



Poetic Perceptions of Childhood: Insights from Select Works of Walt Whitman and Muhammad Iqbal

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Abstract— *The paper incorporates Children's Literature as a theoretical framework to study the innocent, imaginative, and inquisitive worlds of children. To achieve this goal, the researcher focuses on poems about childhood from two of the most celebrated writers of their respective nations, Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938). The paper is a study of textual and comparative analysis of the images of childhood as depicted in their works. Comparing the two writers of varied times and cultural backgrounds, the present study delves into an analysis of childhood as portrayed in their poetic works, Leaves of Grass (1855-1892) and The Call of the Marching Bell (1924), respectively. It strives to establish a relationship that despite their disparities, the innocence and curious nature of children remain the same. It also attempts to reveal the age-old values passed down through these timeless works. Literature connects readers surpassing linguistic and geographical barriers. By delving deep into Children's Literature as a field of study, readers share the collective experience of imagination and astonishment. It provides young readers with a vast vocabulary and unlocks the door to boundless imagination. Through this paper, it is emphasized that the innocence of children often leaves adult readers awestruck as they pose insightful questions that solve life's mysteries that elude us as grown-ups. The values, morals, and habits that children cherish and inherit long grown out of practice are to be talked about as how they impact the thinking of adults. The insights of this paper may contribute to the fields of Comparative Literature, Children's Literature, and Cultural Studies in the global context.*



Keywords— *children's literature, childhood, poetry, Muhammad Iqbal, Walt Whitman*

I. INTRODUCTION

By day or star-light thus from my first dawn

Of Childhood didst Thou intertwine for me

The passions that build up our human Soul...

(William Wordsworth, The Prelude)

Oral literature serves as the foundation for all literary works, including children's literature. In South Asia, stories and folklore were traditionally passed down through generations via oral storytelling. Despite not being initially recognized as formal literature, these tales laid the groundwork for the development of dedicated children's stories, novels, poetry, and books that convey moral

lessons. David L. Russell, in his book *Literature for Children* (2009), explores the detailed history of its development as oral tales in the Classical and Middle Ages, in the form of prints after the invention of the printing press during the Renaissance; to writers like Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe writing full-length novels to finally John Newbery emerging as the father of Children's Literature during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth century. These stories are of adventures, fantasy, moral values, and realistic stories for young boys and girls with illustrations. Modern times, when nothing is untouched by technology, have seen a new genre, Cyberpunk, which emerged in the early 1980s as a form of science fiction in which events take place in virtual reality.

Children's literature can be defined as literary works, created specifically to target children, enriched with a diverse range of literature and illustrated materials to inspire, entertain, and educate young readers. This genre includes fables, fairy tales, folktales, poems, story books, picture books, fiction, and non-fiction. It acts as a gateway between children's real world and the worlds of their imagination. It also serves as a bridge between cultures and generations, preserving traditional stories and values while also evolving to reflect the changing needs and interests of young readers. It is a powerful medium for conveying moral values and lessons, transmitting cultural values, encouraging creativity and imagination, and igniting young minds, thus, helping in the overall development of children-cognitive, behavioral, and social.

Furthermore, children's literature offers a secure environment for young readers to examine their feelings, face fears, and navigate life's obstacles in a better and more reassuring way. Characters and plots in children's books often reflect real-life circumstances, allowing them to connect their own experiences with those of the characters they encounter on book pages. Even characters that are far beyond the realms of reality have cast their imprints on children and adult readers alike. The popularity of works, exclusively for children like *The Cat in the Hat* (Dr. Seuss, 1957), *Winnie the Pooh* (A.A. Milne, 1926), and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (Beatrix Potter, 1902) to works like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Roald Dahl, 1964), *Harry Potter series* (J.K. Rowling, 1997-2007), and *The Hunger Games Trilogy* (Suzanne Collins, 2008-2010), etc. for slightly younger readers, have found popularity among adults as well. These works produced in other popular genres have carved a niche and built a connection across cultures. This connectivity encourages empathy and emotional intelligence, not only aiding children in developing a deeper comprehension of themselves and others but also, teaching others their share of responsibilities. Additionally, exposure to diverse literary genres and styles in children's literature nurtures language abilities, improves vocabulary, and fosters an enduring passion for reading which sets the stage for academic achievement and intellectual development. Thus, we can say that children's literature acts as an essential tool for cultivating the hearts and minds of young readers; enriching their lives; and molding them into caring individuals who are empathetic and culturally conscious.

