

## **Dominance of Socio-Cultural (Family and School) Apparatus on the Psychology of Children: Critically Probing the Success of Roald Dahl's, *Matilda*, and Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid***

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### **Abstract**

The clash between nature and nurture has remained predominant in exposing structured dichotomies of varied social concerns, children and childhood being no exception. In the light of Louis Althusser's identification of different cultural apparatuses leading to uniformity of human behavior, the paper intends to study the role of these institutions in generating considerable responses from children. It is observed that conditioning and manipulation done in an effort to achieve the desired results can lead to restricted sense of understanding, and can forbid natural human potential.

The paper also makes an attempt to account for the popularity of atypical models like, Greg Heffley, and Matilda; children whose flaws and inadequacies are just as normal, as they are human. They take the risk of conforming to their instincts, and subtly defy authorial dictations that go against their aptitude. No wonder, such texts are highly favored by the supposed beneficiaries, i.e. children, and highly gagged by adults; ones who apparently function as preservers of dominant modes of social relations. The paper concludes that the degree of interference of any social institution is justified to the extent it doesn't hamper natural human potential. Children like to read not didactic texts that morally intend to preach, but discourses that enable them to discover social and cultural fallacies on their own.

**Key words:** children, psychology, socio-cultural apparatuses, subversion

### **Althusser's Identification of Socio- Cultural Apparatuses:**

Althusser identifies the nature of core cultural institutions in helping retain the crux of the dominant social order. He classifies these cultural agencies of dissemination under the following ideological apparatuses- the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade union ISA, the communication ISA, the cultural ISA (Althusser et al., 2014). He furthermore asserts that the fundamental functioning of these apparatuses is primarily concerned with the ascendancy of doctrines and principles that eventually mark for smooth sustainability of different social formations- one that curbs repulsive desires of going against the presiding regimes.

Althusser emphasizes the relation between the two apparatuses, repressive and ideological and asserts, "What distinguishes the ISA's from the (Repressive) State Apparatus is the following basic difference: The Repressive State Apparatus functions by violence, whereas the Ideological state Apparatuses function by ideology" (Althusser et al., 2014). The research takes into consideration what Althusser calls the most "traditional" institutions seeking consensual agreement, namely educational and family apparatus. In research from Althusser et al. (2014), it is argued that, "Schools and Churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion, selection, etc., to discipline not only their shepherds, but also their flocks. The same is true of the Family....The same is true of the

cultural IS Apparatus (censorship, among other things), etc.”

Critics often associate adults as fully developed beings, a notion that stands fixed and undeterred, whereas, in contrast, children are thought of as beings that are in the process of “becoming”. However, the specifications and timeline one takes to become an independent subject, taking accountability for all resolutions and decisions, remain largely arbitrary. Owain Jones (2008), explores the “otherness” in relation to the child and claims that, “adult agendas (...) seek to colonize and control childhood, as well as determine what children are and what they should be”. What is important to notice is the nature of “otherness”, however; whether it is created or constructed. Also, the word “colonize” in the quotation above intensifies the gravity of suppression for children and fixes their pathway of seeking acceptance.

#### **Nature of Intrusion: Inherently Political**

Vulnerability of children requires them to be given proper attention, supplying them with a manual of proposed instructions which would further mark for their acceptance and recognition in order for sustenance in the larger social order. This places utmost responsibility in the hands of those who negotiate and make exchanges with these little creatures who’re believed to imbibe every little thing they see, and hear as part of their involvement in the socio cultural set up. A significant amount of attention has been laid on understanding the need to protect children and their thoughts from getting tarnished as a consequence of external evil influences permeating in the environment at large. However, the nature of intervention that would secure children; the innocent angels, from these evil forces, so that the required social order remains least affected, is a subject worth investigation. Intrusion of outside agencies when unmonitored on accounts of the degree to which they interfere, can lead to huge loss, sometimes difficult to account for in terms of their economic or political relevance.

Educative institutions significantly contribute towards disseminating knowledge, the nature of which remains “inherently political”. French philosopher-one of the most influential

scholars of his times, Michel Foucault, draws attention towards the discursive nature of power, one that is meant to control and discipline children through the literary texts created for their consumption. These texts seem to depict the very reality they intend to describe- one that least threatens the normative order of existence. However, it’s the subversive tendencies of these texts that are undertaken for research, which makes it worth the investigation.

