

## Children's Literature Folktales And Cultural Theories

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### **Abstract:**

*The article presents the importance of Children's literature and its significance although it has been deemed to be a minor field of study. The article points out how throughout the ages, Children's literature, being the root of all kinds of literature had been the main source of information that has been passed on for generations. The article displays how children's literature set paradigms of societal construct and how cultural theories have been inter-linked with Children's literature. It focuses on the importance of Children's literature and how it conceals in its backgrounds; the true nature of humans, their cultures, beliefs and superstitions that either inform the reader about the cultural diversity or entertain readers with the beautifully engraved past and functions of what a certain culture once believed in.*

**Keywords:** *Children's Literature, Cultural Theories, folktales, folklores, nursery rhymes, dark cultural backgrounds, multi-cultural influences, concepts of evil-steppmothers and orphans in society.*

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*Jack Zipes believes folktales have always been used to mold the child's attitudes and behaviors and he says, "if we examine the development of the individual and family in different societies.....we can see that instinctual drives are conditioned and largely determined through interaction and interplay with the social environment"*

When we think of children's story today, we probably think of it as a kind of entertainment, rather than a tool for moral instruction. Children's Literature includes books, poems, and plays meant for children. We can further say that even though the genre is defined by its audience, children and adults alike enjoy these stories which are intended for children.

Children's Literature hold within it a wide range of works which include recognized classics of world literature, picture books and easy to read stories written solely for children and this includes genres like fairytales, lullabies, fables, folk songs and tales and even nursery rhymes and a lot of others as well.

Now, let us go into Cultural Theories. First of all, what is cultural theory? We can say that Cultural Theory reveals some of the different objects of theoretical discourse that different scholars of thought and theoretical paradigms have thrown before us. In reality, these paradigms pass through the disciplines of; among many others: sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, literary theory, media and communication studies and even science and technological studies which provides a sense of the development and extension of cultural theory from initial and longstanding questions about power and agency, ordinary and popular practices. Thus, cultural theories question about global humanity and justice to developments in the global cultural economy which concerns the information, technology and even value because Cultural Theory brings out the way that humans interpret their biology and their environment. Taken from this point of view; culture as we speak, becomes an integral part of human existence. It is the human environment and most of the cultural change that can be attributed to human adaptation to historical events. Although most anthropologists try to define culture in such a way that it separates us, human beings from other animals, there is no doubt that many of our human traits are therefore similar to those of other animals which in particular, we can address to the traits of other primates like monkeys and chimpanzees, etc..

Children's Literature can be said to be deeply rooted with the cultural background that it is written in. For example, we have a lot of Mizo folktales and folklores which portray in the stories, multi-cultural influences and practices. Stories like Mauruangi and Liandovate unau portrays the cruel, harsh and difficult life that orphans face in the Mizo community and these problems and difficulties that they face clearly depict things like bullying and even acts of murders. In the case of Mauruangi, we see that her step-mother tried to get

rid of her by pouring boiling water on her; thus killing her. But she was brought back to life again by a serow, which is a type of Capricorn, the state animal of Mizoram (i.e. Saza). When we talk about the multi-cultural influences in children's literature, this 'multi-cultural' symbolizes the promises and pitfalls of injecting race, gender, language, class and other markers of identity into aesthetic discussions. However, the fundamental importance of these characteristics makes it impossible to ignore them.

Black writers, who have historically dealt with questions about race, exclusion and participation in mainstream cultural institutions, express some of the more intriguing viewpoints. The selective tradition provides insights into concerns about how the literature is defined, and whether genuine representations of the African lives are conveyed. By advancing the notion of a contested terrain, we assert that African American children's literature does more than just represent and depict culture. Rather, books can dispute negative racial depictions. Theorists maintain that children's books are cultural products created within particular socio-political contexts and for these reasons; they reflect and perhaps, even perpetuate societal phenomena such as racism and white supremacy.

