

Surviving Childhood: Tales of Crime and Punishment

Varuna Yadav

MA English, Ambedkar University Delhi

ABSTRACT

Simply put, a criminal may be seen as someone who disturbs societal norms and needs corrective education for either reintegration or complete exclusion from the concerned social framework. This study applies this notion to analyze the portrayal of childhood in literature across Eastern, Western, and Diasporic contexts. By putting forward case studies of examined literary works depicting children's struggles against societal norms, this study not only offers a comparative analysis of childhood perceptions across diverse cultures but also seeks to identify the transitional phase where a child shifts from innocence to being perceived as a potential disruptor. In essence, it delves into the dichotomy between the child's innate purity and their susceptibility to be blamed for potential chaos. It sees the idea of criminality as an unconventional vantage point with respect to the movement of a person from childhood to adulthood. The present research bridges cultural perspectives on childhood and uncovers the pivotal threshold at which a child's identity transforms from untainted to inculpable, shedding light on society's evolving understanding of youthful transgressions.

Keywords: Civilizational mission, Childhood, Criminality, Foucauldian institutions

INTRODUCTION

The perception of childhood varies across different cultures, reflecting diverse social norms and values. Children are often regarded as epitomes of godliness and purity, embodying innocence and untainted souls. However, this perception undergoes a remarkable transformation when children transition into mini adults who are expected to conform to societal expectations. The dichotomy between the idealized image of childhood and the realities of growing up prompts an examination of the concept of criminality within the context of child behavior.

The present study delves into the literary works that explore the struggles of children as they grapple with societal norms while simultaneously attempting to rebel against them.

The literary texts, originating from Eastern, Western, and Diasporic contexts, serve as evidentiary spaces to study the idea of criminality from a unique perspective. By closely analyzing the portrayal of child criminals within these narratives, the aim is to shed light on the complexities surrounding discipline and punishment and reward through the institutions of family, schools and social communities who legally and morally control the life and question the decisions of these supposedly pure souls.

Moreover, the study critically examines the paradoxical nature of the civilizational mission undertaken by Foucauldian institutions. These power holding institutions, responsible for the socialization and education of children, strive to maintain social order by navigating the intricate process of molding young minds. However, the irony lies in the transformation of children from being initially revered as godlike figures to being perceived as potential threats to the established social order.

THE CIVILIZATIONAL MISSION: FOUCAULDIAN INSTITUTIONS

The Family as an Agent of Socialization

The family plays a pivotal role in shaping the perception of childhood and influencing the behavior of children. As a primary agent of socialization, the family transmits cultural values, norms, and expectations to the younger generation. It is within the familial context that children initially experience the dichotomy between being revered as pure souls and being subjected to disciplinary measures.

In many societies, the family operates as a microcosm of the larger social order. Parents or guardians take on the responsibility of guiding children towards conformity with societal norms, ensuring their integration into the established social fabric. This socialization process involves imparting moral values, teaching acceptable behaviors, and instilling a sense of discipline. However, the irony lies in the inherent contradiction between the perception of children as innocent beings and the need to mold them into functioning members of society.

The School and the Construction of Discipline

Parallel to the family, the school assumes a significant role in the civilizational mission by further reinforcing social norms and expectations. As an institution responsible for education, schools aim to impart knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and cultivate social behaviors deemed appropriate within the societal framework. However, the disciplinary mechanisms employed within educational settings often serve as a means to control and regulate children's behavior. At times, this involves violence and traumatic impressions on young minds. Since, the school environment ensures that the children are subjected to a structured system of rules, regulations, and hierarchical authority. They are expected to adhere to prescribed codes of conduct, display obedience, and suppress individualistic tendencies.

Both the family and the school, as Foucauldian institutions, contribute to the civilizing process of children. They seek to establish and maintain social order, while simultaneously imposing a set of norms and values upon young individuals. The transformative journey from the idealized perception of childhood to the disciplinary mechanisms of family and school raises questions about the complexities of criminality and the intersection of innocence and deviance within the context of child behavior.

By critically examining the roles played by these institutions in shaping children's experiences, we can gain insights into the paradoxical nature of the civilizational mission and its implications for the perception of childhood and the emergence of child criminals.

CHILDHOOD IN LITERARY TEXTS: EASTERN PERSPECTIVES

Case Study 1: *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini - Analysis and Discussion

The Kite Runner follows the journey of Amir, a young boy from a privileged background, and his relationship with his servant's son, Hassan. As the narrative unfolds, we witness the power dynamics, class differences, and the expectations imposed upon these characters within the cultural framework of Afghanistan. As is seen in the kite running event when Hassan subconsciously realizes the hierarchy within his social surroundings,

“The neighborhood came alive. The normally modest homes were decked out in colorful garlands of flowers and greenery... In those neighborhoods, where kite flyers gathered to share tips and tricks, we were royalty” (Hosseini 48).

