

A Critical Study on the Definitions of Children Literature

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ABSTRACT

The present study is an endeavor to challenge the pre-existing definitions of children literature. The definitions are not inclusive as they have ignored the cultural, geographical, economic and familial differences so that it is imagined that every child with any background is able to utilize literary productions. However, considering the above difference reveals that according to the existent definitions, children literature doesn't include all children and also all of them would not benefit from this literature in the same way. Moreover, based on the economic circumstances, some children cannot use literary works. So, this research claims that not being comprehensive, the existent definitions require revision. Also, it is an attempt to claim that the producer of literary works is not necessarily to be an adult and works produced by children should be regarded as children literature. In this regard, first of all, different definitions of literature and children literature will be discussed and then they will be criticized psychologically. The results present that the definitions are not inclusive and they are in need of analysis and reconsideration.

Key Words: Literature; Child; Children Psychology; Definitions; Differences

I. Introduction

Some definitions are self-evident for people so that interrogating them seems unnecessary. They are so internalized that leave no space for doubt and challenge. Dominant thoughts in humanities have casted a shadow on people's mind to the degree that keep them from the most essential questions. Indeed, in exact sciences such obviousness is almost correct since their performance is based on trial and error and repeated experiments and the first result remain untouched until the new result emerges. But in humanities it does not work. In such sciences, there no exact and absolute definition and it is what raises so many different points of view and tastes. In humanities, every person holds his own definition of the issues. So, in this field, inaccurate and ambiguous definitions seem so obvious and correct that leaves no space for doubt. Notions namely art, literature and especially human being, which is the main axis in humanities, do not have exact definitions.

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In literature, children literature is a much rich field which is ignored and taken for granted. This field is defined in different ways whose most important one will be discussed in this research. Literature and children literature will be defined respectively; as this field is connected to both literature and children which both are not defined in a proper way. In defining this field, some issues should be regarded namely cultural, geographical, familial and economic differences among children. The thing is, can children literature produce works that pave the way for all or most children's usage and enjoyment; the latter is obviously the main aim of literature?

What is Literature?

The definition of literature is of those issues that seem so obvious that needs no research. Being more precise, we realize that most of people dealing with literature, have no exact definition of it or their definition is an elegant piece in praise of literature including no scientific interest. In "What is Literature?", a French philosopher and author, John Paul Sartre, defines literature as the abstract work of human nature. With the help of literature, human releases himself from the barriers of historical facts (Sartre, 1984:154). A Canadian critic, Northrop Frye in "The Educated Imagination", defines literature as a category dealing with human's point of view and his environment and finding the similarities between them (Frye, 1984:29). He also claims that literature is not a set of adorned things through which the best would be chosen, but it manifests the scope of human's imagination speaking of the beauty and ugliness of the imaginary world. For him, literature is human's revelation through which human's inspiration is represented (ibid: 66). Beside these general definitions, literature is defined in another way. Often, literature is known as the dialogues of words creators and myths of thought with contemporaries and the future generation (Escaepit, 1994: 8) or the precise recreation of the existent realities and functions (Welleck, vol.1, 1994:126). Some critics regarded literature as prose or poetic writings whose purpose is not simply to tell the truth but to tell a story via creative imagination in using words (Daiches, 1986:29). Literature is also considered as a fine speech; a speech higher than the ordinary one and through its narration readers can change (ZarrinKoob, vol.1, 1975). Some other critics viewed literature as written works interpreting the highest and best thoughts and imaginations in the best way. Literature is also known as a tasteful activity and embodiment of human thought and feeling; it is often thought to be an inspiration of human nature and life (Emami, 1998:12). Generally, literature is part of language which causes human reaction. Moreover, it is considered as literary works of a nation or country or a historical period (Farshivard, vol.2, 1984: 803) which talks about the way to express feelings and thoughts through words, in composition, lecture, prose or poem (ShoaariNejad, 2003: 63).

The well-known English critic, Terry Eagleton in his book, "An Introduction to Literary Theory", discusses different definitions of literature which we mention only two of them. He regards literature as a speech away from the real world including non-direct scientific purposes referring to the general situations of issues (Eagleton, 1989: 12). Also, for him literature obtains information on our performances and it tells nothing about the fixed and existent situation of things (Ibid, 151).

