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Cultural Semiotics and Mythification in Children's Literature: Illustrated Narratives, Cultural Memory, and the Transformation of Literary Characters

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Abstract: Semiotics involves the analysis of meaning construction and transformation in terms of verbal, visual, and cultural semiosis. In the presented study, cultural semiosis is examined using the medium of children's literature with specific emphasis on the relationship between narrative, illustration, character depiction, and cultural meanings conveyed through these components. The NCERT Barkha books serve as an example of the study's central case with illustrations depicting social and cultural practices of India in such features as clothes, food, home life, gestures, games, and social interactions. At the same time, the paper extends theoretical examination of the issue to mythification and offers another illustrative example of Winnie-the-Pooh as a character whose cultural identity has gone beyond the original narrative of A. A. Milne. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's, Roland Barthes', Yuri Lotman's theories of semiotics and multimodality in children's literature, the study distinguishes between cultural representation and circulation of symbolic meanings after their naturalization. The reason for Winnie-the-Pooh being used as a comparative example, therefore, rather than an empirical case study, is that of Indian children's books. It is stated in the paper that illustrated children's literature not only functions as a form of narrative media but as a signifying practice by which identity, values, memories, and ideology are constructed.

Keywords: *Children's Literature; Cultural Semiotics; Mythification; Cultural Memory; Illustrated Narratives; Semiotic Framework; Multimodal Discourse Analysis.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is one form of creative writing including stories, poetry and factual writings which have been specially tailored for certain groups of children. It is an ever-growing field with numerous aspects and features which are used for entertainment, fostering creativity, educating the young generation and developing necessary life skills. Children's literature has grown immensely, changing from didactic writings to a wide variety of genres and styles. Modern children's literature has become focused on the developmental needs of different age groups. It comprises of bright and colorful picture books for toddlers to novels for young adults. Children's literature serves an important purpose of building up child's perception of the world, forming their values and making them lovers of books for all their life.

Children's literature is written specifically for unbiased and non-prejudiced readers and creates an image of the world (the society and culture around them) through connecting the observations of children and their imagination. Literature becomes an important tool for creating such perceptions as it provides various perspectives through different kinds of literary expressions. For children, literature becomes an important tool of criticism of the surrounding world.

This can be called a large genre of writings and images for kids. This genre contains various writings such as picture books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, fables, comics, folk songs, and classical literary texts of the world. It has the capacity to influence young readers to believe in reality presented by books in a way meant for them. This is the very reason why a huge portion of children's literature comprises fantasy genres.

Children's literature has been categorized on the basis of age and literacy of children; therefore, the suitability of text with the audience is problematic for the children's literature writers. Despite the innocent attitude of the children with regard to the texts that they read, they are capable of accepting

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the world that is presented to them via books. There are many texts of fantasy fiction in children's literature. Fairy tales, fables and beastly tales such as Aesop's fables and Panchatantra of Vishnu Sharma. The texts like Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Caroll and Gulliver's Travels by Johnathan Swift, meant for the adults, are now adapted as children's literature since they are able to accept Lilliputs and miniature humans.

Children are the appropriate subject matter of children's literature. Children's literature may be described as those works which have been created exclusively for children as well as literature that is being read by children. The focus on the literal and artistic nature of a literary work for children becomes very important. However, the main point in creation and translation of children's literature is having a complete knowledge of the audience of these works including their requirements, comprehension level, environment, and interests.

Language is both inherited and acquired. Story books for children include both texts and illustrations. With the help of illustrations, children get to understand and visualize the text of the story as there might be some objects which they would not know about. Illustrations are mainly created based on the socio-cultural background of the reader. The illustrator of the illustration wields the power of representing the world to the reader.

In the illustrated books, there are two ways of representing the same notion, that is, text and illustration. It involves two sets of linguistic and visual symbols that signify the same notion or object (as described in Saussurian theory). Semiotics is concerned with the analysis of the way in which signs operate in order to convey meaning.

Semiotics is concerned with meaning making. It is related to communication and construction of reality. As far as literary theory is concerned, semiotics has been applied to the study of literature. It is concerned with understanding the role of language and other signifying systems in conveying meaning explicitly and implicitly. It focuses on the ways in which different signs operate in order to create meanings in literature, their interpretations and relations to society and culture. Children play the role of makers and decoders of signs who make use of the resources available in their own socio-cultural environment. Semiotics enables us to connect the literary text with the wider context of culture and history. It is a reflection of the response of the work to the social, political and ideological values of the age.