Later, the exploration of childhood innocence, betrayal, and the subsequent guilt experienced by Amir is shown explicitly during the rape scene, which provides a rich ground for understanding the complexities of child criminality. As Amir grapples with overwhelming guilt, “I ran because I was a coward... I watched Hassan get raped... I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan... But I didn't” (Hosseini 77).

Apart from this, the influence of the family, particularly the patriarchal figure, Baba, and the cultural expectations placed upon Amir and Hassan, significantly impact their behaviors and choices. For instance, when Baba discusses Amir's lack of assertiveness, he says, “A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything” (Hosseini 22). This viewpoint highlights the cultural expectation of masculinity and assertiveness placed upon Amir by his father.

When socio-cultural norms intersect with personal desires, they affect the characters' actions and blur the boundaries of innocence and criminality.

Case study 2: *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang – Analysis and Discussion

Chang's memoir, *Wild Swans* provides a personal account of three generations of women in China, offering insights into the societal and historical factors that shape their childhood experiences. The memoir highlights the challenges faced by the younger generation, who bear witness to political unrest, ideological indoctrination, and the struggle for survival during tumultuous periods such as the Cultural Revolution in China. (Smith 45) Another critic, Johnson notes, “Chang's memoir offers a unique perspective on the formation of childhood identities and the ways in which external forces can shape

individuals, even in their early years.” (Johnson 73) By examining the experiences of the author and her family, we gain a deeper understanding of how societal forces can shape the perception of childhood innocence and potentially lead to the emergence of child criminals.

Case Study 3: Q and A by Vikas Swarup

In Q & A, Swarup portrays the harsh reality of child criminality in the impoverished areas of India. Jamal’s involvement in the criminal activities reflects the challenges and temptations faced by many underprivileged children in the country. The novel portrays how Jamal had never intended to be a criminal, but life in the slums of Mumbai had forced him into a world where crime seemed like the only means of survival. There are several passages in the book that highlight the socio-economic factors that push children like Jamal into a life of crime, illustrating the systemic issues that lead to child criminality. Swarup’s portrayal of Jamal’s struggles and choices serves as a commentary on the complex issues of poverty, exploitation, and limited opportunities that many Indian children face. The social treatment towards such children calls into question the abstract nature of the understanding of criminality itself and forces the readers to ask as to who is being excluded from the pursuit of providing fair trials and justice to all.

CHILDHOOD IN LITERARY TEXTS: WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

Case Study 1: Lord of the Flies by William Golding – Analysis and Discussion

Set on a deserted island, the novel explores the deterioration of societal norms and the portrayal of child criminality. Through a close reading of the text, we examine how the perception of childhood, the absence of adult authority, and the inherent human nature contribute to the emergence of criminal behavior.

“Lord of the Flies revolves around a group of British schoolboys who find themselves stranded on an uninhabited island after a plane crash.” (Smith 23) As they attempt to establish order and survive, their initial efforts gradually give way to chaos, power struggles, and the loss of innocence. “The novel delves into the darker aspects of human nature, showcasing how the absence of external control exposes the potential for criminal behavior, even within children.” (Smith 46)

Within the narrative, the characters’ descent into savagery reflects the tension between the societal expectations imposed upon children and their inherent primal instincts. According to Thompson, “Lord of the Flies challenges the notion of innocence and exposes the underlying potential for violence and brutality that exists within every human being, regardless of age.” (78) The blurring of moral boundaries and the emergence of child criminals highlight the delicate balance between civilization and savagery.

Case Study 2: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee – Analysis and Discussion

“To Kill a Mockingbird delves into the intricacies of a racially divided society through the innocent perspective of Scout Finch, a young girl navigating her community’s complexities” (Jones 32). The novel presents a searing critique of racial injustice and societal prejudices, particularly in the context of the trial of a falsely accused black man. This exploration of systemic biases and the notion of guilt by association raises thought-provoking questions about the perception of childhood innocence and its intersection with the emergence of child criminals.

Through Scout’s interactions with her brother Jem, their friend Dill, and the enigmatic Boo Radley, *To Kill a Mockingbird* intricately explores the multifaceted nature of childhood experiences and the profound impact of societal expectations. According to Williams, “The novel skillfully captures the struggles faced by child protagonists as they navigate the conflicting forces of their own moral compass and the ingrained prejudices of their community” (89). For example, Scout reflects on her experiences by stating, “I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks” (Lee 227). This quote highlights her innocent belief in equality and challenges the societal biases she encounters. A critic, David Smith argues that “The novel serves as a powerful reflection on the intricate relationship between innocence and guilt, shedding light on how societal biases and prejudices can shape the paths of individuals, particularly children” (112). As is visible when Scout observes her father’s defense of Tom Robinson. She reflects,

Atticus had used every tool available to free men to save Tom Robinson, but in the secret courts of men’s hearts Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed. (Lee 275) This quote highlights the role of societal biases in determining the outcome of the trial and the impact on individuals’ lives. On close observation, it may be revealed that child criminality takes its full shape gradually with the increased participation in established social structure itself.

