The Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Childhood: A Reading of Select Narratives

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Abstract— Modern Indian English fiction presents children and childhood in a manner that goes beyond conventional notions of innocence and offers complex readings of a rapidly changing society. One thing that immediately stands out is that modern portrayals show a child protagonist who is a perceptive commentator on a world that, from their simple perspective, contains contradictions, deficiencies, and deficiencies that cause anxiety. Such narratives also use childhood as a location that presents struggle and adjustment, often addressing issues related to communal riots, poverty, gender, and inequalities. Modern storytelling also places emphasis on the capability and activeness of children, who, far from being mere sufferers, demonstrate how they can challenge and redefine existing notions and constructions of society. Collectively, these readings show that a figure representing a child in modern Indian English literature uses that presence as a metaphor that captures the challenges as well as hopes that a modern era possesses, and therefore, this study shall exemplify that through selected readings on narratives that try to make sense of various readings on depictions related to childhood. In addition, the paper would also aim to investigate the representation of the child in the Indian popular media in an attempt to grasp the level at which commercialization of childhood is used as an ideological device in an attempt to transmit cultural meanings of childhood and its positioning in terms of the ideology of normal society. In this process of investigation, there would be an attempt at understanding the strategies and techniques involved in building particular imagery and meaning in terms of childhood in the given instances of popular culture.

Keywords— Childhood Studies; Socio-cultural Construction of Childhood; Agency of Children; Indian English Literature; Popular Culture; Commercialization of Childhood; Gender

I. INTRODUCTION

There has been a major shift in the depiction of children and childhood in modern Indian English fiction and media, a shift that has gone beyond the conventional definition of childhood as merely innocent. Children in modern literary texts act not simply as recipients of wisdom from adults, as they were portrayed before, but as keen observers and active agents of the happenings in a rapidly changing India. This reflects, of course, the socio-cultural transformation that India as a whole is undergoing, from urbanization, globalization, and religious communalism to a dissolution of family and community formations (Nayar 112). The figure of the child, consequently, takes on a very symbolic role as

a definition of a developing nation, embracing all the fears and hopes that this transformation involves (Banerjee 56).

In this paper, the socio-cultural aspects of childhood in selected contemporary Indian English literature and popular media texts would be examined to discuss the cultural construction of childhood in the literature, as in popular media, childhood is used as an ideological instrument to communicate cultural meaning effectively (Kumar 88). Based on the convergence of knowledge in literary critique, cultural study, and childhood study, the paper proposes to make an in-depth discussion of the aspects under consideration in the context of childhood representation and its role in the development of the discourse related to childhood and culture.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Childhood in India has been deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and historical contexts with major transformations at different levels over time (Balagopalan 14). In ancient Indian literature and folklore, such as the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Stories*, childhood has been portrayed as a period of moral and practical learning with a fusion of entertainment and instruction (Rao 22). In these tales, an effort has been made to inculcate good qualities such as grit, honesty, and compassion and to shape the moral imagination of children (Sen 47). During the colonial period, children's books became a means of spreading Victorian values and Christian moral instructions at the cost of local knowledge and cultural narratives (Nandy 63).

Since the independence era, there has been an attempt to revive these narratives through initiatives such as the *Children's Book Trust* and *Amar Chitra Katha* series that specifically promoted narratives drawn from Indian history, mythology, and heritage volumes (Bose 101). Contemporary Indian writers have been able to broaden the themes that are explored in Indian children's literature to encompass notions such as gender equality, caste, social classes, social justice, the environment, and mental health that seek to give recognition to the active agency that children can exercise within society (Balagopalan 29).

The study of childhood in India can be said to have been shaped by scholars like Sudhir Kakar and Ashis Nandy, where the former presented a psychoanalytic reading of Hindu childhood (Kakar 88) and the latter, a postcolonial critique of the influence of Western culture on the notion of Indian childhood (Nandy 70). Sarada Balagopalan, Pradip Kumar Bose, and Satadru Sen have recently written about the sociological and historical construction of childhood, pressuring from domestic, educational, and political powers.