According to the afore-mentioned definitions, it can be concluded that literature is an artistic activity resulted from the combination of the author's imagination or pictures drawn from the world and the output of this combination is revealed in imaginary, emotional and effective forms.

Who is Child?

The main issue in defining a child and the nature of childhood, is that can a child be the small version of the adults? Is his mind like the adults but in a smaller scale? Contrary to the old beliefs, new psychology has proved that a child has an independent characteristic and certain way to encounter and realize things. Recent researches show that the difference between children and adults is not in realizing something but in the way their mind reaches something (Vygotsky, 1991: 102). Unlike the pre-existing perception, the child is not ignorant but his way of interpretation and perception is different.

With the advent of new psychology, especially the work of Freud, a scientific attention has been paid to childhood as a critical period in human future. It has been proved that language and children literature, his logic, thinking, his perception of color, dimension, geometry, space, time, number, death, goodness, evil, ethics, religion and other categories is much different from the adult's.

According to the psychological findings, the adult's mentality is not necessarily to be the correct one with acceptable criteria. Free from adults' all value and ethical concerns, the child does something that he himself thinks is the proper one. He tells rhythmic words disregarding adults' judgment. The child's world is a world of happiness and entertainment; the latter is the child's self-centered thinking about which he talks (Ibid 47). The child has a world freed from all adults' concerns and troubles. He does not think about the future; since he has no perception of time. He lives in the moment. He is self-centered; living for himself. The child's talking is like a monologue. He represents himself as he does everything with others' association (Ibid, 49). The English philosopher, John Locke, thinks that child's mind is a blank tablet on which the more writing is engraved, the more intelligence the child receives. But confirming Jean Jacques Rousseau, Piaget believes that the child is not passive; he has an active role in IQ development. Through working, child learns. He is not a mere observer and imitator but he interprets the world to the best of his own knowledge (Hejazi, 1998: 60).

The above-mentioned definitions are in contrast with the old perceptions that a child is an ignorant, thoughtless and imitator being, so he should be surrendered to adults who trains him in its worst and most inhumane behaviors, threats and punishments. They regard child training as taming a wild animal. Our literary works are filled with anecdotes in which encountering children in schools is described like taming. It is totally rejected in new psychology. However, this way of behavior is not only in our culture but it used to be in all cultures. Nowadays, the child somewhat has regained his respect; he has a special global organization; a specific field of study in universities; a specific literature considers him as an independent individual.

Obviously, a very important criterion in defining child is recognizing his age; it means that individual in what age is called a child? In the past, the span between infancy and adolescence used to be called childhood. Even single adults were called children. But nowadays, psychology considered five certain age category which are as follows; 1) before elementary school, 2) the first years of elementary school namely first, second and third grade, 3) the last years of elementary school namely fourth and fifth grade, 4) guidance school and 5) high school (Ibid, 57-8).

Definition of Children Literature

In addition to what has been said, we'll address some definitions of children literature and then the definition of this literary genre. First of all, it should be mentioned that referring to various theories, two distinct streams of thought are recognized: 1) Those who distinct children literature (based on children's limitation) from adults' literature and look for educational and moral goals in it and practically do not believe in any creation trends in literature. They also accept limited aesthetic criteria in such works and know a production bound to audience. This group consider children literature as a field of "restriction and obligation". The second stream regards children as human being and their literature as a distinct genre. They believe that it is the limitation of children and adults in choosing literary works should be noted not the process of creating them. This group realize literary field as a field of freedom and authority; they do not distinct the children from adults and pay much attention to aesthetic criteria (GhezelAyagh, 1998: 55-6).

In next definitions, two different points of view towards children could be observed. Children literature is being referred as a set of works provided for children's entertainment and education. In general, works which fit children and adults, literary and semantically (Ibid, 44).

In other definition, children literature is not a pastime separated from the real world; but it is the cultural roots of the real world. It is a real and practical action and a proper way to live (Encyclopedia Americana, 1998: 563).

A Swedish writer, LennartHellsingholds that children literature means all children's readings and writings. Whatever children encounter in newspapers, books, radio and television is their literature. Moreover, children literature can be a literature made by children. Generally, children literature can be regarded as what is interesting for children (Oittinen, 2000: 62).

