# Narratives of Power: A Comparative Study of Ideological Conformity and Subversion in Children's Literature

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Doctoral Dissertation

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“Death could come upon me very easily now. But as long as I'm able to live, I shouldn't greet death. Of course, if someday I should be forced to face death – as I shall – it doesn't matter. What does matter is how my life or death will impact the lives of others…”.

Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish*

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**Introduction: Children's Literature as Subject of Power Exercises**

Children's literature, long perceived as a benign and imaginative genre designed to entertain and educate the young, is far from neutral. This body of work exists within complex structures of power, ideology, and cultural reproduction. By functioning as a subject of power exercises, children's literature simultaneously reflects and reinforces societal norms, values, and hierarchies. This dissertation examines the multifaceted ways in which power is exercised through children's literature and explores how these dynamics shape the narratives, readers, and societal roles of both children and adults. Drawing on critical frameworks such as Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, Michel Foucault's concept of power, and intertextual and intercultural analyses, this study interrogates the imbalances inherent in the production, dissemination, and critique of children's literature.

Peter Hunt, in his essay *Narrative Theory and Children's Literature* provocatively argues that applying existing literary theories to children's literature without modification is inadequate. He advocates for the development of a "children's-book-specific theory," one that recognizes the unique dynamics of the genre. Hunt critiques the tendency of children's literature criticism to confirm existing theoretical paradigms rather than challenge them.[1] This critique extends to the ways adults analyze, select, and evaluate children's books, often prioritizing adult perspectives over those of children themselves. As Hunt observes, adults decide what constitutes an "appropriate" narrative, ending, or theme, projecting their own values and assumptions onto the literature.[2] In doing so, they often ignore the lived experiences and interpretative capacities of young readers. This raises profound questions about the balance between conformity and rebellion – not only in the narratives themselves but also in the theories used to understand them.

While I emphasize the lived experience of children and young adults as readers, I also recognize that this is not a transparent or easily retrievable category. Access to children's experiences typically comes mediated – through pedagogical studies, surveys of reading habits, or the institutional frameworks of schools and families. Moreover, in today's mediatized context, reading rarely happens in isolation from digital platforms. Picturebooks may circulate in print, but they also migrate into apps, audiobooks, and

[1] Peter Hunt, "Narrative Theory and Children's Literature," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* Vol. 9, No. 4 (winter 1984-1985): 191-194.
[2] Hunt, 193.

animated adaptations, all of which preserve core ideological narratives while reshaping their form. For this reason, I treat children's lived experience not as a naïve or purely voluntary act of reading, but as a complex, mediated engagement with texts that continue to function within larger ideological apparatuses.

The issue of power in children's literature is central to this dissertation and is explored across four primary dimensions. First, the imbalance of power between children and adults permeates every aspect of children's literature. Adults – as authors, publishers, critics, parents, teachers, and illustrators – dominate its production and dissemination, leaving children as passive recipients of adult ideologies and values. This adult-centric approach governs what stories are told, how they are told, and which narratives are deemed appropriate, ultimately shaping children's understanding of the world in ways that often reinforce societal hierarchies. Second, the divide between privileged and marginalized groups reveals stark disparities in access to literature. Socioeconomic inequities determine not only which children have access to books but also which stories are represented within them. These disparities underscore how literature can become a tool of exclusion rather than inclusion. Third, the imbalance between majority and minority cultures in the global exchange of children's literature highlights the dominance of certain languages and cultural narratives over others. As Emer O'Sullivan argues, translations and cross-cultural exchanges are often unidirectional, favoring dominant cultures and marginalizing peripheral ones.[3] This reinforces cultural hierarchies and limits the diversity of perspectives available to young readers. Finally, in picture books, the interplay between text and illustration reveals another dimension of power. Illustrations frequently dominate the narrative, subtly shaping interpretation and prioritizing visual elements over textual content. This dynamic raises important questions about the balance of power between different narrative modes within the genre. The analysis of children's literature, especially picturebooks, necessitates a robust theoretical understanding of the relationship between text and image. As theorists like Björn Sundmark and Anna Kérchy have argued, the word-image dynamic can be understood as a form of "transmediation," a process where a story is translated and adapted across different semiotic systems.[4] In this study, I will analyze how both the written and visual

[3] Emer O'Sullivan. Anthea Bell, trans., *Comparative Children's Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
[4] Anna Kérchy, Sundmark, Björn ed., *Translating and Transmediating Children's Literature* (London: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

elements work together, and sometimes in opposition, to perform ideological work. This is particularly crucial in the case of subversive works, where illustrations can serve as a powerful tool to circumvent censorship and convey a story's message through a visual subtext. Conversely, in conformist texts, illustrations can be used to reinforce a dominant ideology by simplifying and sanitizing complex themes. Therefore, the relationship between word and image is not merely an aesthetic concern; it is a fundamental aspect of how a children's book produces and reproduces a particular worldview.

The evolution of modern childhood is closely tied to the development of children's literature. As Peter N. Stearns argues, modern childhood emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with fundamental shifts: the transition from child labor to schooling, reduced family sizes, declining infant mortality rates, and increased state involvement in childhood.[5] These changes, while ostensibly liberating, also introduced new forms of control. The rise of compulsory education and state-designed curricula, for instance, shifted authority over children from families to state institutions. We can aptly question whether this represents freedom or merely a different kind of subjugation. Within this context, children's literature became both a reflection of, and a participant in, these broader societal transformations.

The modern idea of the child, and by extension, the field of children's literature, is also deeply indebted to the pedagogical theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His work, particularly *Emile, or On Education* (*Émile, ou De l'éducation*), introduced the revolutionary concept that childhood is not merely a preparation for adulthood but a distinct and valuable stage of life.[6] Rousseau's pedagogy, which emphasized the child's innate goodness and the importance of a "natural" education free from the corrupting influence of society, laid the foundation for the liberal humanist worldview that would come to dominate Western children's literature. This worldview frames the child as a developing individual with a right to autonomy, a perspective that is central to both the conformist and subversive narratives examined in this dissertation. Thus, the literature I analyze often reflects a tension between this ideal of the natural child and the ideological pressures exerted by various social apparatuses.

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[5] Peter N. Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

[6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (Republic of Geneva and France: Jean Néaulme, Libraire, 1762).

In considering these dynamics, this dissertation also draws on two pivotal theoretical frameworks: The Althusserian notion of ideology and the Foucauldian notion of power. Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses is particularly relevant to understanding how children's literature functions as a tool of ideological reproduction.[7] According to Althusser, ideology operates by interpellating individuals – hailing them into specific roles and identities that align with the dominant social order. Children's literature plays a central role in this process by presenting narratives that socialize young readers into normative values and behaviors. For example, many children's books emphasize obedience, industriousness, and conformity, subtly reinforcing the values of a capitalist society.

While this dissertation primarily problematizes capitalism as a dominant ideology, it acknowledges that systems of domination do not exist in isolation. However, this study maintains its primary focus on capitalism because, as an Althusserian analysis shows, the reproduction of capitalist ideology is foundational to the perpetuation of other social and political inequalities. Capitalist literature, as an Ideological State Apparatus, functions to shape children into future citizens who will perpetuate the existing social order, an order in which other forms of domination, such as patriarchal and racial hierarchies, are intertwined and reproduced. By focusing on capitalism, this analysis exposes a key mechanism of power that undergirds and informs other, equally critical, systems of oppression.

Michel Foucault's insights into power further illuminate the dynamics at play in children's literature. Foucault conceptualizes power not as something that is possessed but as something that is exercised within relationships. Power is diffuse and operates through a network of institutions, practices, and discourses. In the context of children's literature, power manifests in the ways narratives are constructed to discipline and normalize certain behaviors. For instance, the recurring home/away/home narrative structure often found in children's stories reinforces the idea that deviations from societal norms are temporary and must ultimately be resolved within the established order. Foucault's notion of "dividing practices" – the classification of individuals into categories such as "good" and "bad" – is also evident in didactic texts that reward conformity and

[7] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In *Mapping Ideology*, edited by Slavoj Zizek, 100-140 (London. New York: Verso, 1994), 130-131.

punish deviance.[8] These narratives, while ostensibly designed to educate and entertain, serve as instruments of control, shaping children's perceptions of themselves and their place in the world.

While this study is primarily grounded in the structural and ideological critiques of Althusser and Foucault, it acknowledges that a text's effectiveness as a subject of power exercises is not monolithic across all readers. The age of a child, as explored by cognitive literary studies, significantly impacts how they process and make sense of narrative content. For instance, a picture book aimed at a very young child may use more direct, didactic strategies to convey ideological messages, relying on simple cause-and-effect narratives. In contrast, books for older children may employ subtler forms of ideological shaping, inviting a more nuanced, albeit still guided, interpretation. This dissertation, while not delving into the specific cognitive processes of individual readers, recognizes that the ideological apparatuses it analyzes are calibrated for specific age groups. The mechanisms of interpellation and discipline are thus not static but are adapted to the developmental stage of the child, a crucial element in the successful reproduction of dominant cultural orders.

While Althusser and Foucault provide the primary theoretical scaffolding for this dissertation, I am aware that they do not exhaust the field of ideology critique. Later thinkers – including the Frankfurt School (especially Herbert Marcuse's concept of repressive desublimation), Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and cultural materialists associated with New Historicism – have extended, challenged, or nuanced these frameworks. My choice to foreground Althusser and Foucault is thus strategic: they offer concepts (interpellation, panopticism, discourse/power) that travel well across the diverse corpus analyzed here, while also providing a platform from which to engage later theoretical developments.

This dissertation explores the intersections of power, ideology, and representation in children's literature through a series of interconnected chapters. Chapter 1, Conformist Literature, investigates how children's literature reinforces dominant ideologies, particularly in narratives about war and immigration. Subchapter 1.1, Government of Children? Capitalism and the Case of *Denver*, examines how capitalism is portrayed in

[8] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 8, No. 4 (summer 1982): 777-795, 777.

children's texts as a governing force that shapes social relations and individual aspirations. Subchapter 1.2, Countering the War and Immigration: Simplification versus Manipulation, critiques the sanitized portrayals of these subjects, particularly the portrayal of refugee children as passive recipients of Western charity and the omission of systemic causes of displacement. These narratives, while comforting to privileged readers, obscure the realities of war and migration, reducing them to simplistic moral lessons.

Chapter 2, Subversive Literature, examines texts that challenge power structures and offer alternative perspectives. This chapter defines subversive literature as works that resist normative narratives, question authority, and center marginalized voices. Subchapter 2.1, Freedom and Rebellion: Children's Literature and the Challenge of Power Orders, explores how certain texts encourage young readers to question societal norms and resist conformity. Subchapter 2.2, Intercultural Differences in the Communist Tradition of Writing for Children in Iran and Europe, compares how different political and cultural contexts have shaped children's literature in these regions, highlighting the interplay between ideology and storytelling. Subchapter 2.3, Social Criticism in Fairy Tales and Animal Stories, analyzes how these genres address themes of inequality and justice, often through allegory and metaphor. Subchapter 2.4, Revolution and Censorship in Samad Behrangi and His Works for Children and Young Adults, focuses on the Iranian author's subversive stories, which critique social injustices and empower children as agents of change. Subchapter 2.5, Politics and Pedagogy in Maurice Sendak's Picturebooks, examines *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993), highlighting their conformist/radical critique of societal norms and their potential to confirm/disrupt conventional notions of childhood.

Chapter 3, Violence and Terror in Children's Literature, addresses the representation of darker themes and their potential to disrupt or reinforce power dynamics. It considers how these narratives navigate the tension between protecting children from harsh realities and exposing them to the complexities of the world. The chapter also examines how violence is used as a narrative device to either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies.

Chapter 4, Stolen (Unheard) Voices, analyzes the erasure of marginalized voices, including refugees, peasants, and children themselves, in both classic and contemporary texts. This chapter critiques the commodification of these voices and advocates for the

inclusion of authentic perspectives. By highlighting the systemic silencing of these groups, the chapter underscores the need for more inclusive and representative storytelling.

The epilogue, The Emergence of a Brave New Literary World, envisions a transformative future for children's literature, one that prioritizes inclusivity, diversity, and critical engagement. By reclaiming the unheard voices in children's literature, we can create a literary world that not only entertains but also empowers young readers to envision and work toward a more just and equitable future.

By interrogating the ideological underpinnings of children's literature, this dissertation seeks to uncover the hidden power structures that shape it. Through critical analysis of both conformist and subversive texts, it aims to highlight the potential of children's literature to challenge dominant ideologies and empower young readers. Ultimately, this study calls for a reimagining of the field, one that foregrounds the voices of children and marginalized communities and embraces the radical possibilities of storytelling. This dissertation employs a distinction between conformist and subversive literature as a core analytical lens, while recognizing that these categories are not absolute or mutually exclusive. In reality, many texts occupy a hybrid ideological space, simultaneously reinforcing certain social norms while subtly challenging others. The purpose of this framework, then, is not to create a rigid binary, but rather to highlight the dominant ideological function of a text. Furthermore, the term revolutionary is used here not to suggest a call for a specific political uprising, but to describe a literary strategy that is structurally oppositional– that is, a narrative that fundamentally resists and challenges the dominant ideological structures it operates within. This distinction is critical, as it allows for an analysis that accounts for more than just overt protest, but also for the subtle ways in which children's literature can teach cooperation, negotiation, and sacrifice as crucial coping mechanisms and forms of resistance.

In this dissertation, I distinguish between the terms *children's books* and *children's literature*. By *children's books*, I refer to the individual texts – the material works produced and circulated for young readers. By *children's literature*, I mean the broader category that encompasses these books as a body of cultural production, as well as the critical discourse and scholarship that analyze them. Throughout this study, I use

*children's books* when discussing specific works (e.g., *The Little Black Fish*), and 'children's literature' when referring to the field as a whole.

While the terms children's literature and young adult literature are often grouped together in this dissertation, I recognize that they are not interchangeable. Children's literature is generally written for readers in early to middle childhood and often relies on adult mediation, whether through read-aloud practices or curricular inclusion. Young adult literature, by contrast, addresses adolescents, presupposing greater cognitive capacity, independence, and a different set of social concerns – identity formation, sexuality, or political agency. Despite these distinctions, both bodies of literature perform overlapping ideological functions: they position their readers within normative social orders, reproduce or resist dominant ideologies, and are mediated by adult gatekeepers (parents, teachers, publishers). My decision to analyze them under a shared framework reflects this convergence of ideological operations. At the same time, when questions of agency, resistance, or cognitive capacity are at stake, I will differentiate between the implied child reader and the adolescent reader, to acknowledge the developmental and interpretive differences across these age groups.

