



Children's Literature Across Contexts: Global and Indian Perspectives - A Review of Literature

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Abstract

Children's literature has developed into a significant interdisciplinary field that connects literary studies, education, childhood studies, psychology, and cultural theory. Over the past century, academia has shifted from viewing children's texts as simple secondary or educational tools to recognizing them as important cultural artifacts that shape, challenge, and mirror ideas of childhood. This literature review critically analyzes major scholarly contributions to children's literature, including both global and Indian perspectives. The review features thematic sections, theoretical approaches, and examines trends such as fantasy, realism, trauma, and inclusion. It also highlights Indian children's literature, focusing on its roots in folklore and myth, its links to colonial and postcolonial identity, its gender biases, and recent innovations. By situating Indian scholarship within global conversations, the review underscores both similarities and differences in how childhood is understood across cultures. The paper concludes by identifying gaps in current research and urging more comparative, interdisciplinary, and global South-focused approaches to children's literature.

Keywords: children's literature, childhood studies, narratology, ideology, postcolonialism, India

Introduction

Children's literature has historically occupied a paradoxical place within literary studies. Earlier dismissed as a minor genre due to its association with pedagogy and its "intended audience" of young readers, it is now a robust field of inquiry that intersects with literary theory, pedagogy, psychology, and cultural studies (Hunt, 1994; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994). The study of children's literature is not simply about cataloguing texts for young audiences; it is a critical engagement with how societies imagine childhood, transmit values, and negotiate questions of ideology, identity, and cultural belonging.

Globally, the development of children's literature has mirrored historical transformations in the conceptualization of childhood itself. Philippe Ariès' (1962) seminal work *Centuries of Childhood* argued that childhood is a socially constructed category, not a natural or universal stage of life. This insight provided the foundation for subsequent literary scholarship, particularly Jacqueline Rose's (1984) claim that children's literature is less about children and more about adult desires and ideologies projected onto them. She argues that Peter Pan forces us to question what the adults are doing in the endless production and circulation of children's fiction.

In India, children's literature has its own trajectory. Rooted in oral storytelling, folklore, and myth, it evolved under colonial rule, where English-language texts and translations of epics dominated children's reading. Post-independence Indian authors began experimenting with narratives that reflected modern realities, but challenges remain in terms of thematic diversity, representation, and global visibility (Bhatt, 2020).

This review integrates both global and Indian perspectives to trace the historical, theoretical, and thematic forms of children's literature. It argues that while the global children's literature scenario has moved toward interdisciplinarity and ideological critique, Indian children's literature remains a fertile but underexplored site that requires more scholarly attention and comparative engagement.

Historical Foundations of Children's Literature

The emergence of children's literature as a distinct category is often traced to the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. While ancient fables like Aesop's tales and religious parables were available to young audiences, it was the publication of Charles Perrault's *Tales and Stories of the Past with Morals* (1697) and the Grimm Brothers' *Children's and Household Tales* (1812) that crystallized the notion of a literature specifically for children (Grenby, 2008).

The Victorian era witnessed the rise of moral and didactic stories alongside imaginative classics like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and George MacDonald's fantasy works. Peter Hunt (1994, 2001) points out that children's literature during this time was closely linked with moral lessons, imperial ideas, and the development of obedient, literate citizens. Meanwhile, scholars like Kimberley Reynolds (2011) have highlighted the radical potential of children's books to challenge adult authority and promote creativity.

In the 20th century, the genre expanded with authors like Enid Blyton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien, whose works continue to define global popular imagination. Yet, as Lesnik-Oberstein (1994) observes, the academic study of children's literature only gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, as critics began to interrogate its ideological footing.

Thus, the history of children's literature reveals a dual trajectory: one strand emphasizing pedagogy and moralization, the other embracing imagination, subversion, and play.

Theoretical Approaches

Childhood Studies and the Construction of Childhood

Philippe Ariès' claim that childhood is historically constructed has paved the way for scholars to examine how literature participates in shaping cultural notions of childhood. Jacqueline Rose's (1984) *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Action* argues that children's literature is essentially written by adults for adults, constructing rather than addressing the child reader. Rose's observation remains foundational for children's literature theory.

Allison James and Alan Prout (2015) later developed the "new sociology of childhood," which emphasized children as social actors rather than passive recipients. It emphasizes that childhood is a social construction that varies across cultures and contexts, not a universal or natural state, and highlights the importance of studying children's everyday lives in their own right. In literary studies, this has translated into examining how texts either constrain or empower child agency.

Narratology and the Implied Reader

Perry Nodelman (2008) explores the unique narrative dynamics of children's literature, especially how texts construct a "dual audience" of children and adults. According to him, childhood is both innocence and experience. Maria Nikolajeva (2005) expanded narratological approaches by analyzing focalization, perspective, and the role of adult mediation in children's narratives. These studies highlight the complexity of children's texts and challenge the beliefs that they are "simple" or "transparent."

Ideology, Gender, and Power

Jack Zipes (2001) and Kimberley Reynolds (2011) foreground ideology and politics in children's literature, especially in fairy tales and fantasy. Zipes argues that fairy tales have historically functioned as instruments of socialization, reinforcing dominant power structures. They have been used to shape children's behaviour, values, and societal roles. Feminist critics like Emer O'Sullivan (2011) analyze how children's literature constructs gender roles and national identities, revealing both conservative and subversive tendencies.