Indian English fiction offers a rich domain through which the complexities of childhood, identity, and nationhood are questioned thoroughly over the years. The pioneers in this domain, such as Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, paved the way through their works featuring children as protagonists in order to question social hierarchies, the problem of caste and colonial domination respectively. Anand's *'Coolie'* provides a nightmarish depiction of 'child labor' and its relation to 'caste' and 'economic violence' (Anand 78).

This tradition continues in contemporary literature, with *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh being representative examples that provide nuanced views on childhood as an experience of struggle, adaptation, and empowerment. More contemporary scholarship on childhood focuses on the psychological aspect, covering themes such as trauma, resilience, and emotional intelligence in the child. Figurative expressions on issues such as mental health, depression, and stress, coping with complex emotions in children, and providing them with the tools to deal with these circumstances are explored in works such as *Who Stole Bhaiya's Smile?* by Sanjana Kapur, and *Inside a Dark Box*, a treatise on childhood trauma by Ritu Vaishnav.

III.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: AGENCY, FRAGMENTATION, AND IDEOLOGY

The research points to some significant theoretical concerns which form the basis of the analysis between childhood and contemporary Indian narratives. First, there is the concept of agency - children are portrayed as active agents rather than passive victims, with the capacity to question and reformat already existing social frameworks. This corresponds with the recent drift in the field of childhood studies as advocated by James and Prout. The second theme is the importance of fragmentation as it is related to the presentation of childhood in a country where rapid change is occurring. Innocence is often torn apart by political instability, dysfunctional families, and the tug of globalization, leading to the fragmentation of childhood experiences (Sen 47).

Thirdly, the question of ideology and commercialization in the construction of childhood is also important. Childhood has also been utilized in popular ideology as a ploy in the dissemination of cultural meaning and the projection of ideological values (Kumar 88; Nandy 63). This phenomenon is also identifiable in the utilization of children in advertisements and movies as representations of innocence and as sources of emotion and information draws for audiences in films and on television (Kapur 12).

IV.   METHODOLOGY

Specifically, the research uses qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology that combines the analysis of selected texts of the Indian English literary scene with media analysis of exemplary texts of the Indian popular culture. The research is conducted with the guidance of the following research questions:

- What does the representation of children and childhood in current Indian English literary writings convey in terms of gender, class, communal tensions, commercialization, fragmentation, and other issues?
- How do these texts use the concept of the child as the agent of critique and change?
- How does the concept of childhood in Indian popular media function, and what ideological uses can be derived through the role of commercialization?
- What are the similarities and differences between literary and media depictions of childhood, and what is their impact on larger cultural discourses surrounding childhood and national identity?

In Indian English literature, childhood is depicted not simply as a phase of innocence but as a complex arena where social tensions, cultural aspirations, and questions of identity intersect. Texts such as *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet* (2011), *This is Me, Mayil* (2012) and *Mostly Madly Mayil* (2015) by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran place children at the center of narratives, portraying them as figures who grapple with the intertwined realities of gender, class, community, and globalization. Through these works, childhood emerges as a socially constructed and culturally contested space, one that reveals both the possibilities of empowerment and the vulnerabilities of marginalization.

It is pertinent to note that the Mayil series strategically uses the diary format as a platform that highlights the protagonist's experience of dealing with the confining forces of gender, family, and peers. In traditional literature, childhood has been depicted

through the lens of adults, presenting girls as passive, innocent, or constrained within the parameters of societal norms. In contrast to traditional literature, the Mayil series breaks the rule of childhood being depicted through the adult lens by giving the protagonist direct voiceage through the diary format. Her writings bring to the fore her own experiences, opinions, and critiques rather than being conveyed through the adult voiceage. It can well be characterized as self-writing, which indicates the feminist reconstruction of childhood as defined by Chanda (2018), which gives paramount importance to the girl's experience against the dominant male ideologies. Most Madly Mayil (2015), she proclaims her individuality: "I want to be vocal. I want to write all that I feel, even if my Amma calls it utter nonsense" (7).