The present study is not intended as a symmetrical or statistically representative comparative analysis of Western and Eastern children's literature. Rather, it is a case-based inquiry that uses selected examples to illuminate how ideological mechanisms, both conformist and subversive, operate within different contexts. The primary focus on a single, symbolically rich Iranian text, Samad Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish*, is a deliberate choice. This selection is not meant to overgeneralize the Eastern tradition but to serve as a concentrated site of subversion whose very existence, given Iran's history of tight censorship and the limited translation of such works, is a testament to the power structures I aim to expose. While the analysis of war and immigration narratives is drawn from a Western corpus, this choice reflects the dominance of these themes within Western publishing trends, a pattern that is itself a crucial part of the ideological landscape. This dissertation acknowledges that Western literature is not monolithic and that subversive works do exist within this tradition. However, by focusing on a few select case studies, I aim to provide a nuanced interrogation of dominant publishing trends and state-supported narratives, thereby preventing a too-narrow discussion and providing a context that, while not exhaustive, is critically informed.

The selection of literary works for this dissertation is guided by the core objective of analyzing how power and ideology operate within children's literature. The books chosen serve as representative examples of either a conformist or a subversive approach to storytelling. In Chapter 1, the analysis of conformist literature includes works like *Denver* by David McKee and contemporary refugee narratives such as *My Name Is Not Refugee* by Kate Milner and *The Journey* by Francesca Sanna. These books were selected to demonstrate how children's books can subtly reinforce dominant ideologies, simplifying complex political issues like war and immigration and often presenting them through a utopian or benevolent Western lens. The selection of these texts allows for an exploration of how capitalist and neo-imperialist ideologies are subtly conveyed to children, often without a direct discussion of political causes. In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to subversive literature with the analysis of Samad Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish* and Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*. These works were chosen because they actively question authority, resist normative narratives, and challenge power structures. By analyzing these texts, the dissertation demonstrates how authors, from different cultural and political backgrounds, can break from the traditional home/away/home narrative structure and push the boundaries of what is considered appropriate for children's literature. Ultimately, the selection of these diverse texts – both conformist and subversive – allows for a comprehensive, comparative study that illustrates the multifaceted nature of power and ideology in children's literature, a key goal of this dissertation.

The selection of literary works for this dissertation is also guided by the core objective of analyzing how power and ideology operate within children's literature. This study is informed by recent scholarship on children's agency and activism (*Child as Citizen: Agency and Activism in Children's Literature and Culture* by Giuliana Fenech),[9] the role of literature in shaping national identity (Björn Sundmark and Kit Kelen's *The Nation in Children's Literature*)[10], and the representation of migration and displacement in picturebooks (*Children's Literature Association Quarterly's* special issue on

[9] Giuliana Fenech ed., *Child as Citizen: Agency and Activism in Children's Literature and Culture* (US: University of Mississippi Press, 2025).
[10] Björn Sundmark and Kit Kelen ed., *The Nation in Children's Literature: Nations of Childhood* (New York, London: Routledge, 2013).

migration).[11] These works provide a foundation for understanding the diverse ways in which children's texts engage with and either challenge or reinforce social norms.

The concept of child citizenship is a critical departure from traditional notions of children as passive subjects awaiting adulthood. It implies that children are not merely future citizens but are active and rights-bearing citizens in the present, capable of agency, voice, and political participation. This form of citizenship differs from adult citizenship in several key ways. Adult citizenship is often defined by legal status, rights, and responsibilities, such as the right to vote or hold office. A child's citizenship, in contrast, is less about these formal, legalistic rights and more about the social, cultural, and ideological spaces where they can exercise their influence. In children's books, for example, a character's journey from a state of powerlessness to one of agency can be interpreted as a narrative of a child learning to claim their citizenship, not through institutional channels, but through acts of subversion, resistance, and self-determination.

## 1. Children's Literature and the Althusserian notion of Ideology

Louis Althusser investigates the concept of ideology "in general" (as opposition to particular ideologies), arguing that "ideology" ultimately refers to a representation of the relationship between individuals and their real conditions of existence. He discusses that ideology, as a material existence, does not have a history of its own, and then explores it within the process of "interpellation".

> I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'[12]

Louis Althusser's influential *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)* (1994) made a convincing case that ideology has always interpellated any individual as a subject, and that it therefore constituted individuals as "always-already subjects".[13] This kind of ideological interpellation, which reduces individual to subject in order to constitute identity, is indeed prevalent in children's literature. The various stages

[11] *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* Vol.43, No. 4 (Winter 2018).
[12] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", 130-131.
[13] Althusser, 132.

through which the child's representation passes in literature can thus be evaluated according to the criteria of Althusserian theory of ideology.

To discuss the relevance of children's literature to the Althusserian notion of ideology one has to begin by considering some of his assumptions about the reproduction of the conditions of production. Althusser recognizes that the replacement and reproduction of means in the process of production is as essential as the production itself for the maintenance of economic (capitalist) structure. He also represents another principal kind of reproduction: the reproduction of labour-power or productive forces. A significant difference between the two reproductions (means of production and productive forces) is that the first takes place in the firm while the other takes place outside of it.[14] Althusser focuses on the latter side of reproduction, in effect posing an important question: "How is the reproduction of labour-power ensured?".[15]

The issue of labour-power reproduction is of central interest here in this research because it bears directly on the pedagogical function in children's literature and the notion of knowledge production. As Althusser argues, attempts to reproduce the skills of labour-power are mostly achieved by capitalist educational systems and institutions. Thus an educational system such as school represents significant skills needed for the process of production, such as "know-how" skills and "the rules of good behaviour".[16] Cultural and educational institutions, States and other institutions of power interact with a material effect, not just to reproduce labour-power but to create future conformist citizens. A closer analysis of the Althusserian notion offers a position from which we can begin to unravel the process of reproduction in children's literature.

An important part of Althusser's conception here is the notion of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and their specialized institutions, particularly in so far as they construct an important part of securing the reproduction of relations of production towards the "*subjection to the ruling ideology*".[17] Because the repressive State Apparatuses allow both for violence and physical action, they have tended to receive most attention in discussions of power and repression. With Ideological State Apparatuses, however, more attention needs to be paid to reproduction, both because they exist in

[14] Althusser,102.
[15] Althusser,102.
[16] Althusser,102.
[17] Althusser,104.

plurality and diversity and because of their extensive role in reproducing the ideology of the ruling class. The importance of the Althusserian notion of ISA in the area of children's literature lies in what it tells us about two fundamental examples of Ideological State Apparatuses: family and school.

> Hence I believe I have good reasons for thinking that behind the scenes of its political Ideological State Apparatus, which occupies the front of the stage, what the bourgeoisie has installed as its number one, i.e. as its dominant Ideological State Apparatus, is the educational apparatus, which has in fact replaced in its functions the previously dominant Ideological State Apparatus, the Church. One might even add: the School-Family couple has replaced the Church-Family couple.[18]

Whatever the particular orientation of the School-Family couple, one central issue recurs: the mystery of what States and parents actually do and expect. The subjects of the educational State Apparatuses are children: States and parents both want to maintain their power; and, if we assume that they work towards the same direction, we have to admit that they both rely on educational apparatuses in creating obedient children and future conformist citizens.

In particular, Althusser has argued that school occupies the dominant role by the activities it performs on children; it takes children in their early ages and keeps them for years under control and thus the privileged position of school in supporting and reproducing the ruling ideology cannot be undermined. Hence, he writes: "no other Ideological State Apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven".[19] Or, even more provocatively: "Nevertheless, in this concert, one Ideological State Apparatus certainly has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School".[20]

In view of the Althusserian notion of cultural institutions (such as cinema, theatre, literature, etc.) as forms of ISA, children's literature cannot only be subsumed under school but also under culture. Moreover, it is not simply the modern function of children's literature as an ISA that we are faced with here but the archaic function of storytelling (in oral cultures) as a means of education or a method to transmit cultural heritage (in the form of myths, anecdotes, fairy tales etc.) reminds us of the important role of unofficial

[18] Althusser,117.
[19] Althusser,119.
[20] Althusser,118.

cultural institutions in transmitting ideologies to children in the course of history. Jack Zipes indicates that "fairy tales and children's literature were written with the purpose of socializing children to meet definite normative expectations at home and in the public sphere".[21] As Kimberley Reynolds mentions, this view of Zipes is "elaborated by Robyn McCallum (1999), who sees much of children's literature as part of an ideological trap that seduces readers into accepting a liberal humanist world view". [22]

While Althusser identifies the school as a primary Ideological State Apparatus due to its obligatory and state-supported nature, children's literature's function as an ISA is often perceived as softer or less overt. The distinction, however, is not always clear-cut. While a child may choose to pick up a book, they may also be assigned a text from a mandatory reading list, blurring the boundary between optional engagement and institutionalized coercion. By acknowledging this, my analysis moves beyond a simple binary, demonstrating that children's literature, whether freely chosen or institutionally mandated, actively participates in the reproduction of ideological norms. Its power lies not in its freedom from coercion, but in its ability to operate on multiple levels – from the seemingly innocuous bedtime story to the required classroom text – each working to interpellate the child into a specific social order. In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* Antonio Gramsci saw the crucial relationship between the growth of more productive forces and educational institutions other than school:

> The school as a positive educative function, and the courts as a repressive and negative educative function, are the most important State activities in this sense: but, in reality, a multitude of other so-called private initiatives and activities tend to the same end-initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes.[23]

Similarly, children's literature substitutes school in its absence for transmitting rules, attitudes and skills. It is evident how readily children's literature, especially when it has components of didacticism, connects with Althusserian theories. Children's literature is not only a considerable part of school curriculum in modern times, but also a silent and appealing replacement for school. While children's literature is often seen as a softer or more silent means of ideological control than institutional forms like school or church, its

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[21] Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 9.
[22] Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.
[23] Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ed. And trans., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 258.

role in our times is increasingly contested and anything but quiet. The recent surge in book bannings in Western contexts, particularly in the United States, demonstrates that children's literature is far from an anodyne, private medium. Instead, it has become a highly politicized battleground where different factions vie to control the narrative. The very act of banning a book, in fact, makes its ideological content loud and visible, confirming that literature is a powerful Ideological State Apparatus. This is a crucial point of context, as it shows that while some literature may operate subtly, its potential for ideological work is so great that it can incite public and political controversy. The literary text, then, is a new mode of manipulation for capitalist societies. This claim should be understood in continuity with, rather than in opposition to, digital culture. Far from being displaced by screens, literature often survives in adapted forms within them, carrying forward its ideological functions under new technological conditions. Whether through classroom assignments, parental mediation, or transmedia adaptations, literature remains an active ideological tool – its modes of manipulation have evolved, but not disappeared. The Althusserian consequence for children and education is the realization that

> Everything we do to, with, and for our children is influenced by capitalist market conditions and the hegemonic interests of ruling corporate elites. In simple terms, we calculate what is best for our children by regarding them as investments and turning them into commodities.[24]

The focus on the child-product relations allows us to explore unique power strategies that have been neglected in the study of children's literature. Althusserian discourse illuminates ways in which power over the child is achieved in the name of education. The capitalist assumption is that children as labor-power are too incompetent (or naive) "to be set to work in the complex system of the process of production",[25] so they need education. The critical lessons in Althusserian theory mostly have to do with ideology and with construction of the subject. The implications for the picking of the child-product image are provoking a new crisis in defining children's literature. We provide children with books on the assumption that literature communicates more naturally and more pleasantly than school, and thus helps children to make sense of what they have already learnt in school. But are all literary works so readily written for the sake of imagination?

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[24] Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), xi.
[25] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", 103.

And are children books really so natural? Could children have the pleasure innocently, without the knowledge of reading?

The claim that literature communicates more naturally than other educational mediums warrants careful consideration. While literature often operates on a narrative and emotional register that is more pleasurable than overt classroom instruction, this appearance of naturalness is a strategic mechanism that masks the significant cognitive labor it demands of the reader. As with the parables found in religious traditions or the allegories of oral storytelling, children's literature presents meaning in a mediated and symbolic form. This requires the child to actively engage in the interpretive process – to perform acts of deduction, pattern-recognition, and metaphorical understanding. Therefore, the power of literature as an ideological tool lies not in its effortlessness, but in its ability to embed complex messages within a pleasurable form, thereby inviting the child to willingly participate in their own ideological interpellation.

Children's literature in general, and all its various forms, are what we can call "means of reproduction" – in Althusser's words, "a reproduction of […] submission to the rules of the established order".[26] It's for that reason that power exercises in children's literature are so important, and that thinking of children's books in (re)productive terms is our most valuable tool in coming to understand them. As Perry Nodelman suggests, "the intended audience of picture books is by definition inexperienced […] Consequently, picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture".[27]

I suggested earlier that children's literature is silent as a means of reproduction and control. That silence might itself speak loudly, for it mediates the two important ISAs – family and school. All Ideological State Apparatuses imply subject positions for their targets to occupy. Because children's books do so with students as well as with children at home, their subject positions have much in common. Children's books in both situations offers adults (teachers and parents who are themselves the subjects of States) a position of power.

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[26] Althusser, 104.

[27] Perry Nodelman, "Picture books and illustration", In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 154-166, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 157.

The attitude that different cultures have about whether children's books should be a part of school curriculum or not be something children encounter among other subjects in school is a key marker in identifying it either as a means of ideological reproduction intended to manipulate children's behaviors or as a means of pleasure intended to entertain them. Those books identified as parts of school curriculum encourage children towards the established orders of a ruling ideology, whereas those existing outside of the school seem to be more diverse. But still, both are means of ideological reproduction. The first is more obviously so because as soon as books enter into the educational system, they are subject to censorship and selection.

Children's literature critics have emphasized the importance of "low moral standards"[28] in children's literature censorships in schools,[29] "major themes related to censorship include language, violence, parental depictions, religion, sexuality, homosexuality, and low self-esteem".[30] The immediate relation between banning books and schools is frequently mentioned in children's literature discussions of censorship. Studies of censorship point to the importance of adults' objection (individual parents or ideological groups) to some books that children read in schools and its influence on the process of banning certain works of children's literature.[31] Robert D. Sutherland also suggests that the silence of teachers and librarians about certain works could also be a form of censorship.[32]

Even though Ideological State Apparatuses do not function mainly through repression, and their power is often invisible, censorship is not outside of this process; it is a key component of it. By selecting what can and cannot be encountered, censorship shapes the very terrain on which ideology operates. While Althusser's framework emphasizes the subtle, reproductive work of institutions like the school and family, censorship serves a complementary function by actively repressing competing ideologies. Therefore,

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[28] Christine H. Leland, Lewison Mitzi with Jerome C. Harste, *Teaching Children's Literature: It's Critical* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 281.

