



## Mainstreaming Social Realism in Children's Literature

Ngantchou Yongsi Benjamin<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of African Literature and Civilisation, Université De Yaounde I, Cameroon

### \*Corresponding Author

Ngantchou Yongsi Benjamin

Senior Lecturer, Department of African Literature and Civilisation, Université De Yaounde I, Cameroon

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**Abstract:** Childhood is the base for human growth and development and it shall be prudent if the child has an opportunity to get exposed to the challenges and realities of life along with fantasy, ecstasy and imagination. Children can grasp and learn their environment right from an early age as they are really smart; but the supplement which reaches them in terms of literature in any form should also provide them with glimpses of real life. Hence, it would be really judicious if the fodder they get in terms of literature is infused with social realism so that they understand the realities of life, the kind of society they live in with all kinds of inequities, stigma, discrimination, cruelties, marginalisation, and social exclusion, and so on. Children shall develop the wisdom to distinguish just from unjust and in a way might also build up their responding, assertion and decision-making skills. The Paper primarily discusses how social realism needs to be mainstreamed in children's literature, firmly believing that it shall help the children towards their own positive development along with the development of the communities and nations they live in.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Mainstreaming, Social Realism, Community, Development.

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## INTRODUCTION

Children are an asset of every community. They form the future torchbearers of the nation; hence, an understanding of the hard core realities of the societies they live in must be made available to them at a very early age itself. There can be numerous arguments in this regard, but no matter what pros and cons are presented, it is necessary they assimilate the societal structures, systems, their strengths and weaknesses as and when they grow. They need to develop their critical thinking and rationalising abilities so that quality development can be foreseen in our children which shall positively build healthy communities and nations, in turn, a just society for fellow beings to live in. The Paper does not advocate total neglect of the creativity, imagination and fantasy in children's literature which is very much required for the development of the children, but what is being

given to the children needs to be inclusive in its content and approach so that the child gets both imagination as well as realism in it.

Children in contemporary times have access to different kinds of literature through varied mediums - Audio, Visual, Print. There is a huge development in these mediums and lots of effort is being made to reach children as they form the prime market in today's society. Children have become a huge identifiable market and there are lot of competitors vying with each other to showcase their best so that they can make their profits. The reason behind this is basically the changing family structure - nuclear families, migrant families, single parent families and other categories where engaging children and entertaining them is becoming a great challenge. The economic demands of the family are pushing both parents to work with children having

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time to have access to different modes of entertainment. At times, it is used efficiently, but at times, due to peer pressure and absence of supervisory guidance, it is misused. Urban living with no space for playgrounds is also pushing children to remain glued to television sets and other appliances like video games and play station, thereby eliminating the possibility of having physical activities, group learning and socialisation.

Children's Literature has varied forms and its classification is really difficult and challenging. Its introduction to children happens at an early age where stories, folk tales, songs, rhymes, poems, lullabies are being told / sung to children, which interest them and thereafter create a bonding between the two. Grandparents are preferably not available at homes these days with the changing societal systems, and the parents in their busy schedules take out time to discuss this with children. Books, CDs, Cassettes, VCDs are being purchased to make children understand different kinds of literature available to them and also to make them familiar with different options available to them. Children always have a flair for stories, fantasies and imagination and the primary caretakers use this as a major mode of engaging children, besides home, the neighborhood and the school constitutes a major platform where these children have an opportunity to have access to literature and use it to their benefit.

The Stages of Childhood can be categorised into:

- Early Childhood (0-6 years)
- Middle Childhood (8-14 years)
- Late Childhood / Adolescence (14-18 years)

**Erik Erikson's model of life stage development:**

Erikson (1995) proposes 'eight stages of man' which is a model of development which individuals move through:

- **Birth to one year** - Trust versus mistrust, in which the child learns to trust others, based upon the consistency of their caregivers.
- **One to three years** - Autonomy Vs shame and doubt, in which children begin to assert their independence.
- **Three to six years** - Initiative Vs guilt, in which children assert themselves more frequently.
- **Six years to eleven years** - Industry Vs inferiority, in which children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments.
- **Adolescence** - Identity Vs role confusion, in which children are becoming more independent, and begin to look at the future in terms of career, relationships, families and so on.

- **Young adulthood (20-30s):** Intimacy Vs Isolation, in which the person begins to share themselves more intimately with others, exploring relationships, leading towards longer-term commitments with someone other than a family member.
- **Middle adulthood (40-60s)** - Generativity Vs Stagnation, in which Careers are established, relationships are 'confirmed' and families are established.
- **Late adulthood** — ego integrity Vs despair, there is a tendency to slow down productivity and explore life as a retired person. (Crawford, K *et al.*, 2010).

There have been numerous psychologists who have explored the human behaviour and have gone ahead to investigate their thoughts, feelings, emotions, moods and behaviours looking at how these interact with the person's social environment. An understanding of these factors shall help the writers to grasp the different facets of childhood and cater to their needs accordingly.

