

The Transformative Power of Children's Literature: An Intersectional Analysis of Narratives of Conflict, Caste and Gender

Vyomakesisri T.¹

ABSTRACT

The Israeli invasion of Palestine is the most recent instance of how war and displacement, including those caused by causes other than war, are witnessed and experienced by children. 9/11, 26/11, 7/7 and other events have altered our perceptions of the world and ourselves by negatively impacting the planet. The stories/poems about conflict, religion, race, gender, and caste that are interwoven within children's literature offer opportunities for comprehension and introspection. These tales do more than just amuse children; they educate them about the complexity of social structures and human lives. As children navigate stories of war, they come into contact with the harsh realities of war, not only as distant historical events but also as catalysts for empathy and resilience. Through the lens of gender, they examine the fluidity and spectrum of identity, challenging traditional norms, and celebrate diversity. Meanwhile, narratives of caste expose the ingrained biases and inequalities that persist in society, urging them to question and confront societal injustices. Together, these themes foster critical thinking and compassion, creating a generation that is not only aware of the complexities of the world but also inspired to contribute to a just and inclusive society. This research paper is an intersectional analysis of the aforementioned themes in the text *A Clear Blue Sky: Stories and Poems on Conflict and Hope*, authored by writers from Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, including Bulbul Sharma, Elmo Jayawardena, Manjula Padmanabhan, Poile Sengupta, Komail Aijazuddin, and Gulzar, discussing myriad problems plaguing our contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: Diversity; Displacement; Equity; Inclusivity; Intersectionality; War

INTRODUCTION

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion, too

Imagine all the people

Livin' life in peace. (Lennon)

Few songs resonate across generations and cultures as profoundly as John Lennon's "*Imagine*," released in 1971. The song becomes a powerful anthem for peace and solidarity envisioning a harmonious global community amidst the turmoil of the Vietnam War and the rise of global social movements.

War and conflict are among the morally complicated subjects that parents, teachers, and other stakeholders have often debated regarding their suitability as premises for works of children's literature. The depiction of war and conflict in children's texts is particularly complex for numerous reasons, including the possibility of glorifying violence, reflecting human cruelty, and offering stressful imagery to readers unprepared for such material. However, even as these concerns emphasize the potential for negative repercussions for younger readers, many scholars subscribe to the notion that early exposure to the grimness of war may, in fact, both sensitize children to the realities of conflict and direct them toward more peaceful solutions.

¹ Associate Professor, Stanley College of Engineering and Technology for Women, Telangana, India.
✉ vyomakesi@yahoo.co.in

While war is generally seen as belonging to the domain of adult concerns, Jennifer Armstrong has pointed to current research showing, in line with United Nations studies, that more children are hurt and killed in contemporary wars than soldiers (Armstrong 2–4). Many recent children’s books challenge conventional notions of war by subverting stereotypes and adding new dimensions, often by retelling war narratives from a child’s perspective—for instance, a child who does not follow his father into war. Therefore, one effective way to educate young readers about peace is to introduce them to carefully mediated books about war. Through fiction, poetry, and oral histories, children can explore the lives of conflict-stricken people, integrating historical understanding with literary engagement to better comprehend the past and strengthen their faith in creating a peaceful world.

The anthology *A Clear Blue Sky: Stories and Poems on Conflict and Hope*, which forms the primary focus of this paper, features contributions from noted male and female writers, poets, and artists from India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Their diverse narratives, coupled with their distinct voices, allow readers—especially young readers—to engage deeply with sensitive topics such as war, caste discrimination, and gender dynamics. The short story “A Time to Mend” by Asha Nehemiah recounts the experiences of Mubina, her Ammi, and her grandmother, and how they comfort her troubled mind in the aftermath of the violence that occurred in a church. “The New Game” by Paro Anand explores a mother’s anxiety about the way violence is disseminated through video and computer games for children, potentially desensitizing them to real-world brutality. “The Answer” by Rohini Chowdhury presents a historical account of the riots during Partition, drawing on her three years of interviews with Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women regarding the atrocities they endured. She also illustrates how the Partition riots disrupted the cordial relationship between her father and his friend’s family. The title story of the anthology, “A Clear Blue Sky” by the Sri Lankan writer Elmo Jayawardena, offers a harrowing account of war, depicting how children were trained to become soldiers ready to kill or be killed, often without understanding why or for whom they were expected to die. The poems “The Growing Pangs of Nine-Year-Old Faraz” and “Singing Across

Borders” by Gulzar and Anasuya Sengupta, respectively, also subtly address themes of violence, religious intolerance, and conflict, while emphasizing the urgent need to build a peaceful world grounded in empathy and resilience through respect for difference. “Making Stones Dance” by Subhadra Sen Gupta and the poem “For God’s Sake” by Suchitra Krishnamurthy foreground caste- and gender-based discrimination prevalent in society. Collectively, the anthology foregrounds the human cost of conflict, with particular attention to the gendered and communal dimensions of violence during and after Partition.

