



Views on the Concept of Childhood and its Representation on Children's Theatre: A Brief Analysis

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Abstract

It is indeed very necessary to find a parallel between the concepts like childhood and children's theatre. As far as child development and welfare is concerned both subjects demand special mention and assume significant importance in any society. Lot of scholars and researchers by the time has come up with various theories and viewpoints about the concept of child and childhood. Being an influential medium for the children to understand the things around them, children theatre is a germane topic, where there is a room for a researcher to associate the concept of childhood to children's theatre. This paper is an attempt to observe how the concept of childhood is associated to children's theatre and how children are looked upon in the context of children's theatre. Paper is inclusive of discussions on advantages of children's theatre for the children and representation of children in Indian theatre in historical perspective. The paper also throws light on European concepts on childhood and certain theories developed during seventeenth and eighteenth century, the period in Europe where the concept of childhood started burgeoning with a serious outlook.

Keywords: Childhood; Children's theatre; Development; Indian theatre; European perspectives

Introduction

The questions such as who is a child and what is childhood are quite solemn for a researcher interested in subjects related to childhood to probe into. Many scholars in the past have tried to define the term child and the idea of childhood. In terms of biology science or in any of those perspectives, the term childhood can be defined as the initial stage in the physical and mental growth of a human being. But the term has got a deeper significance where it means more than how it is defined in scientific terms. It is indeed a fact that there is no

concept such as a universal childhood and the definition and explanation for the terms and concepts such as child and childhood vary across each culture, place and time. It is completely depended upon the way in which the society deals with their young population and it is very much evident that organizations like children's theatre and films for children came into prominence during the twentieth century only when the society started identifying child as a young adult.

However it is a widely accepted fact that theatre does have a deeper impact upon the children especially in their learning process.

Views on Childhood: A Review

Among the philosophers who tried to define the concept of child and childhood, the English renaissance philosopher John Locke (1689) demands a special mention. His celebrated book 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding' throws light into the philosophical outlook to human life. He defines the mind of a new born child as tabula rasa (clean slate). More than developing a new outlook to childhood, Locke's attempt mainly was to destroy the universally adopted notions about childhood by the adults [1]. One of the important personalities to conduct a solemn discussion about childhood is Phillippe Aires [2]. He realized that the concept of childhood is only of recent origin and nowhere in the history either during old age or middle ages that the childhood of a person is looked upon with any significance. His renowned book 'Centuries of Childhood' could be identified as a path breaker to serious studies about childhood. He believes that child is a social construct and there undergoes a series of changes in the term between infancy and adolescence. Even the term 'child' was not properly defined during those ages and the conditions were no different even during the early ages of seventeenth century, which is also considered as the early stage of the modern period [2]. Following the studies of Aires there occurred plenty of studies and views related to children and childhood. Peter Stearns [3] is another scholar who has come up with his own definitions on childhood. According to him, children tend to imitate the world they see around them and as a result when these children grow up as adults they become

a part of that life that is around them without disturbing the repetitive structure of the social life [3]. Patrica Pace's [4] conducted a significant study that tends to identify childhood from more than mere biological reality. Pace's argument is that, childhood identity is as similar as gender identity as far as the construction of the former is concerned. More than being an essential biological reality, Pace insists that childhood has got a different existence. In his opinion while associating it to biological reality, child's body is not that expressive [4].

The focus of childhood takes a different turn in Althusser's [5] concept of interpellation. When most of the theorists and followers of Aires focused on childhood as a separate entity, Althusser discusses how an adult goes back to his/her childhood. Althusser's [5] concept of interpellation argues that the experience of the child is not just a void to the study of history, but also a void to society. Adults can only ever re-experience childhood through the imperfect lens of their memories, conditioned by good experiences and bad, modified by trauma and repression, and made hazy by distance. As such, adults have no choice but to understand childhood through interpellation, by hailing the echoes of childhood from their void.

All these scholars didn't emphasize the concept of childhood in a social perspective where the social stratifications really do play a vital role in defining it. It was Andrew o Malley [6] who explained childhood in a social perspective in his book titled 'The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century'. According to him, the rise of middle class has thoroughly affected in determining childhood. The overemphasis of a middle class child, child's growth and growing up with in a family has neglected the child of a lower class family. Even the childhood stage of a child born in a lower class doesn't even come to the consideration of the society in Malley's point of view. This tendency has hampered a generalized view about childhood. Malley states that it is necessary to harness and control the potential energy of the children in order to equip them to participate successfully in the new ideological project [of the middle class] of the period [6].