When we say that cultural influences are largely embedded in literature, we do not exclude children's literature as well. Children's literature portrays many cultural traits as we can see in not only many, but almost all of them, these children's stories reflect the cultural background. We even see in *Matilda*, the story of the little girl with telekinetic powers how much she has been neglected and abused verbally by her own parents and even her mean and scary principal miss

Trunchbull. In the story of *Matilda*, certain values that can be linked to specific social classes are fairly easy to note down and classify or recognize as the story underlines the importance of literature and education. Apart from this, in Roald Dahl's other works as well, we are able to see and detect his dark past which reveals the fact that he is an orphan who was sent to live with his aunts; who, instead of consoling and loving him, abused and bullied him. His aunts were known as a sadistic pair. Several of his writings and books on children's literature mirror the dark cultural background that he has encountered which also resulted in his stories. For example, his work, 'James and the Giant Peach' has been criticized for its racism, profanity, references to drugs and even consumption of alcohol including the sexual implication and even communism. We can also pinpoint the reflection of cultural aspects such as the way orphans were mistreated not only through Roald Dahl, but through other children's literature such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White* who both were motherless at an early stage of their lives and how they had to endure the wrath and bullying of their stepmothers. The two characters though they were princesses, had to suffer a lot since they were victims of their stepmothers who never wanted them to be apart of something that would be a good result in their lives and things that would make them comfortable than them. Thus, the notion of evil stepmothers may prove to be right all along. Many Mizo folktales also contain this concept of evil-stepmother. The story- *Mauruangi* is, among many of the stories that portray the concept of evil-stepmothers.

Not only in stories, but when we look at the nursery rhymes which we often sing to children and teach them, there seem to lie beneath these sepulchred rhymes, dark stories which reveal the cultural aspects of their origins.

'*Baa Baa Black Sheep*' as we greatly know too has a dark and tragic background in which this rhyme is about the medieval wool tax, which was imposed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by King Edward I. Under the new rules, a third of the cost of a sack of wool went to the king, another went to the church and the last was for the farmer. In the original version of the rhyme, nothing was therefore left for the little boy who lives down the lane. While in today's version, we see that the little boy got one bag as the poem goes-

*"Baa Baa Black Sheep, have you any wool,*

*Yes sir, yes sir, three bagsfull.*

*One for the master, and one for the dame,*

*One for the little boy*

*Who lives down the lane ... "*

However, this has only been sequestered for the rhyme to not be too cruel. Thus, we find evidences from this rhyme about the cultural background of the period as it portrays and here in this particular rhyme, it portrays the dark cultural background during the 13<sup>th</sup> century when even the kings were not always good and noble. Thus, we can say that these children's literatures are intense illusions of real life and the events that portray a sense of reality relating to certain times of their lives. We also have tales like Beowulf which truly portray the cultural background of the Anglo Saxon community where wars matter and monsters were still a thing.

In terms of their celebration with feasts and alcohol over winning battles, it shows their way of life and even the chivalric actions and quests that warriors had to challenge with on their day to day life. The Anglo Saxon values and cultures have been deeply rooted and portrayed through this tale which includes the heroic, the bravery, honor, loyalty towards their duties and the concepts that they hold and value.

The Mexican folktale, The Book of Life has injected in the story their cultural elements regarding the set of ancient ideas towards life, death and the afterlife which in the Mexican culture is largely descended from Aztec roots. The Mexicans believe that a persons' experience of the afterlife is not so much linked with what he had done when he was still alive. Instead, it has been closely connected to whether his descendants still remembered and value him instead. The afterlife was divided into two realms- one, the land of the remembered and the other, the land of the forgotten. The land of the remembered is like a colorful religious festival, a place where the dead ancestors whom the living still remembered lived. The land of the remembered; as portrayed in the story is a place where the remembered ancestors feast and rejoice. The land of the forgotten on the other hand, was a dark and bleak destination where dead souls blow away like ashes in breeze. The forgotten dead ancestors are the ones to live in this place. According to the story, when one dies, the moment they are forgotten and neglected by their relatives is the moment they end up in the land of the forgotten. This Mexican tale depicts the cultural identity of the Mexicans. Manolo and his family are a family of bull fighters who, in the Mexican community are like entertainers and the profession was seen as a respectful profession. Manolo on the other hand, was interested in music which his father disapproves greatly. For Manolo's father, their family's legacy was more important than Manolo's dream. This can be related to how many people often force their children to pursue careers that they want for themselves, putting aside their children's wants and dreams. Thus, these incidents in the story clearly portray the views and beliefs of not only the Mexican culture, but also most parents.