[29] Also see Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship and the Innocence of Youth* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007)

[30] Walter E. Sawyer ed., *Growing Up with Literature* (US: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2012), 87.

[31] E. Sawyer ed., 87-88.

[32] Robert D. Sutherland. "Hidden Persuaders: Political Ideologies in Literature for Children," *Children's Literature in Education* 16 (1985): 3, 143-157, 151.

censorship is not a separate, extra-ideological act of force, but rather an integral part of the process through which a dominant ideology secures its own reproduction.

While today different works of children's literature are represented in schools or even are included in school's literature books in many countries, they are merely advertised and represented by private institutions or parents in some other countries such as Iran. Such a strategy obviously characterizes the fear of literature rather than ideological usage of it and is highly suppressive. Geoffrey Williams explains how children's literature found a new status in modern education while he mentions that

> Previously, though enthusiastic teachers read to children during story time, actual instruction in reading 'skill' was largely carried out through specially written materials, in the form of reading schemes and comprehension exercises. The result was that for very many children Janet and John, Dick and Jane were more familiar figures of fiction than Rosie, Alfie or Tom Long. There have, of course, always been teachers who understood that the texts through which children learned to read were important for the kinds of readers they became, but these exceptions were the more remarkable because the dominant practices were so strong.[33]

However, this description of the past alludes to the current position of literature in elementary schools in Iran, for which made-up stories with made-up figures, usually having religious names, are still represented to the children as reading materials in their so-called literature books. Children's exposure to literature only takes place out of school by parents or, as Williams mentioned, by some enthusiastic teachers who may encourage children to read literary works in the classroom or recommend some books for their leisure time at home. Otherwise, an examination of officially published Persian literature books for elementary schools reveals a curriculum that prioritizes the reproduction of state-sanctioned narratives and values. These texts, designed to instill a specific national and cultural identity, often employ a didactic approach that leaves little room for individual interpretation or critical inquiry.

But it is not only children's literature itself as a reading material that matters in the process of ideological reproduction. The connection it makes between family and school also matters. Similarly, Geoffrey Williams' essay alludes to "the metaphor of an essential partnership between home and school literacy practices" as a matter of focus.[34] Young readers who come to encounter works of literature by the choice of educational system

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[33] Geoffrey Williams, "Children Becoming Readers: Reading and Literacy", In *Understanding Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 151-163, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 151.
[34] Williams, "Children Becoming Readers: Reading and Literacy", 151.

with an explicit interpretation of their teachers will have a markedly different experience of reading. This describes a reading process where the child consciously recalls and refers back to specific interpretations that were represented in school which will also restrict the child's opportunity for free interpretation at the point of reading at home. The texts of children's literature are stimulating sites on which to mobilize a school-family connection that is interactively working for the same ideology.

Because the differences between privileged and unprivileged children (in the sense of their accessibility to children's books as a commodity) dictate key differences between the ways they are reproduced as labour power, an important issue to investigate is the social stance of children as future productive forces. This perspective is particularly relevant when studying forms of transferring ideologies to children: To what kind of norms should children of different social classes be adapted? How are they adapted to conform to attributes designed for them? And so on.

An important aspect of reproduction is the kind of know-hows and skills determining the means of transfer of ideology for each social class: How is it that general skills such as those needed for manual works and rules of good behaviour in the sense of discipline are mainly thought at school while other so-called cultural knowledge are found more in means such as literature and other forms of culture and art which are available only to the children's of a certain class? The asymmetry of distribution in children's books together with its pedagogical stance are defining elements of the difference between educating and reproducing the proletarian children and the bourgeois children, as children's books generally passes through higher social classes not normally accessed by the unprivileged.

Althusser addresses, for instance, the self-reproduction of proletarians in their duties and functions. One example is the skill development for the "destined" duty, which includes "rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination".[35] It also entails, for example, the learning of using the proper language, "to 'speak proper French', to 'handle' the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to 'order them about' properly, i.e.(ideally) to 'speak to them' in the right way, etc.".[36] We can also examine such aspects as how the

[35] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", 103.
[36] Althusser, 103.

bourgeois reproduce themselves or how fictional stereotypes can be used in books for children to encourage the appropriate bourgeois-specific modes of thought and behavior for the future capitalists towards their servants.

It is from a viewpoint like this that we can begin to see why children's literature – such a complicated part of Ideological State Apparatuses – has become an important means of reproduction. What Althusser was suggesting was that a deep intention exists in the ultimate aim of a capitalist regime: that the subjects or what he called "labour-power" reproduce themselves.[37] For his part, Althusser was correct to point out that school, far more than any other Ideological State Apparatus, is influential in the reproduction process. It seems to be a convincing argument as well that alongside school, with its various mediating factors, Children's literature is fundamental to the process of reproduction too. It has a pivotal role in the submission to the established order as well as the opportunity it gives to the ruling power to manipulate the ideologies.

Finally, of particular concern is to look at children's literature's definition and its relations to power orders in a new light without relying on or taking for granted what have been previously considered as obvious aspects of children's literature. One of the main obstacles when it comes to the discussion of children's literature, and issues related to power relations and ideologies, is that it might bring some issues under question which are not pleasant for those who are only interested in the colorful and innocent world of children's literature.

Perry Nodelman draws a compelling connection between the commonly unchallenged understanding of children's literature and Louis Althusser's concept of ideological "obviousness".[38] He refers to the way many people feel they instinctively know what children's literature is – until they are asked to define it. This sense of certainty, according to Nodelman, reflects Althusser's idea that ideology functions by presenting certain beliefs as natural and unquestionable. These "obviousnesses" are so ingrained that they are accepted without scrutiny, evoking an automatic response of recognition and agreement. In the context of children's literature, this means that societal assumptions about what it includes or should be are rarely examined, precisely because they feel so

[37] Althusser, 102.
[38] Althusser, 127.

self-evident. As a result, critical reflection is often bypassed, which conceals the ideological underpinnings and potential biases embedded within these assumptions.[39]

Children's literature in general, and all its various forms, are what we can call "means of reproduction" – in Althusser's words, "a reproduction of […] submission to the rules of the established order".[40] It's for that reason that power exercises in children's literature are so important, and that thinking of children's books in (re)productive terms is our most valuable tool in coming to understand them.

## 2. Children's Literature and the Foucauldian notion of Power

The relational concept or compound term power relation is immensely evocative and therefore difficult to define neatly. Michel Foucault was one of the first critics to articulate a good way of studying power relations; in his essay on *The Subject and Power*,[41] he delineated the concept and stressed the importance of opposition. Foucault acknowledges that it's harder to find tools to study power relations than relations of production and relations of significations. He seeks to discuss not the phenomena of power, but the history of the different modes by which human beings are made subjects. Foucault also focuses on forms of resistance against power and some series of oppositions as a way to analyze power relations not from the point of view of its internal rationality but through the antagonisms of strategies. He suggests "opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live" as some examples.[42] He also wrote of the commonalities of these struggles, showing how easily they are observed in some countries but at the same time they are not limited to any specific culture or government, and can be found everywhere. In most countries for example, adults are enforcing on the disempowered, the weakest members of society – children – a form of power through education, through both protection and a kind of knowledge production.

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[39] Perry Nodelman, The Hidden Adult (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 139.
[40] Althusser, 104.
[41] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 8, No. 4 (summer 1982): 777-795.
[42] Foucault, 780

The fact that children resemble the mad and the sick is part of what Foucault calls "dividing practices",[43] that links children and other marginalized groups together, expressive of objectifying of each social subject, where they are divided inside themselves or from others. Foucault states: "Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys'".[44] Although I would not claim the child's status in society to be exactly as that of the mad, sick or criminal, we can still note the somewhat scientific basis for their resemblance: otherness, a lack of control over their bodies,[45] and the challenge they pose to the orders of the modern world.

In the face of such a complex and volatile subject, it is helpful to bear in mind that two features distinguish children from other kinds of disempowered members of society: their essential role in society's life-cycle and their constant presence in the social arena. What worries parents, teachers and other adults is to protect children in order to bring them up in a way that they become both healthy and useful citizens. Foucault claims that

> The problem of 'children' (that is, of their number at birth and the relation of births to mortalities) is now joined by the problem of 'childhood' (that is, of survival to adulthood, the physical and economic conditions for this survival, the necessary and sufficient amount of investment for the period of child development to become useful, in brief the organization of this 'phase' perceived as being both specific and finalized). It is no longer just a matter of producing an optimum number of children, but one of the correct management of this age of life.[46]

The claim to transcendence in child protection should be distinguished from that of the sick, mad and criminal, since there must be a strong need for the management of the child's future which is not the same with those who are not an active part of the society. Also Foucault's comment that power has meticulously worked "on the bodies of children and soldiers"[47] serves to remind us that children's bodies and soldiers' bodies are important and similar in two ways: they are generally defined in terms of their health; and they are subservient and, of course, these features are generally used to serve a dominant power.

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[43] Foucault, 777
[44] Foucault, 778
[45] Foucault, 780
[46] Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 Michel Foucault* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 172.
[47] Gordon, ed., 56.

In his introduction to *Shaping Childhood* (1996), Roger Cox explains to his readers an important feature of power relations between child and adult:

> There are problems with any theory of power that appears to deny the enduring structures power creates, but at least in relation to childhood, Foucault's conception serves to remind us that even the earliest and most intimate relations between child and adult are, in some sense, relations of power. [48]

It is in making that early and intimate power relation between adults and children become a particular category. Admitting that an imbalance of power among adults and children does take place was an important breakthrough for both writers and critics of children's literature. Strangely, though a close power relation between adults and children lies at the heart of so many children books, the exploration of the Foucauldian notion of power has been less explored.

In *The Subject and Power* (1982), Foucault captures the importance of the relation between conduct and power. Foucault's analysis of the exercise of power is both eye-opening and haunting for what it tells us about seeing the way of power's operation on the life of children from a different point of view. He defines the *government* as the conductive operation of power in a way that it leads individuals' or groups' actions; [49] to adopt his term, the readers of children's books are governed by adults. Foucault lays the ground for such an approach, stating in his essay that "'Government' did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick".[50] In Foucault's term, power opts for the government; it crosses over from violence into the conduction of actions.

Children can articulate their views about the world, and these views can and should be incorporated into what adults desire for them to understand. This remarkable government of children is made possible by distinctive and differentiated forms of education, both within school and beyond. To Rachel Falconer, "Adults are arguably more engaged with contemporary children's literature than they ever have been. This engagement could become merely predatory or manipulative, as some critics fear".[51] The claim that adults

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[48] Roger Cox, *Shaping Childhood: themes of uncertainty in the history of adult-child relationship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 6.
[49] Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, 789-790.
[50] Foucault, 790.
[51] Rachel Falconer, "Crossover literature", In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 556-576 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 572.

are more engaged with contemporary children's literature than ever before is a trend that is most pronounced and widely studied in Western contexts, particularly in the Anglophone world. This phenomenon is often attributed to a combination of factors, including the rise of digital media, the expansion of young adult fiction, and a cultural embrace of nostalgia that makes adult engagement with children's media not only acceptable but expected. While the critical discourse surrounding this trend – and the accompanying fears of a predatory or manipulative adult gaze – is largely a Western concern, the underlying dynamic is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. The role of adults as mediators of children's texts, and the potential for their own ideological agendas to shape a child's literary experience, is a universal constant. However, the specific forms this engagement takes, and the public or private nature of that mediation, are dependent on the cultural context in which it occurs.

The modernist features of children's literature have attracted interest from different forms of institutions of power (from parents to states) more recently. In *The Making of the Modern Child* (2003), Andrew O'Malley suggests that children can, by the means of children's literature, "be rendered into subjects whose energies could be controlled and effectively harnessed".[52] The child characters in children's books are free, cheerful, but are told by adults (both actual and implied authors) what they can do and how they should act. Coming through this discussion, there should, however, be a strong sense of freedom bond with the specific child character that brought the text into a means of control. Implied readers are positioned as well in a freer and more active position which seems to be in contradiction to the issue of control. However, as Foucault has argued, "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. … subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized".[53] The narrative conventions of children's literature work to mask the contradiction between the government of children and their artificial freedom and to construct an illusion of an unmediated relation between child readers and their fictional counterparts.

Andrew O'Malley's *The Making of the Modern Child* contains a note addressed to another mechanism to govern children which describes the relationship between Lockean

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[52] Andrew O'Malley, *The making of the modern child: children's literature and childhood in the late eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 11.
[53] Foucault, 790.

pedagogy and Foucault's description of panopticism in terms which constitute the feeling of shame and its internalization by children as being constructed by the constant surveillance of adults: "In the case of the child subject, the risk of shame, or more accurately the detection of behaviour considered by the parental authority as shameful, is internalized by the child, and becomes a self-regulating mechanism".[54]

As Michel Foucault suggests in his discussion of the Panopticon,

> If Bentham's project aroused interest, this was because it provided a formula applicable to many domains, the formula of 'power through transparency', subjection by 'illumination'. In the Panopticon, there is used a form close to that of the castle-a keep surrounded by walls-to paradoxically create a space of exact legibility.[55]

The actual techniques of power used within the Panopticon are and always have been, overwhelmingly, not only the gaze (*le regard*) but also interiorization. As Foucault suggested, by using too much violence or discontinuous intervention, there is a high risk of revolts, resistance and disobedience. For instance, monarchical power operated this way by arresting a considerable proportion of criminals to frighten people. A somewhat different sort of power operation demands a more complex system with less cost: "the system of surveillance". The system here operates as an inspecting gaze interiorized by the individual after a while.[56] Children's literary works are also used as internalized structuring devices which point to the applicability of the panopticon to the domain of literature.

By accepting the hierarchical power relations between adults and children, the panopticon can be used to articulate questions about authority, surveillance and interiorization, such as who has the control of choosing the children's books and presenting them to children – the parents, teachers, publishers, writers, children themselves, or the socio-political context within which the books are produced, distributed and interpreted. Extra-literary agents and discourses are combined so as to constitute a kind of panoptical surveillance on different levels of children's confrontation with books, internalize the feeling of adult's gaze, and conduct the process of reading.