Of all these interpretations about childhood, one point is so evident that child is a reservoir of immense potentials and it is very essential to recognize and bring it out from them. To meet this end, theatre is one of the most effective and appropriate medium.

Impact of Theatre amongst the Children

"Theatre is powerful tool in pedagogy. It provides meaningful contexts for bringing language alive, for enabling interactive learning to take place and providing children with another medium for the expression and presentation of learning" [7].

The words are of much significance as far the impact of theatre in children and their development is concerned.

Children never learn things in isolation. They always tend to associate things with something. To put it more explicitly, Children require the presence of a medium or an object to correlate abstract things to it in order to understand those concepts in its complete sense. It was T.S. Eliot, renowned English literary figure, who used the term objective correlative for the first time to emphasize the necessity of something concrete as a medium to associate things and concepts which are essentially abstract or do not exist in a tangible reach with a form or shape.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked [8].

Analyzing in this regard, it is one of the significant benefits of theatre for children that it provides a medium, rather the theatre itself turns as medium for the children to learn things in easiest manner. Vygotsky [9] and Rinaldi [10] are of the opinion that it is the interactive nature of theatre that makes it central in the learning process. They look forward to theatre in education in a social constructivist perspective view of learning where children are not seen as empty vessels to be filled but as active recipients or co-constructors of meaning with others.

One of the reason for the theatre to turn out as an appropriate medium for the children in their learning process is the element of freedom that it provides to the children to imagine. To understand any concept, theory or whatever it may be, a person cannot reach to its kernel level until and unless the person develops his faculty of imagination. Imagining the idea in their own way and giving a form and shape to those ideas in their own imagination makes learning more effective and enjoyable. Deakin Crick's [11] views are relevant to be brought in at this context. According to him, 'Effective Learners are able to look at things in different ways and to imagine new possibilities. They like playing with new ideas and taking different perspectives, even when they don't quite know where their trains of thought are leading' [11].

Another significant advantage that the children benefit out of theatre is the possibility for physical and mental activities. Learning must always be a practical endeavor and passive learning works less especially when it comes to language learning. Learners must involve in the learning process and they should arrive at an emotional state where they should forget the fact that they are doing the activities for a specific purpose rather they are doing it out of their own interest. If such a kind of involvement happens from the part of children, then learning becomes never a tiresome difficult process rather a delightful exercise. There is no replacement for theatre in this regard for the children to derive such a pleasure in their learning process. Baldwin and Fleming [12] are of the opinion that 'The mind, body and emotions are given opportunities to connect and function together rather than separately, enabling children to make all-round and interconnecting sense of their experiences and learning'. Thus

the benefits of theatre for children in their learning are myriad. Turner et al. [13] in their work titled 'Children Engaging with Drama' has mentioned a few advantages of theatre in the learning of children. According to them, theatre enable children to develop their emotional sensitivity, responses and vocabulary through the aesthetic learning, literacy skills then to develop in turn through emotional learning. It also helps children in gaining self-esteem and self-confidence, which are commonly taught to be key factors enabling children to engage with and succeed in school work [13].

The child representation in theatrical activities which became much rigorous in the modern period doesn't signify that there was no involvement of children in theatrical activities during previous centuries. Both in East and West the representations of children in theatrical activities were much common. While analyzing the history of Western theatre, Konesko [1] is of the opinion that, children have appeared in Western drama in every ages right from the ancient Greek stories of Oedipus and Medea through Christ and marry in mystery plays during medieval period up to the modern period [1]. The English theatre during sixteenth and seventeenth century where the plays of Shakespeare were in much vogue, employed children as the performers especially to carry out the roles of female characters. One of the reasons for it is the absence of female artists to take over the roles of female characters. Children were selected for these roles mostly for their sound texture that resembles the sound of females. Konesko [1] in his thesis titled 'Representing Childhood: The Social, Historical, and Theatrical Significance of the Child on Stage' discusses on the construction of childhood in Shakespearean plays and it is worth quoting in this context.

"His children move from playful and worldly knowledgeable to the strictest definition of the severe little adult. In further proof of their lack of real agency, however, Shakespeare often writes tragic endings for these child/not-child characters. Some of these, such as Mamillius in 'Winter's Tale', might be attributed to a sad reality of contextual medical conditions after all, a high percentage of children died in the first ten years of life. Some, however, die or otherwise suffer through no actions of their own. Indeed, Shakespeare's child characters are often his noblest and most doomed to suffer [1].

