CRIMINALS, CURIOSITY AND CONSEQUENCES: TRACING CRIME IN INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Devjani Ray[*]

ABSTRACT

The essay briefly traces the shifts in the concept of discipline to reflect on the notion of crime and the criminal in children's literature, focusing on Indian children's literature in the later sections. The article also highlights that the concept of perfectibility through proper education has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from idealistic aspirations to practical realities. Earlier, children's writers recognised the transformative power of vicarious experiences, using both enjoyable and educational narratives. However, in the current reality, child characters often face the deprivation of essential elements of childhood, such as play, imagination, and study. Today, criminality in children's literature in India (as in any other part of the world) is seen as more a product of environmental factors rather than inherent traits.
Keywords: *Crime, Childhood, Criminal, India, Children's Literature*

1. CHILDHOOD – AS A CONSTRUCTION

French historian Philippe Ariès significantly impacted our understanding of childhood by emphasising its fluid nature. He asserted that childhood is not a static entity but a dynamic construct influenced by temporal, cultural, and geographical factors. Ariès encouraged us to perceive childhood not as a tangible reality but as an abstract notion, subject to various societal influences. The evolution of childhood studies has highlighted the dichotomy between two prevailing beliefs that greatly influence parental perspectives in Western cultures: the inherently sinful child and the innocent child. These contrasting ideologies can be traced back to their origins in Christian teachings. The 'pure child' is seen as pure and innocent, closely connected to God and reflecting divine purity. In contrast, the 'innately corrupt child' is viewed as carrying the stain of original sin from Adam and Eve's disobedience. This perspective, upheld by the Puritans, emphasises the need for supervision, obedience, and discipline to counter the child's innate corruption. It may be noted that the Puritans placed great importance on child rearing, which played a significant role in the growth of literature tailored for young readers. Their beliefs continue to influence modern views on parenting and childhood. Children were seen as important in religious reform, with disobedience seen as a violation of both religious principles and domestic order. The inner "badness" attributed to children necessitated strict control and discipline. According to David Archard, Puritans believed that children were inherently inclined towards this "badness," which could be corrected only through a regimented upbringing. Readings like this reveal that religion was both a rationale and an excuse for the harsh treatment of children. To counteract the perceived immorality of children, the Western disciplinary approaches drew much from the doctrine of original sin. As a result of this perspective, punishment was often used as a disciplinary tool, along with threats of damnation for those who deviated from acceptable forms of behaviour. However, during the 17th century, prevailing Augustinian concepts of original sin were challenged by shifting notions of childhood. The emerging perspective portrayed children in more neutral terms, neither as purely innocent nor as innately corrupt. John Locke, a key figure in the history of childhood, played a transformative role. Locke observed that although children are not born rational, they possess the capacity to develop reason. Education and adult-child interactions, therefore, should focus on nurturing and honing this potential, guiding them toward intellectual maturity. Locke's ideas reverberated through time, particularly in 19th-century England. His belief in the improvability and malleability of children, along with the notion that their will could be shaped, influenced parental approaches to discipline. Thus, his thoughts marked a turning point, challenging the severity of treatment previously inflicted upon children.

2. DISCIPLINING THE CHILD

In the realm of disciplining children, practices have evolved, adjusting to shifting contexts and goals. Despite enduring fundamental features, the contemporary perception of childhood and discipline starkly contrasts with that of the 17th and 18th centuries.

