

Mapping Ideologies to Childhood: Jamila Gavin's *Coram Boy* and *The Surya Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature is never politically or ideologically neutral. Even though childhood is an apolitical and asexual period of time, all children's literature is ideological and based on implicit or explicit attitudes, assumptions and world views. It has been harnessed to topical or ideologically motivated causes like abolition of slavery and predicament of working-class during industrial revolution, to more controversial and current trends in the proliferation of science fiction.

Following this line of great tradition, Jamila Gavin (1941-), a British author of Children's Literature, mines an authentic episode of British social history in her epic story, *The Surya Trilogy*. She reveals the contrast between the city life and that of country estates, the wealthy class with the poverty-stricken in the light of contemporary discourse on ideology. As an inheritor of two rich cultures, sharing "half and half", Gavin depicts the fortunes of two generations of a family showing the impact of colonial rule and the horrors of partition in their lives.

The aim of this paper is to examine how cultural debates on ideology and power find its space in *Coram Boy* and *The Surya Trilogy*, which appeared in the third golden age of Children's literature. There are many competing ideologies around childhood, role and status of children and purposes of literature for them. The questions of whether literature should entertain or instruct is an ideological one, as is the questions of what children should learn through literature.

KEYWORDS

Children's Literature; Ideology; Culture; Power.

The literature for children has always been implicitly or explicitly ideological, presenting and promoting particular ideas about childhood and encouraging children to either uphold or challenge particular values. Although some eighteenth- and late nineteenth-century writing for children, mostly rhymes, still survive as old favourites, the fiction that has retained classic status for children mostly dates from second half of nineteenth century, marking the dawn of the First Golden Age of children's

literature. Late Victorian period witnessed a dramatic shift in ideas about childhood: the idea of childhood as protected space, characterized by innocence, goodness and purity was reaching its heights in the Victorian cult of the child and especially the cult of girl child well-known exemplified in Carroll's 'Alice'. Although many children were still working in factories and denied of education, the wider social ideal of childhood emphasized is naturalness, domesticated in the feminine realm, protected from male, adult world of work,

money and sex (Montgomery and Watson, 2009). Radical changes took place by the end of nineteenth century, emphasizing the social and emotional role of the young children; they were valued from being economically 'useless' but 'emotionally priceless', from being viewed as a producer to consumer (Zelizer, 1994). This new way of looking at children had a profound impact on the literature written for them.

The period of childhood is not homogenous as children experience it differently according to their age, gender, ethnicity and ability. It is odd that 'the child' as Judith Ennew points out, is frequently referred to as 'strange, ungendered isolate' (Oakley, 1994:21) when the great variety in the ways that childhood is experienced is so central to children's own lives and to adults' understandings. Even in literature written for children, childhood is not represented as homogenous; there have been deliberate attempt to produce children's literature specifying gender, splitting boys and girls in what they read and promote different ideals in the literature designed for them. Louisa Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), a classic of children's literature is an exquisite example for one of the most famous and influential books ever written for girls. Apart from its portrayal of a feminized domestic ideal, its importance lies in the ways it genders childhood and challenges the limitations of the expected roles and expectations of girls. In contrast, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1884) has been considered as a boys' story with its emphasis on adventures and explorations in contrast to the world of enclosed domestic interiors suitable for girls.

The tradition of talking animals can be traced back to sources as diverse as Aesop's fables or Charles' Perrault's fairy tales, which were not originally written for children, have later become closely identified with children's literature. The *Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901) by Beatrix

Potter is one of the most famous animal stories written so far. It can be placed as part of a long-standing tradition of animal stories and as part of a tradition of picture books for younger children where images and text work together to create meaning. Poetry and drama for children sometimes appear less prominent than fiction in studies of Children's literature. Two important collection s of poetry for children, Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885) and A.A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* (1924) analyze the very different childhoods they invoke and still they speak to contemporary children. The ideals they depict and promote are radically different suggesting a major breach in the notion of childhood itself. Children's literature has always been engaged with overt and covert political ideologies. Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) serves as an exquisite example of an obvious political novel for children. It deals with the oppression of African Americans and tackles the themes of racism and discrimination in a historical rather than a contemporary context being set in 1930s

The novels of Philip Pullman and J.K. Rowling's, the popular phenomenon of *Harry Potter* brought children's literature into greater public prominence. The profound impact, these books have had on children's literature, literally sustained the interests of millions of readers and they will still be seen as classics in fifty or a hundred years. They have arguably presented a new, epic vision of childhood. The child hero or heroine of these stories is not just an adventurer but also a redeemer. In this new Golden Age of children's literature, it is worth looking critically at how these writers draw different ideologies into childhood and what role literature played in their lives. They engage children with issues such as sex, drugs, race-politics, eco disasters, war and people trafficking, subjects that have no place in an idealized view of childhood. Children

cannot remain in a cozy, protected and privileged space, separated from adults; they are asked to engage with harsh realities of life (Montgomery and Watson, 2009)

Jamila Gavin's *Coram Boy* (2000) remains as an exemplar of the recent renaissance in children's historical fiction, a genre that stretches back deep into nineteenth century's love of Sir Walter Scott and which still boasts classic titles such as Captain Frederick Marryat's *The Children of the New Forest* (1847) and Rosemary Sutcliffe's *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954). The popularity of historical fiction even though diminished in 1980s and early 1990s, the new millennium saw it in a 'vibrant state' (Bramwell, 2005:109) as a response to the perennial need to bring history alive for school children. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that because fiction is historical, it does not address the contemporary issues; race, empire and colonialism are the subject matter and context of Jamila Gavin's fiction.