Children spend their early childhood (0-6 years) days in the creche, day care, and move on to Kindergarten / Montessori / Play School / Junior Nursery and Senior Nursery settings. During the Middle Childhood, the child completes his / her primary and elementary schooling, and during Late Childhood and Adolescence, the child moves to High School and Higher Secondary School. Most of the developments which occur in this stage are : Motor Development, Aesthetic Development, Physical Development, Psychological Development, Language Development, Cognitive Development, Social Development, Emotional Development and Intellectual Development, to just mention a few. The list is quite exhaustive, but all these developments begin at an early stage and gradually progress in a phase- to-phase manner.

Child Development is a continuous and an incessant process in which more complex skills are gradually built on the simpler ones to enhance effective survival of a child as an adult individual. As the age progresses, physical and neurological maturation pushes a child to attain good motor skills and language development. This capability brings in the desire for independence and autonomy, which is reflected in child's behaviour and social relationship. Children, therefore, begin to face various new challenges and stimuli of the outside world, and so, the foundation of social development begins. Children are active learners and observers. They endlessly perceive information and store it in their memory. Memories are retrieved, and then, used to solve problems. This is reflected as cognitive

development of the child. Hence, Literature plays a crucial role in the development of the child.

Understanding the literary characters in stories, fictions, rhymes and other literature is one of the first ways a young child has of making sense of what it is to be human. As the child dwells in and wonders at the lives lived in a story, she comes to know both herself and the world, and begins to see that world as something over which she, as a character in life, might exercise some control. The events of a story are a means of exploration of the world, helping her to confirm, to illuminate, and to extend her own life experiences, in ways that give her power over them. Story gives public form to private meanings, and thus, helps those who receive its messages to reach out to other human beings in the world, knowing that they share some of the same concerns and feelings.

Those who care about children and their literature have an obligation to inform themselves of the best and the latest thinking about the constellation of topics that will enable them to bring the two together most successfully.

#### **Meaning of Realism and Social Realism:**

Realism often refers more specifically to the artistic movement, which began in France in the 1850s. Realism in France appears after the 1848 Revolution. These realists positioned themselves against Romanticism, a genre dominating French literature and artwork in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Seeking to be undistorted by personal bias, Realism believed in the ideology of objective reality and revolted against the exaggerated emotionalism of the Romantic Movement. Truth and accuracy became the goals of many Realists.

Social Realism developed as a reaction against idealism and the exaggerated ego encouraged by Romanticism. Consequences of the Industrial Revolution became apparent; urban centers grew, slums proliferated on a new scale contrasting with the display of wealth of the upper classes. With a new sense of social consciousness, the Social Realists pledged to “fight the beautiful art”, any style which appealed to the eye or emotions. They focused on the ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathised with working-class people, particularly the poor. They recorded what they saw (“as it existed”) in a dispassionate manner.

#### **Mainstreaming of Social Realism - The Need:**

Children learn from their social environment, be it the home, school, neighborhood and other places where they get a chance to socialise. Hence, the characters and the issues, involving around them, have to make their presence in the

literature which will enable them to relate to the incidents, happenings and relationships which they see on a day-to- day basis. Hence, there is a genuine need for literature to be infused with social realism so that children can understand the following:

- The realities of life
- Societal realities and dynamics
- Challenges and Constraints
- Vulnerable and marginalised
- Biases and Prejudices
- Inequalities
- Privileges
- Injustice
- Hatred
- Stigma and Discrimination
- Violation of Rights

The children can get more occasions to understand if there is a chance where they can identify themselves with the characters in the stories, rhymes, poems, fiction, and so on. Writers are so imaginative that they have the innate capability to associate real life characters with imagination, but the extent to which it is presented is what matters. An illustration towards the same is as follow:

#### **Illustration 1: The Third Gender - Transgender**

The presence of the Transgender in the communities is never made a part of any rhyme, poem or story. When such individuals exist and they are a part and parcel of the society why that is any story does not have any character such as them? How will children accept them all of a sudden when no mention of them is made to them at any given point of time? There is every possibility that such a child can have access to school, then, how are other children going to know about them or accept them? Why do not such characters make their way into children’s literature? The children have a right to know about the presence of the third gender as well.

#### **Illustration 2: King - Powerful and mighty rules the Kingdom**

Most of the stories told to children depict a King who is powerful and mighty who rules the kingdom. Why is it that a woman - the Queen - cannot be mighty and powerful and also rule the Kingdom? There is no rule that the Prince is always handsome and he is an heir or a successor, and the princess is always charming and to be given away in marriage. These things can be reversed. Gender discrimination and Gender roles get embedded in their minds at such a young age that in the long run, they cannot accept a woman as a leader or a girl as a successor to the family rule / business or any other enterprise. In today’s world, there are so many women leaders who are successful and are governing several states and nations as well. Everything is feasible if the social realistic perspectives take its place in the literature.

### **Illustration 3: Child in a *Purdah* ! *Burqa***

Similarly, we may not find story books or any other rhyme or poem speaking about a child in a *Purdah* or *Burqa*. What happens when a child suddenly encounters any other child wearing a *Purdah* or a *Burqa* a child is not able to relate to her as she must not have had an opportunity of seeing any child who wears it in her neighbourhood. But if children's literature introduces it, people might find it normal and common. (Take, for instance, *Harry Potter*, it is famous all over the world - the character registers in the mind and it becomes a household name and character).