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[54] O'Malley, 15.
[55] Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 Michel Foucault*, 154.
[56] Gordon, ed., 155.

Viewing Bentham's theory in the context of labour, Foucault talks about a triple function of labour (productive, symbolic, and disciplinary).[57] The existence of such a form suggests something about the logic of Foucault's usage of labour mostly in relation to discipline rather than production. He has suggested that insane persons, prisoners and children are meant to perform labour as a disciplinary mode. By drawing attention to the ways in which children are disciplined and to how they are expected to become idealized future citizens, children's books can potentially teach children specific moral codes and disciplines and behavioral structures with which to interpret and make sense of other similar situations happening in the real world. As the Foucauldian notion of labour acknowledges, labour in the sense of discipline, just as that of production in Althusserian notion, has been part of children's government in almost every society in the world, and yet it is still rare to find attention paid to these discussions in the field of children's literature.

Literature offers an especially powerful and productive set of ways with which childhood has been defined, perceived, imposed and managed in different periods and cultures. Cynthia Lewis and Jessica Dockter have argued that in a globalized world

> What remains unchanged, then, is that a primary function of literature in secondary schools is to produce a particular kind of citizen. Whereas the kind of citizen considered desirable (i.e., religious, moral, empirical, personally engaged, socially conscious, culturally critical) changes with time, the use of literature and schooling to produce particular kinds of citizens is long-standing. This function of literature is evident in Caughlan's (2004) study of cultural models of literature teaching. Following Foucault (1982), she identified a pastoral function for the teaching of literature meant to control students' values and dispositions as individuals who will self-regulate for the common good.[58]

Most modern societies developed significant strength in the introduction of a new form of political power (or state) which functions through both individualization and totalization. Foucault explains this new form of political power as it has integrated in itself the old "pastoral power"[59] originated in Christian institutions. According to him "pastoral power" is

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[57] Gordon, ed., 161.

[58] Cynthia Lewis and Jessica Dockter, "Reading Literature in Secondary School: Disciplinary Discourses in Global Times", In *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature* edited by Shelby Anne Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine A. Jenkins, 76-92 (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 78.

[59] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 782.

> a form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation in the next world... is not merely a form of power which commands; it must also be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock. Therefore, it is different from royal power, which demands a sacrifice from its subjects to save the throne...is a form of power which does not look after just the whole community but each individual in particular, during his entire life. Finally, this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.[60]

If children's literature can be regarded as in some ways a means for exercising a kind of pastoral power, the qualities Foucault attributes to this form of power demonstrate more ways in which children's literature can be investigated. The criteria used by Foucault to evaluate the "pastoral power" can help us begin to construct a full appraisal of its function: What is the ultimate aim of producing literature for children? Could it be to assure children's salvation or protection? Protection is a universal ingredient of power exercises upon children, a central representation of adult power which can also be found in children's literature. When a story is written down, not only the choice of subjects but also the choice of words assumes a concern over the child's salvation, not in the next world but in the real adult-centered world.

Another useful insight of Foucault's criticism has been that no power can be a strong thing if it only works through "censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression".[61] Seen in this light, power's strengths are its productions; and what power produces instead of preventing is knowledge. Some books written for children are good examples of this knowledge production of power. By my reckoning, the children's books which are about controversial issues but at the same time they seem not to bend towards the critical priorities of any side, are those which concern the capability of children to be manipulated by the produced knowledge. Literary knowledge production gained ground in schools when special educational material was needed, similar work was done in ideological books (religious or political) but the knowledge production in modern high-quality children's books began to be developed with the change of power's strategy from censorship to production.

Another point to consider here is that Foucault introduces law (*droit*) as a mask for power in Western societies, since law was both an instrument for the constitution of monarchical

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[60] Foucault, 783.

[61] Michel Foucault, Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 Michel Foucault*, 59.

forms of power and a weapon of struggle against them as well. Law is thus dependent on the way power wants to function and proceed and when it becomes necessary the law will change its mechanisms from prohibitions to non-juridical ones.[62] The modern renewal in the laws of literary production for children has also adapted a number of non-prohibiting strategies. Getting to know the kinds of power strategies used in children's stories is the greatest challenge and is easiest when the story has been investigated suspiciously and not superficially.

I doubt that we should base our judgments on the argument that all of children's books are part of the dominant power and for manipulating purposes when it is clear that we have some best texts of children's literature as oppositions to those produced by institutions of power. But nonconformist books for children are overshadowed by those other works which are supported by the ideological state apparatuses or institutions of power. Some of these texts are termed unsuitable or revolutionary texts because they model how to seek freedom or question obedience. Authors unafraid to deal with revolution, questioning or disobedience are most likely to be pushed away from the main arena.

Foucault's genealogical approach offers a useful lens for examining children's literature. Instead of focusing narrowly on debates about its origins, this perspective encourages a broader inquiry into the conditions that make children's literature possible. It considers how the field has been shaped or "storied" in particular ways over time, highlighting how some narratives have been legitimized while others have been marginalized or disqualified. This approach allows for a critical exploration of the power dynamics and discursive practices that influence what is recognized as children's literature.[63]

Another Foucauldian notion in this regard is to argue that, in the very period when Marxist and "Marxised" revolutionary movements made us newly aware of the omnipresence of State apparatus in all aspects of our lives, and the impossibility of confining its occurrence to visible surface features of a government, the revolutionary movement against the State "must possess equivalent politico-military forces and hence must constitute itself as a party, organized internally in the same way as a State apparatus with the same

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[62] Gordon, ed., 140-141.

[63] David Rudd, "Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children's literature", In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 29-44 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 33.

mechanisms of hierarchies and organization of powers. This consequence is heavy with significance".[64] Paradoxically, while accessing to equivalent forces gives revolutionary movements the means to overcome the state, it is empowering them that helps reaching their quest, putting their position as the same as another new State apparatus in charge of power. But, particularly in the case of children's literature, these hierarchical changes do not happen because it is only a small part of a bigger system of power relations. These revolutionary movements in children's literature may only take the form of a single book -read by few children or staying in the shelves of libraries, or be linked with some political groups like socialists, communists or anarchists.

I keep three questions in mind when approaching a children's book with the Foucauldian notion of power during this research. Does the author represent any form of resistance against power? Is the young reader offered a position of power or is he or she meant to be disciplined? Is the subject (especially if it is a controversial one) offered in an oversimplified and manipulated way? In appraising a literary work, we must take into account that the audience is likely to be both adults and children, and that we do not want to interest adults in the first place. The signs are, though, that new strategies of power - bringing forth new ways of knowledge production beyond what we can now consider- will continue to satisfy and empower adults rather than replace their interests with those of children.

There are a number of disciplinary modes in most of children books (the accepted behaviour of the main character, the institutionalized morals, self-regulation of main character, for example), but the most central is the narrative structure with which the actions are controlled: the home/away/home structure or happy endings. As Shira Wolosky writes: "Discipline enters into children's narratives both for the characters acting in them and for the audiences witnessing them".[65] Although Wolosky focuses in her essay on the positive and constructive side of discipline, we keep the Foucauldian notion of imposed discipline through our research. What I want to propose here is that this recurring narrative structure is not just a matter of some unplanned, traditional way

[64] Gordon, ed., 59.
[65] Shira Wolosky. "Foucault at School: Discipline, Education and Agency in Harry Potter," *Children's Literature in Education*, no. 45 (2013), 285–297.

of storytelling for children,[66] but a noticeably well-managed disciplining power strategy that works through a literary device.

It's the same story when looking at children's books with Althusserian and Foucauldian points of view: children's literature as an ideological product developed from the educational systems with labour-power reproducing and disciplinary intentions, and our modern children's books still bear the same intentions while they may seem free of conventional didactic approaches. Children's literature has always made children into subjects in order to impose on them the ideology of dominant power (culture). Today, this is most visible in the capitalist societies where institutions of power have found the way of not only preventing children from reading certain materials but also producing and supporting books which are actually serving their ideological interests.

Children's literature is inherently pedagogical, as it always works to shape a child's understanding of the world. However, this study distinguishes between a form of implicit pedagogy, which is subtly embedded within the narrative and cultural norms of a text, and an explicit, didactic approach, which openly seeks to teach a particular moral or lesson. While all children's literature contributes to knowledge production, the books analyzed here are particularly powerful because their pedagogical functions are overt and systematic, either working to explicitly reinforce a given ideology or, conversely, to subvert it.

The educational agenda within children's literature is not monolithic; it operates on a spectrum, with a critical distinction between beneficial and manipulative forms. On one hand, a text can have a positive pedagogical function, using its narrative to foster a child's agency and critical thinking. This approach aims to equip the reader with the tools to navigate a complex world, encouraging them to question authority, understand diverse perspectives, and develop a sense of self-determination. On the other hand, the educational agenda can devolve into negative forms of didacticism and propaganda. This approach often seeks to impose a specific, predetermined set of values or beliefs onto the

[66] As Nodelman notes in *The Hidden Adult* (2008) "This home/away/home pattern is the most common story line in children's literature. Various commentators offer explanations for the recurrence of this pattern. Anita Moss and Jon Stott suggest that stories from the folk tradition, important models for much later children's literature, have 'two basic narrative patterns . . .. In both linear and circular journeys, the central character . . . is displaced from the home environment.' Margery Hourihan suggests that children's literature continually retells something like Joseph Campbell's archetypal story of 'the hero with a thousand faces,' a story that 'has been with us since the emergence of Western culture'" (223).

reader, leaving no room for independent thought. Such texts function as a form of ideological conditioning, where the explicit lesson or moral of the story serves to reinforce a particular social or political status quo, rather than empowering the child to challenge it.

## 1. Conformist Literature

> "We are all conformists of some conformism or other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man."
>
> Antonio Gramsci 1971, 324

This chapter addresses issues of evaluating different forms of conformist children's literature as a tool for capitalism or institutions of power. Bound with the question of knowledge production, and the role of the writer as a disciplined subject, are the notions of control and government of children (according to Michel Foucault) and their operations through literature which go to the heart of my analysis in this chapter. A basic criterion for evaluating a conformist literary work is that imagination is dominated by education as a result of power relations. Indeed, we can say that in conformist literature "we are less concerned with the nature of literature itself than with the role it plays in education".[67] And this is the case in most children's books about other people and other cultures. They are mostly pedagogical and their main purpose is to teach children how to behave. Charmed by the colorful world of conformist children's tales, we may easily forget that these stories, which are –literally- following some same patterns of narration, are in fact an educational artefact of the dominant ideologies.

The conformist story is usually completed at the end of a journey where the hero (heroine) or the implied author tacitly cries out: everything happened the way it was expected to. But if a huge amount of contemporary children's books are works of instruction, produced to build disciplined, conformist and obedient children, how are we to read and evaluate them? And how is it possible that some critics address some of these conformist works as controversial and subversive? I will discuss these questions with the help of Althusserian and Foucauldian theories on discipline and power.

Another central issue in our discussion is that conformist children's literature today insists far too much on political issues with a peaceful point of view; it does not promote a revolutionary child and it avoids portraying the fact that all political disasters have an

[67] Mingshui Cai, *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 4.

ideological and economic dimension. The goal of conformist literature is not always to engage with explicit political issues, but rather to subtly shape a child's worldview and prepare them to continue on a predetermined path. These narratives work to socialize children into a community that upholds specific social and cultural norms. By presenting a seemingly apolitical vision of the world, this literature functions as an ideological apparatus, ensuring that children internalize values such as obedience and conformity, thereby securing the reproduction of the existing social order. Moreover, conformist literature will prepare children for a supposedly utopian life within capitalist institutions. This partly explains that it is not merely the subject which makes a book controversial but also the way the text is representing that special subject can help us decide if the approach to the issue is conformist or otherwise. It should be added too, that conformist works of children's literature are good examples of knowledge production, not necessarily coming from a unique institution of power and conscious authors but they are the representations of interiorized ideologies.

To achieve a more accurate evaluation of conformist literature, our criticism will be embedded in a closer literary analysis by looking at some contemporary works of children's literature such as *Denver* (2012), *Tusk Tusk* (1978) and *The Conquerors* (2004) by David McKee, *My Name Is Not Refugee* (2017) by Kate Milner, *Stepping Stones* (2016) by Margriet Ruurs, *Suitcase* (2019) by Chris Naylor-Ballesteros and *The Journey* (2016) by Francesca Sanna, which are few examples of a larger corpus of conformist literature for children that follow the same ideologies and narratives in a way or so. I believe texts such as these must be read in the light of Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation. Althusser clearly explains the process of interpellation as a way for ideology to turn individuals into subjects. In this sense, these conservative books about political issues are anything but controversial. Althusser's description of recruiting of subjects by interpellating or hailing them, could be applicable in those stories where children are constantly and implicitly called upon and interpellated by the author to confirm their identity according to the ideology of the book. Similarly, Foucault, with his idea on Panopticism, teaches us a new way of looking at these stories. One could say that in conformist stories, there is always a strong adult gaze and surveillance, just as in a Panopticon, which constantly observes and interpellates the child reader to interiorize in them obedience and conformity to the intended ideology.

As for the so-called *absolute conformism* of a text, one could say that it is unfair to accuse it of not being more controversial, when after all it is conceived as a book for children. But more to the point is that although authors of conformist literature don't turn a blind eye to most political issues (even if they are difficult issues for children to cope with), there is no trace of diversity in points of view, criticism or any controversial views at all for that issue (neither ideological nor anecdotal). In stories about war and immigration, those affected (individuals experiencing the war or fleeing from it as refugees) are given as little voice as the minorities in any of the other forms of political happenings. Typically, too, most authors in other kinds of political stories recount narratives from a conformist point of view, where middle and upper class adults and children and obedient working class characters are the only desired citizens and it is according to the dominant order that they all end up living happily together. One must of course acknowledge that the authors of such texts take an active part in the confirmation of status quo often associated with capitalism. But on the whole, their confirmations are not always explicit – as in some of the examples that we will refer to – they represent and produce an apparently neutral and peaceful experience – mostly an interpretation rather than an experience. One way in which the conformist author defuses challenging aspects of a controversial issue is to show how easily people in each culture and background find a way out of the disaster they are going through with or without the help of others. Thus, the work privileges the utopian and dreamy depiction of the world and seems to say that absolute optimism is integral to a work written for children. In other words, those out of disaster are usually the ones who define the situation for the unprivileged – not the other way round. In this case, we can find a model for how conformist works of literature can conceive of a desirable world in which children can become fit citizens.

