), employ storytelling techniques to empower young readers.

INTRODUCTION

A significant challenge facing genres is the need to adapt traditional notions to resonate with modern readers. Children's literature, in particular, embodies a complex blend of fantastical adventures, young protagonists, and optimistic moral lessons designed to engage both children and adults. However, contemporary authors such as Mahasweta Devi and bell hooks approach children's literature differently, viewing children as curious individuals seeking an understanding of the world and their identities. This paper looks at how Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* (2003) and hooks' *Happy to Be Nappy* (1999), employ storytelling techniques to empower young readers by shedding light on systemic injustices faced by tribal communities and African-Americans, while showcasing how child characters challenge these societal norms.

In contrast to the didactic and prescriptive children's literature prevalent in colonial India during the 19th and 20th centuries, *The Why-Why Girl* challenges traditional norms and approaches. Early children's books in Calcutta, starting from 1817, often reflected didacticism- the adult writers' moral teachings of reward and punishment. However, as the 20th century progressed, narratives depicting diverse childhood experiences and addressing societal issues gained traction. The translation of stories from regional languages to English further broadened the readership. The questioning attitude of Moyna, a tribal girl, within a caste-conscious society, marks a significant shift in modern Indian literature. Aligning with the views of Kehily and Swann (2003), it is evident that childhood today is a global concern requiring a reevaluation of conventional practices.

Moyna's natural curiosity and probing questions serve as a means to enlighten young readers about the harsh socio-economic conditions faced by the landless Shabar community, within the confines of caste-based discrimination. She challenges the traditional norms by refusing to show gratitude to the Babu for basic provisions, questioning the unequal distribution of labour and resources. She says, "Don't I sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him? Does he ever thank me? Why should I?" Similarly, she wonders, "Why do I have to graze the Babus' goats? Their boys can do it." Despite being labelled as obstinate by her mother Khiri, and called the 'Why-Why girl' by the postmaster, Moyna's unwavering sense of self reflects the exploitation faced by indigenous communities who contribute their labour without receiving due recognition or reward.

To ensure that children can empower themselves through Moyna's tale of resisting oppression without facing adult censorship, illustrator Kanyika Kini employs crayons and pastel graphics instead of violent images. Nodelman (1996) observed that illustrations play a crucial role in conveying deeper meanings about the world and social structures to children, and argued that, "It is important to have an understanding of text as both verbal and visual language, and

this is particularly true of children's literature – given that the primary audience is still learning about language as it uses it." Moyna's sense of wonder is captured in her upward-facing curious glance. Similarly, not only do the animal drawings entertain the young readers, but also convey Devi's relentless work with the Samiti and the local tribals. Additionally, the caricatured representation of Babu with his large frowning head, protruding belly, and resting posture is juxtaposed with the perpetually labouring tribals, highlighting the community's plight without romanticising their surroundings. By utilizing these artistic techniques, Devi and Kini effectively convey the message of empowerment and resistance in a way that is both engaging and thought-provoking for young readers.

The book uses free-flowing texts and illustrations to convey the message that education empowers ostracised individuals and communities to bring about change. Moyna, like her brother, loses her childhood to work, but she challenges her circumstances by asking her school teacher to change the timings and questioning why she shouldn't study- "Why shouldn't I study too?" and "If you don't teach me, how will I learn?" Determined to educate herself, she uses the Samiti to learn and eventually becomes a teacher who encourages students to ask questions. Moyna's queries to her teacher demonstrate the evolution of student-teacher relationships from *pathshalas* of the 18th and 19th centuries to contemporary India. Unlike in colonial India, students are now encouraged to have a voice of their own, instead of being labelled as troublemakers who deserve punishment after deserve.

In contrast to prevalent feminist narratives in India that predominantly focus on the struggles of privileged upper-class and/or caste women, this text offers empowerment to its young audience through the lens of a tribal girl. Basu and John (1998) contend that the country's feminist discourse often centres on the concerns of urban elites, sidelining the complexities of caste and class disparities faced by marginalized communities. The contemporary feminist movement has strong ties to the concerns of the middle-class *bhadralok*, wherein Brahmanical patriarchy is viewed as the central force of gender discrimination. Similarly, writers in the 1990s depicted rich and educated children against the dangerous 'Other' - poor, illegitimate and illiterate orphans. Through an intersectional perspective, the text portrays childhood from the viewpoint of a subaltern protagonist who defies societal norms related to socioeconomic status, class, and gender by emphasizing the importance of education over-dependence on a privileged saviour. Consequently, Devi challenges the exclusion of oppressed groups from mainstream literary representations, providing urban children with a glimpse into contemporary social realities through the curious eyes of a relatable peer. As Devi argued, a writer must be socially responsible in depicting the realities of distinct periods, the language of the people, and power

relations between the oppressor and the oppressed.

