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Literature for Children and Ideology in Transition: A Study of Haruki Murakami's *The Strange Library*

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Abstract

Children's Literature is a misleading phrase. It seems to establish that certain perspectives and topics may come under the purview of the genre, whereas more demanding issues may get assimilated into domains of literature meant for grown-ups. When adults construct literature to suit a specific readership, they may try to filter their narratives accordingly, but is it truly possible to pluck out ideological signifiers from a narrative? This question steers the following research paper.

Haruki Murakami, whose works are often said to be postmodern, has refrained from declaring his allegiance to such a label. However, his works do challenge established boundaries. His novella *The Strange Library*, catering towards children, apparently resembles his other work meant for grownups, *Kafka on the Shore.* Thus, the aim is to study if an author can filter ideologies based on the intended reader. The paper also investigates how these ideologies manifest when they become moderated. Finally, the paper explores if the very conventional understanding of 'children's literature' demands a revision.

Keywords: Ideology, readers, children's literature, 'matured' literature, power.

The paper seeks to explore whether there can be a literature reserved for children. It aims to study whether the literature being made available to children by the market is free from the ideologies pervading the supposedly "mature" literature.

This paper will study Murakami's *The Strange Library* to explore the above questions. I will be comparing the predominant symbols used in the work to those of another work by Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore.* There seem to

be certain motifs that reappear in *Kafka on the Shore* even after 20 years of the publication of *The Strange Library* in Japanese. However, for this study, I would limit myself to the study of the English translation, which became available in 2014. Murakami is accused of telling the same story across his narratives. Yet, to my understanding, if we are to speculate on the issue, he does so perhaps quite intentionally to experiment with storytelling itself.

His work, thus, hurls the following questions to us as readers and researchers: Can the same story cater to different audiences? How can an author shape, or tell the same story to readers belonging to different age groups?

Is the Child Present in Children's Literature? A Journey through the Ages

The very notion of 'children's literature' is a problematic idea. At its core, there is a homogeneous identity which we tend to signify through the phrase 'children'. Quite ironically, the definition of the child thus seems to be defined by the adult in retrospect. As evident in topics like this, thinkers often fail to reach a consensus, partly because, trying to conclude upon an abstract entity can only yield interpretations and hardly anything conclusive. So, questions like the following become artificial – what should a child read? What constitutes children's literature? These questions are framed by adults to test their hypothesis of what it is to be a child.

Reading habits of and materials for children are not universal throughout history, and this can point to one direction, that is, there is no one universal understanding of childhood.

> Children in medieval and Renaissance Britain were certainly provided with a wide range of reading material, books produced primarily for older readers that they were permitted or encouraged to read, as well as texts designed especially for them. But should we consider this children's literature? The critic Peter Hunt certainly thought not, arguing vociferously that children's literature is properly comprised only of texts that were 'written expressly for children who are recognizably children, with a childhood recognizable today'. (Grenby 3)

The Restoration witnesses the categorisation of the child as an 'other' entity, perhaps to be shielded from the malice of the adult society. Tales like Johnathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* became immensely popular. However, the satirical narratives were transformed to suit the imagined mind of the child.

Margaret Evans writes that "chapbook versions" of Swift's original tale were made available for children (243). There is an inherent ideology at work here, the assumption which perhaps motivates this transformation is the priorities of the child must be made different from the adult. The child must be different, or else the authority of the adult loses its legitimacy.

The Romantic age sees the child as that innocent figure who has the potential to shape a better society. This vague statement must be understood in the context of romanticism. The writers of the times were moving away from the materialistic life of the urban scene, and they were advocating a return to nature. Here, nature perhaps represents a way of life standing in sharp contrast to their present society. William Blake's little child brimming with curiosity, and eager to know the world, grows up to confront the 'experience' of adulthood. If the innocent child in "The Chimney Sweeper" concludes that if everyone performs their duties faithfully, then God will reward them in the afterlife (Blake, qtd in Yeats 51), then the experienced child of "The Chimney Sweeper" realises that in his society, God's dictum never reaches, instead, it is the Church and King who regulate the social structure. The injustice which he faces is ensured by these authorities in the name of God, and religion becomes the foil to hide this social inequality (Yeats 71). Hence, Wordsworth's Lucy cannot survive in the long run, despite the promise her existence ensures. She meets an untimely end (Brett 192).