Most of these stories were written by women writers and poets belonging to three different countries, offering different perspectives on how these sensitive issues are told to children, sensitizing them to the real-world problems, probably what a Palestinian or an Israeli child is currently facing; emphasizing the need to say no to wars, conflicts, caste, gender discrimination to live peacefully. Thus, these stories have a transformative power to inculcate a sense of brotherhood, leaving a positive impact on their minds to respect different viewpoints and embrace a world of dignity, equity, and tolerance. Thus, using literature allows children to effectively manage and resolve conflicts. The strategies and resources embedded within these stories offer crucial insights; thus, interacting with these texts transcends mere entertainment and serves as an important ideological tool. According to Kimberley Reynolds, since ideology is firmly embedded in language, it is challenging to alter the opinions and values of society (Reynolds 4). The views and viewpoints reflected in children’s literature reflect the values and concerns of the day. Another author Silva too highlights that children’s literature serves as a means of empathy despite otherness between adults and children (141). This paper examines the themes of war, conflict, gender, and caste, an intersectional analysis of these themes, the reaction of the child characters in the stories in perpetuating or subverting these prejudices and like. This paper explores how children’s characters in war narratives evolve, focusing on aspects that help them evolve throughout the story’s progression. Betancourt and Khan in their research focused on resilience mechanisms in fictional narrative literature, excluding factual accuracy and empirical data on young readers.

Most of these stories were written by women writers and poets belonging to three different countries, offering different perspectives on how these sensitive issues are told to children, sensitizing them to the real-world problems, probably what a Palestinian or an Israeli child is currently facing; emphasizing the need to say no to wars, conflicts, caste, gender discrimination to live peacefully. Thus, these stories have a transformative power to inculcate a sense of brotherhood, leaving a positive impact on their minds to respect different viewpoints and embrace a world of dignity, equity, and tolerance.

AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES

The main objective of this analysis is to focus on how themes like conflict, gender and caste are represented with or without any association with the child figure in these stories and poems by three different writers. This analysis also examines various characters and their viewpoints in helping the child characters directly or indirectly understand the problems plaguing society. Intersectional Analysis is a critical theoretical framework called intersectionality that elucidates the complex interrelationships among various social identity power structures and cultural discourses. Understanding the intersections and overlaps between various social categories and identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability can help individuals or groups that represent multiple marginalized identities create complex experiences of privilege, discrimination, and social inequality. The point at which two or more entities cross or intersect is the literal definition of intersectionality. Intersectionality studies the ways in which various social identities influence the creation and reception of written works in language and literature studies.

What is the anthology about?

Numerous themes significant to the storyline and conflict development are present in these short stories. Certain aspects are shared by a few of them, including references to and depictions of war, conflict, religious intolerance, othering and terrorism and how they create *Us vs Them* dichotomy leading to lack of empathy furthering feelings of hostility symbolizing that conflict, whether physical or psychological, is endless that makes this world

unsustainable for living. The poems also deal with the aforementioned themes, emphasising the destruction that a war/conflict creates, the effects of war on children, and how important it is to establish a peaceful world. Unlike the above-mentioned stories and poems, the two stories shocked us into the reality of various faces of caste divide and gender-based discrimination, necessitating dignity, equity, and respect for all. This anthology, on the whole, underscores the importance of moral policing.

War, Conflict, Terrorism, Religious Intolerance and Othering

War, conflict, and religious intolerance have been the direct causes of riots and terrorism in these stories and poems. These themes have been used to reflect how they have been internalized in our minds so that even children cannot remain untouched by their drastic effects. To exemplify this, the story *A Time to Mend* by Asha Nehemiah introduces the child character Mubina, who perceives the black-clothed auto driver with a beard to be a robber, part of the mob who was trying to attack the church. The girl and her cousin, deeply affected by this incident, had several tormenting questions in their mind about why there is a difference between Us and Them, why this difference frightens people, and why this creates a feeling of uneasiness that results in lashing out at people. Through Mubina, the writer exposes the dark side of human behaviour, including children. The characters Ammi and grandmother subtly emphasize the importance of empathy without being didactic, aiming to create a society of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance for building caring communities.

On the same lines is the poem *The Growing Pangs of Nine-Year-Old Faraz* by Gulzar (translated from Hindi by Sunjoy Shekhar) that discusses how a nine-year-old boy Faraz pauses and looks around for a while to feel the aftermath of climate change in the form of mucky water, polluted air, and chopped-off trees. Additionally, upon reaching home, the TV shows the news of vandalism (a train, a bus and even houses), forcing him to leave. Given these conditions for the past 50 years, his mind contemplates whether there really is no need to grow up. We find the despair and devastation of a young boy who experiences violence.