The researcher doesn’t intend to dismiss the role of adults, or other social institutions, and the need of their involvement in showing the little ones the correct pathway so that they could make a significant contribution as upright moral citizens of the country. Instead, the argument stresses on the degree of flexibility granted to these children so that they could identify more closely with their surroundings, and so that their repertoire of knowledge remains largely unprejudiced, being least affected by external cultural agencies and institutions.

#### **Greg Heffley and Matilda: What makes them Popular among Children?**

The concept of “other” is uniquely identified with explicit social categories directly known for their minority status, be it ‘women’ being ostracized for their ‘gender’, ‘homosexuals’ being marginalized for their ‘sexuality’, or the ‘blacks’ being repudiated for the skin of their ‘color’. What remains unnoticed is the exclusion of that social category which remains discriminated on lesser concrete grounds, i.e. a person’s age (in this case young children). It is not to deny that wisdom and intellect is a consecutive outcome of age and experience, but what is an acute matter of concern here is the very same nature of ‘wisdom’ and ‘experience’ the adult folk seem to have accumulated from their surroundings; whether it’s the result of hidden implicit forces, or the ones that one volunteers to choose for oneself. Literature produced for children often does not go against the normative standards of social order, whether it’s related to superiority of one race over another, promoting heterosexual behavior, submission to dominant religious, political ideologies, surrendering to dominant social hierarchies, etc. However, what makes the texts undertaken for research unique, is their

identifiable concern to place the readers into the text by more closely identifying with their agonies, dilemmas, joyful experiences, and thereby enriching their reading experience altogether. The sheer readership of these books and their visible popularity across the borders make it worthy of further investigation and discussion.

In order to view how these institutions manage to target the most credulous beings, whose impressionable minds are susceptible to outside environmental influences, the paper examines two extremely influential characters of children fiction, namely Greg Heffley, from Jeff Kinney's, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and, Matilda Wormwood, from Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. The choice of characters owes to their widespread popularity witnessed not so much amongst adults, but instead among children: the actual beneficiaries of these discourses. What makes parents apprehensive about the fondness of their children with these characters is that they tend to advocate for ideas and behaviors the former would never readily agree for.

Adults have always had an edge over children, primarily for their age, and secondarily for the wisdom they seem to have acquired as a result of their involvement in the larger socio-political order. In a book that traces the subjugation of children by adults, Joseph L. Zornado remarks, "The lived relationship between an adult and child is the story of hierarchy, buried rage, domination, subjugation and violence" (2021). He further adds, "The vast majority of children's stories invite the child to identify with the adults' idea of what a child should be" (Zornado, 2021).

### **Censorship and Subversion**

It is crucial to note that the family apparatus conjectures proclamation in matters related to children where other authorities prove to be insufficient. Greg Heffley, is an embodiment of everything that parents would usually detest in their children. He's mischievous, arrogant, clumsy, mean, paranoid, dishonest, and inquisitive to the extent of questioning established authorities. What makes him identifiable, however, is the human touch given to his very flaws that seem to compromise

with the qualities of an unrealistic, ideal hero, making him a more flesh and blood character.

A review from a parent who highly disapproves of the "inappropriate behavior" and the "unacceptable language" encouraged in the series states, "Why read it when there are so many other more positive books available. Those children who read a lot of these series, pick up quickly to the bad humor" (*Parent Reviews for Diary of a Wimpy Kid, Book 1 | Common Sense Media*, 2007). There is another very interesting review expressing the concern of a parent in relation to the conditioning of the conscience of her kids, this parent seems to be fully aware of the responsibilities that follow soon after becoming a parent. It seems to be a warning call for all guardians who she feels should function as preservers of their children's well-being. She states, "Wise up parents! The purpose of a book is not to make kids feel better about being immature, unkind, disrespectful, and lazy. The purpose of reading is to elevate the standards and inspire them to do better. Parents can do better by leaving Wimpy Kid at the mall itself." (2007). The responses recorded above marking the perturbation of the parents, who understand them to be liable for every little impression created in the minds of the kids justifies the need to censor a role model like Greg, one who embodies everything in him, the former wouldn't ever want the latter to embrace. Hence, the research argues against an outlook that supports the supremacy and agency of the family, primarily the authority of adults in *making* the little ones epitomes of morality and civil behavior, an outlook that also out rules the possibility for children to function as individual subjective agents.