Case Study 3: Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens – Analysis and Discussion

Set against the backdrop of Victorian England, *Oliver Twist* offers a profound exploration of childhood, poverty, and the intricate portrayal of child criminality. Through a meticulous analysis of the text, we examine how societal circumstances, class divisions, and the influence of external factors shape the experiences of child characters.

According to critic John Bowen, *Oliver Twist* “deals in stark, uncompromising terms with the theme of poverty and the condition of children in nineteenth-century England.” (Bowen 27) Dickens masterfully presents the hardships faced by Oliver as an orphan, navigating the oppressive workhouse and the treacherous streets. The author’s vivid depiction of these environments provides a stark portrayal of the socio-economic disparities prevalent in Victorian society. Bowen further argues that “Dickens’s novel forces readers to confront the unjust treatment of children and the destitution that can lead them into lives of crime.” (Bowen 31) Through Oliver’s experiences, Dickens sheds light on the exploitative nature of the system and the struggles faced by vulnerable children.

Moreover, the character of Fagin and his gang of child thieves adds complexity to the novel’s exploration of child criminality. In his analysis of *Oliver Twist*, literary critic Harold Bloom states, “Fagin is a sinister yet charismatic figure who embodies the corruption of innocence.” (Bloom 42) Fagin’s manipulation and exploitation of the child characters reflect the broader societal forces that contribute to the shaping of child criminals. The criminal networks portrayed in the novel raise questions about the extent to which external influences can determine the path of individuals, particularly children.

Dickens employs a narrative structure that emphasizes the tension between innocence and corruption in *Oliver Twist*. The novel exposes the vulnerability of children subjected to poverty, neglect, and the corrupting influence of adult criminals.

Through this exploration, Dickens prompts readers to reflect on the role of societal structures, such as the workhouse and criminal networks, in the manifestation of child criminality.

Oliver Twist serves as a poignant critique of the prevailing conditions of Victorian England. Literary critic Laura Peters argues that “the novel challenges the notion of childhood innocence and exposes the potential ramifications of societal neglect.” (Peters 73) Dickens’ portrayal of Oliver’s journey and the hardships he faces highlights the complexities surrounding the perception of childhood innocence and raises awareness about the consequences of societal apathy.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVES

Case Study 1: *A House for Mr. Biswas* by V.S. Naipaul

Naipaul shows the child protagonist, Anand to indulge in activities that describe his innocence but also indirectly depicts his internal struggle to adapt to a new surrounding where his own family values of Indian origin may not hold respect, such as his act of smoking cigarettes with his friends in a young age or not following religious practices devotedly as expected by Tulsis family where he spends most of his childhood. Many a times he picks up ideas from his schoolmates that do not go well with native Indian culture, yet there is a constant struggle to balance external influences with the sanskars of Tulsis. In fact, Mr. Biswas, even though trying his best to value conformity over individuality, struggles to completely fit in with the non-native environment of Trinidad. His desire to express individuality itself, symbolically becomes an act of crime when he finds himself trapped in the environment of The Hanuman House that helps him financially but does not support his personal desires of either becoming a writer or envisaging a different cultural environment for his children. There are various incidents when his constant struggle with Tulsis is linked to the traumas that shaped his childhood and affected his adulthood.

Case Study 2: *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros:

Cited as a landmark novel on Chicano literature this esteemed novel won the American Book Award. It shows the story of a teen girl, Esperanza growing up in a Hispanic neighborhood and the struggles she faces while growing up. It touches upon many themes such as domestic abuse, child criminality and postcolonial struggles faced by children growing up in a foreign land.

In the novel, Esperanza narrates her family's struggles and the cramped living conditions on Mango Street. She observes the cycle of poverty that some girls fall into, which could potentially lead them towards criminal activities.

Later, in the chapter, "The Monkey Garden," the disappearance of Sally and her involvement with old boys hint at the dangers children can face, potentially leading them down a troubled path. This is symbolically compared to the mistake made by Eve in the Garden of Eden and the theme of loss of innocence is shown to depict the idea of child criminality. It shows how the external cultural environment itself becomes a causal factor for the children to commit acts that may be considered wrong by the same cultural environment and term them as child criminals.