Mayil's insistence on speaking out is deeply symbolic. By recording her thoughts, she asserts narrative control over her own life. This resonates with feminist childhood studies, which Mayil's self-reflections reveal how patriarchal structures are simultaneously internalized and interrogated, as she oscillates between conforming to familial norms and asserting her individuality. For instance, her entries about clothing choices and friendships highlight the subtle ways in which cultural scripts of femininity shape everyday childhood experiences, while her refusal to remain silent underscores her agency in redefining these roles. She worries about how she is perceived by peers and family, yet she resists these roles by asserting her individuality. In *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet* (2011), Mayil writes in her diary: "Why should only girls be told how to sit, how to talk, how to behave? Boys get away with everything" (Rajendran and Subramaniam 42). This aligns with Sarada Balagopalan's argument that childhood in India is often framed through normative expectations of gender and class, but children actively negotiate these boundaries. In *This is Me, Mayil*, her diary entries about crushes and friendships highlight the gender differences felt by children at young age which is evident from the statement "Everyone thinks it's silly if a girl has a crush, but boys can boast about it all the time" (Rajendran and Subramaniam).

This way, her diary becomes a performative act of resistance where she gets to critique the gender role, challenge the notion of family in her diary, and redefine what it means to grow up as a girl in India. In the Indian setting, 'her-story' acquires a deep significance in so far as it undermines the colonial and patriarchal traditions that exist within children's books. In other words, the inclusion of Mayil's narrative through her diary brings forth a cultural project aimed at reconstructing diverse, resistant narratives of childhoods which go beyond innocence and establish a dynamic, critical, and self-conscious concept of childhood.Mayil's diary in this regard becomes a whole lot more than a diary documenting the transition to maturity because, through her diary, her story paints a picture of a feminist intervention in the area of childhood. Such representations resonate with James and Prout's influential argument that childhood is socially constructed—a category produced through cultural discourses yet continually reshaped by children's practices and voices (James & Prout, 1997). This can be best illustrated by referring to Mayil's diary, which appears as a performance as far as her writing is concerned, as they pose a challenge to the adult paradigm. Moreover, her defiance against conventional femininity supports Chris Jenks's observation that

childhood occupies a position of critique and transformation, as youngsters use their perspective on childhood to subvert mainstream structures (Jenks, 2005). Thus, as depicted in this series, Mayil, as both subject and critic, reveals how Children's literature in English, published in India, occupies a position, which presents youngsters as agents in reshaping culture, thus participating in wider debates on childhood that concern issues related to "voice," "agency," and "identity."

The ideological construction of childhood through cultural meanings and representations has been seen to aid the production and dissemination of specific values and ideals validated by society. Indian popular cultural representations, for instance, tend to further shared ideas about normative childhood that exert a pervasive influence on the creation and internalisation of identities and individualities. Very often, cultural texts function as powerful discursive tools that condition the multiple ways in which childhood is imagined and experienced. The following observation attains significance in such a context. "Literary, media and popular texts are a powerful means by which the broad category of childhood is constructed, maintained, protected and challenged. Whether cultural texts are produced for children or about them, their depictions of childhood provide important resources for those interested in exploring the logics and practices through which contemporary childhoods are imagined, produced and experienced" (Khan & Saltmarsh 267). In the multitudinous contexts of Indian popular culture, childhood becomes a constructed category that reproduces dominant beliefs and practices pertaining to societal existence. Most often childhood becomes a metonymic reference point for shaping and consolidating institutionalised thought-processes and expectations that align with societal notions.