Another story that truly reflects the anxieties of a mother is *The New Game* by Paro Anand. This story revolves around a boy and his friend Mano, who were addicted to computer games like *The Terrorist*, with references to 26/11, 9/11, and 7/7 attacks, which are subtly integrated into online computer games. While playing these games, use arms, kill people using AK-47 and other explosives, take a life to gain an extra life, attack Parliament buildings, killing politicians and parliamentarians to reach the next level. The writer expresses her concern over how these games slowly immune children to violence, sometimes leaving them unaffected by the news of real-time terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre or the Parliament.

The title of this anthology, *A Clear Blue Sky*, is the title of the story by Sri Lankan writer Elmo Jayawardena, which is a heartfelt account of the tragic life of Selva, the planter's son who aspired to become a great bowler like Muralitharan, but ends up being a soldier fighting for a separate homeland. He sees other boys and girls trained to fight in the war with real guns and grenades. They are ready to kill and are killed if the need arises. Selva meets a tragic end. He had always wanted to be a bowler. The writer reveals how our world and lives may become things we would never want them to be. Then comes the situation in which we should have courage, determination, faith, hope, humility, and confidence to deal with them.

Thus, these stories predominantly reflect the theme of Hope during the darkest days and how kindness from strangers and caring communities can change the stereotypical ideologies of people combating Hate and promoting Harmony.

Caste and Gender intersectionality

The story *Making Stones Dance* by Subhadra Sen Gupta discusses the desperation of the character Chinappa, a stone carver, and his son Keshava, who anticipates that one day the idol of Vishnu carved by his father would make its place in the sanctum of the temple. However, to his surprise, he learns from his father that he will not be able to see the idol placed in the temple. After all, they are restricted from entering the temple because they are of a low caste. This story brings back the system of Devadasis and explains how even they were meant to dance, but did not enter the temple. They were educated and spoke Sanskrit better

than fat brahmin, but they were marginalized. This story reflects the courage of two low caste marginalised boys in subverting the norms set by high-class societies in the past. They prove that there is no caste or religion; only compassion can drive the world.

Another story highlights gender-based discrimination is *The Answer* by Rohini Chowdhury, where she talks about how women—Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh—were stolen, abducted, kidnapped and separated from their families during Partition. She narrates a short story with the backdrop of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim butchering during the Partition that creates hostility between two friends, resulting in hatred.

The poem *For God's Sake* by Suchitra Krishnamurthy highlights caste- and gender-based discrimination. This poem discusses how the poet sensed separation and disparity due to Caste and Creed. She explains how shocked she was to see the maid always covering her face, who came and left in the dark, as her shadow was also thought to cause some inauspicious incident. She was also not allowed to play and eat with friends because they belonged to another faith. It was then that her grandmother tries to console her mind by explaining that she should follow her heart and change things to accept and respect differences in language, religion, caste, creed rich, poor, man, and woman to spread compassion, love, and oneness and root out hatred and prejudice by liberating the mind to realize that it is each for all and all is one.

The poem *Singing Across Borders* by Anasuya Sengupta stresses the themes of a strong belief in ending conflicts, refusing to be enemies, promoting peace, ending hatred, and passively accepting history that promotes hostility. She envisions a future in which the world becomes a sustainable place for all.

CONCLUSION

Finally, children's books are an effective way to examine the intricacies of conflict from a young reader's perspective. By emphasising the interconnected realities of gender, caste, and conflict, these stories provide complex viewpoints that enhance understanding and empathy. Storytelling from a child's perspective humanises historical and societal challenges, increasing their impact and relatability. They

emphasise that being resilient means having enough courage to dream beyond trauma in addition to simply surviving. Being tolerant turns into a show of strength rather than weakness. Despite differences, these stories promote a feeling of compassion. They encourage conversation and dispel stereotypes. Above all, they sow the seeds of hope in readers of all ages.

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, Jennifer. "On Reading about War and Peace." *Five Owls* 16, nos. 2-4 (2002): 29, 31.
- A Clear Blue Sky: Stories and Poems on Conflict and Hope*. Edited by Paro Anand and Zai Whitaker, Puffin Books, 2020.
- Dosilva, Wellington. "Literature children - child as protagonist." *Journal of Humanity*, vol. 02, no. 01, 1 July 2014, pp. 155–171, <https://doi.org/10.14724/02.11>.
- Lennon, John. "Imagine." <https://genius.com/John-lennon-imagine-lyrics>. Accessed 28 August 2024.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. *Children's Literature in the 1890s and the 1990s*. Northcote House, 1996.