The legacy of the arbitrariness of signs by Saussure emphasizes that the connection between the signifier and the signified is conventional. This is especially evident when it comes to the linguistic signs about which Saussure was talking about. We are able to understand a certain word as meaning what it does only because we have mutually agreed on doing so. According to Saussure, 'entirely arbitrary signs serve better than others in expressing the ideal process of semiology. In this way, linguistics provides a model for all of semiology, although languages are only one form of semiological system' (Saussure 1983, 68; Saussure 1974, 68). He also says, 'Any expression which is accepted in a community always has at bottom a collective habit, or a convention, which amounts to saying the same thing' (Saussure 1983, 68; Saussure 1974, 68).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural semiotics looks into how culture can be organized through signs and how meaning can be made within a specific culture. This is a very useful way to study culture in relation to perception and behavior. By analyzing signs and symbols of a specific culture, one gains insights into the underlying values and belief systems of that culture.

Yuri Lotman introduced the concept of the "semiosphere" as the environment in which all semiotic processes occur. "The semiosphere is the totality of all signs and codes, existing in a given culture, which allows the creation of new meanings through the interplay of these systems." (Lotman 2000, p. 7). He also explored the dynamic nature of cultural systems, noting that cultures are not static but evolve through change, conflict, and disruption processes. For him, cultural change often arises from breaking established codes and structures. "Cultural dynamics are driven by the constant eruption of foreign or new codes, which challenge and reconfigure existing systems of meaning." (Lotman 2001, p. 45).

Umberto Eco, an Italian philosopher, semiotician, and novelist, developed his theory of the sign in 1973. In his book, Le Signe defined a sign as "The sign is used to transmit information; to say or to indicate a thing that someone knows and wants others to know as well" (Eco 1988, 27). In another book, A Theory of Semiotics, Umberto Eco emphasized the expansive nature of semiotics, arguing that signs are not limited to linguistic entities but include objects, gestures, and even cultural practices. "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign."(Eco 1976, 7).

Yuri Lotman emphasized that culture is a system of semiotic codes through which individuals communicate and organize experiences. His theories focus on the interconnections between signs, culture, and meaning, underlining the ever-changing nature of human communication and cultural expression. In his book, he argued that cultural signs are not simply reflective of the external world but actively construct it. "The culture of a society can be viewed as a set of semiotic systems, and these systems are in a continuous state of interaction and transformation." (Lotman 1990, p. 13). For Lotman, "text" was not limited to written or spoken language but encompassed all forms of communication, including rituals, art, and everyday practices. A culture is a system of texts that interprets the world meaningfully. "Any part of the culture, whether it is a literary work or a specific social ritual, can be analyzed as a text that encodes meaning." (Lotman 1970, p. 29).

Christine E Sleeter and Carl A Grant, in their article 'The Semiotics of Multicultural Children's Literature:

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Representing Diversity and Promoting Understanding,' explore how multicultural children's literature can promote cultural understanding and appreciation, challenging stereotypes and promote inclusivity and examine how these books can help children develop empathy and respect for different cultures and perspectives.

Perry Nodelman's book chapter 'The Evolution of Illustration in Children's Literature: Reflecting Social and Cultural Changes' traces the historical development of illustration styles in children's literature, exploring how they reflect changing social, cultural, and artistic trends. It examines evolution of illustrations in becoming more diverse and comprehensive representation of contemporary society.

➢ *Objectives*

- To evaluate cultural and contextual factors in semiotic interpretations of selected children's literature.
- To investigate cultural semiotics embedded in selected children's literature and examine how these semiotic elements convey ideologies and perpetuate cultural narratives.
- To examine how literary characters may acquire extended cultural and symbolic meanings through mythification, adaptation, and cultural circulation.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to be an attempt towards qualitative study on the concepts of sign, cultural, and social semiotics. The study will make an attempt to understand the concepts of semiotics through the theories of Barthes Roland, Clifford Greetz, Yuri Lotman, Louis Hjelmslev, Michael A K Halliday, Robert Hodge and Kress Gunther and other critics associated with semiology. It will be useful to understand the concept of semiotics as a method of analyzing the sign, symbols and other meanings in the selected illustrated storybooks and understand the implications of semiotic structures on the texts. The study is aimed at making an input into child studies through literature construction of ideas and realities. The NCERT Barkha series constitutes the primary textual and visual corpus for the analysis of Indian cultural representation. The discussion of Winnie-the-Pooh is incorporated as a comparative conceptual illustration to demonstrate how a children's literary character can move beyond its original narrative and become associated with wider cultural meanings. Unless a systematic corpus of adaptations, merchandise, reception materials, and other representations is separately examined, the Pooh discussion should not be presented as an independent empirical case study. The analysis therefore distinguishes observations drawn from the Barkha series from theoretical interpretation informed by the example of Pooh.