Certain ideologies tend to reinforce traditionally validated moral codes and patterns that are embedded within the behaviours and experiences attributed to childhood. In this sense, the ways in which children respond to the domestic and social space around them indicate meanings that touch upon the varied aspects of individual existence. Herein lies the importance of viewing childhood as socially constructed and as involving the "complex interweaving of social structures, political and economic institutions, beliefs, cultural mores, laws, policies and the everyday actions of both adults and children, in the home and on the street" and these also signify "the essential ingredients of the cultural politics of childhood." (James & James13). There lies a certain multiplicity characterising the very construction of childhood, as different institutions position childhood within the demands and compulsions of dominant power systems. Within the cultural context of India, in particular, the child becomes a moral, cultural and social subject shaped ideologically and regulated by customary behaviour. Popular culture plays a significant role in perpetuating such images, constructing patterns and modes that may be emulated and validated by society. Through different manifestations that communicate with the masses, ideologies tend to be internalised in covert ways leading to the formulation of identities for the child. Different popular cultural texts exert a tremendous role in this regard and resort to various means and representative strategies to put across content that resonates specifically with children.

Some texts exclusively rely on the image of the child as a medium for ensuring better visibility and acceptance among the audience. For instance, in the advertisement for popular health drinks such as Horlicks and Boost, along with the motive of enhancing the product image and boosting sales, there also lies the idealisation of childhood in terms of reflecting societal expectations and moral values that are to be upheld in society. The child in such advertisements is represented as signalling a crucial stage of growth and development that has to be monitored and managed for the attainment of success. The implicit idea is regarding how the consumption of the product can accelerate the physical and mental well-being of the child, thereby also constructing a version of childhood where a specific phase of growth requires completion and fulfilment. Along with this, there can also be seen the association between academic achievement and physical development that ensures the child's competency and social visibility in the future as well. Concomitantly, such advertising also reiterates the image of the mother as a caregiver who is singularly responsible for choosing the ideal health drink that can cater to the requirements of childhood. Moreover, such a commercialisation of childhood for market gain also tends to exclude children from the margins as these cultural representations tend to project the needs, experiences and circumstances of children who largely belong to the middle class. Most importantly, the child image in such advertisements emphasise the importance of being socially and morally responsible, envisaging good citizenship, thereby also transforming the child into an embodiment of goodness. The child's identity is thus constructed in relation to a societal system of codes and regulatory behaviour. A similar idea is expressed in the tagline of the popular washing powder brand Surf Excel which states "daag achhe hain" (stains are good) when it involves the dissemination of values and actions that are meaningful and socially glorified. By using children as the main protagonists, this advertisement campaign centres on notions such as empathy, kindness, selflessness, generosity and naivety that are upheld as the intrinsic attributes of childhood. Thus, the child becomes an active social agent who is morally conscious, empathetic and considerate towards others, once again reminding the adult world about the importance of the right values. The child image represents a mixture of playfulness and responsibility that is expected to augur well for the creation of a just and equitable society. It can also be seen that childhood is sometimes represented not as a homogenised, idealised space but as a diverse and dynamic phase that is constantly being shaped by familial and social biases, expectations and judgments. The character of the child Sapna who is the daughter of the protagonist Shashi in the Hindi movie *English Vinglish* exemplifies the manner in which children are drawn towards internalising prejudices and attitudes from their surroundings and replicate hierarchical notions that society holds. However, the change that the character undergoes also presents childhood as a transitional space that contains the potential to negotiate and evaluate so called normative codes of conduct and identities. The conventional ideas about individual worth being determined by proficiency in English language and the patriarchal subordination of the woman are represented as being effortlessly imbibed by the child pointing to how childhood also entails the reproduction of power imbalances and mechanisms of domination. The self-realisation that the child attains as she witnesses her

mother's transformation in terms of confidence and capability, also indicates how many of the values and meanings embedded in society tend to be constructed according to systems of power and are subject to change. The idea of moral learning can thus be seen as a motif that is directly or indirectly woven into the narrative framework of popular narratives.