Moving on, the Victorian age unsurprisingly seems to embed a moral lesson in its production of literature for children. Grenby, therefore, observes – "Pre- nineteenth century children's poems, as the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America* puts it, 'appear to twentieth-century eyes wholly impossible for children.'" (33). It must also be noted that illustrations became a major addition to Children's literature of the period. Walter Crane is one such illustrator, working at the end of the Victorian era, who illustrated tales like *Aladdin* (Whalley 324). It is perhaps safe to say that just like 'adult' literature (as we can see in the modernist works), references from other national literatures and cultures intervene in the popular imagination behind Children's literature.

Grand narratives like imperialism did not shy away from works catering towards Children. Dennis Butts writes that there were schools in Britain which prepared children to work in faraway colonies like India, and Rudyard Kipling was also a student in one such school. The adventure story genre for

children, therefore, garnered immense popularity – the British man/woman going to a faraway land and working for the empire (342).

While discussing the nineteenth century, one must mention Robert Lewis Stevenson. Grenby writes that his works try to locate the anxieties of the sensitive and solitary child (49). However, in a quite contradictory manner, Stevenson admits elsewhere, "'It's awful fun, boys' stories. You just indulge the pleasure of your heart, that's all; no trouble, no strain'" (Hunt 191). Thus, Stevenson's position simply strengthens the assumption that it is difficult to truly understand the motives behind the construction of a work that is meant for children. Talking about another eminent Victorian writer, Jacqueline Rose asserts that Lewis Carroll's works explore the psychological space which represents childhood, which cannot be visited again. She writes that one is exiled from that imagined space as one grows old, and she asserts that the same can be said about C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* (Grenby 145).

C.S. Lewis also stated, "if a book is not worth reading at sixty it is not worth reading at six" (Falconer 571). It is needless to say that other researchers studying him have also expressed similar observations. Many have identified hidden religious ideologies at play in his work. For instance, Ghesquiere writes that Christian morality remains enmeshed with a fantastical narrative in the case of Lewis (312). She points out that the child can partake in the fantastic tale, whereas the more mature reader can appreciate the religious allegory. If the above line of thinking is true, then it problematizes the idea of children's literature even further. It appears that canonical children's literature celebrates narratives where the child is in a way tricked to uphold/idolise the hidden morality at work, separating the good and bad.

Tolkien seems to prioritise another aspect of children's literature, that is, the dominant role often played by fantasy within narratives. He says that a work of high fantasy is a parallel imaginative world, guided by its own rules, whereas, the world inhabited by the reader is the "Secondary World" (Sullivan 437). The magic woven by the author is such that readers willingly participate in this suspension of disbelief, to borrow Coleridge's terms. However, Sullivan points out that occasional juxtaposition of the two worlds is necessary, or else, "the reader would not be able to understand a word of what was written" (437).

Moving on to another contemporary of Tolkien, I would like to discuss William Golding's island story, *Lord of the Flies.* When talking about the

tradition that makes children's literature, one must look towards the horizon of the convention. It only broadens the scope of exploration. Unlike R. M. Ballantyne's island tale and the assumed identity of children, Golding focuses on the destruction of innocence, if there was ever one, to begin with. Golding's active role in the Second World War allowed him to perhaps witness how the war utilised child soldiers. His narrative shows that the division of adult-child identities is merely a construct. Children can be equally hungry for power and mindless violence. Peaceful co-existence is hardly desired by the children in Golding's narrative. It does bring to the forefront issues like bullying, which plague civilised society even today.