Another exemplary British author whose works have left an unmatched impression in the minds of child readers is, Roald Dahl. Although known for a number of widely acclaimed books, *Matilda*, his book, published in the year 1988, specifically offers a disdainful commentary on selfish and neglectful parents. Dahl is often criticized advocating for disruptive tendencies in the behavior of children, making the latter seem out right revolutionaries. He does that with carefully crafting his characters and managing to give an inside glance into the world of infants, who look for ways to survive in an adult-centric

world. However, the tendency of such texts to instigate radical spirit cannot be overlooked, and the revolutionary zeal or transformative capacities are always held in sync with support for the system, or an attack against it.

It is a gratifying experience for young children to see Matilda emerge as a victorious character standing against all authorities that fail to acknowledge her spirit and genius, especially her parents and the head mistress, Miss Trunchbull. She uses all coercive means at hand to discipline her students and prevent them from exercising their will that essentially threatens the social order. The normative social standards disallow Miss Trunchbull to approve things like pigtails on girls, or long hair on boys. In addition to this, she suppresses those with inquisitive ardor and who dare to stand against the authority of adults; who she feels have utmost ascendancy over the decisions and moral judgments of children. Additionally, Matilda's parents think of her as nothing more than a "scab". Dahl defines "scab" as "something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away" (Dahl & Blake, 2007).

In another incident from the novel, Matilda is seen experiencing distress and anxiety, and when confronted, she tells the librarian, Mrs. Phelps, that her parents don't encourage her to read books, for which she has to look for other ways to do what she wants. It is probably because parents tend to censor everything their child is likely to learn and experience, in an attempt to forbid them to inherit those values and behaviors which might ignite revolutionary attitude in them, and make them less of conformists. Hence, children have little or no choice, but to face the abuse at the hands of adults in instances like these. Matilda's intellect is extraordinary to the extent that she ventures to barge in the world of adults. In fact, it gave her a single handed insight into it and made her conscious of her own status as 'different' and 'other'- one that stands in accordance with one's age and acquired wisdom. After having read all children's books, she delves into the world of adult literature, and begins to read eminent authors like, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and John Steinbeck. Her fondness for Dickens stems from the major

concern of the author to empathize with the abuses and hardships children faced as vulnerable members of Victorian England.

As the paper intends to discuss the role of family and academic learning institutes as disseminators of dominant practices and traditions, it is worthy to note that, both Greg and Matilda, stand at the substratum of the hierarchy, having little or no agency of their own. These cultural establishments, however, employ their own unique methods to seek submission and control; whether it's alluding to coercive means or via manipulating the conscience.

### **Suggestive Alternative: Discussion**

Matilda and Greg offer considerable space and scope for young readers to have an alternative outlook for situations that demand for conventional responses. What is notable however is the fact that reversal or subversive tendencies and behavior doesn't out rule social hierarchies upside down, but definitely give space to the one standing against the system to learn, to survive, and become conscious of his own wellbeing. Role models like Matilda Wormwood and Greg Heffley create possibilities for children to identify with the real world and look for ways to maintain sanity and composure within the same.

It is interesting to note that these young protagonists have unique heroic attributes, those that are very different from traditional and ideal ones. These playful infants for their sheer cleverness and creative outlook sometimes use their brain power to reverse the situation. But as Dahl puts it with reference to Matilda that, "any five year old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told, however asinine the orders might be. Thus, she was always forced to eat her evening meals out of TV-dinner-trays in front of the dreaded box. She always had to stay alone on weekday afternoons, and whenever she was told to shut up, she had to shut up" (Dahl & Blake, 2007). Thus, justifying what Althusser suggests, that these private domains of which "family" is an essential component, strive to maintain order and discipline by keeping itself systematically aligned with other institutions in the ideological

apparatus, meant to conform to the interests of the one standing supreme in the social hierarchy.