The fantasy television show *Baalveer*, exclusively targeting children, embodies a similar narrative strain that emphasises the ways in which moral and ethical values are learned, understood and communicated to the audience. Here again childhood becomes a formative phase where social values get inculcated in alliance with proper guidance and correction. Such images reinforce the notion of the 'ideal behaviour' that has to be instilled in children for ensuring their proper development as 'good' individuals. By depicting a binary structuring of moral/immoral behaviour using appropriate character positionings belonging to the two extremes of good and bad and the consequent reward/punishment, the narrative envisions a moral instruction that is articulated according to strictures and demands of societal regulation. By upholding such strictly patterned structures of thought, the narrative also simplifies individual behaviour by visualising it in terms of a dichotomy that is non-pervasive and fixed. This tends to exclude other forms of child behaviour that are varied, non-categorical and goes beyond strict boundaries. Such workings of power also tend to be seen in the manner in which socialisation with respect to gender roles becomes ascribed to childhood. Advertisements contain meanings and ideas that explicate gender norms and conventions that are effectively executed using imagery and techniques catering to childhood. For instance, in the advertisement for Kinderjoy, the gender binary tends to be reinforced in the very colour coding used in the packaging as the colours pink and blue tend to be attributed to the girl and boy respectively. Occasionally, advertisements also try to subvert such notions and strive to represent a fluidity that transcends gender prejudices as in the advertisement for the brand Comfort fabric conditioner, where washing clothes is portrayed as not being a woman's job alone. Here, the boy who taunts his sister saying that she might need to cultivate skills in managing domestic chores for the future is made to wash clothes by his mother who lovingly teaches him the lesson that one should go beyond gender stereotypes to bring in the change. Such attempts also point out how popular cultural manifestations indulge in the negation of accepted ideas and offer counter discourses of equality and opportunity.

These representative instances indicate how cultural texts display a range of emotions that strive to connect to the notions about childhood and consolidate constructions about innocence, moral superiority, wisdom and hope. There also lies the consumerist motive that capitalises on the societal ideas about childhood aiming to influence market interests and purchase habits. Even more pertinent is the emphasis given to middle-class childhood and its values and circumstances as popular culture tends to predominantly showcase children from such backgrounds and present such images as normal or as the ideal. Gendered ideologies also get articulated through the experiences and interests of children producing patriarchal values, marginalising certain identities. Such insights point to the fact that popular culture also plays a significant role in perpetuating ideas about how childhood

should be socially constructed with respect to children's behaviour and perception about themselves in relation to the adult world. Thus, childhood in popular culture brings into effect a curious mix of innocence, sincerity, intelligence and consumerism and children are seen to learn, "think, feel, communicate and act within the cultural practices and processes of a particular sociocultural context" (Kaur). Thus, different variations of childhood arise in relation to varying cultural contexts and the experience of childhood needs to be contextualised within the specificities and demands imposed by such specific circumstances. Thus, childhood assumes meaning within the discursive manipulations of societal power.

V.   CONCLUSION

This research has examined the socio-cultural aspects of childhood in post-modern examples of English literary narratives and popular cultural texts in India to illustrate that it is neither universal nor apolitical but constructed in ideological ways. Rather than relating to innocence in literature in the expected romantic way, it has been made clear that children are active agents in recent examples who navigate and react to gender, class, communal identity, poverty, and capitalism in society that is rapidly changing in relation to global pressures.

The study of Indian popular media also supports this view and illustrates how the notion of childhood is intentionally constructed and used for the purpose of promoting ideological messages. For example, advertising, cinema, and television shows commonly use the trope of the child in their cultural production for promoting morals, patriarchal ideologies, consumerist dreams, and middle-class values. Although some cultural productions might aim at questioning stereotypes and providing a counter-discourse, the mainstream representation still favours mainstream frameworks of child-hood, thereby neglecting alternative experiences of child-hood. The commodification of child-hood, therefore, stands revealed as a successful cultural practice that shapes identities and social aspirations.

By bringing together perspectives from studies of childhood, cultural studies, and literary studies, this study emphasizes that childhood as a site where power and ideology meet is of paramount importance. The representation of the figure of the child in contemporary narratives of India reflects both an image and an interpretation of society in its entirety. However, at its core, it also ascertains that representation in childhood has an immense significance in constructing cultural consciousness in relation to national identity and that the child is no longer just a subject of narration but also an active participant in constructing meaning in society.

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