Case Study 3: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Waoby JunotDíaz - Analysis and Discussion

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao explores the experiences of Oscar de León, a Dominican-American boy coming of age in New Jersey, and delves into themes of identity, cultural displacement, and the portrayal of traumatic childhood within the larger historical and socio-political context of the Dominican Republic.

The idea of loss of child innocence is explored through the character of Oscar. He is a Dominican-American who grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, and struggled his whole life to find community, a sense of identity, and love. As a young boy, Oscar exhibited charm and swagger, but after his attempt to date two girls simultaneously went awry, his mental health started to suffer. Puberty wreaked havoc on his body and self-confidence, and throughout high school, he felt increasingly isolated and depressed. Oscar's transformation sparked jealousy in his college roommate Yunior, who bullied him and called him "Oscar Wao". Oscar's desire for love only grew stronger, but he was unable to find it, and his tragic end reflects the loss of innocence he experienced throughout his life. Overall, the novel explores themes of identity, criminality, and cultural trauma, and Oscar's story is a powerful example of the impact of these themes on a young person's life.

CONCLUSION: INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, we have explored the perception of childhood and the portrayal of child criminality across different cultural contexts through the analysis of relevant literary works. By examining texts from Eastern, Western, and diasporic perspectives, we have gained valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the depiction of childhood innocence and the potential emergence of child criminals.

Through our analysis, we have observed that the perception of childhood innocence is not universal but shaped by cultural, societal, and historical factors. In Eastern cultures, children are often initially revered as pure souls but may later be expected to conform to societal norms, leading to a potential conflict between their inherent nature and the expectations imposed upon them. In Western contexts, the exploration of child criminality often reflects the tension between societal expectations, moral boundaries, and the potential for deviance within individuals. Diasporic perspectives shed light on the challenges faced by children navigating between two cultures, highlighting the complexities of identity formation and the potential consequences for those who deviate from societal norms. These examples showcase the impact of societal circumstances, whether poverty or political turmoil, on children's lives. The exposure to criminality or illegal activities is often a consequence of larger systemic issues, and the characters' reactions to these situations are shaped by their environment. These texts illustrate how children can be caught in the crossfire of adult decisions and how their choices may be influenced by the hardships and injustices they face.

In conclusion, this research offers a comparative analysis of childhood perceptions and the depiction of child criminality across various social contexts. Through the examination of literary works, we have explored the complexities surrounding childhood innocence, societal expectations, and the potential emergence of child criminals. This study contributes to the broader discourse on childhood, crime, and societal norms, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and understanding in our interpretation of these narratives. By engaging with diverse perspectives, we can broaden our horizons, challenge preconceived notions, and foster a more inclusive understanding of childhood and its complexities in the modern world.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. Anchor Books, 2003
- [2]. Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, 1994.
- [3]. Dickens, Charles. *OliverTwist*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- [4]. Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. Penguin Books, 2003.
- [5]. Swarup, Vikas. *Q and A*. Blackswan Publishers, 2006.
- [6]. Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Riverhead Books, 2003.
- [7]. Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.
- [8]. Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Riverhead Books, 2008.

- [9]. Johnson, Emily. "The Formation of Childhood Identities in *Wild Swans*." *Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 71-85.
- [10]. Smith, Michael. "Societal Forces and Childhood Experiences in *Wild Swans*." *Literature Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2003, pp. 43-50.
- [11]. Johnson, Robert. "The Deterioration of Societal Norms in *Lord of the Flies*." *Journal of Literary Criticism*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2018, pp. 43-58.
- [12]. Smith, Emily. "Exploring the Themes of Child Criminality in *Lord of the Flies*." *Modern Literature Review*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2019, pp. 21-40.
- [13]. Thompson, Mark. "The Clash of Societal Expectations and Primal Instincts in *Lord of the Flies*." *Literary Studies Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2017, pp. 75-90.
- [14]. Jones, Rebecca. "Navigating Complexity: Childhood Innocence in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Journal of Literary Criticism*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2018, pp. 30-48.
- [15]. Naipaul, V.S. *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Vintage International, 2001.
- [16]. Smith, David. "Exploring the Impact of Societal Biases on Child Criminality in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Modern Literature Review*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2019, pp. 100-118.
- [17]. Williams, Emily. "Contradictions and Conscience: The Struggle of Child Protagonists in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Literary Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017, pp. 80-96.
- [18]. Bloom, Harold. "Oliver Twist: A Meditation." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2013, pp. 40-55.
- [19]. Bowen, John. "Charles Dickens and Social Questions: Novel Contexts." *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, edited by John O. Jordan, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 23-43.
- [20]. Peters, Laura. "The Lost Childhood: Dickens's Critique of Victorian Society in *Oliver Twist*." *Victorian Review*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2019, pp. 72.