IV. DISCUSSION

➢ *Barthes, Roland. Image, Music, Text. Fontana Press, 1977*

Barthes collection of essays on semiotics and structuralism including his literary theory. Pertinent essays include "Rhetoric of the Image" and "Myth Today." Barthes does not focus explicitly on children's literature; however, his seminal work includes all the necessary semiotic ideas such as sign, signifier, signified, denotation, connotation, and myth. This analysis of the way images and myths are used in culture is important for children's literature, particularly picture books, as an illustration of how they form meaning using signs and symbols.

➢ *Lotman, Yuri M. Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture. Indiana University Press, 1990*

Lotman develops a semiotic theory of culture, treating culture as a complex system of signs and sign systems. Yuri is fond of concepts like semiosphere, cultural memory and conversations among cultures. Lotman's ideas are important to consider the role of children's literature in the context of cultural semiotic traditions. Lotman's concept of semiosphere is a theoretical tool that views children's literature as part of the larger cultural semiotic environment, which forms cultural codes and values. Also, his concepts of cultural memory and intertextuality are also important to consider how the children's literary texts contribute to the continuation of cultural narratives.

➢ *Bharata, Natyashastra, Translated by Manomohan Ghosh, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951*

Rasa or theory of aesthetic emotion is an indispensable element of Indian arts. Illustrations of story books can effectively employ visual strategies to make the reader feel emotions. The face expressions along with body language with certain details would help in creating an array of emotions that creates a strong link with the character. Color and composition are also vital elements; warm colors denote passion or anger while cool colors denote peace and tranquility. The sequence in which the elements are arranged conveys the emotion.

➢ *Perry Nodelman, Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books, University of Georgia Press, 1988*

The relationship between text and picture in illustrated storybooks goes further than just being a decorative purpose. It is an indispensable part of storytelling. It is a form of visual comment or complement to the text. It helps enhance the text through visual depiction of the most important scenes in the story. It helps provide cultural background by depicting cultural practices and rituals in a way that the readers can fully understand them. It makes the story more appealing to younger audiences. It captures their attention and imagination in a way that makes the stories more memorable and powerful.

➢ *Emma Tarlo, Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India, University of Chicago Press, 1996*

The costume and decoration serve as excellent visual references in the illustration of story books that clearly give connotations to ideas of social hierarchy, gender roles, and regional diversity. The royalty dresses up in rich clothing and jewelry that show their high social standing, while common people have simple costumes. The accents from the regions in the traditional costumes like sarees and dhotis are used as props in the pre-existing gender hierarchy of clothing, as is

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seen in the map of regional costumes and the embroidered name tag of South Asian dresses to show the larger cultural spectrum of ethnicity in India.

➢ *Selected Illustrated Story Books*

The Barkha Series is the series of forty storybooks published by NCERT to promote language development in young learners. The illustrations in the story books go hand-in-hand with texts and make texts meaningful by depicting an elaborate cultural and social context to texts. The Barkha Series gives us The Coherence of Text and Illustrations. The illustrations in this series focus on the events of stories only. They are lively and realistic. The representation of children in the series is neither stereotypical nor clichéd but quite realistic and life-like. The plots of this series focus on daily life and include elements and motifs related to our everyday activities. The series portrays the culture of Indian middle-class families.

The series portrays the everyday life of Indian middle-class families. The depiction of various aspects of home, school, and society reveals elements and motifs of a specific culture, like preparation of tea and sherbet for the guests. The illustrations in the Barkha series enable children to have a better understanding of the social and cultural context of stories.

The characters in this collection are selected from a multicultural background and have secular values of India associated with them. From the texts, we can see that the names of the characters belong to different multicultural backgrounds like Uma, Jeet, and Naziya. The depiction of their attires in the illustration suggests this. The depiction of the father of Milli who is a brown person having a dark skin tone and wearing a mustache is familiar to the surrounding of Indian kids. The clothing of women is illustrated but not described in the text.