Gavin was born in India of an Indian father and an English mother; her works exhibit a blend of eastern and western cultures and display many modes and genres including short stories, retelling of myths, science fiction and teen novels set in India and ghost stories set in England. Her two historical novels, *Coram Boy* (2000) and *The Bloodstone* (2003) are set in seventeenth century India and Venice. Apparently, what her works has in common is 'a need to reflect the multicultural world in which my children and I lived' (Gavin, 2009). Her characters cross over different worlds, connecting in fact different spheres between the living and the dead, the European and the Indian, the earth-bound and parallel reality. Making such connections often entails the suturing of family generations such as in *The Bloodstone* (2003) in which a young boy travels to find and release his father held hostage in Afghanistan.

Coram Boy (2000) is centered upon the intertwined fates of two orphans, Toby, saved from an African slave-ship and Aaron, the abandoned heir to a great estate; both finally reach at the Coram Hospital for the Deserted Children. The novel focuses on rediscovering the hidden stories of invisible children - the illegitimate, the orphans, the black, the poor and the enslaved. It is not merely an exercise in re-creating eighteenth-century England to young readers, but has an ethical and political dimension in its discussion of oppression and injustice. Dealing with the fates of these children, black and white, male and female, the novel tackles the vexed history of empire and its legacies on the one hand while trying to recuperate loss and oppression through the mechanism of romance.

The Surya Trilogy (2001) was partly autobiographical, unearthing experiences from Gavin's childhood in India and rediscovering her parents' history of a previous generation. She remembers their stories, their perception on events as they unfolded, dating back to two world wars, the colonial struggle for independence and the gradual fragmenting of the British Empire. She holds a different perspective of history; it is not just some dates and events that define a country's political public persona and status; rather histories explain ethnicity, gender and identity; histories which can be brought from anywhere and by anyone, a greater realization that everyone is history in the making (Gavin, *Coram Boy* as History, 2009). Fiction, according to Gavin, is telling a story intentionally or unintentionally and trying to explore different truths rather than merely facts and figures. It can be emotional truths, social truths, the effects of power and domination, or sex and rivalry families, friends and enemies, race and gender.

In her narrative *The Surya Trilogy* (2001), she connects the destiny of two generations of a Sikh family screening the

impact of the powerful British Empire and the wounds of partition on their lives. The three volumes of this novel, entitled as *The Wheel of Surya* (1992), *The Eye of the Horse* (1994) and *The Track of the Wind* (1997) are centered on three important pillars: the Second World War, Independence and Partition. In *The Wheel of Surya* (1992), the first of the trio, an epic journey of a brother and sister to independence is portrayed extending the frontiers of India and England, echoed in war and peace. The novel unveils the difficulties of two young Indians called Jaspal and Marvinder to make their way to England to look for their father, Govind, who went there to move further on with his studies in university to claim a second degree. Unfortunately Govind got caught up in a war and joined the British army to fight against the Nazis. Fleeing from their burnt-out village as civil war rages in the Punjab, Marvinder and Jaspal are violently separated from their mother, Jhoti. Marvinder has already saved her brother's life once, but now they both face a daily fight for survival. Together they escape across India and nearly halfway around the world to England, to find a father they hardly know in a new and hostile culture. The setting is in 1947, during partition and India's independence, a time of great turbulence and civil war where the state of Punjab is badly affected, as the people do not know whether they will belong to India or Pakistan. The story reaches its finale when Marvinder is reunited with friends she knew long ago in India. Gavin was deeply impressed by the idea that children should be able to read stories about any situations which affected their lives. This is what made her to find a way of writing about the horrors of partition in India in *The Wheel of Surya*.

In the dramatic story of *The Eye of the Horse* (1994), a family divided by history, is searching for reconciliation. This is a beautiful tale of displaced individuals and their struggle for a better life. In 1948, Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated, "the light

has gone out of our world." In India, chaos and turmoil reign. In England, Jaspal and Marvinder's father is in prison. Jaspal cannot forgive him, and longs to return to his village in the Punjab where he feels he belongs. Marvinder has found friends, her first love, and her gift as a violinist. But she cannot ignore her mother's voice calling her back to India. She is torn between two worlds. Postwar London, on the one side, is exciting, but post-partition life in Punjab is heart-breaking. *The Eye of the Horse* carries on with not much of a break in time. Jamila weaves what goes on in both countries into one story, the glories and miseries side by side.

The final volume in trilogy *The Track of the Wind* (1997), presents Jaspal and Marvinder's reunion with their mother in India, but their fight for independence goes on. Gavin's books were partly material from her own life; things she knew from her childhood in India, including her parents' history of a previous generation, their stories and their take on events, dating back to two world wars, the colonial struggles for independence and the gradual fragmenting of the British Empire. (Heather and Watson, 2009) Gavin argues that children should be able to read stories about any situations that affected them. In the forward to her books she wrote: "...Everything I experienced simply became material with which I could overlay a complete fantasy. As a child can turn a table into a house, or two chairs into a train, I turned my life into a fiction in which any resemblance to characters living or dead is purely coincidental – as they say in the movies" (Gavin, 2001).

As the variety of childhoods are increasingly acknowledged and celebrated now, the childhood can also be a time of multiple subjugations. It means that the universal, innocent, protected child, so idealized in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries, is in fact a socially, economically and culturally constructed ideal which has always been well out of the

reach of the many, perhaps majority of the children. That is why the set texts of the American and British authors challenges the 'whiteness' of many of the recognized classics of children's literature, presenting the voice of the oppressed and exploring the diversities of childhood. Gavin joins this group, contributing to debates about

and visions of turn-of-the-millennium childhoods, a time of great social concern about children that is well reflected in the literature written for them.

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