Thus, a brief enquiry into the rudimentary development of the history of Children's literature makes us question our existing assumptions between 'mature' literature and works meant for children. It seems authors, intentionally or quite subconsciously, leave a breadcrumb of ideologies at work in narratives meant for children. Moreover, the idea of children's literature is a problematic one, as these texts are being constructed by adults. They seem to propagate the idea of what a child should be through their works. In other words, there is an imagined essential identity of a child, which can either be ascertained or perhaps questioned by the author.

This line of thinking may bring us to the idea of childhood. The goal of the paper, however, is not to assert any understanding of childhood. Instead, it aims to ask if it has changed, then how the literature representing it has undergone changes. This transformation is perhaps only logical, otherwise, contemporary children's literature would lose its connection with the readers.

I speak for a generation whose experience of childhood has been shaped by books, television, and computer games. If qualities of morality and virtue are imparted by comics like the 'boy-scout' Superman, yet a harmless show like *The Road Runner* makes the viewer casually aware of the existence of TNT, and the unrelenting will to kill the enemy. Mushroom clouds frequent the television screens to such an extent that these viewers may become desensitised towards the implications of such topics. Computer games like *Resident Evil* effortlessly present the experience of killing humanoids with a headshot. My point is that childhood is not a singular experience that can be captured through a genre. To do justice to this ever-changing idea, authors need to be more adventurous. They perhaps need to devise a narrative that can

unlock hidden pathways within the long-standing, isolated, walled chambers, which come together to constitute children's literature.

A rough history of children's literature, which this paper has discussed previously, may yield a brief list of its sub-genres. Perhaps this is a structuralist attempt to categorise the available data. Grenby, for instance, in his book, *Children's Literature,* identifies fables, poetry, moral tales, school stories, family stories, fantasy, and adventure stories as variations within the discourse. He categorises the likes of *Harry Potter* under the school story sub-genre. But even though such categorisation may help identify the tale being scrutinised, occasionally, as researchers of literature, one may encounter a text which blurs these walls. One such example is Haruki Murakami's *The Strange Library.* The story masks its message if at all it contains a message.

Making this jump, from literature emerging from the British Isles to Japan, is necessary to test the hypothesis this paper aims to explore. This is because, at the core of this enquiry, we aim to discuss how contemporary children's literature has evolved to incorporate new realities that may constitute the experience of a twenty-first-century child, predominantly living in an urban locale. Hence, exploring Murakami's work, which has garnered immense transcontinental popularity, should strengthen the argument even further. Moreover, while conducting this literature survey, it surprises me as a researcher to see how works emerging from Asia have found representation in the critical discourse. So, incorporating Murakami in this argument is only rational.

Dissolving Boundaries: Construction of the Murakamiesque Child Figure Murakami's works seem to address an issue that this paper prefers to discuss. Can an author, who is also an adult, 'dilute' his ideas to suit a different kind of readership? If it is so practised in the publishing industry, then how is the ideology of the adult creeping into the mind of the young? To understand this phenomenon, this paper compares Murakami's *The Strange Library* with *Kafka on the Shore.* Both works showcase certain overlapping motifs, while the former is meant for children and the latter caters towards young adults and grown-ups alike.

Clash of Generations: The Old Man and Mr Johnnie Walker

In several Murakami narratives, a reader may encounter an archetypal member of the previous generation who seems to represent the angst of Japan's lost

decades. A person belonging to the 1980s, who has lost their faith in the grand narrative of the state, having enough to continue with a materialistic pursuit, yet wondering whether life is meant to be lived in such a way, powerless and without any alternative. The tales of Murakami seem to play with the alternate reality device to experiment with these states of angst. In *Kafka on the Shore*, it is implied that Koichi Tamura, an otherwise eminent sculptor, turns insane and acquires the persona of Johnnie Walker, a serial killer who murders cats to steal their soul. Koichi, even though an artist whose topic is the subconscious, is an immensely materialistic man. The readers get a glimpse of his study and his obsession with brands. The narrative almost seems to suggest that men who indulge in materialistic pursuits lose their mysterious connection with reality, and upon realising this, they resort to perverted ends, like Johnnie Walker did to re-establish that lost connection.

