

Anti - Indian Biases in Children's Literature: A Study on the First Thanksgiving

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Abstract: *This paper examines the biased representation of Native Americans in children's literature, focusing on the narrative of Thanksgiving. It explores the impact of these narratives on young readers, leading to cultural appropriation and racial prejudices. The study analyzes texts available on platforms like Amazon and Flipkart, recommended for children aged 0 - 12.*

Keywords: Children's Literature, American History, Thanksgiving, Native Americans, Postcolonialism

Stories hold a special kind of power over human minds – they can mould perceptions, reconfigure societal dynamics, influence the understanding of self, and shape the formation of identity. Consequently, in the process of storytelling, 'what is being said' gets inadvertently influenced by 'who is saying', also 'why and how?' The issue gets further complicated when the listeners or the audience are at an impressionable age and are likely to be influenced by the 'knowledge' provided by these tales all through their lives. Hence the art of storytelling that serves as a medium to introduce young readers to their surroundings, culture, community and historical past; can double up as a potent tool to further propagandas, biases, prejudices and misconstrued notions, when not used responsibly.

Stories centered on historic events and happenings are often used as instruments to familiarize children with history through the use of simplistic versions. This process of simplification is mostly done under the guise of protecting children from the possible trauma that can be caused by the coarse revelation of gruesome past. However, what gets included, blurred or erased is a complex political question. The basic assumption that writings for children are 'simple' and can easily address them is faulty to begin with. In her seminal essay, "The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction" (1984), Jaqualine Rose quotes, "Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple" (95). Universalizing of the concept of a 'child' undermines racial, cultural, class and gender based differences; all of which have a significant role in shaping background, perception, upbringing and education of these young learners. This paper will analyze portions from Children's story books to understand anti - Indian biases and the impact of these prejudices on readers.

Race has always been a sensitive issue in the context of American history and it continues to impact the contemporary society in several different ways. Emphasizing the connection between psychology, history and society; Diane Hughes, an expert of applied psychology at NYU, states that "Race has meaning because we give it meaning – especially in the U. S., where our history is largely structured to uphold these racial differences. We assume that there are unobservable underlying personality traits that correlate to certain physical characteristics"

(Weir). Presuming an individual's disposition and temperament based on their physical features and their ethnic identity is cultural fallacy generally disguised as natural given. Moreover, the racial biases and difference are often naturalized by promoting sanitized narratives; and overlooking 'history from below' in the interest of the grand narratives. The story of the origin of 'Thanksgiving' is an example of this process. From children's literature to popular TV shows and magazines, Thanksgiving is presented as an occasion to express gratitude for the gifts of life and a symbol of racial harmony.

According to these sanitized narratives, the Thanksgiving story begins with a group of Pilgrims who leave England to obtain freedom of religion and undertake a difficult journey on their way to Plymouth. They survive harsh winter with the help of the natives and then celebrate the harvest festival. This simplified story with a happy ending is deeply colonial in nature. It swiftly places the Pilgrims at the center of the narrative, pushing away the Native Americans to the margins.

The Puritans who refused to accept the Anglican Church and were then known as Separatists are honoured as 'Pilgrims' or 'Pilgrim Fathers' in these books. Moreover, their conscious decision of leaving their homeland and settling in an unknown territory is glorified as bravery, overlooking the fact that their uninformed decision resulted in the loss of life for a number of people from their group and ended up as a big colonial project destroying native tribes. Examples are given below:

- "These settlers were called the 'Pilgrim Fathers.' " (Cambridge Bilingual 6)
- "At last the weary Pilgrims had reached America. " (Raphael and Bolognese 52)
- "We have reached this new land and we shall make it our home now. Let us call it Plymouth...We shall make a settlement there. " (Imu 12)

While the former two examples present the Puritan's colonizing mission as a pilgrimage; the tale by Imu displays the authoritative attitude of the English settlers who assume that unannounced arrival and overtaking of any land is normal for the Whites, and the Natives do not have any say in the decisions related to their land. In this origin history of America, the outsiders are portrayed as protagonists and the

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Natives just become the unproblematic mute supporting characters who are later 'civilized' through Christianity. It makes the migrants the 'Self' and Native Americans the 'Other'. The good natured Self with supposedly pure intentions visits the mysterious land of the crude 'Other' and eventually reforms the community. The Native voices are silenced and they do not get to have an opinion in the decisions related to their lands. They are only heard welcoming the Pilgrims, offering help and smoothly paving way for the construction of the robust nation known today as America.

The feast offered at the harvest festival is given undue importance and the actual sentiments of the locals are pushed into the backdrop. The examples are given below:

- "There was a lot of eating. There were probably games. There were more Native American guests than Pilgrims. It was a happy time." (Holub 43)
- "Then the Pilgrim Fathers made friends with the Native Americans who lived in Massachusetts." (Cambridge Bilingual 8)
- "Then, one day in March two strangers called Samoset and Squanto visited the settlement. They were native Indians who lived on the land.