It is important to acknowledge that the impulse to simplify complex narratives is not exclusive to conformist literature. Given the target audience, all children's literature, regardless of its ideological stance, must calibrate its content to the age-specific cognitive abilities of the child. However, the function of this simplification is what differentiates a conformist narrative from a non-conformist one. In conformist texts, simplification serves a strategic purpose: it reduces the complexity of an issue, such as war or immigration, to a manageable, easily digestible problem with a clear, predetermined solution. For example, a picturebook for a young child might present a refugee's journey as a simple quest from danger to safety, thereby reassuring the reader without challenging them to

confront the systemic injustices that caused the displacement. In contrast, a non-conformist narrative may also simplify in terms of plot, but its goal is to foster a child's interpretive agency, encouraging them to think critically about an open-ended problem rather than simply accepting a predetermined solution.

Although books like these certainly intend to bring up a controversial issue, it is significant that an authentic representation of reality and an attention to the cause of incidents are lacking in recent political children's literature, and can only be found in a few subversive books that we will discuss later in the next chapter. One particularly important point is that there usually exists a kind of charitable point of view towards the unprivileged and those suffering from war and immigration in the books with political content. As in the books that we will mention later, the challenging effects of war are highlighted, but they are given within the context of a false hope and otherness of the unprivileged. The protagonists' fate, moreover, depends a lot on the charitable acts of the host society. In my opinion, these books, and other examples of the same genre, on a small scale mediate power strategies through commodification and are intertextually connected with each other. As in capitalist stories, the working class people are also viewed and treated in a charitable way. In the course of these stories, the child reader learns nothing about the reasons behind social and economic inequities. The war and immigration stories, too, are neutrally told and create an impression in children that all these disasters are coming from nowhere and they are not anyone's fault. The claim that children's books fail to address the root causes of social and economic inequities is a critical one, but it must be calibrated to the cognitive and emotional development of the target audience. The purpose of this dissertation is not to suggest that books for young children should be as explicit about geopolitical complexities as a university textbook. Instead, this analysis argues that even within the constraints of age-appropriate storytelling, a key ideological choice is made: to either foster a child's understanding of systemic issues or to obscure them. For example, in the books analyzed here, the focus is placed on a protagonist's journey from adversity to safety, leaving the causes of their plight unexamined. This strategic omission, regardless of the target audience's age, serves a specific ideological function, one that prioritizes reassurance over critical inquiry and frames social inequities as a given reality rather than as a product of human actions.

The charitable viewpoint in children's literature, which often portrays the unprivileged as objects of sympathy and aid, is not a recent phenomenon. This narrative strategy has deep

roots in older narrative traditions, from the moral lessons of biblical parables to the allegorical structures of folktales. In these traditions, the protagonist is frequently tested by a disguised helper or a needy animal, and their willingness to offer help serves as proof of their moral worth. This model of charity, however, is not without its ideological implications. While it may cultivate a sense of empathy, it can also frame suffering as an individual's problem to be solved through benevolence, rather than a systemic issue requiring collective political action. By recognizing this historical link, my analysis shows that contemporary children's literature, even when addressing modern crises like war and immigration, often draws upon established narrative patterns that may unintentionally reinforce a status quo of passive pity rather than active change.

Kathy Short mentions that charitable acts in schools in the form of money gatherings for the children in need or as she calls it "give the unfortunate a handout" approach only "invoke children's compassion […] from a stance of pity rather than an informed understanding, sense of connection with children in these situations, or a belief in their own ability to make a difference".[68] The particular point that I will discuss here regarding conformist literature is this "stance of pity," from which the author writes and the reader perceives. According to Short, such a stance does not urge readers to take action for a change.[69] On the contrary, it elicits a tendency towards egoism, which can lead children to a "narcissistic self-reflection" instead of "a change in their perspective on the Other".[70] This tendency is exemplified in the picture books that I will discuss in this chapter.

According to Mingshui Cai, promoting tolerance and acceptance, rather than dealing with real tensions and discriminations, are dominant themes in today's multicultural literature. Authors trying to inform readers of different cultures only by the way of cultivating the notion of tolerance in them do not create books within which the political awareness of children is developed: "if children read mostly books of this type, they may not really know the people different from them and understand the issues of racial and cultural conflicts in reality. Together these books create a world that is more an illusion than reality".[71] As Cai points out, the illusion of a culture or phenomenon cannot correspond with reality, for if it could it would not appear as appealing as it is now in these conformist

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[68] Kathy Short. "Children's Agency for Taking Action," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 50, N0. 4 (October 2012): 41-50, 42.
[69] Short, 42.
[70] Mingshui Cai, *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*, 16.
[71] Cai, 123.

books. Regardless of how complicated and disastrous the issue discussed is, such books suggest that you can always find an easy peaceful solution.

The claim that children's literature can create a world that is "more an illusion than reality" [72] raises a crucial question about the role of fiction in a child's life. This dissertation does not argue for the wholesale removal of illusion, which can serve important functions in a child's imaginative and emotional development. Rather, it distinguishes between two types of illusion. The first is a comforting illusion, one that presents a sanitized, simplified, and ultimately misleading vision of the world. This type of illusion, often found in conformist literature, functions to protect the child from challenging truths and, in doing so, reinforces a status quo that may be unjust. The second is an empowering illusion, where a text uses elements of fantasy or metaphor to engage with reality in a deeper, more meaningful way. In this case, the illusion does not obscure reality; it illuminates it. A children's book becomes an important tool for realism when it presents a world that is honest about its complexities and contradictions, offering children the opportunity to grapple with difficult truths in a safe, yet not deceptive, manner. The point at which a book should be realistic is when its primary goal is to foster a child's critical thinking and their capacity to navigate the world as a subject of power exercises rather than as a passive observer.

"Informing" and "empowering," in Cai's opinion, are two important factors to describe the appropriate function of multicultural literature.[73] In recent works of children's literature, we find several examples of informing, such as those about other cultures, different social classes and ongoing political disasters. This is not, however, the most important feature of these books. In fact, contemporary children's literature dealing with multiculturalism and political issues has, generally speaking, a tendency to be manipulative, to narrate the events in an optimistic manner in a way that it may endanger the authenticity of information. The introduction of manipulative or false information in children's books causes a fundamental and dramatic change in the second function of multicultural literature which is empowering. Information is used to empower children to face a new phenomenon but also to encourage tolerance and acceptance instead of a genuine understanding and direct action. While Cai often mentions the importance of moving from informing to empowering, we should keep in mind that the kind of

[72] Cai, 123.
[73] Cai, 134.

information that motivates and empowers children also matters a lot. This point also connects with what is described by D. D. Hade as a "tourist view of multiculturalism" which in his term refers to a "naive view of culture" [74] and with Cai's belief that with this point of view "we will not move from informing to empowering".[75] The slight distortion and manipulation is essential to the touristic method in children's books. Instead of utilizing the documentary aspects of the phenomenon, the conformist authors use a touristic approach and see the literary work as a tool of sightseeing. The conformist and touristic approaches do not aim to shock, to explore the reality through unsettling combinations of events. Rather than being provoked, the reader as a tourist will only confirm whatever s/he perceives. This is not to say that shocking children is a necessary or desirable goal, but rather to highlight a key distinction in the ideological function of a text. While a conformist narrative seeks to avoid unsettling its reader, an effective subversive text, calibrated for its specific age group, may introduce a degree of shock to challenge a child's worldview. There are scholarly texts that discuss this, often linking it to the role of children's literature as a space for moral and emotional development. For instance, Jack Zipes' works on fairy tales suggest that classic tales often rely on a form of narrative shock to force the reader to confront difficult themes. Similarly, contemporary realist fiction for middle-grade and young adult readers may use shock to engage with topics like war or trauma, providing a safe space for children to process complex emotions.

Therefore, the question is not whether to shock children, but rather what age-appropriate methods a text uses to either reassure or to provoke critical thought. While a picturebook for a four-year-old would not depict the trauma of war in explicit detail, it might use a less-than-perfect ending or a jarring visual to disrupt a comfortable narrative. By considering the varying needs and abilities of different age groups, we can analyze how shock functions as an ideological too – either to protect a child from reality or to empower them to confront it.

In her acknowledgment to *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks* (2015), Janet Evans writes that she is fascinated by unconventional, non-conformist picture books.[76] A

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[74] V. Harris, ed., *Using multiethnic literature in the K-8 classroom* (Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 1997), 237.
[75] Cai, 137.
[76] Janet Evans, *Challenging and Controversial Picture Books* (London: Routledge, 2015), xi.

major question could be asked here: what creates non-conformity in a picture book? Is it simply about bringing up difficult subjects for children or is it the specific way the author/illustrator depicts the subjects which makes the picture book a non-conformist one? The other thing that we should keep in mind is that the conformity or nonconformity of a picture book depends mainly on the political and social background of the country and the culture in which it is produced. In some countries, controversial subjects in picture books are accepted while in other places they are regarded as taboos. I argue that being controversial and non-conformist has to do primarily with the way the author and/or illustrator represent the subject, not the subject itself, and that the proper business of controversial picture books is to focus on pushing the boundaries. This frame enables us to idealize controversial and challenging picture books as a set of non-conformist children's literary works that do not just borrow a subject from the list of assumed controversial subjects for children. In this sense, some of the examples of controversial picture books chosen by children's literature critics could be reconsidered and analyzed to see if they are really controversial or they are chosen as controversial works just by their subjects.

The idea of changing boundaries is a helpful one for the analysis of some special controversial subjects in children's picture books. As an example, the subject of immigration in children's books is considered to be a controversial subject. But is it really a challenging subject in itself? Nowadays we have so many picture books with this subject. Are they all pushing boundaries or are they mostly repeating stereotypes? How can we understand if a book with the subject of immigration is controversial and non-conformist? In most of these books, the inequality of power relations is not depicted as a controversial issue. The causes and reasons for wars and their consequences like immigration have never been challenged as well. So, for example, a great deal of picture books with the subject of immigration are about the phenomenon itself and not about its cause. If we take the examples of this chapter which looks at the concept of immigration, we find that assumed controversial picture books mostly bring up subjects like the act of immigration itself or the feelings of a person who is an immigrant or refugee and there is no talk about the reason(s) behind.

Despite their differences, the conformist techniques applied in children's books are based on the effect of familiarization, making the reader see unfamiliar things or controversial situations in familiar or conventional ways. The main reason for this effort of

familiarization is that the target audience of most of these books (especially those ones about war and immigration) are mainly Western children or generally those children who are outside the disaster because those affected are already experiencing the issue in their real life and they do not need to be familiar with the phenomena through books. Combinations of different methods and techniques, as well as manipulation of reality in different levels, draw attention to the concept of false hope and the confirmation of the status quo. Charming illustrations, visual styles and conformist contexts are being repeated and represented to create literary familiarization in war and immigration images or to express unquestioned legitimacy in other forms of conformist books.

These books, although slightly different in their form, narration and style, seem to have the ability to institutionalize in children a conformist point of view of political and social circumstances. It is notable that the conformism in contemporary children's literature is not based on discarding controversial issues, which was the case in the early pedagogic works of children's literature, but quite the opposite: writers turn to a range of problematic themes and subjects, both within allegorical and realistic stories, and represent them in conformist ways – by simplifying and manipulating reality, letting unfamiliar contexts emerge and thus creating an expression that is at the same time controversial and undisputable.

John Stephens in his book *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992) mentions that

> Since a culture's future is, to put it crudely, invested in its children, children's writers often take upon themselves the task of trying to mould audience attitudes into 'desirable' forms, which can mean either an attempt to perpetuate certain values or to resist socially dominant values which particular writers oppose.[77]

Conformist works are thus perpetuating dominant values in their content. Subversive works, on the other hand, offer readers a critical point of view of a broad range of challenging subjects. We trace the trends of conformist literature in the following part and some examples of subversive writing in the subsequent chapter.

[77] John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 3.

### 1.1. Government of Children? Capitalism and the case of *Denver*

Capitalist contemporary children's literature, in the context of this dissertation, is defined as a body of texts that, either overtly or subtly, functions as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Drawing on the work of Louis Althusser, this literature works to interpellate the child into a specific ideological framework, reproducing capitalist values and norms without explicit coercion. These texts are designed not merely for entertainment, but as a silent means of shaping a child's worldview, presenting a utopian vision where capitalist ideals such as individualism, consumerism, and obedience to a specific social order are normalized. The lessons in these stories serve a dual purpose: they entertain while simultaneously preparing the child to become a compliant and productive member of a capitalist society, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of existing power structures and hierarchies.

A brief survey of the political and social stance of children in Foucault's writings shows us the power's manners of governing children by calling our attention to the particularities of the disciplinary mode of labour. Foucault aptly describes that he deals "with people situated outside the circuits of productive labour: the insane, prisoners, and now children. For them labour, insofar as they have to perform it, has a value which is chiefly disciplinary". [78] Thanks to his seminal study of discipline and surveillance, we can now learn more about the representations of power's government over children and its disciplining strategies in children's literature.

Focusing on the systems of surveillance and Panopticon, most notably those ones used in working places and factories, Michelle Perrot (in her conversation with Foucault) mentions that "the system of micro-powers wasn't installed at a stroke. This type of surveillance and hierarchy was developed first in the mechanized sectors occupied by mainly female and child labour, that is by those already accustomed to obey".[79] Following an overview of the history of the failures of surveillance systems in "*cités ouvrières"*,[80] Perrot goes on to provide background information about different factors that lead to a revolutionary resistance among the workers on the one hand and to their destined replacement by machinery on the other.

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[78] Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 Michel Foucault*, 161.
[79] Gordon, ed., 163.
[80] Gordon, ed., 162.

Due to their supposed obedience, children are appointed as less resistant subjects of disciplinary labour with whom the systems of surveillance and gaze works more effectively because they have less power and therefore they interiorize the feelings of shame and fear (caused by the gaze) much easier than adults. That is why I think that children as the target audience of conformist literature can still be governed and disciplined by the way of surveillance and Panoptican even though this strategy was a failure in other circumstances and with the adult audience.