Children literature is often thought to be a collection of writings, songs and sayings allocated for children (Hejazi, 1998: 19). Children literature is a collection of writings, songs and speeches provided for children by adults (Razani, 1975: 11). Another definition considers this genre as a set of books and articles provided by specialists for children. In these works, children's taste and age are regarded (ShoariNejad, 2003: 34). Finally, children and adult's literature are artistic attempt in word format to help children to grow in a way suiting their understanding (MortazaviKaroooni, 1985: 58-9).

Aspects of Definitions of Children Literature

According to the previous arguments regarding children literature, some questions will be raised; such as is there any literature with such definitions? What kind of literature is children literature? What criteria does it consider to define or even create literary works for children? Is the definition of children literature comprehensive?

Obviously, different circumstances create different people. May be child living in a rich family is provided with high facilities and a child in poor family is deprived from any facilities and another child living in a family with moderate economic situation. Naturally, these three different families have different economic backgrounds; so,their view toward the universe differs sharply. They sometimes understand each other and sometimes do not. For a rich

child, the poor child might seem a child without luxurious house, car and travel disregarding the hunger the child bears all nights. These three families differ in education, point of view, morality, religion and ideology. So, a literature produced by an adult once was living in either situation, can create a literature proper for these three classes? If so, literature of which group would he create? If he writes about the first group, the other group will not understand him and read his book; if they read it, they feel regret and sorrow while the first aim of literature is pleasure. The annoying literature is not literature.

On the other hand, children grown in different geographical situations have different characteristics. So, how children literature will face these differences? Clearly, a literature written in south is less tangible for children from the other areas; since every geography creates distinct human. It might be thought that turning to local and popular literature is a problem, but in our country, is there such literature allowed to express itself?

The result of geographical difference is dialectical and linguistic differences. How such differences which are the infrastructures of cultural differences, can create literature giving pleasure and artistic usage?

On the other hand, the point is that whether the main audience of formal children literature are all children or a specific stratum; children who can buy and read books, go to children and adolescents' centers, can access to cultural and library facilities and have all the possibilities a normal child has. Meanwhile, these children will not be those with economic and environmental problems or have trouble going to schools or even those who are child labor. The latter group should be entertained with what kind of literature? What children literature can create for them? Can child labor read stories, poems and tales which rich children can do? If this group is excepted from the other children and literature cannot address it, so literature should be exclusive to a specific group. When we discuss children literature, it should include all children, but is it practically true?

Another aspect worth mentioning is that literature made by children is the purest literary genre. The question is, is not it the time when children literature be released from the yoke of children literature's authors and given to children? Instead of changing children literature into a business, is not it the time for schools, mass media and social media to think about children with different social, economic, cultural and ideological situations and pave the way for children's self-interpretation?

Therefore, two questions would emerge: the first is that the term of children literature does not have comprehensive definition; because it does not include all children. The second question is freeing children from adults and submitting them to themselves.

If according to Smith literature is an enjoyment, (Hejazi, 1998: 20) is it only prepared by adult creator? Professor Hogarth says that literature is a discoverer, regenerator and meaning explorer. So, it is important for children, as human, to experience the most extent of discovery and truth-seeking in childhood (JafarNejad, 1983: 179). Hence, we should let children express their own discoveries. We should not express their own world by imitating their language.

We know that the aim of creating a literary work is firstly expressing author's inside through words; the author in fact describes his imaginations and findings. Is not the child able to do so? It is imagined that instead of

imposing adults' thoughts to children in childish format and based on education not pleasure, children should be given a chance to think and create freely. It is said that literature is divided into two parts: the first part consists of story, myth, poetry, play and biography and the second part is the unwritten literature namely legend, poem, proverb and other verbal games expressed orally (Razani, 1975: 22). So, it is certainly said that a child who is unable to enjoy literature due to economic, environmental and familial reason, he can turn to another thing; all his literal and artistic experiences will be his mother's lullabies, grandmother's tales and some games. But does not that mean evading responsibilities by literature? in this case, written literature, which is always more formal and valid than the oral literature, can obtain the benefits but the less formal literature cannot.

II. Conclusion

According to the present research, the definitions of children literature are not inclusive. On the other hand, they do not consider children with different economic, cultural and linguistic situations. Moreover, children literature has become a business for authors and publishers who do not have any specialty and taste in this field. So, the real growth of children literature demands a special attention from universities and cultural centers. Finally, the pure, adorable and sincere children literature should be left for children who are the real owners of this field. In this case each child creates his own work based on his economic situation. If it seems unacceptable for some people, they should at least pave the way for the growth of literature made by children.

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