The text can be analyzed through Foucault's concept of omnipresent hegemonic power influencing everyday discourse to maintain inequalities. Devi's portrayal of power dynamics between the Shabars and the babus, and Hooks' challenge of the white gaze towards African-Americans' natural features, exemplify this idea. In the children's book *Happy to Be Nappy*, self-love and black cultural identity are celebrated by redefining nappy hair as a symbol of racial pride. As Tolson argued, children's literature written by black writers is significant in motivating "the African-American child to feel a sense of value and self-pride." Furthermore, Du Bois (2005) observed that children's picture books are vital in changing the ideas about black bodies and identity.

In her therapeutic writings, hooks empowers coloured children by celebrating the beauty of their bodies, challenging discriminatory narratives, and advocating for self-acceptance. Manuel (2009) states that hooks was defined by her social and political aim to build and disseminate a positive concept of black identities. Before hooks, *The Brownies Book* designed for coloured children also strove to make them understand their bodies are normal and beautiful. By addressing the impact of Eurocentric beauty standards (which deem white rosy skin, and long silky and straight hair as the ideal) on young minds, she highlights the importance of embracing one's natural features, such as 'cottony hair', in the face of societal pressures. Through her work, hooks aims to educate and inspire young readers to embrace their unique identities and resist harmful stereotypes.

Chris Raschka's illustrations and textual depictions of happy African-American children hold significant value for young black readers. In contrast to the stereotypical portrayals of black children in 1970s children's literature, Raschka's use of warm pastel watercolour illustrations and crayon-written texts showcases self-assured children with diverse skin tones and hair types. The self-assured children's 'soft' hair is likened to a 'flower petal' and 'halo', while they are encouraged to experiment with their 'heads of joy' by pulling it tight, brushing, twisting, or 'let[ting] go'. Moreover, hair is associated with healing properties as it can 'take the gloom away'. According to Hade (1997), it is the adults who are responsible for helping the child reader become "critical readers and thus critical thinkers" by teaching the children how to read such important texts.

The children's hair is celebrated as a source of joy and healing, encouraging readers to embrace their natural appearance. Through their collaboration, hooks and Raschka empower young readers to take pride in their unique features and identities. As argued by Nodelman, the pictures and the text go hand-in-hand in picture books written for children. This is because both the mediums are problematised and interpreted by the readers as a whole, instead of being seen as separate and independent of each other's influence.

The poignant narrative of African-American children rejecting white beauty standards and forming connections with one another serves as a source of healing for both young viewers and adults grappling with years of emotional wounds and insecurity.



The visuals like the ones in Fig.1 and Fig.2 capture the

tradition of young girls undergoing hair treatments, symbolizing their transition into womanhood and highlighting the bond shared among females of different ages. hooks comments, "For each of us, getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is a sign of our desire to be women. It is a gesture that says we are approaching womanhood - a rite of passage." Similarly, Coleman (1983) highlights that women got a chance to catch up with each other, acknowledge their blackness and share confessions of suffering.



Fig.3

Likewise, the imagery in Fig.3 portrays a group of diverse, joyful children whose unique skin tones blend harmoniously, representing a message of unity.



Fig.4

The final illustration (Fig.4) conveys a powerful message of African-American girls finding strength and joy in a continuous cycle of personal and collective resistance, embracing their natural hair texture with pride.

The books *The Why-Why Girl* and *Happy to Be Nappy* convey empowering messages to young readers who may feel disconnected from children's literature written solely from an adult perspective. These books challenge the notion that picture books only provide emotional pleasure through their use of layered illustrations and texts. By encouraging children to explore social, economic, and cultural issues, these books answer their questions and foster critical thinking skills and self-confidence, ultimately empowering them to think independently of adult influence.

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