In many ways, children's literature is not only for children, but also for adults alike. The many morals that have been imprinted in children's literature are no doubt all great. But, when taken through a critical approach, children's literature is the embodiment of the values and norms that are representing their own times. We also have Robinson Crusoe which was written by Daniel Defoe, a British in which the story shows the many traits that the British had been practicing their whole lives which include colonialism which also is a major theme in the novel. Crusoe himself represents colonialism as a theme, completely being the perfect representation of the attitude that one's own group, ethnicity, or nationality is superior to others. The English have a tendency to think of any indigenous group as savages and rationalize their exploitation. Most of all, colonialism is portrayed clearly in the relationship between Crusoe and his servant Friday. Crusoe names him Friday to remind him of the day that he saved Friday's life, always keeping him in Crusoe's debt. Upon being saved, Friday grabs Crusoe's feet and Crusoe puts his foot on Friday's head. There is no more fitting metaphor for the effect of colonialism on indigenous people other than this. The story thus illustrate the British imperialistic mindset and their thirst for power and colonialism, thus claiming that the island was his, and even making sure that it remained his, Crusoe visited the place more than once even after his escape from the island. Crusoe's nature clearly defines and portrays the colonial mindset of the British.

Now talking about the Mizo folktales in particular, one can say that a lot about the history, culture and ethnicity can be seen through these folktales that we have passed down for many generations. We have talked about Mauruangi; which is a story that portrayshow an orphan is often mistreated by their stepmothers and how hard their lives are made, being made to perform critical tasks, beaten, bullied and being given the worst things when it comes to not only materials but everything. When we look into the story, we see that after Mauruangi was wedded to the Indian chief and came to visit her family, her evil stepmother and stepsister planned to take care of Mauruangi for good; which in this case was to kill her.

*"Suddenly her stepmother took a pail of boiling hot water and poured it over her and Mauruangi died. But a wild goat found it and brought her back to life, and he kept her as a nursemaid"*

Society's cruel behavior towards orphans has always been depicted in the folklores of Mizoram. Apart from the story of Mauruangi, we also have another story which is Liandova te Unau which similarly portrays the way orphans have been treated in primal Mizo society. The story shows how badly orphans are being treated by the community, making it hard for orphans to make a living.

Certain folktales also portray how the people were superstitious and believed in supernatural beings. From folklores like Sichangneii, Kungawrhi, Chhura, Chawngchilhi, Thinlanga, etc., we come to see certain occurrences of the supernatural.

In the case of Sichangneii, we come to know of how people conceived of the idea about fallen angels and how they can live amongst humans, bearing children and tending their family. We see instances of the connection between heaven and earth and the possibility of fallen angels not being just a concept, but a reality as well since this concept can be related to many cultures as well. If one looks close enough, the concept of fallen angels have been told as stories through time.

Kungawrhi is another folktale that depicts a supernatural being which in this case is "Keimi" that took Kungawrhi to their community that has been the abode of the guardian spirits.

*"...they set off for his home and when he reached the outskirts of the village, he made use of his magical powers and turned into a tiger... .."*

This proves that the Mizo community once had believed in such supernatural beings long ago. Not only the "Keimi" is an example here, as even the world of the guardian spirits being depicted in the story is also another example that can show how Mizo people had believed in the supernatural.

Apart from the supernatural, the story "Kungawrhi" also depicts how women have been viewed as a material during the old days, an asset and a material that can be given and taken. This can be proved using the words of Kungawrhi's father when he realised the true form of the man he had given his daughter to.

*"Whoever rescues my daughter from the clutches of the Keimi community shall be given her hand in marriage"*

Through these words, we can see that Kungawrhi has no say in the matter. What her father decides, she has to comply; without hesitation.

Children's literature has been away of portraying perfect stories that children and adults can both enjoy. However, one can say that these stories are far more than meets the eye. Woven beneath these folktales and folklores are hidden harsh truths of reality that; if, being told through a different perspective (for instance, normal adult fiction) can sound harsh and evil. Thus, inserting these harsh concepts of realities in Children's literature butters up the surface, not only concealing the truth, but also modifying them for children to be able to experience a gist of what the society really is; through the stories and tales that have been made for them.

Apart from the things mentioned above, one can say that children's literature often depicts the dark cultural background. Many stories portray the dark secrets that every culture carries with them. People often view children's literature as an enjoyment, not taking it as a serious topic. But what most people fail to notice are the cultural theories and truths that have been hidden in children's literature. We all grew up listening to them, we were all once children and it is through these stories that we get the idea of how the world functions. It is through these stories that we come to understand how everything works and in some kind of way, it had prepared us to face the vile-workings of the world and its beliefs that often kill dreamers and innocent minds alike.

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