Reader-Response and Pedagogical Perspectives

Aidan Chambers (1991) and Louise Rosenblatt (1994) emphasized the role of the reader in co-constructing meaning. Both advanced the reader-response theory, emphasizing the reader's active role in constructing meaning from a text, in contrast to earlier approaches that focused solely on the text. In the context of children's literature, this perspective foregrounds how child readers interpret and resist textual authority. Pedagogical critics highlight the use of children's literature in education, both as a literacy tool and as a means of social-emotional development.

Postcolonial and Global Frameworks

John Stephens (1992) and McCallum and Stephens (2011) extended ideological critiques into postcolonial contexts, examining how children's texts encode cultural hierarchies of race, nation, and empire. Stephens shows how fiction can work to constrain or liberate audience responses. Within Indian context, Raman (2002) argues that Indian children's literature occupies a marginal position in global circuits, shaped by translation, colonial legacies, and uneven publishing infrastructures.

Together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that children's literature is not merely entertainment but a site of cultural construction, ideology, and contestation.

Thematic Trends in Global Children's Literature

Fantasy and Imagination : Fantasy remains one of the most popular genres of children's literature. From Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007), fantasy has been celebrated for expanding children's imagination but also critiqued for reinforcing dominant ideologies (Nikolajeva, 2005). Authors like Nikolajeva assert that fantasy is a genre for expressing cultural values and interrogating social injustices. Zipes (2001) sees fantasy as a vehicle for both social control and resistance, depending on its narrative strategies.

Realism and the Problem Novel : In the late 20th century, realism and the "problem novel" gained prominence, tackling issues such as divorce, drugs, and identity. John Stephens (1992) noted that such texts often oscillate between empowerment and didacticism. Multicultural children's literature has sought to provide representation for diverse readers, though critics note that it often risks tokenism.

War, Trauma, and Memory: Children's literature has increasingly addressed war and trauma, particularly Holocaust narratives like Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (1989) and *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. Kertzer (2019) highlights how these texts bring about the paradox of representing trauma for young audiences, balancing historical truth with age-appropriate narration. She also examines the ethical and representational challenges of writing about the genocide for young audiences. In South Asia, Partition literature and conflict-zone writing extend this tradition.

Inclusivity and Diverse Childhoods: Recent studies emphasize inclusivity, analyzing how children's texts represent disability, queerness, and marginalized identities. This trend responds to critiques that children's literature has historically reinforced normative ideals of race, class, gender, and ability.

Digital and Graphic Narratives: The rise of digital media and graphic novels has expanded the field of children's literature. Scholars examine how interactive texts and multimodal storytelling transform the reading experience, making children active participants in meaning-making.

Children's Literature in India

Children's literature in India has deep roots in oral storytelling, epics, and folklore. However, during colonial rule, English texts and translations of Indian epics dominated children's reading. Original Indian children's literature was limited and heavily didactic. Dave (1985) emphasizes the colonial legacy, noting the dominance of mythic retellings. According to him, during the colonial period, most children's books were imported from England. Only the children of the Indian elite could read and they read the classics of the English masters. After independence, there was a great leap in children's book production, but most of them are retellings of the great Indian epics or else they are purely educational in purpose.

Bhatt (2020) highlighted the role of folklore and myth in fostering cultural pride and identity. Verma (2025) emphasized the contributions of women writers and translators, who bring marginalized voices into children's literature, thereby diversifying its themes and readership.

The *Triveni Journal* (n.d.) critiqued the urban and male-centred biases in Indian children's texts, noting how rural and female perspectives remain marginalized. Vyas (2023) and Sati (2023) offered feminist readings that reveal how recent works challenge gender stereotypes by presenting empowered girl protagonists.

Chandra (2023) critiqued the inability of Indian children's literature to keep pace with technological and social change, while Sarkar (2023) analyzes how contemporary works discuss indigenous identities and nostalgic constructions of childhood. Dar and Kannan (2023) explored how modern Indian texts engage with globalization and modernity.

Raman (2002) situated Indian children's literature within global debates, highlighting its marginalization in world literary circuits but also its potential for unique contributions.

Comparative Insights: India and Global Children's Literature

A comparative lens reveals both convergences and divergences. Like global traditions, Indian children's literature draws heavily on folklore and myth for cultural transmission. However, its postcolonial context gives it distinctive features: the legacy of colonialism, the tension between English and regional languages, and the struggle for visibility in global markets. While Western scholarship increasingly engages with inclusivity and diverse identities, Indian texts still grapple with urban bias, limited thematic range, and market constraints. Yet, the richness of oral traditions and the growing feminist interventions position Indian children's literature as a vibrant, though underrepresented, strand within global scholarship.

Conclusion

Children's literature is a dynamic field that reflects and shapes how societies construct childhood, discuss ideology, and transmit culture. Global scholarship has developed rich theoretical tools—narratology, ideological critique, postcolonialism—that illuminate the complexities of children's texts. Thematic trends such as fantasy, realism, trauma, and inclusivity reveal the diversity and adaptability of the genre.

Within this global landscape, Indian children's literature offers unique contributions grounded in folklore, cultural identity, and postcolonial negotiation. Despite challenges of visibility, thematic bias, and limited critical attention, the Indian context demonstrates how children's literature is not merely derivative but an important site of cultural imagination and resistance.

Future studies must bridge global and Indian perspectives, foregrounding comparative and interdisciplinary approaches that recognize the multiplicity of childhoods across cultures. By doing so, children's literature can continue to expand its horizons as both an academic discipline and a cultural practice.

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