The cultural values and practices in Indian society have been embedded in text and images in an indirect way, including, for example, the depiction of the process of preparing gulgule, which is one of the typical Indian dishes, as well as the depiction of an Indian kitchen where Indian utensils are used in an Indian kitchen. Certain dietary habits, like the habit of sitting on the floor while having meals and having food on leaf plates called 'pattal', and serving rotis and rice as staple foods in Indian homes have been shown in the images. The indigenous practice of feeding jaggery and kadha to a cow immediately after giving birth to her calf and tying a rope around the neck of the new-born calf shows the cultural value of empathy towards animals.

The illustrations present a cultural context of the texts in order to present cultural elements of India, like indigenous games like gilli danda, skipping rope, playing with sticks, and rolling tires. The culture of tying hair with ribbons, using flower decorations in their hair like Sadabahaar that is indigenous to them, and also the depiction of the Golgappa stand and the way in which they used to eat is presented in illustration. The illustrations within the text present hidden codes of culture and give more meaning to the text.

➢ *Mythification and the Cultural Transformation of Children's Literary Characters*

The examination of semiotics of cultural discourse in illustrated children's literature could be broadened to include not only the semiotics of cultural practices, but also the semiotics of cultural symbolism that is achieved by the transformation of literary characters into recognized cultural symbols. At the beginning, a character receives its meaning in a certain narrative, according to its looks, behavior, relations, and narration. Nevertheless, after entering the sphere of adaptations, reinterpretation, popular culture, and social memory, its signification might move beyond the limits of a specific text. It could be considered using Roland Barthes' theory of myth as a second-level semiology.

In Barthes' terms, a sign which has obtained its meaning on the first level of signification could become a signifier on the second level and generate additional meanings which go beyond the borders of the particular narrative. Using this theory for children's literature, it becomes possible to investigate how a literary character acquires associations with values and concepts that go beyond the scope of the story. Such associations should not be considered universal or static; they are created and transformed in a historic, cultural, and interpretative context.

The figure of Winnie-the-Pooh is a relevant example in this regard. Having first appeared in the novel Winnie-the-Pooh by A. A. Milne (1926), the character was originally represented in a certain literary universe and narrative context. Later on, Pooh became recognizable outside the context of his original literary appearance due to further cultural representation and interpretation. In the example provided, one can see connections between such connotations as innocence, childhood, nostalgia, and British cultural identity. Using a Barthesian perspective, it becomes possible to analyze those connotations as connotative meanings that can get naturalized through further repetition.

This example is also relevant in relation to Lotman's semiosphere concept. Literary characters do not exist in a vacuum; they enter the cultural environment where various types of literature, illustrations, movies, TV shows, institutions, and audiences coexist. Each new context carries in itself the possibility to keep, highlight, and even change something related to the character.

The comparison with the NCERT Barkha series is an analysis and not an equivalence. In the Barkha stories, cultural meanings are conveyed mainly through the depiction of daily activities in India, such as domesticity, food, attire, games, bodily movements, and social interactions. In the case of Winnie-the-Pooh, the focus is on the potential for the literary figure to become a cultural sign through its circulation and reinterpretation. This example, in conjunction with the previous one, reveals the two interrelated but separate processes of embedding cultural meaning into illustrated stories and the subsequent re-signification of the narrative signs into cultural symbols.

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A detailed empirical study of the process of myth-making of Pooh will require an investigation of a well-defined corpus of editions, illustrations, screen versions, promotional literature, merchandising, and reception throughout particular time periods and cultural backgrounds. The corpus will help identify the meanings in Milne's story and distinguish them from those that have been embedded in the later interpretations of the narrative.

V. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates the value of a cultural semiotic framework for examining how illustrated children's literature constructs, communicates, and transforms meaning. The analysis of the NCERT Barkha series shows how verbal and visual elements work together to represent Indian social and cultural contexts through clothing, food, domestic practices, games, gestures, and relationships. Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, together with Lotman's semiosphere and cultural memory, provide a broader framework for understanding how signs operate within and beyond individual texts. The discussion of Winnie-the-Pooh extends this framework by illustrating how a literary character may acquire additional symbolic associations through cultural circulation, adaptation, and nostalgia. The two examples represent related but distinct dimensions of cultural signification: the representation of cultural codes within illustrated narratives and the mythification of characters beyond their original narrative settings. The Pooh example is conceptual and comparative; a systematic analysis of its adaptations and reception would be required to establish the historical development of particular meanings. Future research may therefore examine a wider range of Indian and international children's texts, their adaptations, and their reception across generations to understand how cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and renegotiated.

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