Samoset - Hello settlers! Welcome to your new home.

Pilgrims - Thank you. Who are you?

Samoset – We see that we are having trouble with food. Squanto here can teach you how to grow food on this soil. And so the pilgrims made new friends." (Imu 18 - 19)

These narratives conveniently omit the parts which present the Wampanoag's¹ side of the story; their fear of attack from the new settlers, constant threats from the neighboring tribes, their desire to find an ally, etc. The political dimensions of the story are mostly excluded; and if included are not explained properly. An Example is given below:

- There are about 130 women, men and children leaving the ship. The friendly Americans greet the Pilgrims. The local Natives give food and help to the new people. The Pilgrims sign a paper called the Mayflower Compact. They agree to help each other plant food and build homes (Linville 6 - 7).

This is one of the very few tales which mention the Mayflower Compact; however, it does not clearly explain what it was about. The description here gives the faulty idea that this was a contract signed by Pilgrims and Natives where they formed an alliance; however, this was a legal instrument binding only the Pilgrims when they arrived at Plymouth.

All these stories focus on the feast of 'Thanksgiving' presenting it as the happy ending to the long struggle faced by the Pilgrims. Authors completely overlook the years of war, slaughter, extinction of native tribes, indigenous culture and religion that followed. The exploitation of indigenous

people and the impact of the Europeans' greed for the land fails to find even a subtle mention in these tales. The young readers reading these books get blindsided to the actual repercussions of these events faced by the colonized; and they eventually form general perceptions about the entire race based on representation of the Natives in these texts. Michael A. Dorris describes an event in which a first grade classmate of his son asked him how to skin a hamster, hunt with an arrow and bow, or endure a scratch without crying while being dressed in a Halloween costume. His son was unable to understand how he and the exotic natives in the books are expected to present a common front (21).

Stories, plays and fancy dress parties where the natives are presented as unkempt black people in the costumes adorned with feathers, carrying primitive tools as accessories, using grammatically incorrect language leads to the internalization of the superiority complex amongst the Whites children and a sense of inferiority amongst native children. Dorris further mentions an instance where he read a printed program given by his son's school and saw an illustration of the First Thanksgiving where the caption read in part: "They served pumpkins and turkeys and corn and squash. The Indians had never seen such a feast." He argues that, on the contrary, the Pilgrims had literally never witnessed such a feast because every food item mentioned is only found in the America and was, according to legend, offered by the local tribe (21). Description like these reverse the fact that the Pilgrims were at the receiving end and it was the local population that helped them survive the harsh winter and extreme hunger. These books fail to foreground the struggles, contributions and generosity of the native population.

After reviewing several textbooks, novels, handbooks and picture books for children, in the foreword for *A Broken Flute* (2005), Deborah A. Miranda states that representation of Indians in all these books can be classified into two categories – Invisibles and Construction Material (3). Their presence is often invisibilized and contributions overlooked. When their presence is noted, it acts merely as the materials for constructing the facade of a nation built on the grounds of racial harmony and equality. They aren't depicted as wronged humans but are used as building blocks for creating a coherent narrative.

Other than whitewashing the wrongdoings of the Colonists, historical past of the natives is twisted to churn money by selling cleansed narratives. Exposing the politics of excessive use of the indigenous materials by non - Native authors for children's literature, Doris Seale quotes, "Whether retellings, adaptations, or edited versions of stories: historical accounts, photographic essays or biographies, these works have been carefully produced, lavishly illustrated, and brought out with artfully orchestrated publicity" (4). He continues by saying that reviewers who lack the necessary understanding to recognise that the works in question are false, patronising, heaps of lies, and generally enormously disrespectful to the individuals whose lives are being used for profit, find these to be extremely well accepted (4).

When children are regularly fed these questionable narratives full of lies and anti - Indian biases, it affects their

¹ Wampanoag are Native Americans from the northeastern Woodlands based in southeast Massachusetts and some areas of eastern Rhode Island.

thought process and the way of looking at race. According to a study by Kristin Shutts, at age of 3, White children are equally likely to become friends with Black or White children. But by ages 4 - 5, White children more often choose friends from their own race (Weir). Another series of studies by Yarrow Dunham and his colleagues show that between the age 3 - 4, racially white children in America were more likely to associate the faces of colour, particularly black, with emotions like anger whereas they associated White faces with more positive emotions. However, this preference was not shown by Black American children (Weir). The report suggested that this bias was not implicit rather culturally learned. Children start to understand racial difference at a very early age and the representation of the people of colour in their textbooks/ storybooks can have a crucial impact on their perceptions regarding race and equality.

The study concludes that childrens literature plays a significant role in shaping young readers perceptions of history and race. Authors should avoid conclusive narratives and present different perspectives to promote tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity.

folk culture. Gender Studies, Social Psychology, Humor Studies, Children's Literature and Popular Culture are some of the domains she likes to explore in her research endeavors.

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