Children's poetry, like prose, often explores imaginative and fantastical themes. Through poetry, children can explore new worlds, characters, and ideas, fostering their creativity and imagination. It conveys meaning in a more concise and condensed form than any other genre in literature.

Donna Norton (1983) remarks that "Poetry allows children to experience the world with new understanding and share feelings, experiences, and vision with the poet. Poetry encourages children to play with words, interpret the world in a new way." The playful use of poetical language captures the attention and imagination of readers at once. Thus, it becomes more appealing to children to cater to their shorter attention spans, enabling them to engage and stay focused. The rhythmic and repetitive nature of poetry makes it easier to remember compared to prose. Children enjoy memorizing and reciting poems, which not only enhances their memory and confidence but also sharpens their language skills. Additionally, it mirrors cultural motifs, traditions, and values, acquainting children with various viewpoints and experiences. This exposure aids in cultivating empathy, comprehension, and appreciation for distinct cultures and societies. But, at the same time, it is not ignorant to its other readers. As much as the whimsical and fantastical themes appeal to children, children's literature also has deep and underlying lessons for adults. It also opens new and broader perspectives for them. It presents before them the wonders of childhood and the innocence of children that pose questions to challenge their ability and intellect to interpret the world.

The present paper discusses select poems from *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892) and *The Call of the Marching Bell* (1924), by the American literary giant, Walt Whitman and 'the poet of the East', Muhammad Iqbal, respectively. The aim is to present the similarities and contrasts between the two cultures taking insights from children's perspectives and the universal lessons they posit.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative methodology, grounded in content analysis. This entails an in-depth analysis of texts to interpret the significance of their contents through systematic inquiry into both primary and secondary sources. One of the primary texts was originally written in Urdu, therefore, various translations of the same have been consulted with.

III. DISCUSSION

Walt Whitman is regarded as one of the most pioneering and undoubtedly the most celebrated poets in American literature. Born on Long Island and raised in Brooklyn, Whitman experienced numerous fluctuations in his life. He left school early, working in various jobs including teaching and journalism. He is best known for his landmark poetry collection which he self-published in 1855, *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman sent the first copy of his book anonymously

to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a letter full of appreciation. The letter opened as ‘‘I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of ‘Leaves of Grass.’ I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed (Cummings 30).’’ The work, celebrated for its bold free verse and the celebration of democracy and the individual, underwent several editions throughout his life.

Leaves of Grass is one of the most significant and influential works in American literature. Whitman spent much of his life expanding and revising this collection, and it went through multiple editions, with the first edition published in 1855 and the last in 1892 as the death-bed edition. The title ‘‘Leaves of Grass’’ symbolizes the diverse and interconnected aspects of the human experience. Whitman’s poetry in this collection celebrates the individual, the nation, nature, and the human body. It is to date celebrated for its innovative style, its celebration of the individual, and its exploration of human spirituality and connection to the natural world. Whitman’s influence on poetry and the American literary landscape continues to be significant, inspiring generations of writers and readers. There is not a single theme that Whitman has not touched in this book. It ranges from celebrating the self, individuality, nature, spiritualism, or transcendentalism to many controversial themes. Whitman’s use of free verse since then has become a poetic expression.

In Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, children and childhood are recurring themes that play a significant role. His perspective on children and childhood is one of admiration, innocence, and potential. Whitman often idealises and celebrates the purity and innocence of childhood. He sees children as emblematic of the uncorrupted and natural state of humanity. In the book, he frequently uses children to symbolise hope, potential, and the future. Book III of *Leaves of Grass*, entitled ‘‘Song of Myself’’ deals with themes of celebrating self, connection with nature, spirituality, etc. In section 6 of the poem, Whitman says,

A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

Here, he talks about the curiosity in children that often makes adults awestruck with their insightful questions about life making the writer contemplate life. In various poems throughout the book, Whitman invokes images of childhood innocence and freedom, using them to contrast with the complexities of the adult world. He suggests that the essence of childhood—its simplicity, joy, and curiosity should be carried into adulthood.

The poem, ‘‘There was a child went forth every day’’ talks about perceptions that a child goes through. The touch that introduces him to the contrasts of the world- the seasonal changes, animals, the elements of nature, people, village scenes, and other sights that sharpens his perceptions and makes him aware of the opposites and changes of the world, of life and death and renewal:

There was a child went forth every day,

And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or dread, that object he became,

And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day . . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

‘‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’’ depicts a boy’s maturity into the poet as he experiences love and loss. It is a poem that shows development and growth in a child’s life. The poem portrays a young boy on the beach when he sees two mockingbirds and closely observes them. One day, the female bird did not appear, and the male bird laments out for her. The bird’s lamentations resonate with the boy and he subsequently translates this throughout the poem. Through this experience, he becomes aware of nature’s profound effect on human emotions and understanding. His song bears a strong impact within him who ‘‘treasur’d every note’’ for he understood the meaning of the bird, whom he called his ‘‘brother’’. Through this experience, the boy realizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the beauty and power of the natural world:

Yes my brother I know,

The rest might not, but I have treasur’d every note, ...

I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,

Listen’d long and long.

Listen’d to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,

Following you my brother. (183)

Whitman’s depiction of children in *Leaves of Grass* encompasses both admiration and reverence, where the child presents inquiries that elude his understanding, yet he stands in awe of their intellectual capacity. This interaction involves a teaching aspect as well where Whitman exposes them to a variety of perspectives and life’s vicissitudes, imparting knowledge on various aspects. Moreover, he represents children as embodiments of innocence, optimism, and the possibility of an improved tomorrow. From Whitman’s perspective, these teachings are invaluable lessons for life.

The second poet, known in the Indian subcontinent as the ‘‘Poet of the East’’, Muhammad Iqbal is equally popular as a philosopher, visionary, and mystic. Born in Sialkot in pre-independent India, Iqbal’s life has since been influenced by

the mystic disposition of his father, Nur Muhammad, the teachings of his teacher, Syed Mir Hasan, and other philosophers. Iqbal is honoured and celebrated in many countries like Afghanistan, Germany, and Iran. It was his vision, his philosophies, and his poetic genius that made him relevant and widely read among other poets. He has written many books and essays in Persian, Urdu, and English. His first poetry collection in Urdu is *Bang-i-Dara* (1924) or, *The Call of the Marching Bell*.

Bang-i-Dara is a renowned Urdu poetry book, first published in 1924, and is considered one of the most significant works of Iqbal. The title "Bang-i-Dara" translates to "The Call of the Marching Bell" or "The Sound of the Bell." The 'bell' is symbolic of the sound to awaken the people of his land. The book is divided into three parts. The first one is poems written before 1905, in which the poet celebrates his rich cultural heritage and history of the Indian subcontinent. The second part is poems written during 1905-1908, in which the poems deal with his religious side, his spirituality, and the concept of selfhood. The third one is between 1908-1923, about the desire for a separate homeland. However, the book has many poems dedicated solely to children, or adopted for children by English writers. One such was during his nationalistic phase when he composed his famous poem, "Himala" to show his reverence for the great protector of India, the Himalayas, followed by 'Tarana-e-Hindi' and 'Hindustani Bachchon ka Qaumi Geet'. 'Tarana-e-Hindi' is still sung with the same zeal by children of India:

The best land in the world is our India;

We are its nightingales; this is our garden

If we are in exile, our heart resides in our homeland.