Apart from this, their flexibility and enthusiasm to involve in theatrical activities also becomes a crucial factor that makes sure the presence of children in the theatrical activities. While reviewing the history of theatre for children in India, the same trend of providing female roles to the male children at their young age could be seen. The reasons are almost the same in Indian context also. However it is significant to evaluate the representation of children in Indian theatre.

Representation of Childhood in Indian Theatre

India has a rich tradition of theatre and children were always a part of it. In certain traditional families that are inclined to theatre, children are taught about the nuances of

theatre at a very young age itself. From their home they learn the primary lessons of theatre from their parents and later from a scholar of theatre as higher studies. There are a few traditional theatre groups in India which incorporate children as their performers. Nilakantan in her article titled 'History of Indian Theatre' observes Ramlila and Chhau as examples of those traditional theatre performing groups. In these performances, children in their teenage often perform the role of females. This forms a co-incidental relationship between Indian and English theatre. Not only in Indian folk theatres are that children made to perform female roles, in traditional classical theatre in India like Kathakali too, children in teenage are mainly trained to perform female roles. While discussing on the themes of these folk theatre groups, Nilakantan [14] observes that the themes are mainly oriented in Hindu mythology and the children assuming the mythical characters in it are called the Swarups (incarnations). She explains that during the performances, they are considered as the embodiment of gods. Among the theatrical productions, there are mainly two that are particularly meant only for children. Both of them are from Manipur and amongst the two, the play Gostha Lila or Sansenba originated in the 18 century describes lord Krishna's experiences as a cowherd and his killing of the demons and includes both fun and games. The second play Gaura Lila is derivative of Sansenba and describes the religious journeys of Lord Chaitanya mahapraphu [14]. When it came to the modern period the most important person to organize children's theatre performance in more systematic manner purporting the educational value of theatres was none other than Rabindranath Tagore. He initiated educational programs for children in his village in West Bengal which is now known to the world as Shantiniketan, where he organized a lot of academic and literary activities for children. Theatre he found as the most appropriate medium for the children to enhance their language skills. His plays like Sharadotsav (Autumn Festival) and The King and The Rebel not only ensured the participation of the children in it as the performers but also enhancement of their language speaking abilities. According to Nilakantan [14], the play The King and The Rebel was written especially to improve the fluency of children in English. The significant contribution of Tagore to the children's theatre fraternity is the inclusion of female children to take part in the theatrical activities. Till then it was only the male children who carried out the roles of females, where Tagore introduced girls themselves to the stage providing them better opportunity to acquire good academic knowledge, in an age which denied the woman folk the wisdom of education. Tagore maintained his own views about the inclusion of both male and female children in theatre. In Tagore's words, "If our schools were run on the right lines, boys and girls would never lose their natural gifts of bodily expression" Nilakantan [14]. There remained a few academicians and theatre activists like Sankaradas Swamigal and GR Shirgoppikar, the other variety of children's theatre, that is, plays done by trained adults for the children and the young. But these organizations did not achieve much. Sanskar Rang Toli, the New Delhi based National School of Drama's TIE Theatre Company, is perhaps the only such regular one in the country. It is very necessary to have a look in to the reasons behind the retarded growth of children's theatre in

India. One of the basic reasons for this is due to lack of adequate financial support for teachers and theatre technicians by the government [15]. It is hardly possible of an individual or a group to raise funds to carry on massive projects like this. Another reason is the absence of infrastructure, particularly of well-equipped auditoria and transport facility that can make theatre-going, a joyful experience. Most of the teachers and parents have not yet recognized the value of watching professional plays for their children and they are more interested in seeing their children attending workshops and performing in theatre than ensuring the participation of their children in it. This attitude of both the parents and children may also be considered as a reason for the poor development of theaters for children in India. Last but not the least, the lack of efficient and trained professionals in children's theatre also turns out to be a prominent reason for the under-development of children's theatre in India [16].

Conclusion

Among the subjects that have achieved global attention, child and childhood come in the forefront of the list. Associations and organizations around the world are working as a whole to ensure the welfare of the children and to make their life standards better. This paper is an attempt to identify childhood through definitions on childhood provided by philosophers and scholars worldwide and to identify its association with theatre. While associating childhood with theatre the paper limits itself to the theatre in India and while describing childhood the paper brings in the theories explained by scholars around the world.

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