Foucault defines the government of people as the conduction of people's actions, here the children. We trace here the representation of this form of government in an example of a capitalist contemporary children's literature, which has ideologically dictated certain forms of behavior and attitude to its child readers. Norbert Elias in his discussion of behavioral formation and its constant reproduction in the process of civilizing, indicates that

> The older generation, for whom such a standard of conduct is accepted as a matter of course, urges the children, who do not come into the world already equipped with these feelings and this standard, to control themselves more or less rigorously in accordance with it, and to restrain their drives and inclinations.[81]

The initial need for the government of children and disciplining them comes from the fact that they are considered to be threatening for the maintenance of power, whether it be in relation to their parents or in a wider view as future citizens. Elias suggests that "children necessarily encroach again and again on the adult threshold of repugnance, and – since they are not yet adapted – they infringe the taboos of society, [and] cross the adult shame frontier".[82] David Rudd takes Homi Bhabha's (1994) idea of "troubling hybrid relationship in the colonial situation" and states in his discussion of children's literature and hybridity that "those who effectively wield power– adults, in this case – are never secure in their position. As detailed earlier, this is because power is not an abstract possession, but an effect of discursive relations which are productive as well as repressive". [83] This productive and yet repressive government of children is typical of power exercises performed both by parents and States within a relation in which parents

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[81] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 108-109.
[82] Elias, 141.
[83] David Rudd, "Theorising and theories: The conditions of possibility of children's literature", In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 29-44 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 35.

as adults are themselves subjects and consciously or unconsciously under the government of States. The conformist books intended for young readers, in keeping with the ideologies and manners established for their adult parents, engage children to submit to the social expectations.

Initially this "steering of human conduct and the social codes of commandments" [84] is produced mainly with the help of internalizing the feelings of shame and fear which we have discussed earlier in the Foucauldian explanation of surveillance and Panopticon. This function of "human made fears" as means of control and power maintenance is well explained by Elias:

> The child and adolescent would never learn to control their behaviour without the fears instilled by other people. Without the lever of these human-made fears the young human animal would never become an adult deserving the name of a human being […]. The fears which grown-ups consciously or unconsciously induce in the child are precipitated in him or her and henceforth reproduce themselves more or less automatically. The malleable personality of the child is so fashioned by fears that it learns to act in accord with the prevailing standard of behaviour, whether these fears are produced by direct physical force or by deprivation, by the restriction of food or pleasure. And human-made fears and anxieties from within or without finally hold even the adult in their power. [85]

The power of children's books in shaping a child's worldview is not comparable to physical or mental punishments, but in some ways it is more profound. Physical and mental punishments operate through overt repression, a form of power that is external and immediately recognizable. In contrast, the fear and shame cultivated by certain narratives, particularly those that moralize misbehavior, work from within. These emotions are internalized by the child, leading to a self-policing that is arguably more effective and lasting than any external discipline. Thus, literature's power lies in its ability to interpellate the child into a state of voluntary conformity, making it a powerful and subtle Ideological State Apparatus. In addition, there is an experimental stand in picture books for young children: they witness a cautionary story with an outsider point of view and interiorize the feeling of fear without being afraid at that moment. These fears could be "fear of war and fear of God, guilt, fear of punishment or of loss of social prestige, man's fear of himself, of being overcome by his own affective impulses"[86] as well as fear

[84] Elias, 442.
[85] Elias, 442-443.
[86] Elias, 443.

of instability, loss of money and home and fear of bad fate; some of which are conveyed in the examples that we investigate in this chapter especially in the case of *Denver* (2010) which evokes in children the fear of instability and loss.

The success of power in government and control of its subjects is bolstered by naturalizing certain fears in children's subconscious:

> To a large extent, however, the conduct and drives of the child are forced even without words into the same mould and in the same direction by the fact that a particular use of knife and fork, for example, is completely established in adult society-that is, by the example of the surrounding world. Since the pressure or coercion of individual adults is allied to the pressure and example of the whole surrounding world, most children, as they grow up, forget or repress relatively early the fact that their feelings of shame and embarrassment, of pleasure and displeasure, were moulded into conformity with a certain standard by external pressure and compulsion. All this appears to them as highly personal, something "inside", implanted in them by nature.[87]

Under the permanent government and gaze of surrounding power, the child's fear and anxiety grows slowly but steadily, establishing a fueling resource for conformity and building up "definite limits, binding him or her to a certain standard of shame and embarrassment, to a specific accent, to particular manners, whether he or she wishes or not".[88] However, it is true to say that power's strategies in establishing certain standards is dynamic and encouraging as well as forbidding and that this did have a great impact on representing the standards in children's books, to the extent that during the reign of children's literature as an important ISA in modern times (we have discussed previously that cultural institutions such as literature can be considered as ISA next to the school-family couple, so I use the term advisedly) conformist picture books become identified as means of implanting standards within both encouraging and cautionary techniques.

Initially, children used to have more opportunities to be free in the past in a sense that they were not that much under the gaze and control of adults as they are today, so there were not significant differences between adults and children regarding their ways of behavior and freedom of actions. When they started to be considered as an important part of civilization and with the growth of technologies and media that accommodate the surveillance, "The distance in their behavior and whole psychical structure between

[87] Elias, 109.
[88] Elias, 444.

children and adults" has increased. [89] It was maybe for this reason that Peter N Stearns asserted that "children had advantages in the past that have been lost or challenged today" [90] and urges that we should have "historical and cultural empathy […] to understand the past accurately" and "to avoid silly self-congratulation about the present".[91] There were obviously some important advantages for children on the evidence of what many historians wrote such as Philippe Aries.[92] Stearns mentions Aries' argument which explains how young children in the past had more freedom "than they would have amid the careful monitoring of modern societies".[93] The books written for children, then, can also serve as a means of monitoring children as well as they can offer them through imagination that kind of freedom that they could experience in reality in the past times: for the power institutions, the first function matters most while it is the second function which goes well with the nature of child and literature.

In addition to dramatically increasing the ways of surveillance over children, power's other technique in modern times is the creation of certain expectations from children. This is what Elias wisely articulates as follows:

> Today the ring of precepts and regulations is drawn so tightly about people, the censorship and pressure of social life which forms their habits are so strong; that young people have only two alternatives: to submit to the pattern of behaviour demanded by society, or to be excluded from life in "decent society". A child that does not attain the level of affect-moulding demanded by society is regarded in varying gradations from the standpoint of a particular caste or class, as "ill", "abnormal", "criminal", or just "impossible", and is accordingly excluded from the life of that class.[94]

These expectations and patterns of behavior, which went on to become normal and approved by societies, have been mostly conformed to Western capitalist standards, demonstrating that power has an eye for both reproduction of future labor force or disciplined citizens and boycotting unfitted subjects. The capitalist world of the West has already been the role model of civilized standards (specifically for upbringing and education of children), and although historians such as Stearns illustrate that "Western impact" is not only "a force for positive change", but "Western activities, and particularly

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[89] Elias, xi.

[90] Peter N. Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.

[91] Stearns, 7.

[92] Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood, a Social History of Family Life,* Robert Baldick, trans. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

[93] Stearns, 11.

[94] Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations,* 120.

economic exploitation, often inhibit societies from adjusting childhoods as fully as Western advocates urge, for example in the area of reducing child labor", [95] new approaches to children's education, psychology and literature are based on Western idea of childhood. Stearns also shows that the selection of events can make a comment on "modern childhood" as a "complex phenomenon" which "must not be reduced to Western patterns alone, or (even worse) to a comparative approach that holds Western achievements as the model on the basis of which other regions must be criticized for failures to reach the Western level".[96]

Today, however, the landscape of literature for children is almost occupied by certain Western ideals and standards. In part, this is a result of power exercises in reproducing and introducing active future role players and also conformist passive subjects. In part it can be seen as a result of the power's strategy for maintaining the desired world order, and surely no order would be maintained without establishing and updating a sequence of role models and standards and the impact which they make on children as future citizens.

When we refer to certain Western ideals and standards, it is not arguing for a monolithic Western identity. Rather, it is addressing a specific set of liberal humanist values that have historically dominated children's literature in the Anglophone world and beyond. These ideals include a strong emphasis on individualism, the nuclear family, a meritocratic social structure, and a belief in the inherent goodness and innocence of the child as a being in need of protection. These standards often dictate narrative conventions, such as the focus on a single protagonist's journey of self-discovery and the preference for happy endings that restore social order. In this context, Western ideals refer to the dominant ideological forces that shape the publishing, marketing, and reception of children's literature, promoting a worldview that, while seemingly benign, functions to uphold specific power structures.

Clémentine Beauvais, in her book *The Mighty Child*, asserts that "the didactic situation set up by children's literature means that there is always a reliance on the child as future agent".[97] To accomplish the goals and objectives of capitalism as well, many literary

[95] Stearns, 15.
[96] Stearns, 15.
[97] Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child* (Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 152.

works have been produced to equip children as future agents. Their aim is to give children stories in which the capitalist ideal world is depicted, in order to prepare them for a participation in this unfair world by means of conformist readings based on their social classes. At the same time, these books work towards the revival of dominant culture and putting it in a desired form; the promotion of an all-inclusive utopian culture; the training of children as future agents and giving them the opportunity to play a part in the process of labor-power reproduction. The training of such agents is in the interests of those in power, here the State and parents.

The conformist narrative in children's books is rather predictable, as most of them are obviously didactic. Beauvais suggests that "Children's books are characterized, it seems, by a desire for predictability – generally speaking, the reproduction of established sociopolitical conventions".[98] In this respect, conformist works of children's literature produced by pro-capitalist writers govern their future agents in different ways. In capitalist stories for children, politics, feelings and social phenomena are presented concisely on a cheerful stage, and the authors and illustrators seek in their texts and illustrations to represent things that are challenging and controversial from a conservative point of view. In doing so, they cause a gentle comfort in their readers that makes them take notice that the issue represented in the book is simple and predictable. A good example of this is found in one of David McKee's latest picture books *Denver* (2010),[99] which offers even quite young children an obviously capitalist point of view of society to diminish their fear of instability in the guaranteed safety of a capitalist world. Within this imaginary world, McKee doesn't leave any room for questions, for doubts and thoughts which gives the child a critical point of view.

While the conformist narrative is often predictable due to its didactic nature, it is important to clarify that not all children's books, or even all conformist literature, is openly didactic. A great deal of children's books is designed to be purely entertaining, to foster imagination, or to cultivate a love for reading without an explicit moral lesson. However, the books analyzed in this dissertation, particularly those serving a conformist agenda, are selected precisely for their overtly pedagogical function. Their predictability

[98] Beauvais, 2.
[99] David Mackee, *Denver* (London: Andersen Press, 2012).

stems from the fact that they are designed not to surprise or challenge the reader, but to efficiently and pleasurably reproduce a specific set of cultural, social, and political values.

"Contemporary children's literature appears obsessed with social cohesion, with making people get on. As such, it is fervently aware of the "difficulty" and the "trouble" of this "necessary condition", but considers it, it seems, as treatable," Beauvais has said.[100] This emphasis on solving all the problems and the prediction of what ensues when one follows the expectations and then maintains the social order – these are the things that make conformist stories so particularly manipulating, because they open up a selected scope of a controversial issue and get readers involved in the text believing that all troubles are easily solvable.

In the back cover of *Denver*, an abstract of the book explains its fondness for a capitalist charitable point of view in the following way:

> Denver is rich – very, very rich. Everyone in the village loves him for his kindness and generosity. But one day a stranger arrives, who breeds discontent by telling the villagers it isn't fair for Denver to have so much more than they do …
>
> A gloriously colourful picture book about being content with your lot […]

McKee's fascination with different kinds of political issues is linked directly to his fondness for simplification and conformism. In *The Conquerors* (2004) and *Tusk Tusk* (1978), he returns to the origins of war and peace and creates capitalist utopian worlds in a few sentences. And that is not all: in all of these stories, he creates hope by proposing solutions to all problems with the result that children (and adults) believe in those systems which are treating all the troubles in a seemingly peaceful way.

In *Denver*, McKee encourages his readers to observe from passive perspective things that he has crafted into conspicuous symbols; and he lets the words, constrained with evaluative connotations, interact with children in a very didactic way. This gives rise to his exaggeration of the situation both in text and illustration:

> He had lots of people to look after him. They were happy to work for someone as kind and generous as Denver. It was Denver who provided and presented the prizes at the Berton school prize-giving. There was always something for everyone.
>
> ….
>
> He was always cheerful and was very popular. (from *Denver*)

[100] Beauvais, 101.

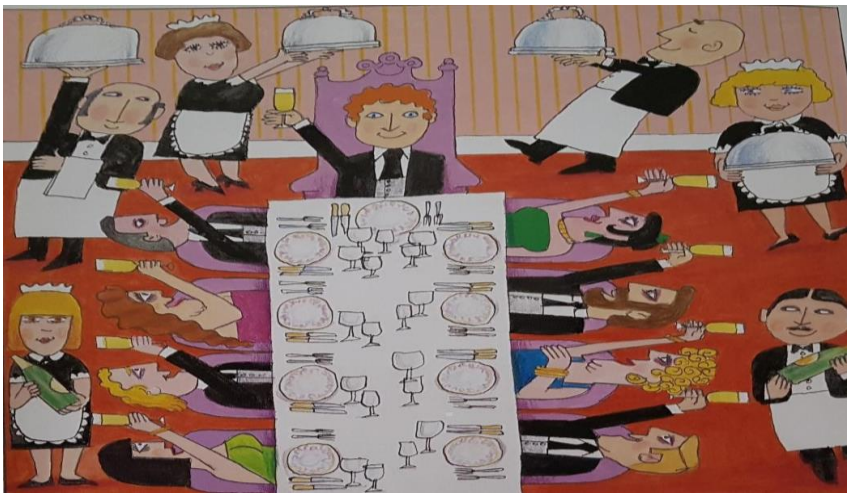

Figure 1. From *Denver,* demonstrating happy servants.

McKee manages to tell the story of a successful and cheerful rich man who is the reason for everyone else's prosperity and happiness. The story of *Denver* is given both a traditional and modern atmosphere by means of different frameworks within which Denver appears: a man living in a house with a farm and garden, goes to the school ceremony, shopping streets and cafes. On the one hand, the daily life of a man in the privileged class is shown, providing an insight into the living conditions of the aristocrats, and, on the other hand, the life of common people ("villagers" in the story) is depicted by portraying them as simpletons who need Denver from the upper class to take care of them.

