

FOOD: A MAJOR SIGNIFIER IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

Children have posed multifarious responses towards food in varied situations and a proper interpretation of their behavioural patterns helps us probe deeper into a deep understanding of their psychology and psychological developments. Also, a critical analysis of presentation of food in various children's literary works (my paper includes both Western and Indian tales) helps us grasp the sociological factors, which regulate Children's Literature and are in turn regulated by the latter. My paper accommodates the study of this processes of development in children through a critical observation of when and how food has been used in several Children's Literature as 'signifier', and why they have been particularly used to depict socio-cultural aspects. My interpretation reveals potent ways of influencing child psychology via the varied usage of food in literature.

Keywords: Assimilation, Accommodation, fairy tales, Grimm's Household Stories, Hans Christian Andersen, Jean Piaget, Michel Foucault, Sukumar Ray, "Thakumar Jhuli".

Food comes to play, for more than a particular reason in literature. But technically, if it's just children's literature we are talking of, our subject's abundance aggravates drastically. A child's basic requirements and social requirements are perhaps not radically different from one another as when compared to an adult world. Particularly, this might crop from the very reason that, apparently children's necessities are more earth bound then transcendental; which is quite natural enough. Childhood is the very part of our lives when we get to materially know our world around, gradually familiarize with all the unknown, half-known and un-understood things around us.

Sincerely wondering why Ruskin Bond craved for food while writing his *Children's Omnibus*, he himself modestly replies that one can hardly write with a growling stomach; and food speaks in more than just growls when we are speaking of children's literature. In fact, hunger being a living being's basic feeling, every child can connect to the concept of food at a very tender age.

Jean Piaget, the Swiss developmental psychologist while dealing with the nature of knowledge and gradual acquiring or cognitive development of children makes an important observation 'Assimilation' occurs when humans are faced with new or unfamiliar information and refer to previously learned information to make sense of it.

This is the very process perhaps that works at the core of every child's subjective interpretation of so many varied foods that they come across in stories, ever having themselves tasted or perhaps even glimpsed them. This, I am writing, in perspective of a particular case study. When I read out the term 'schnitzel' from a translation of Grimm's collection of Fairy tales while narrating the stories to a six year old child, she gave me a quizzical look and asked what a 'schnitzel' was. Before I could reply, she came up with a modest question of whether it was a particular 'পিরিঠি' that her granny makes for her whenever she behaves well. Now, I seemed to find my-self in a horn's dilemma. If the, literal meaning of 'schnitzel' is clarified, the taste that the one bears will be completely reverse from the one pointed out by the child and yet if the lit meaning is done with for some time, it lingers to bear a particular social / moralizing value which might be corrected as the child grows up expanding his/her vocabulary. It was then an act of 'assimilation' on the part of the child to be late developed into an act of accommodation.

A next instance that I would be inclined to put forth would be a part of the story form the canonical dream literature for children, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice was perhaps "startled" and obliged with the appearance of the "Cheshire cat" sitting on a bough with its "large grin and very long claws", that "she felt it ought to be treated with respect". Alice conducting herself well gets to know of the Mad-Hatter and the 'March Hare and on her timid entrance to the March Hare's place finds herself standing in front of a large table set out under a tree in front of the house where the March Hare and the Hatter were having tea. Alice was greeted by the three hosts – the couple of them and a Dormouse, huddled at the corner 'No room! No room!' Alice sitting herself down on as large arm-chair at an empty end of the table replied "There plenty of room!" and the Hare offered her "some wine", to which when she pointed out that there wasn't any the Hare acknowledged. Alice angrily retorts, "Then it, wasn't very civil of you to offer it" and is replied by the Hare on a similar note "It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited". The scene seems to be that of an inviting, cozy English tea-party, where the rules and manners have already been prescribed. The questions of civility, table-manners of a Victorian society appear again and again and though Alice out of sheer curiosity sits uninvited she definitely behaves way civilly in comparison to her hosts and surely she is surprised to find herself rewarded at the end of the party: to find herself into the beautiful garden, "among the bright flower-beds and the cool fountains".

The abundance of a stereotypical English meal, in contrast to our previous picture, in the first text of "Harry Potter" by J. K. Rowling, finds her readers gorging on foods sequentially: "roast beef, roast chicken, pork-chops and lamb-chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire-pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup and for some

strange reason, mint humbugs”. And when the folks have gobbled as much as they can, appeared puddings, blocks of ice-creams in all flavors one can imagine – “apple pies, treacle, tarts, chocolate éclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, jelly, rice pudding...” . If our narrator’s shifting to Paris at the end of Joyce’s “A portrait of an Artist as a Young Man” is an instance of wish fulfillment for our poet, then to Harry, a boy brought up by his uncle and aunt, who perennially doted on their own child, feeding him to unimaginable obesity, in front of Harry’s eyes and providing Harry with only what Harry’s tummy could only hold without hunger, then this episode would just provide our protagonist with equal amount of satisfaction and fullness. No wonder then that Harry, who was deprived of anything that he really wanted till date by his cousin Dudley, piled up his plate with a “bit of everything except the humbugs”. Also, if one is a bit observing, one will notice the particular sequence of arrangement in which the food is narrated; the beef is followed by roasted chicken and then the pork and lamb-chops, which are succeeded by succulent and fried potatoes and so on. It does definitely give us a hierarchal structure of food as far as their monetary values are concerned, if we keep the subjective cravings of test buds at bay.