[*]Department of English, Miranda House, University of Delhi; Email: devjani2024@gmail.com

For children's writers and educators, exploring the complexities of the human psyche is crucial. Their central objective has been to mould young minds and regulate their behaviour for the greater social good. It was Hartley who underscored the significance of correct associations of ideas; he warned against the potential consequences of incorrect associations, such as the development of intense emotions and harmful behaviours. Maria Edgeworth also stressed the influence of associations on the imagination, noting that errors in these associations could result in both physical and mental ailments. William Falconer, an esteemed 18th-century physician, acknowledged the importance of early influences on the imagination and their impact on future emotional well-being. During the 17th and 18th centuries, prevailing beliefs about childhood and education often likened childhood to a state of sickness or vulnerability. Misbehaviour and faulty reasoning were interpreted as signs of this inherent condition. However, intellectuals of the time saw discipline as a tool for correcting and enhancing a child's development, rather than simply punishing disobedience. By the late 18th century, there was a shift towards a more instructional approach to discipline, influenced in part by John Locke's rejection of corporal punishment for children. It was around the same time that Michel Foucault highlighted a notable change in the approach to punishment within prisons in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*. This shift marked a move away from punitive measures towards a rehabilitative model. Earlier, the criminal's body served as the site for state-sanctioned retribution. However, Enlightenment ideas promoted the belief in human perfectibility and the notion that prisons should be used to reform offenders by addressing perceived mental deficiencies. According to Foucault, the body becomes a powerful force when it is both productive and subjected. Rather than harming or punishing the body of a criminal, making it obedient to authority was found to be more advantageous for utility and societal harmony. This shift in approach extended beyond adult criminals to include children, whose irrationality, though different from that of the criminals, was believed to be the source of their problematic behaviour. This focus on guiding children's behaviour through rational and disciplined approaches reflected a shift towards more humane and enlightened methods of child-rearing, aligning with broader societal efforts to improve institutions and systems of control. The evolution of discipline, therefore, reflects a broader shift from punitive measures to a more constructive, educational approach to shaping young minds. Foucault emphasises the power of shame in revealing individuals' arrogance. Shameful punishments, stemming from vanity, were effective means of influencing behaviour. Children learned to conform to societal norms as they internalised the adult justice system, ensuring their continued acquiescence. The child gradually comes to understand the logical reasoning behind punishment, seeing how it relates to her actions and helps shape her future behaviour. This comprehension is a crucial part of her cognitive development. The prevailing belief was that children needed discipline to transition from disorderly to orderly individuals. Discipline was seen as essential in middle-class education and medical management to instill self-discipline in children. It played a key role in fostering regularity of thought and behaviour, allowing middle-class values to influence future generations. Essentially, in the eyes of writers focused on children, discipline was viewed as necessary to transmit and preserve the ideology of the middle classes.

3. DEFINING PUNISHMENT

Punishment, from its earliest presence in literature, has played a crucial role in shaping narratives for young readers. A look at the intriguing evolution of punishment within children's literature reveals that storytelling for children was highly didactic in the first half of the 19th century. These narratives served more as exemplars, illustrating lessons and cautioning young readers against undesirable behaviour. They carried strong educational undertones, emphasising the effectiveness of various punitive tactics, the fear of deviance, and the authority of adults. As the century progressed, punishment took on a more internal dimension, targeting children emotionally. Judith Burdan notes a transition "from the physical to the psychological" and "from the punitive to the reformative" in 18th-century children's texts. The changing landscape reflected broader shifts, including discourses against corporal punishment, increased tolerance toward children's behaviour, and a greater emphasis on emotions. Punishment remained a key component in nineteenth-century narratives, albeit in more intricate forms. Writers utilised punishment as a narrative instrument, forging deep emotional connections between characters and readers, which included adults. Disciplinary episodes prompted reflection on questions