Denver's interest in painting is connected to the author's interest in art dealing in real life. Painting as a way of business is touched upon, but is not seemingly central to McKee's story. However, the act of painting in illustrations (look at the examples below) and in underlying layers of the story plays an important role: Denver takes comfort in painting in his leisure time till a stranger appears and provokes villagers against him because he believes that it is unfair that Denver has lots of money and others so little. From that moment on, in an unbelievable act, he distributes all his money between the villagers and he himself goes to another town named *Mardell* and starts painting with his share of money. In both text and illustration, McKee shows in a subtle way how Denver is able to make money again with merely a few paintings: the simplest paintings suddenly produce lots of money for him while other villagers waste a huge amount of money by spending it at once.

Figure 2. Paintings in Denver's house.


Figure 3. Denver paints in his free time.

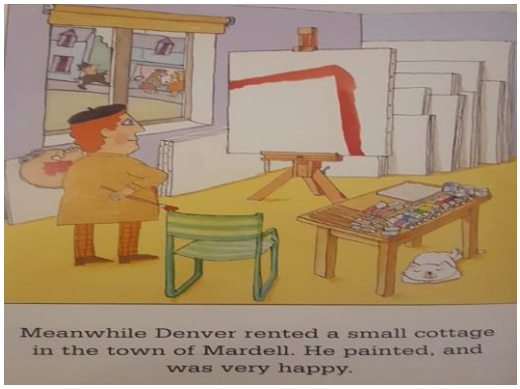


Figure 4. Denver is painting to make a living.


Figure 5. People buy Denver's paintings.

Figure 6. People carrying Denver's paintings.

In almost every sentence the reader is amazed by Denver's infinite excellence and competence. For instance, the brief sentence: "Because of Denver, Mardell also became famous, and had a lot of business". It could not be simpler, nor could it be more telling. The fact that the man is fixing everything wherever he goes, as if the man is the people's savior, reveals a great deal about the utopian capitalist world, but also about the hierarchy in this desired system. All characters except Denver, whether the people working for him, the ones in the street or shops, are depicted as naïve and in need of guidance. As a result

of the decisive nature of the story, the suspicious character of the stranger is not given a face – being depicted as a man in black suit – and thus loses his legitimacy.

McKee is an expert in suggesting solutions for controversial issues – for example, in the story *The Conquerors*, where people of a small country exhibit their culture and traditions to the invading soldiers instead of resistance and in this way evoke admiration from the soldiers and their oppressor General because they become conquered in peace. This strange way of sorting things out closes the eyes of both young and adult readers to the complex aspects of the issue. The commodifying of the child in such stories derives from imposing and interiorizing in children a certain view of the world. McKee's other story *Tusk Tusk* and other similar children's stories place children in the position of responsibility in order to achieve peace, stability or other goals that dominant powers set for a supposedly desirable future. This is another way of commodification in which the child is put under the gaze of adults by the author's constellation of child characters in charge of fixing the world. Beauvais considers this strategy as throwing "'the world into the child's hands'".[101]

Each one of these books bears a desire of turning children into conformist obedient "villagers" - "A middle-class desire to tame child readers into unthinking acceptance of the hegemonic sociopolitical system".[102] There is no doubt that they are nicely written, beautifully illustrated, and produced with high quality, but they all invite children to accept the same values and ideologies which guarantee the stability of status quo. This has been a concern shared by some critics of children's literature. Beauvais, one of the most accurate critics of ideology in children's literature, writes:

> Thus omnipresent liberal humanist values are ideological assumptions – which belong to Sutherland's "politics of assent", and to Hollindale's second and third categories of ideology. Because they inculcate contentment towards safety and a socially constructed sense of freedom, there is a discrepancy between what we could call the (not always very clean) *realpolitik* of adults and its deformed, idealised representation within children's literature, which contributes to constructing content and consenting citizens. Insofar as citizenship and the future of society hinges on this construction, children's literature is always a form of political speech, and sometimes a form of political noble lie.[103]

[101] Beauvais, *The Mighty Child*, 172.
[102] Beauvais, 180.
[103] Beauvais, 181.

As well as inculcating contentment in children, I think conformist literature would interiorize in them a sense of prejudice and legitimacy especially if they already belong to the dominant social class. What I want to emphasize is that books such as *Denver* work towards both "the reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers" and the "reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression"[104] which means that it educate both future conformist citizens (by teaching them in a threatening way to be content with their share) and future agents of power (by instilling in them the feeling of self-righteousness of their privileged position). This is how David McKee, introduces contentment as an important element of survival with an extremely judging and didactic ending in *Denver*: "As for the stranger, he's still wandering around breeding discontent. If he comes your way, don't listen to him". The prejudicial approach is harmonious with expressive illustrations all over the book.

In an era in which we are bombarded by visual images, pictures are not only a vital part of conveying information to the audience but comprises a hierarchical power in themselves. One of the principal goals of illustrations in children's picture books is to try to double the effect of the implied ideology of the text, and enhance the credibility of the content. The illustrations in picture books also have more power than the text, enabling the producers to depict the harsh moments of reality in a cheerful manipulating way. Moreover, the charm of illustration provides a perfect opportunity for the writer and illustrator to easily convince the audience of the book's legitimacy – which, as in other visual media, doesn't happen that easily through words.

In my opinion, images in different forms of media (here in the form of children's books' illustrations) can be deceptive as much as they can be awakening. To a child especially, under the charming power of illustration, every little detail in the pictures gain a bigger meaning and consequently will be more effective than any written words. This is what I would like to call *hierarchical power relation between the image and the text* in children's books where images have definitely more power than the words in conveying meanings and ideologies. This effectiveness of image in attracting the audience is easily perceivable in the case of *Denver* and also in other examples that we will investigate in this chapter.

[104] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", 104.

As E.H. Gombrich mentions "it is all the more important to clarify the potentialities of the image in communication, to ask what it can and what it cannot do better than spoken or written language".[105] The important potentiality of the image or "visual impressions" according to Gombrich is their power to "arouse our emotions".[106] The example that he brings to show the effectiveness of the visual impression is a simple experiment with children: "Try to say the sentence [a sentence about a cat] to a child and then show him the picture and your respect for the image will soon be restored. The sentence will leave the child unmoved; the image may delight him almost as much as the real cat".[107] This provoking impact of image has been recognized well by the writers, illustrators, publishers and critics of children's literature but its manipulative aspect has been less investigated. This aspect of visual impression is well used in many works of McKee, especially *Denver* that we are discussing here. The aim of illustrations in this book is to emphasize the legitimacy of Denver as the good guy and the illegitimacy of the stranger as he is a threat to the stability of villagers' lives and Denver's authority. Illustrations hand in hand with the text strongly work together to maintain this aim. Before focusing on illustration, we can notice that in the text we have a full description of Denver with positive and encouraging words while there is no characterization of the stranger and it is obvious from the fact that he even hasn't given a name (unlike Denver whose name and even the name of places he is related to is precisely mentioned) and we don't know anything about his personality and origins and attitudes. He has no identity and only comes to cause chaos in the peaceful lives of villagers. The illustrations depict Denver in a charming appearance and colourful clothes while the stranger is illustrated in black suits which signifies danger and darkness and suspicion accompanied with a hidden face which heightens the feeling of unreliability.

This was a basic introductory explanation to show that concerning the deceptive aspect of illustration and media, we must not consider the images and illustrations only as means of providing genuine information and knowledge because they can also cause deception and absorption in dream and false images instead of causing awareness.

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[105] Richard Woodfield, ed., *The Essential Gombrich: selected writings on art and culture* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 41.
[106] Woodfield, ed., 43.
[107] Woodfield, ed., 43.

Figure 7. The stranger depicted as threatening.

Figure 8. Denver scared by the stranger while carrying his own painting

Within the course of history, children have always been regarded both as "future agents"[108] and "potentially threatening to the stability and order of the adult world"[109] and that's why "they were [and still are] in need of moral education and social discipline".[110] One reason for the prevalence of conformist literature for children is because it is a good means of moral and social education and therefore properly functions to subjugate children and prepare them to be disciplined future agents and (or) citizens. The child audience of these books such as *Denver* are subjects of disciplining and governing, being cautioned of any form of instability and advised to conform to the conventions of

[108] Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child*, 152

[109] Pamela Karimi and Christiane Gruber. "Introduction: The Politics and Poetics of the Child Image in Muslim Contexts," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, Number 2 (2012): 273-293, 275.

[110] Karimi and Gruber, 275.

capitalist ideology. With retelling and manipulating political issues for children, literature is not only a signifier of conformist culture but also renders an illusion of a free world. As a result, it helps to overpass political controversies and stimulate more capitalist justifier themes for children. As far back as 1982, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o tried to mock capitalism attempts of justifying freedom in his novel *Devil on the Cross*. In a scene where there is a feast "arranged by the Organization for Modern Theft and Robbery", a speaker announces that

> We believe in freedom, the freedom that allows one to rob and to steal according to one's abilities. That's what we call personal initiative and individual enterprise. And that's why we have always stated that we belong to the Free World, a world where there are absolutely no barriers to stealing from others.[111]

In the above-mentioned literary parody, the author proposed that the concept of freedom could be justified in different ways in a capitalist world. Nowadays, most people regard *Denver,* a picture book illustrated and written by a pro capitalist person, as a book about contentment. Indeed, discontentment in a sense that it causes an ambition towards gathering more, is the very essence of capitalism, but promoting this idea can be problematic when it comes next to the idea of disciplining the subjects. Such problems can be avoided by making a justified definition of hierarchies and freedom according to one's abilities. For example, Denver is depicted as a person who has the right to govern people and act freely because he simply has the ability to do so. A categorical depiction of this kind is easily circulated around the village and there is no need to doubt the legitimacy of this depiction, because it is heavily based on the certain assumption of personal initiative and individual enterprise, which is only available to Denver.

### 1.2. Countering the War and Immigration: Simplification versus Manipulation

Many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have happened among people who are suffering the traumas of war, following the traditions handed down to them by the Western media and political ideologies and in some cases by the original eyewitnesses. In both cases, most of the contemporary children's picture books dealing with the subject of immigration and war are taking the same road, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. But this relatively simple statement requires

[111] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann, 1982), 173.

careful evaluation of several seemingly contradictory elements. In many instances, immigration picture books are working similarly in a way that they simplify and, in some cases, manipulate the issue. The comparison of these works (both allegorical and realistic ones) further illustrates the same narrative they follow: The main character(s)'s journey from disaster to the utopian land (the land of hope and trust) with a didactic point of view. This simplification happens both in meaning and style while the subject is much more complex than a single map of experience. On the other hand, if we look at these books in terms of their reception, rather than in terms of their meaning and forms of narrative, then we can introduce another critical point of view; the limitation of the target audience. That is to say, most of the books are written by western writers for western children while they are supposed to be concerned with the unheard voices of children from somewhere else in the world.

There is significant interest in the life of refugees and immigrants, not only because of the sympathy but also because it is a new trend in the field of children's literature to highlight the areas of concern. An important part of the development of such issues in picture books lay in the need to produce enough promotional material in order to breed, uphold and spread the interests of dominant ideology. Children's books also approach these difficult issues in order to represent a calming solution for chaotic situations. The plot of most of these books iterates, as the writer of *Family First in Homes Away From Home: Depictions of Refugee Experiences and Flight from War in Picturebooks Published in Sweden 2014–2018* so truly states, "a journey – travelling from the war-torn country to eventually settling in the safety of the recipient country",[112] and some children writers are undoubtedly masters when it comes to representing the worlds in which everything can be fixed by the intrusion of those in power who appear to be helping the unprivileged.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that we encounter inducing sentences such as "a story full of heart, hope, and kindness about how we treat those in need" at the back cover of *The Suitcase* for example, [113] which is a children's picture book about otherness and immigration. Like so many other books of this genre, *The Suitcase* does not only represent

[112] Åsa Warnqvist. "Family First in Homes Away from Home: Depictions of Refugee Experiences and Flight from War in Picturebooks Published in Sweden 2014–2018," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 56, No. 4 (2018): 60-71, 62.
[113] Chris Naylor-Ballesteros, *The Suitcase* (London: Nosy Crow, 2019).

the ideology of "we fix it for you!", but also reflects the charitable point of view of host countries towards immigrants.

The emphasis of the book is on the concepts of home and attachment. The beginning of the story describes well the feelings of the strange animal who has left his home and arrived at a new place with a suitcase in his hand containing his precious attachments and memories. The text says that he looks "dusty, tired, sad and frightened". This description is short but very precise because only with few words it describes all the deep feelings of an immigrant, a refugee or whoever who has to leave behind their home; they are tired because of the long way they had (in case of refugees, it is not only the length of the way that matters but also the danger and difficulty that they have to face), they are sad because they had to leave their home and all their belongings and loved ones and finally they are frightened because they have an uncertain future, they do not know what awaits them. In illustrations as well, these very complicated feelings have been artistically depicted through the very simple drawing of the strange animal's eyes.

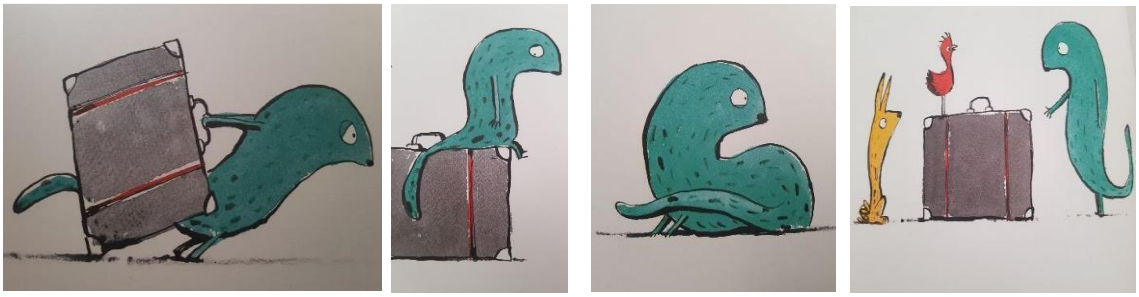

Figure 9. The illustrations vividly capture the complex emotions of the strange animal upon arriving in a new place – his weary eyes reflect exhaustion, sorrow, and fear, visually reinforcing the text's powerful depiction of displacement and uncertainty.

The other animals welcome the strange animal with curiosity. They only want to know what he has with him in his suitcase and while he sleeps they break his suitcase and when they see that there is only a broken teacup and a photograph of his home, they build him a colorful house which looks like the one in the photo that he carries in his suitcase. The moment the strange animal wakes up and sees the house, all those feelings of tiredness, sadness and fear are gone simply because he got enough rest, his broken teacup from home is fixed and he has no fear of the future because the other animals have built him an even better colorful new house. The fascinating illustrations here again make us

believe that feelings of sadness and homesickness are easily treatable as well as in *Denver* where illustrations can easily convince young readers that Denver is a good guy and the stranger is devil although his words about justice and equality seem to be logical and thought provoking.