Generally, a child’s attitude to food is determined by and as well determines his/her social and emotional position. The concerns of Harry and Alice are as well reflected in other children’s stories and they create the sociological, cultural, economic notions and images.

It’s of no surprise that Foucault’s knowledge-power equation has a similar equivalence in food as signifier in children’s psychology. “A child derives security only from the conviction that he understands what baffled him before – never from being given facts which create new uncertainties.” Bruno Bettelheim.

Food, since related to hunger, is a very basic motive for children to connect to, even at a very “base” age as categorized by Piaget, and is the most potent allure to capture their imagination. Hence, the story of the two-siblings ^[1], locked up in a witch’s-den, all disguised as the food-parlour, is understandable enough even to the tender section of children, who has hardly assimilated completely.

Interestingly, if the adult-writers, publishers of the genre choose to choose and publish the work, which can regulate the socio-moral developments of the child, then the entire section of adults/syllabus-makers, fall under this section of power-structure; food being a signifier of the ‘knowledge’ of child psychology.

Speaking from sociological and cultural perspectives, food again forms that essential ingredient in the recipes of Children’s Literatures of diverse regions: Be it a highly conspicuous English meal at Harry’s table or the specific sequence followed by Sukumar Ray in his short story “পেটুক” (a Bengali word for ‘Glutton’ here). Anyone reading the story will find, in sequence, the foods that ritualistically form an assortment of Bengali platters in a feast or a celebration, just as the previous explores its English manifestation. Not only will the child reading the story form an idea of the foods offered to guests but also will develop their distinct idea about the courses in meal in a traditional Bengali setting: a tart follows a heavy main course for Harry and “Doi, Sandesh, Rabri- and Rosogolla” succeed any

traditional Bengali feast. Not only will the child be educated about what to gorge on sequentially, but the entire story revolves around a child who is in a way punished for his particular trait of being a glutton. Now that forms an essential feature of any Children's Literature. Besides, educating the readers of one's cultural codes they have always been a medium for ethical and moral education- right from the Victorian modification of folklores and fairy tales in order to regulate social value systems for the would be adults, to the chanting of nursery rhymes where the adult world keeps a tab of what the young are up to. Naturally, 'Johnny' is forced to open his mouth to his papa's command with a reluctant "Ha! Ha! Ha!" and Ray's protagonist in "পেটুক" sustains his period of punishment, obviously modified by his guardians in their own ways.

The story ends with the curing of his 'vice' and numerous similar treatments are found elsewhere in Children's stories: Rowling's *Harry Potter series* bears several instances like Dudley's exceeding greed for food that leads him to earn a pig-tail from Hagrid, the monstrous wizard and it is no coincidence that our snow-white and little Hansel and Gretel fell for the similar temptation, but of course in notably varied situations. Basically, food being one of the most basic necessity of human existence its values, its manners [which may be frequently attached to Victorian notions], its need, and its greed, lies at the base of human understanding; it is essential that children imbibe the ideas not only for their lifestyles' sake but also, that seems to be the most practical way to relate the material existence of the world around with the first bodily need that they come across- that of hunger. Referring back to Piaget's Sensory-Motor comprehension of the world, I would suggest they are naturally conditioned too to assimilate their social, cultural, moral 'adaptations', and in relationship to what they bodily require(food) and what they actually get, which includes the economic scenario they are placed in.

Sukumar Ray actually utilized many different significations that food sustains in his writings. With reference to "খাই খাই" (whose English translation would perhaps be *Inexhaustible Appetite*), I would choose to point out that not only does he locate the vivid platters available in Bengali tradition but the generalized food habits that define an individual's characteristics or their traditional traits: "জ্যাঠা ছেলে বিড়ি খায়, কান ধরে টানিও... ব্যাঙ খায় ফরাসিরা (খেতে নয় মন্দ)/বারমার 'গাম্পি'তে বাপরে কি গন্ধ! /মাদ্রাজী ঝাল খেলে জ্বলে যায় কন্ঠ/ জাপানেতে খায় নাকি ফড়িঙের ঘন্ট! / আরশুলা মুখে দিয়ে সুখে খায় চীনারা".

What seems interesting to note is, the entire body of children's literature are equally read, enjoyed and comprehended by adults. In fact, fairy tales collected and published by the Grimm Brother's, Charles Perrault, Hans Anderson, were first written for the adults. It was the Victorian society, who first formulated the construct, or rather the idea of the childhood and thereby a separate identity and needs of a child. No wonder, it was again the work of Victorian society itself, that this enormous body of folklore and fairy tales was modified to suit their needs and serve their purpose of imparting moral, social, and cultural education to children. Similarly, the smoking of "বিড়ি" by "জ্যাঠা ছেলে" is a part of typical flouting of

Indian moral ethics and hence he is ‘pulled by the ear’ which can be related to the contrary situation where Alice sticks to obedience of table and civil manners and later rewarded.