of justice and ascendancy. Thus, punishment continued to weave its threads through children's stories, adding layers of complexity and intrigue. Marah Gubar, in her work *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, interrogates both "the cult of the child" and Rose's critique of it. She observes that the golden age children's writers were sceptical of the Romantic primitivism associated with childhood images and did not portray children as embodiments of absolute freedom immune to social influences. Instead, their works grappled with the intricate agency of children, acknowledging both the pervasive power of adult influence and the potential for children to be enabled and inspired by their inevitable inheritance. Gubar further argues that Rose's criticism overlooks this complexity. Rose's view, where children's fiction frames and secures the child, treats children as helpless pawns in the hands of all-powerful adults. While Rose's study is widely used in contemporary criticism, it characterises children's literature as a domain of domination, where children are somehow "colonised" by adults. Appropriating Dickens's phrase, "artful dodger," Gubar contends that Golden Age children's literature often represents a multifaceted collaboration between children and adults. Collaboration, though more ambiguous than colonisation, serves as a robust analytical framework. It critiques the notion of childhood as inherently pre-social and instead views childhood experiences as a complex negotiation with adult power and authority. Here, it would be interesting to explore how writers across cultures and time periods grant agency to fictional children through the lens of collaboration.

4. DICKEN'S CHILDREN

Dickens holds a significant place in literature for his vivid, haunting portrayals of children in his works. He delved deep into the sordid realities that children faced during his time, shedding light on themes such as hunger, ill-treatment, begging, filth, and constant fear. Through his writing, he captured the lonely fantasies, spiteful behaviour, and fights that characterised the lives of these young individuals, who cried out against the injustices they endured with gritted teeth. For them, the world was a place of degradation and violence. By presenting the world through the eyes of his child characters, Dickens offered his readers a glimpse into the struggles and challenges faced by those young individuals. As representatives of adult society, readers are reminded of the responsibility towards children - not to control or oppress them, but to educate and care for them. His child characters, who occupied a permanent place in the literary imagination of 19th-century popular novels, served as powerful symbols amid the anguish and horror experienced by real children in their daily lives. Childhood, as portrayed by Dickens, encapsulated both the scandalous and the unattainable, serving as a canvas where innocence and darkness intertwined.

In Dickens's narratives, children navigate a world fraught with disturbing associations with evil, painting a picture of a densely inhabited hell where young individuals grapple with a range of emotions and experiences. His keen observation and sensitivity towards their thoughts and feelings showcased the fragile wonder and haunting abyss that childhood could embody. Ultimately, in Dickens's world, childhood emerges as an amalgam of pain, loss, and darkness, where innocence and darkness collide to create a narrative of extremes that evoke both heart-wrenching pathos and repugnance. Dickens's exploration of childhood paints a picture of a murky, grey-black metaphorical realm where children and young individuals encounter a myriad of human experiences - from kindness and generosity to malevolence, unhappiness, and suffering. In his works, children are portrayed as victims of various afflictions, including obsession, persecution, oppression, fear, terror, arrogance, and blackmail. Their lives are marked by trauma, distorted emotions, and material hardships, making them emblems of severe developmental trauma endured during their formative years. While these traits may reflect the iniquitous social conditions of Victorian England, Dickens also acknowledges that young people have suffered ill-treatment even before the industrial age.

Dickens breathes life into these displaced and invisible children within his literature, granting them a second birth and restoring their visibility. These "little helpers," as Nabokov aptly labels them, not only allow the development of the plot but also assume adult responsibilities in a world where innocence and darkness intertwine. Jo in *Bleak House* serves as a vital link between various characters. His encounters highlight the power of individual agency and the harsh realities that vulnerable children

face. Jo's tragic fate serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and injustices inherent in the world, casting a shadow of death over the lives of these young souls. Through powerful symbols, Dickens imbues premature death with an aura of announced finality, evoking the angelic nature of child sacrifice. Characters like Jo are sacrificial victims to the dead hand of injustice and social inequality, killed by abandonment, orphanhood, and indescribable poverty rather than disease. Dickens's portraits of children serve as a catalogue of icons etched into the collective imaginary, depicting the desperate situations they face due to indifference and neglect. Reading Dickens from an educational standpoint compels us to confront the appalling and acknowledge the multifaceted factors contributing to childhood suffering, urging us to engage with empathy and awareness rather than turning away. The above discussion on the evolution of the idea of childhood and crime in children's literature and its portrayal in literature, particularly in Dickens' work, draws our attention to how children's writers in India have visualised and portrayed childhood in general and the "errant child" in particular since the late nineteenth century.

