

## READING THE CHILD IN POSTCOLONIAL SRI LANKAN LITERATURE

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#### **Background to the study**

Many contemporary theorists in the fields of childhood studies and psychoanalysis have researched on the relationship between children and literature. Jacqueline Rose, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, Erica Burman, Carolyn Steedman, and Valerie Walkerdine are among the major contributors to the field. They challenge the general assumption that the child is true or self-evident, and argue that childhood is a construction. This does not mean that the 'reality' of childhood is nonsensically denied, but thought of as shifting, historical, and psychoanalytical. Informed by their views, this study analyses the fiction of three Sri Lankan writers in English: Shyam Selvadurai, Carl Muller, and Punyakante Wijenaiké. The main texts for discussion are Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Carl Muller's *The Jam fruit Tree* (1993), *Yakada Yaka* (1994), and *Once Upon a Tender Time* (1995), and Punyakante Wijenaiké's *Amulet* (1994). Situating these authors in the post-independence Sri Lankan literary scene, I argue that their works negotiate notions of ethnicity through constructions of childhood. My reading focuses on how these texts produce notions of ethnicity through narrative investments in children: Selvadurai's novel examines the perceived marginalisation of the Tamil community and homosexuality through its protagonist Arjie; Muller's fiction deals with the hybridity of the Burghers as descendents/children of European colonisers and the colonised locals; and Wijenaiké's work examines the constructions of a majority Sinhalese identity through discourses of family and development.

#### **Justification or Rationale**

Much of the criticism available on the fiction above has so far bypassed theoretical engagement with the notion of childhood; while focusing on the themes of ethnicity and sexuality, these studies often do not question the function of the child within the texts. Such analyses take the child's point of view for granted or assume it to be conveying the truth about the Sri Lankan context. This paper analyses the implications of re-reading the narrative investments in childhood and argues that precisely by reading the child in the text, significant interventions can be made to the current debates on ethnicity, language, sexuality, and marginality in the field of Sri Lankan literature as well as in postcolonial studies. While many Sri Lankan novelists have engaged with issues pertinent to ethnicity, Selvadurai, Muller, and Wijenaiké were selected for discussion primarily because of the child perspective. The constructions of childhood in their texts yield well to a comparative analysis: children are posited as spokespersons, observers, and 'victims' among other things, and I examine the implications of such investment in children within these narratives and its significance to the production and consolidation of ethnic identity.

#### **Methodology**

This study draws upon childhood studies as well as postcolonial theory, especially the views of Graham Huggan and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on marginality. It undertakes a close reading of the selected fiction, paying particular attention to narrative perspective. The role of the child within the narratives is

interrogated and related to debates on marginality and authority in postcolonial studies where 'marginality' as a transparent category has been challenged.

Questions to be considered will include the following: how do children figure in the works of these writers? How far can the selected texts be related to each other through their use of generic conventions? Are there similarities/differences made in the claims for ethnic identity? What role does language play in defining ethnicity and how is language linked to childhood in these texts? What is the relationship between childhood and sexuality in the narratives? Do these narratives make claims for 'authenticity' and if so, how is the child implicated in this process of authentication? How is my reading of the selected novels informed by the key theoretical positions in childhood studies and what is the significance of such a reading for existing studies on Sri Lankan fiction in English? And how can these concerns be situated within wider debates in postcolonial literature and criticism?

### **Outcomes**

Through close analysis, the study finds that children occupy a central/marginal position within the narrative frameworks: while children are the central means through which events are narrated in the texts, they are also often positioned outside realms demarcated as 'adult' knowledge. The study also shows that the selected narratives invest in the child's perceived relationship with the notions of language, innocence, ignorance, and sexuality in order to neutralise potential biases and validate claims to truth. All three writers are seen employing the child as a means of producing versions of reality in their narratives.

### **Conclusions**

The study establishes that all the narratives under exploration make a claim for the 'real' by investing in the child as a guarantor of authenticity. However, I also demonstrate that even as the narrative strategies of the selected texts are comparable, they are not necessarily invested in an identical notion of childhood. By closely scrutinising the 'child's point of view', I establish that it is constructed through a complex interplay of the multiple narrative strands that destabilise claims to a stable, uniform truth, despite attempts to set up the child's account as impartial and hence more valid than adult versions; in other words, the 'real' in the text is shown to be precisely constructed through a multiple layering of meaning. As such, I problematise the notions of 'agency' and 'voice' of the child and highlight the ethical dangers involved in speaking for 'marginality'. While such dangers cannot be fully avoided, I emphasise that a self-reflective critical practice will enable one to be aware of the kind of investments made when claiming to speak for another. The theoretical investigation of childhood in these texts is thus significant for childhood studies as well as for postcolonial debates on authority and authenticity.

### **References**

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