Now the question arises, how Murakami's tale meant for children can present this relevant, yet surreal and gory take on his society. *The Strange Library*, similarly, presents the character of the old man in the manner of Johnnie Walker, only this time, he eats the brains of little children after trapping them in the library. This instantly places the villain within the long tradition of witches and wolves guilty of consuming little children. Nevertheless, if the conflict between two generations was highlighted through the Oedipal take on Koichi Tamura and his son Kafka Tamura, in *The Strange Library,* it is represented through figures of the old man and young child – the former living a life of futility and perversion, while the other showcasing a promise towards a newer tomorrow.

Characters from the Margins: The Sheepman and Nakata

Murakami's narratives seem keen to present a character who lies at the margins of the commercially motivated society. In *Kafka on the Shore*, it is Nakata, who was left traumatised after a fateful incident in his childhood. His parents disowned him for his stunted mental faculties, and he ended up living with his grandparents. As Nakata grows up, he never manages to identify with the motivations of his society. He never understood the desire to live a life of materialistic plenty. He is a retired carpenter who searches for missing cats, and he has the unique ability to find them. An unusual skill, but something which is less valued in the society within Murakami's narrative.

The Strange Library also seems to present a similar character in the form of the Sheepman. He lives in the labyrinth under the library and looks after children who are kept imprisoned by the Old Man. Nakata befriended Hoshino, and the two went on a journey to find the entrance stone. Similarly, the Sheepman befriends the protagonist of the story, and they attempt to escape the labyrinth together. The Sheepman also lies outside mainstream society, and the protagonist suggests a path that can help him get assimilated within the society, opening a doughnut parlour (40).

If sometimes it may appear that Nakata represents the alter ego of Kafka, similarly, the Sheepman then represents the fearful psyche of the young boy. This may account for the dread which the Sheepman feels towards the Old Man.

Fragmented Selves: Little Ghost Girl and Miss Saeki's Spirit

Another character that apparently travels between the two narratives is the spirit of the young girl. In *Kafka on the Shore*, Murakami perhaps attempts to show how the minds of grown-ups become fragmented as they grow up. The 40-year-old Miss Saeki has somehow managed to suppress her 16-year-old memories. These have taken the form of a spirit that haunts the library at night. Similarly, the silent young girl who frequents the labyrinth under the library is revealed to be the pet bird of the protagonist that had died earlier.

The two seem to share a budding romance, yet it never materialises into anything concrete. Perhaps the constraints of a story meant for children limit Murakami's free play at this juncture. However, Murakami does play around with the idea of a first kiss and a damsel in distress who is without a voice. During the moment of the escape from the library, when the Old Man confronts them, the girl transforms into a bird to stop his advances. Murakami's tale, therefore, reverses the conventional gender roles at this point. The boy fails to save the girl, and it is the girl who manages to save the boy.

The Woman: Absent Mother and Death

Another issue that revisits Murakami's fiction time and again is the absence of the mother figure. *The Strange Library* depicts a mother who hardly says anything throughout the narrative. Later, in a passing reference, the readers are made aware by the young protagonist that his mother has suddenly died. Likewise, *Kafka on the Shore* also begins with the search of Kafka's absent

mother and sister. This absentee mother is perhaps a depiction of the Japanese post-war literary tradition. Susan Napier writes – “[T]he post war fantasies of male writers are notable for the absence of women characters. Women are no longer part of wish-fulfilment fantasies. Instead, they are part of the reality which the male protagonist longs to escape” (54).

Women no longer settled for being controlled by the society around them. They became an active part of the workforce during the post-war nation-building. Women moved beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere. Perhaps, for this reason, Koichi Tamura fails to control his wife. The latter is said to have eloped with her daughter. Koichi curses his young son to have a fate like that of Oedipus. The curse is perhaps symbolic, in other words, the father represents the old patriarchal generation that fails to accept the new role of the woman. Hence, the woman can never truly settle with him, and she chooses to leave such a limited domestic sphere. The son, however, represents the later generation, who is supposedly more open-minded, less bound by conventional ideas of gender roles. The woman can truly have a sustainable relationship with him.