5. THE "ERRANT CHILD" IN COLONIAL BENGAL

In colonial Bengal, the idea of the "errant child" underwent a significant transformation, as writers grappled with the emergence of a modern child moulded by Romantic ideals. This led to a reconfiguration of childhood inclinations and natural development, challenging traditional disciplinary practices and encouraging children to learn from their own experiences. The goal was to cultivate responsible and self-sufficient individuals capable of navigating a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. One notable literary exploration in this context is the portrayal of characters like Bhim in Pramadacharan Sen's "Bhimer Kapal" (Bhim's Fate) [published in the Bengali children's periodical *Sakha* in 1883], whose experiences reflect the complexities of childhood and the tension between reality and the ideal. In the story, Bhim, a young boy, is portrayed as restless and impulsive, running away from home after a trivial incident. Rather than reprimanding Bhim for his impetuous actions, Sen allows him to face various challenges and experiences in the outside world.

This ultimately leads Bhim to return home as a changed individual. At the outset, two friends, Bipin and Bhim, are portrayed as complete opposites. While Bipin is patient and quiet, Bhim is obstinate and impulsive. Bhim's inability to stay within the confines of a home, even a hospitable one, leads him to seek adventure and escape. Despite being cared for by the kind Mitra family, Bhim longs to leave and explore the world. Sen emphasises the stark contrast between Bhim's audacious nature and the goodness of the people who shelter him during his escapades. Each time Bhim faces difficulty and attempts to escape, he is met with the kindness of hardworking individuals. Through these encounters, Sen suggests that Bhim's interactions with benevolent people will ultimately lead him to reform himself. The narrative reaches its climax when Bhim, feeling homesick, yearns to return to his mother. This pivotal moment signifies Bhim's realisation and acceptance of the importance of family and tradition. Sen does not remain neutral in his portrayal of Bhim's journey, ultimately guiding him back to the fold of convention, authority, and family.

In essence, "Bhimer Kapal" explores the theme of rebellion and self-discovery through Bhim's character. Through Bhim's transformative journey, which ultimately returns him to the comforts of home, Sen reminds his readers of the enduring values of family and tradition and demonstrates the power of growth and change. Similarly, in Punyalata Chakraborty's "Shantoshila" and Sukumar Ray's "Nutan Pandit" (The New Teacher), characters evolve and change, finding their place within the social fabric. Shantoshila (the female counterpart of Bhim) is a 'bad' girl who reforms herself after experiencing challenging circumstances. In "Nutan Pandit", the mischievous students are relieved when their new teacher, who was not only stringent but also unnecessarily oppressive, leaves the school. They realise the value of their old teacher and promise never to trouble their old schoolmaster, whom they had disregarded earlier. Narratives like these emphasise the characters' journey from defiance to tradition, showcasing a nuanced exploration of personal growth. Here, it is worth noting that Bengali children's literature of the time also incorporated innovative disciplinary perspectives, diverging from traditional methods. Ray's "Ajab Shaja" and "Bholanather Sardari" illustrate a compassionate approach where understanding and empathy supersede punishment, thereby

acknowledging the impulsiveness and vulnerabilities of children. For instance, the teacher in "Ajab Shaja" opts not to punish his students for disturbing his slumber, viewing their actions as mere childishness, and instead issues a mild warning. Again, in "Bholanather Sardari," Bholanath's escapade in the school laboratory could have warranted reprimand, but his father's compassion prevails over anger when faced with his son's genuine fear. Such stories shed light on a unique approach to discipline, where children, in their playful mischief, often end up entrapped in their schemes, leading to self-realisation and amusement at their own mistakes. Rather than condemnation, these stories subtly guide children towards introspection, highlighting their errors and fostering awareness of their shortcomings. This unconventional method not only refrains from harsh punishment but also instils valuable lessons through the natural consequences of their actions.