Understand that we are also where our heart is. (13)

In this collection, poems like 'The Mountain and the Squirrel', 'A Spider and the Fly', 'The Cow and the Goat', 'Sympathy', 'Prayers of Children', 'National Song of Indian Children', and 'The Nightingale and the Firefly' teach children moral values like helping others, praising God, nationalistic fervour, trust, and walking on the path of righteousness. Poems such as 'The Mountain and the Squirrel', 'Sympathy' and 'The Message of Dawn' were inspired by Western poets like Emerson, William Cooper, and Henry Longfellow, respectively, and are dedicated to children. 'The Child's Invocation', which has not become the prayer of a child but everyone who wants to walk on the paths of righteousness (Anjum 54).

Some of the poems have also used the theme of animal fantasy to convey the message while enriching the minds of young readers with creativity and imagination. The poem 'Hamdardi (Sympathy)' imparts an invaluable lesson on

empathizing with others' suffering and extending aid if one possesses the capacity to do so. Within the narrative, a firefly illuminates the way for a nightingale besieged by fear of darkness, unable to return to its nest. Moved by the nightingale's sorrowful cries, the firefly extends assistance, thereby conveying a significant moral lesson not only for children but everyone:

Never mind if the night is dark

I shall shed light if the way is dark

God has bestowed a torch on me

He has given a shining lamp to me

The good in the world only those are

Ready to be useful to others who are. (12)

In his book, *Urdu Mein Adab -e- Atfal: Ek Jaiza* (1991), Rahmani emphasized the importance of writing for children. Ansari writes that "Iqbal was well aware of the wisdom of children and that is why his verses have completely embodied the essence of childhood (14)." Though Iqbal has not written much about children yet it is significant in the way that it touches upon their psyche, makes them curious about their surroundings, and helps them observe and learn from them (Ramzan, 2022).

IV. CONCLUSION

The significance of children's literature cannot be overstated as the impact of reading upon children. It not only nourishes young minds with imagination, creativity, and command over language but it carves its niche as a separate field of investigation as Cornelia Meigs says, "had its own characteristics, its own individuality, and its own greatness" because it dives deeper into children's psyche (*Children's Literature: Theory and Practice*).

We have analysed and interpreted two great poets, Whitman and Iqbal, and their works, *Leaves of Grass* and *The Call of the Marching Bell*, respectively. It must be noted that they have presented two different perspectives yet appeal universally. Children have been portrayed not at the receiving end but also as educators posing challenging questions, thereby, contesting the intellectual prowess of the poets and also the readers. Yet, their inherent innocence remains intact even though they embody wisdom. They take nature as their inspiration and seek knowledge by observing their surroundings. Their worlds are filled with ideals, a sense of wonder, and hope, and have the potential for a better future as it is uncorrupted by our world thus fostering love, empathy, and compassion.

It is to be concluded that the primary target of children's literature is children yet it holds a profound significance for adults as well. Like all literature, it surpasses the cultural

and geographical boundaries. The above-mentioned texts have very well portrayed the inquisitive worlds of children and taught us many lessons. Thus, Children's literature creates a strong bond between generations through shared stories. It simplifies the complex life lessons and teaches us, in the simplest manners, the hard lessons of patience, courage, resilience, and empathy. The simplicity and purity of children, their childhood, and their psyche, as depicted in literature, grasp the attention of adults who, engulfed by the harsh realities of life, have forgotten these simple joys. As Angel Lockheart puts it:

*The innocence of a child,
Is one thing I wish I could always have,
To look at everyone and not judge,
To wake up and marvel at a new day.*

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