The Strange Library does not seem to explore the character of the mother, and the readers never get a glimpse of her psyche. But they learn that the mother and son lived alone, without the father. It can conform to the larger framework of Murakami’s works, as stated above. However, her death comes suddenly, and it seems nothing out of the ordinary – “My mother died last Tuesday. She had been suffering from a mysterious illness, and that morning she quietly slipped away” (72). The narrative at this moment may remind the readers of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, or more precisely, the casual passing reference to the death of Mrs Ramsay.

The mother’s death and the subsequent reference to the protagonist’s loneliness remind the readers that the division between child and adult is arbitrary. A child may encounter and brave a trauma which an adult has yet to confront. The comfort which adults try to bestow upon a child is a projection of their expectation of childhood, and it is not the reality of childhood. Murakami’s narrative through the mother’s demise seems to highlight this fissure between what childhood can be and what adults expect it to be.

Authority and Resistance: Mysterious Libraries and Black Dogs

Murakami speaks of libraries and black dogs in both works. Apparently, these are just settings that the author perhaps prefers to revisit. However, a closer inspection of these symbols may tell another story. The library may not be what it seems to the reader. It is not just a fantastical space that the narrative introduces to capture the fancy of the reader, but it can also be a trope to explore the psyche of the child protagonist. The dark labyrinth which the library seems to be is perhaps an extension of the fears of the protagonist. He lets the readers know towards the end of the tale – "I lie here by myself in the dark at two o'clock in the morning and think about that cell in the library basement. About how it feels to be alone, and the depth of the darkness surrounding me" (76).

The library makes its appearance once again in *Kafka on the Shore*, and it becomes a source of escape for Kafka Tamura. It represents to him that secluded space far away from the materialistic life, which he longs to leave behind. It is in that same library, like the child protagonist of *The Strange Library*, that he meets the ghost of Miss Saeki and is attracted towards her, like the child protagonist.

If the library becomes a refuge, then the 'black dog' symbolises the ominous machineries through which authority exerts its influence. The old man is accompanied by the beast to do his bidding, in a manner quite similar to Johnnie Walker and his gigantic black hound in *Kafka on the Shore.* Murakami's narrative for children seems to preach the same ideology that his novels targeting adults appear to highlight.

The narrative borrows conventional tropes like a child being captured by a monstrous figure, which prefers to eat him. It is not a witch or a big bad wolf, but instead, it is an old man in Murakami's tale. The tale does not end with the promise of a fairy godmother, and instead, the readers are left to wonder if there was a spirit helping the lonely boy in the first place. The reader wonders if everything was but a figment of his imagination. Murakami's work, thus, seems to deconstruct the conventional stereotypes of storytelling meant for children and fuses more 'mature' psychological themes.

To Conclude

Murakami's work questions this invisible wall, categorising literature into the mature and less mature versions. It attempts to show that this wall is a figment of our imagination, constructed by the cultural standards of morality. As evident through his works, the issues which are discussed in more 'mature' literature can simply revisit a work of art meant for children, even without the notice of the people in power, in this case, the parents, determining what their child can read. Murakami's work then resembles an experiment that exposes the artificiality of the prerequisite conditions which determine the outcome of a chemical reaction, in this case, building the minds of the future generations, the units of society.

Thus, it seems that the conventional relegation of the Children's Literature genre perhaps stems from the stubbornness of the institutions in power to recognise the ideologies at play within a work meant to cater towards children. As cliched as it may sound, this ability of the work is certainly postmodern – it resists easy categorisations and questions the definitions and dictums set by the positions of power. The darkness which adults generally prefer to exorcise from children's literature, according to Murakami's work, never leaves the margins – it only waits for the child to break free of the parent figure. The death of the mother then becomes the symbolic growth and coming to power of the child.

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