In a world where the tendency to condemn children for minor transgressions is prevalent, these narratives offer a refreshing perspective on discipline, emphasising empathy, understanding, and the power of self-discovery as tools for guiding youthful behaviour. In Ray's stories, we find a fine approach towards addressing children's faults. He prioritises growth, reflection, and the gentle art of learning from one's mistakes. Overall, the literary investigation of childhood in colonial Bengal reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, discipline and compassion, providing insights into the evolving perceptions of childhood and the shaping of responsible individuals within society. The children in several of these writings emerge as autonomous individuals capable of independent thought. Interestingly, in many of these narratives, one notes the absence of a perceived authoritarian, almost megalomaniac adult. Instead of viewing children as needing stringent education or reform, these writers disapprove of the often punitive and oppressive nature of adults. For instance, in the school stories—such as Sukumar Ray's "Pagla Dashu" (Crazy Dashu)—we witness a departure from the traditional approach. Like his contemporaries, Ray also differed from the authoritarian adults of the time. The small group of like-minded children's writers that Ray belonged to didn't dismiss or disregard children's attitudes and activities as "childish." Instead, they encouraged children to remain unperturbed by the rigidly regulated adult world. The strict regimes and physical punishments prevalent in controlling children, as noted by Pradip Kumar Bose, were notably absent in the writings that appeared in periodicals for Bengali children. Perhaps this explains why Ray's Dashu is never punished for his pranks; he exists outside the norms of conventional punishment. What may appear "insane" to disciplined adults is humorously dismissed by children's writers. While this leniency may not always reflect reality in schools, it underscores the preservation of children's individuality even as adults wield their influence. The writers' sympathetic view of childhood resistance and their awareness of the coercive nature of adult-imposed discipline in colonial Bengal resonate with children's desire to break free into a world of unrestrained joy. Their narratives often challenge the conventional dichotomy of good and evil, portraying characters like Dashu, a child who questions the problems and injustices of everyday life. Dashu may not conform to traditional morals and manners, but young readers can easily identify with his untamed spirit. Through stories like Dashu's, we see the world through a child's eyes, celebrating their resistance to authority and their potential to challenge the status quo.

6. THE EMPOWERED CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT FICTION IN INDIA

Kenneth Kidd aptly observes that "we no longer have the luxury of denying evil or postponing the child's confrontation with such" in his essay "A is for Auschwitz". This reflects the contemporary dichotomy between the child and evil—a dichotomy that Paro Anand challenges in her novel. In *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*, Anand invites readers to assess the horrors, inhumanity, and complexities of the world within the confines of children's literature. By making Aftab, her protagonist, both the instrument of violence and ruin, and the cause of trauma, Anand undermines the conventional configuration of the child. *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* registers the decline of innocence through Aftab's experiences. But this loss of innocence extends beyond fictional characters; it reaches the actual child reader. Anand challenges the notion of innocence in her work through violence, religious bigotry, military torture, and explicit sexual interactions. Her work seeks to 'de-romanticise' childhood and disrupt the stereotypes that have shaped children's literature. The central plot—where a child is radicalised into terrorism—opposes the Romantic notion of childhood as an epoch of untarnished

purity and timeless virtue. Wordsworth's 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy!' is based on this model of childhood. Aftab challenges the stereotype of the "imitative child" commonly found in Romantic literature. In contrast to children who replicate adult behaviours, Aftab engages in critical questioning and actively resists his parents' perspectives. His display of autonomy and independent thought distinguishes him from the traditional understanding of childhood as mere imitation.