### **Illustration 4; Sibling Rivalry, Family Conflict - Concept of Counsellor**

Every individual undergoes stress, tension and conflict, and to err is human as well. Children's fiction can speak about how a Counsellor can help the child in understanding and dealing with the problems. There can be numerous instances where this can be mentioned in the context of frictions, tensions in the story line, then, the child will understand the role of the counsellor in the backdrop of stories in its form of relationships and understand its significance in resolving a problem. Artificial valour and super characters with super powers might only mislead them, and in reality, it is not feasible to resolve conflicts and the other problems which the children actually face or go through.

### **Illustration 5: Community Park - Attitude towards healthy living**

All stories need not be necessarily placed in palaces, jungles and forests; instead, even a scene or a story with Community Park as the base might instil an attitude towards healthy living. Stories can be weaved on laughter clubs, on morning walks, yoga groups and other avenues so that children understand the Community Park and its possibilities in socialisation and in healthy living aspects.

### **Illustration 6: Father and childcare - Break**

Is it necessary that mothers always quit office to take care of children when they have a family? There can be stories set as models where the father takes a break to take care of the child. Pictures depicting fathers in kitchen, in garden, in child care and mothers in office can also be placed in some stories which makes the child feel like that it is normal and there is no gender specified role in any family. Both father and mother are active participants in the well-being of the family.

### **Illustration 7: A diabetic child / Child living with HIV/AIDS**

Stories can be weaved based on a diabetic child, a child living with HIV/AIDS, and the challenges he / she face and how these can be prevented in

future, how to support them, the role they can play, and the causes and its preventive strategies. Such discussions might make them understand how precious life and health is and what preventive measures needs to be taken.

### **Illustration 8: Differently abled child as a friend / in the classroom**

The stories depicting a school's visual setting never has a differently abled child; hence, when the child confronts him / her in a class / school setting, he / she does not understand how it is possible to include this differently abled being in the class setting and why it should be so. Their problems, their segregation, stigma and discrimination can be well portrayed for children to understand it in a positive light and face them accordingly.

### **Illustration 9: Women / pregnant woman at a workplace**

In contemporary times where women even during pregnancy go to office, construction workers with young children at a workplace is a common scene, it is essential to make the children understand how economic needs force women to go to work and what are the challenges the pregnant women / young mother faces at work place. Children will understand their biological needs better and the problems the mother has to face. This shall also make them understand the special needs of the women workforce at workplace and promote positive attitudes in many ways.

### **Illustration 10: Inter religious parents, specially abled parent**

There can be instances in stories where children can have parents of different religion married together, one parent or both parents who are especially abled, a family in which the child has a single parent, and so on. The child shall have a glimpse of the kind of families existing in the society, and is aware of its constraints and challenges, and might have also have a family structure similar to one of them mentioned above.

These are some of the illustrations through which Social Realism can be chipped in Children's Literature. The illustrations can be many, but the writers need to be creative enough to weave them into the story line skillfully so that children get a feel of it, otherwise, it shall not be productive.

### **Social Realism in Children's Literature - Its Proposed Outcome:**

- «A Compassionate inclusive civil society
- Chances for greater social inclusion
- Equality and lesser discrimination
- Social Integration
- Reducing Stigmas and Cruelties

- Balanced and Healthy Development of Individuals
- Equitable Societal growth
- Aberrations can be reduced
- Violence could be understood
- Respect for fellow human beings could be enhanced
- Enhanced social cohesion and bonding among relationships

#### **Scope for Intervention:**

- Mainstreaming of Social Realism in Children' Literature needs to be advocated in many platforms.
- The benefits of Social Realism need to be spelled out, lobbied and campaigned for at all levels.
- Children's literature imbued with concepts of Social Realism should be made part of the formal and non-formal school curriculum.
- Writers of Children's literature need to enrich their understanding on issues in-depth to facilitate accordingly.
- Media needs to play an active role in sensitising and creating awareness on these issues.
- Government support should also be generated in sensitising writers and public, initiating awards, also encouraging through publishing, circulating and marketing socially realistic children's literature.
- Private players should also be encouraged in this field by public pressure and Government support.
- All existing social structures - public libraries, Schools, Community Centres, Hospitals, Clinics need to play a pivotal role in its generation, display and distribution.

## **CONCLUSION**

Children's Literature plays a pivotal role in the development of the child. The writers and illustrators who work in this field need to be genuinely interested in making this literature inclusive in its content and approach to promote mature individuals. Imagination alone does not work wonders, it needs to be supplemented with social realistic features; when this is done, and the literature provides a palatable food which satisfies everyone's hunger and need. It does justification for the purpose for which it is executed. Writers and illustrators have a huge role to play in today's world where children have easy access to all destructive things first than the constructive ones for them. The selfish elements in the society for profit try to suppress the child's minds at an early age itself. If all this has to be minimised, then, genuine literature can supersede if adequate advocacy is done for the right kind of literature. Let children learn from literature - should be the adage and just not go through a mystical kind of experience which is short lived and does no good to anyone, including the society in which one lives in.

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