The artistic creativity employed by Roald Dahl makes adherence to subtle measures and linguistic expressions that brings to focus the outgrowing distance between children and adults, both physically and mentally. It also lays emphasis on the inability of adults to think of children beyond the customary conceptualizations defining their existence. For instance, in a conversation Matilda seems to have with her classmate, Lavender, the readers get a glimpse into the psyche of the headmistress, Miss Trunchbull. She thinks of five year olds as “grubs that haven’t yet hatched out” (Dahl & Blake, 2007, p. 96), and even seems to detest “very small children” (2007, p. 96). Moreover, she asserts that “children should be seen and not heard” (2007, p. 5), entailing the need to consistently silent the cognitive abilities of children, to prevent the social order from getting distorted.

What is central to Trunchbull’s character is her absolute disregard for children who fail to remain inside in their respective little territories. In one of the many incidents from the text that account for her intolerant attitude, she is observed making shrewd comments on children who dared to go beyond their permissible age limits. She loses her calm when discovered that the young children learnt to spell as long and complex a word as “difficulty”, which she believes the five year olds are not supposed to learn until they are eight or nine. However, at the same time, painting a character like Matilda allows Dahl to subvert and challenge absolute and fixed viewpoints and perceptions. She manages to surpass all the limited conceptions of a child, and is even seem to exercise intellect and wisdom, sometimes even beyond adult comprehension. But, it must be noted that Matilda, unlike other children of her age, is exceptionally different, in the sense that she acts in accordance with mature beings, and does seem to possess supernatural abilities. Whereas, those unlike her, still seem to be trapped in fear and agony of the authorities that intend to tame the vibrancy of children and childhood.

In contrast, Greg Heffley is atypical from every possible dimension. When compared to Matilda’s intellect and maturity, he stands for completely the lack of it. He is selfish, mischievous, manipulative, and sometimes goes beyond all measures to fulfill his whims and fancies. Therefore, Kinney doesn’t seem to standardize ideal behavior through his central character and often thus shows him as a victim and others as tyrants. Despite creating a character that is not very likable (especially among adults), Kinney does make an attempt to weaken conservative traditional authorities in the private realm, including family and schools. What speaks for the popularity of Greg, is his consistent efforts to withstand the larger dominating forces, for which the readers also unconsciously side with him. It must not be forgotten that a writer is always obliged to not waver from his ethical responsibilities that naturally come to him, for his creative endeavor, and for his ability to address huge masses. However, Kinney does not prove himself to be morally principled to the extent that he would compromise with genuine human flaws and errors. He instead colors Greg with all possible shades of colors so that his reliability remains true to itself.

However, a crucial point that requires considerable attention is the way in which the so called radical, subversive children fiction writers, namely, Roald Dahl and Jeff Kinney, supplant an alternate version of their central characters so as to sabotage the traditional ideal models of morality and virtues. In case of Matilda, the supersession of authority comes at a cost of having atypical powers enabling her to dismantle the ascendancy of adults over children. Only when she disguises herself as a ghost of Miss Honey’s father, and ridicule Miss Trunchbell writing a message for her on the chalkboard, is she able to avenge from her, thereby placing Miss Honey to her rightful place.

Greg, on the contrary does not possess any supernatural powers, and instead appears to be quiet self-centered and unconcerned. Although, a character not very appealing and likeable, Greg still appears to be empowered against the authority of adults, both in private and public spaces. His readers’ fondness of him

stems from his flesh and blood responses to lifelike situations and demands. Despite his failure to flatter them, he still manages to relate to every middle aged school child. The apprehension on part of adults for the fear of introducing wrong and inappropriate ideas to their children stems from Greg's problematic behavior, one that requires deliberate effort to understand wit, irony and humor. Kinney also shows the aftermaths of such radical instinctual patterns and hints at the harsh consequences a person is likely to suffer as a direct outcome of deviation from the standardized normative attributes of social behavior. No wonder, Kinney initially intended his work to serve as nostalgic comedy for adults, only to later realize that it also reflected authentic experiences of middle school children in America.

To conclude, both the texts chosen for the purpose of research mark similarities in the sense they advocate for antiheroes who fail to embody the traditional models created for children's reference. At the same time, they differ from each other in terms of their respective cultural contexts, showing how these discourses depart from tradition and yet remain cohesive in the larger literary canon. Both seem to confirm children's approval for heroes other than absolute models of virtues and perfection, and both also stand against absolute didacticism; one that restrains an individual to grow and flourish. Greg and Matilda, instead represent childhood in general while exhibiting real flaws and terrors of being surrounded with bullies that tend to tame and discipline, and the ones that prevent them to navigate their own pathways.

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