In dealing with the world of fantasy too in Children’s Literature, food plays an important mediator and quite symbolically mediates psychological impacts; which is many a times explored in the tales as a medium that boosts or enhances confidence. It can be pointed out in the usage of “Felix felicitis”, a magical potion that boosts Ronald Weasley’s confidence in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter series*, or the magical properties inherent in the “cake” and the “drink” which Alice bites or sips on, in order to increase or reduce her body size. The essentiality of food to survive and sustain is something that needs to be acknowledged by children before they become independent and here lies the importance of the magic power that is attached to food.

Again in Ray’s “পুতুলের ভোজ” (Doll’s Birthday Feast), the protagonist believes without a shred of doubt that her dolls are animate, lively beings since they consumed the foods plated for them (while she was asleep). Though we, the readers, know of the rats who actually devoured the foods, but the little girl places her firm belief in the disappearance of the same due to her ‘living’ dolls and this belief of the child is built in her confidence of being able to logicise the matter, as far as she can see. However for the readers, including the children the entire plot works on a different psychological level. Not only will the child listening to or reading the story comprehend and sympathize with the half-formed logic of the little girl, but the reader/listener will definitely be able to see through the entire episode and form better capability to opine or interpret situations- which is perhaps one of the most essential function and potentiality of fantasy in literature, more so in Children’s literature.

Analyzing food from the socio-cultural perspective, its ethics are quite integrated into child psychology with the vivid narration of the attitudes of characters and presenting them accordingly. In this context, I would like to point out a particular literary trope present in Children’s Literature, which are worlds apart as far as the time period of their compositions are concerned, as well as their linguistic backgrounds. Yet, we can hardly fail to recognize a similar train of thought in them. My first literary example would be that of the entire collection of fairy tales, both from Western and Indian repertoire, wherein the powerful figure of wicked stepmother enacts moments of open hostility towards their stepchildren. She makes them starve, kills them and even eats them.

In “*The Juniper Tree*”, the stepmother kills the stepson and serves him to his father. Also, in “নীলকমল আর লালকমল” a tale within “ঠাকুমার ঝুলি”, compiled by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, both the stepson and the biological one fall prey to the appetite of a monstrous mother. I would like to mention another disparate reference which is too considered to be a part of Children’s Literature, and that is “একটি মরণের কাহিনি” by Sukanta Bhattacharya.

All of them utilize the trope of cannibalism to a smaller or a larger extent. Looking back at the separate time-frames of their composition, we can trace similar historical backgrounds behind them all. The oral narratives of the fairy tales compiled by the Grimm Brothers, Charles Perrault, and Hans Anderson stem from the age-old folk-narrations, dating back to

the medieval period. Europe had envisaged a huge famine during the early fourteenth century, when several incidents of cannibalism had been historically recorded. A similar situation appears to have been confronted by the people of Bihar, West Bengal, North-western provinces and Oudh in 1873-74A.D. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar compiled his “ঠাকুমার ঝুলি”, which consists of the tale “নীলকমল আর লালকমল”. He compiled the work from the hugely widespread oral-narrations of aged women of the village Mymensingh, then a part of West Bengal.

“একটি মরণের কাহিনি” was written in around 1946A.D. by Sukanta Bhattacharya when he was the editor of “Kishor Sabha” of *Dainik Swadhinata*. It is a tale wherein a cock, which dreams all day long to gorge on a huge feast at last, gets to be present in one. Unfortunately, it hardly gets to indulge in that feast but is presented as a platter therein, which again betrays a cannibalistic tendency.

Again, Bengal witnessed a huge famine during 1943A.D. It is true that a severe lack of the basic substance of sustenance can subvert rational, cultured, civilized human beings. The necessity to survive forced human beings to turn violent, even to the extremity of being cannibals and all of the tales are sheer manifestations of this extreme abnormalcy of human behaviour. What I am interested to point out in this context is that Children’s Literature in exposing such violence provides a revealing insight. Food, or rather its lack, as a signifier in subversion of the entire normalcy of the adult world, inculcates among children the norms and ethics bound to the same.

In associating the little readers to their respective literary counterparts, who are mostly placed as the victims of the subversion, the literature both emphasizes the fact and makes them aware of the cultural and civil codes of the adult/human world, which if ignored can lead to pitiable catastrophe; suffered by all the wicked stepmothers without fail.

In fact, while speaking of the presence of food in abundance in Children’s Literature, I would like to point out at a very primary level the mother-infant relationship, wherein many years psychoanalysts as well as psychologists extensively studied the infant’s need of compulsory sustenance, and thereby survival, the indispensability of being fed. Definitely the infant is dependent on his/her mother as a whole structure of a chain of social-interactions that one just begins with. No wonder, it is an essential part of child’s psychological and hence personality development.

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