In the novel, rather than depicting children as hapless victims, Anand imbues her child characters with agency and the ability to shape their world. The distance between Aftab and his family, and his transformation into a militant, challenge traditional social norms. Here, Anand's work defies the Romantic notion of childhood innocence, where violence is seen as an external event inflicted by adults on children. Instead, she portrays Aftab as both the perpetrator and the victim of trauma. His final act—a suicide bomb blast that kills hundreds—serves as a potent metaphor for the complex relationship between children and violence. In the story, we encounter Angad, who functions as Aftab's foil. Angad embodies the model Romantic child—innocent and unflawed, unlike Aftab. While Angad dissuades Aftab from engaging in devious activities, the conflict between the Romantic child and the 'modern child' ultimately tilts in favour of the latter in the story. However, Anand leaves room for young readers to develop their interpretations. She de-romanticises while empowering readers in ways that promote the greater good. Aftab, on the other hand, occupies a strange hybrid space between adulthood and childhood. He exhibits typical child-like behaviours—craving his mother's comfort, and playing cricket with friends—yet simultaneously displays adult traits: cruelty, calculation, and terrible violence.

Anand disrupts the typical hero-villain dichotomy often present in children's literature. Through her narrative, she challenges traditional notions of good and evil by focusing the story through Aftab, a child terrorist. This narrative choice presents a complex and sensitive portrayal of a character typically seen as a villain, forcing readers to empathise with Aftab and question their preconceived notions. This challenges the readers to see beyond black-and-white morality and encourages them to consider the complexities of human nature. By doing so, Anand pushes readers to engage with uncomfortable truths and confront the realities of violence in a way that is both accessible and impactful. The story concludes with the characters distancing themselves from violence and reaffirming their faith in peace. This ending serves as both a warning and a beacon of hope. By recognising the thin line between violence and community well-being, readers can contribute to a better future. Anand's didactic approach also sets it apart from traditional children's literature. Rather than imposing moral messages on her young readers, Anand prompts them to participate in meaning-making. By presenting complex, morally ambiguous situations, she encourages readers to form their own interpretations and engage critically with the text. In aligning her portrayal of the child characters with the notion of the 'modern child', Anand further emphasises the importance of presenting young readers with challenging and thought-provoking content. By treating children as capable of understanding and grappling with complexity, Anand empowers her readers to think critically and empathise with multiple experiences and perspectives.

7. CONCLUSION

Challenging traditional notions, it becomes evident that criminality in children's literature in India (as in any other culture) is more a product of environmental factors rather than inherent traits. This essay briefly highlights how the concept of perfectibility through proper education has evolved significantly over time, transitioning from idealistic aspirations to practical realities. We noted that in earlier perspectives (e.g., writings for children in colonial Bengal), children's writers recognised the transformative power of vicarious experiences through enjoyable and educational narratives. We also found that the construction of crime in children's literature is deeply intertwined with social hierarchies and power dynamics, leading to the victimisation of innocents and the creation of criminals. For instance, in Paro Anand's work, individuals are not inherently born criminals, but are shaped by social injustices. As society navigates these complexities, the role of education in shaping individuals and addressing criminal behaviour among children and youth remains a fundamental point of discussion and action.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

Sakha - 1883

Sandesh – 1918-1920

Anand, Paro. *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*. Roli Books Private Limited, 2012.

Secondary Sources

Aries, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood*. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1973.

Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji. *Gopal-Rakhal Dwandashamash: Upanibeshbad o Bangla Shishusahitya*. Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991.

Bose, Kumar Pradip. 'Sons of the Nation: Child Rearing in the New Family' in Partha Chatterjee (ed), *Texts of Power, Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Burdan. Judith. "Girls Must Be Seen and Heard: Domestic Surveillance in Sarah Fielding's The Governess," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, p. 8–14.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Vintage Books, 1977.

Gubar, Marah. *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Kidd, Kenneth B. "A" is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the "Children's Literature of Atrocity". *Children's Literature*, vol. 33, 2005, p. 120-149.

Nandy, Ashis. 'Reconstructing Childhood' in *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias.* Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987.

Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.