In this way, children will not be able to get to know the real essence and seriousness of those feelings that the immigrant or refugee has when they arrive to a new place and they will only gain a superficial understanding of the concepts of home and attachment. There is also another bothersome point in the story which is related to the immorality of other animals' act when they open the stranger's suitcase without permission which has been justified in the story by showing that they did it for good. It is such a big problem that for several reasons we cannot ignore it. It is not only because intruding into other people's privacy isn't a moral act but also because this immorality is justified through a charitable point of view which gives the right to those in power to intrude into the private lives of those in need.

This story of facing the stranger, which is a conformist one, can be well compared to the story *Eric* (2008) by Shaun Tan which looks at the same issue with a totally different point of view.[114] For me, the surrealistic atmosphere of this story offers the best metaphors for the most inner emotions of a stranger and also those who host him. The real challenge in these kinds of stories is first and foremost the true understanding of the situation and then is how to represent these deep and complicated feelings and emotions to the young readers which is, I think, well managed by Tan in this genuinely touching story. The first important aspect of the story is the elaboration of the stranger's character, Eric, which gives him a unique identity and personality. The main message of this characterization seemed to be: we have to understand and accept the cultural differences at the same time that we do not hang on the idea that the popularity of some cultures does not mean their superiority. In that way, Eric took a respectful place among the family who were hosting him. So here, the stranger instead of being a pitiful character as in other similar stories, has been represented as somebody with a particular identity and with a mission: to represent the true story and emotions of those who have been through the same experience of loneliness and homesickness.

[114] Shaun Tan, *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (Canada: McClelland & Stewart, 2008).

Figure 10. *Eric*, the foreign exchange student.

Tan presents the case of a small creature "Eric" who has been introduced by the narrator as a "foreign exchange student" and he is well hosted by the family of the narrator (who seems to be a child).[115] For some reason, however, Eric does not seem really happy and he has been represented as an introverted thinking character. Bounded with doubt, the narrator explains:

> But sometimes I wondered if Eric was happy; he was so polite that I'm not sure he would have told us if something bothered him. A few times I saw him through the pantry door gap, studying with silent intensity, and imagined what it might be like for him here in our country.[116]

Figure 11. *Eric* choosing to sleep and study most of the time in the kitchen

[115] Tan, 8.
[116] Tan, 10.

A few pages later, he explains again his doubt about Eric's feeling where he says: "I think Eric enjoyed these trips, but once again, it was hard to really know".[117] When Eric is suddenly gone, he and his family still wonder about the stranger's real feelings:

> There was much speculation over dinner later that evening. Did Eric seem upset? Did he enjoy his stay? Would we ever hear from him again? An uncomfortable feeling hung in the air, like something unfinished, unresolved. It bothered us for hours, or at least until one of us discovered what was in the pantry.[118]

Children meet the concepts of strangers, cultural differences, home and attachment from a totally different perspective in this story, where the hosts respect Eric's privacy and culture, until they start to develop a kind of attachment to each other. When Tan reveals Eric's story through the child narrator, it becomes evident that the child is trying to understand Eric's feelings. Tan's book could be a turning point in writing about immigration for children. This is a story that does not only promote the charitable attitude of the host country but also focuses on the difficulty and complexity of the feelings and emotions that both sides experience in a respectful relation: unlike *The Suitcase* where the charitable act of other animals toward the stranger is shown through their intrusion in his privacy (opening his suitcase without permission), in *Eric* the hosts respect Eric's privacy and way of life and there is no impression that conveys perfection or superiority of the host country:

> We had repainted the spare room, bought new rugs and furniture and generally made sure everything would be comfortable for him. So I can't say why it was that Eric chose to sleep and study most of the time in our kitchen pantry. 'It must be a cultural thing,' said Mum. 'As long as he is happy.' We started storing food and kitchen things in other cupboards so we wouldn't disturb him.[119]

The most important point of this story, however, is the fact that nothing is represented as categorical as it is in other similar stories; the narrator and his/her family do not have the ultimate solution to make Eric happy, Eric does not easily lose his feelings of sadness and homesickness and more importantly the story does not end by Eric staying there happily forever after. For me, Eric also has another different quality from the similar characters in other immigration stories. Almost every refugee or immigrant character in conformist stories come under the same characterization, whether it be in the form of an animal story

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[117] Tan, 12.
[118] Tan, 12.
[119] Tan, 9.

(*The Journey* for example)[120] or the realistic ones such as the examples that we will investigate later in this chapter. Their common quality is their neediness which will be treated later by the charity of the host country and a new life and that is not the quality of the stranger in *Eric* neither the focus of the story.

It is not just the cases such as *Denver* that set a charitable point of view by portraying the incapability of common people as the reason for their poverty and addressing capitalism as the only way of salvation; each of the conformist works about war and immigration is also narrated from the safe stance of benevolence. Unlike versions such as *Denver*, which brings up, or almost completely manipulates, the reason(s) for issues such as wealth and poverty, stories about war and immigration purposely ignore in their narratives the cause(s) of these disasters.

Telling the story of travelling individuals while at the same time conveying the qualities of the new land or as Warnqvist calls it "the romanticized new country"[121] is something at which Western writers are particularly skilled, and both *The Journey* (2016) by Francesca Sanna and *My Name is Not Refugee* (2017) by Kate Milner as well as other stories which will be discussed in this chapter,[122] feature detailed illustrations in which the stories' protagonists are but westernized and simplified figures. By focusing on the host lands in which the protagonists end up rather than on the (refugees/immigrants) characters themselves, these books underline the essential perfection of the new land, and the extent to which immigrant's lives are improved by foreign efforts. In her recent study about Swedish picture books about war and immigration, Warnqvist stressed that "in the depictions of the recipient country, there is a strong tendency to focus on the progression towards integration, acceptance of life in the new country, and a happy ending".[123]

One of the things that some writers of these books particularly enjoy is depicting the process of travel from a somehow same perspective, and the covers of *The Journey* (2016) and *Stepping Stones* (2016), which portray the refugee families during difficult travelling conditions while carrying lots of luggage, are perfect examples of their skill in focusing

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[120] Francesca Sanna, *The Journey* (London: Flying Eye Books, 2016).
[121] Warnqvist. "Family First in Homes Away from Home: Depictions of Refugee Experiences and Flight from War in Picturebooks Published in Sweden 2014–2018," 64.
[122] Kate Milner, *My Name Is Not Refugee* (Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Barrington Stoke Ltd, 2017).
[123] Warnqvist, 64.

mostly on the journey itself rather than on conditions of refugees after arrival to the new country.

Figure 12. the cover of *Stepping Stones*


Figure 13. the cover of *The Journey*

By repeating the same pattern of narrative but changing the characters, details and illustration techniques, these books convey in a very delicate manner the necessity of finding hope in a new country and the constructed concepts of freedom and prosperity. Illustrations and tone of stories profoundly influence the way in which difficult events and situations appear to children, and writers usually use words very carefully, interweaving concepts such as hope, happiness and home with effective illustrations, and elaborated and tranquil endings. Warnqvist, who has investigated different examples of this genre, realized the ignorance existing in these books, and said precisely that "the reality facing many refugees – long stays in refugee camps, language barriers, the wait for visa or asylum decisions, high unemployment, xenophobia, racism, inner turmoil, and longing for the home country and all that they left behind – is barely addressed in these stories".[124] The problem is that these books of war and immigration are simply not created by (and for) those experiencing these traumas. There is no wonder then that the writers and illustrators of such books are able to demonstrate a cheerful and hopeful representation of those phenomena, free of any painful distraction caused by real life experiences. Warnqvist has said that "this is possibly the reason why these stories convey such positive images of the recipient country and of the situation of the refugees in the new country".[125]

[124] Warnqvist, 65.
[125] Warnqvist, 65.

"Can outsiders rely on imagination to create culturally authentic books about cultures other than their own?" Mingshui Cai asks in his book *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*.[126] He also argues that "there is no denying that imagination is a powerful creative faculty, but it is not the master of reality. "Brute facts" impose constraints and limitations on the author's imagination".[127] Possibly the writers would try to write about other cultures from the perspective of the implied author or as Cai calls it the "second self",[128] but eventually they are still bound by their own cultural identity and their limited knowledge of the other side's reality. In spite of this simplification of difficult issues such as war and immigration, or perhaps because of it, this genre of literature has been represented very much to children these days, and especially to those children who have not experienced those difficulties by themselves.

The Althusserian concept of interpellation is an important criterion here if we want to look at these books in a larger political scale and in relation to the institutions of power. The interpellation – the process by which children (as subjects) encounter and submit certain ideologies and values – is and remains one of the substantial foundations on which my work relies, even if its presence is not quite so obvious in all of the works that we investigate in this chapter. What I really want to do here is to draw attention to the works in which an interpellant atmosphere exists and in which a form of ideological conformism dominates. Kate Milner's *My Name is not Refugee*, which follows the stereotypical pattern of a journey, is a good example of interpellation under the adult's gaze. In almost all pages of this book, I see a clear connection to the Althusserian interpellation and to the Foucauldian explanation of panopticism. This is particularly clear in the case of questions posed in each page addressing the audience and in illustrations. There is also a very specific manipulative aspect in each question, an aspect that causes distraction from the main important issue with an attractive playful feature. Such techniques are characteristic of a great deal of war and immigration picture books.

In *My Name is not Refugee*, Milner tells the story of a refugee boy's journey from home to a new land in the company of his mother. The narrator of the whole story is the mother who explains to the boy the stages of their travel. In their way, as the mother tells, they will experience different and difficult situations in peace. What is much more important,

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[126] Mingshui Cai, *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*, xvii.
[127] Cai, xvii.
[128] Cai, 63.

is that the author demonstrates in a superficial way an explosive situation of a war torn country only by mentioning the unsafety and nastiness of the place. It is war time in the story, and still there is hardly any picture which illustrates the situation. Moreover, the settings of the story, the illustrated customs and the accessories do not always relate to the culture of the main characters as those who are living in non-western war torn regions.

In their chapter, "Texts That Assure: Selecting Picturebooks to Use with Displaced Children", Julia E. McAdam, Evelyn Arizpe and Sussane Abou Ghaida explore how books are often chosen to create a "safe space" for children who have experienced displacement.[129] This aligns with the argument in this dissertation that certain migration narratives, such as *My Name Is Not Refugee*, function to provide reassurance rather than to provoke a critical understanding of the political structures that led to the child's displacement. By simplifying the refugee experience, these texts offer comfort but avoid the more difficult conversations about power and agency.

And finally, I think the questions which appear in each page are not provocative and essential and only function as an interpellant medium to institutionalize the ideology of the book and to distract the audience from the main issue in a playful way. We sense the excitement of preparing for a journey in some questions such as "what would you take?" (in the backpack for the journey), "How far could you walk?" (accompanied by some illustrations showing the boy using a skateboard! See the picture below), "what games can you think of?" (while bored during the journey), "Do you like cars and lorries?", "can you speak more than one language?" and "what is the weirdest food you have ever eaten?", almost as if the boy in the story is going for a holiday vacation.

Figure 14. From *My Name is not Refugee*

[129] Julia E. McAdam, Evelyn Arizpe and Sussane Abou Ghaida, "Texts That Assure: Selecting Picturebooks to Use with Displaced Children", In *The Routledge Companion to Migration Literature* edited by Gigi Adair, Rebecca Fasselt, Carly McLaughlin ed., *The Routledge Companion to Migration Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2025), 520-533.

The shocking statement of the mother when leaving the town saying "it will be a bit sad but quite exciting too" accompanied by the inducing question "Do you think you could live in a place where there is no water in the taps and no one to pick up the rubbish?" reminds us that the story is enforcing a superficial point of view about the situation of a war torn country and the feelings of its people. As they grow up, children should learn about the emotions, both of their own and others. A big part of the forced translocation of children from their own country to another is about their feelings when they have to leave behind whatever belongs and matters to them. In the course of this book, the feeling of excitement dominates, and the little boy's true identity and emotion as a refugee hides behind simple and cheerful words and illustrations. Vassiliki Vassiloudi in her scrutinizing article *International and Local Relief Organizations and the Promotion of Children's and Young Adult Refugee Narratives* (2019) quotes mentioned sentences from *My Name is not Refugee* and argues that these kind of statements "do no justice to the trauma suffered by children in the East. By erasing the trials and tribulations they face, these narratives are misrepresenting them".[130] She continues saying that "true awareness and empathy by Western child readers cannot be raised by portraying the displacement suffered by underprivileged children in the East as a sugar-coated, risk-free journey".[131]

The most important thing for me in this story is the fact that the exciting questions for the audience and how they spread in each page in order to interpellate or hail children is through the whole story. It happens so naturally that no one doubts about their other side of existence which is about distracting the audience by representing the journey as something exciting at the same time that it shapes or reminds them their own identity by the act of hailing through the questions which are mostly related to the personal traits.

Based on the complexity of the subject and the simplified (and sometimes manipulated) representations of it, these kinds of books should not be recognized as genuine literary resources to inform and empower children about war and immigration: children outside the experience will probably not understand what is really happening in war torn countries – and perhaps not relate to the situation, even if for different reasons the book has been modified and customized to their culture.

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[130] Vassiliki Vassiloudi. "International and Local Relief Organizations and the Promotion of Children's and Young Adult Refugee Narratives," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 57, No. 2 (2019): 35-49, 42.
[131] Vassiloudi, 42.

The universality of the "home-away-(new) home pattern",[132] as well as introducing the new home as an ideal and safe place, is an essential character of this book and so many other immigration books, for example *Stepping Stones* and *The Journey* that we will further investigate in this chapter. There is a trend today that "the writers and picture book artists have mainly chosen to depict flight from war as a travel or adventure story with a happy ending rather than to focus on the flight as a trauma".[133] And this is not just about a few instances: many children's books about refugees show the same tendency, for example, those ones investigated by Warnqvist and Vassiloudi. There can be no doubt that these books play an important role in the political comprehension of children and institutionalization of dominant ideologies in them. Because illustrations are strongly effective in picture books too, children and their parents may also be more swayed to rely on the texts which accompany the illustrations to conceive the issues of war and immigration.

Young readers of *My Name is not Refugee*, *The Journey* and also *Stepping Stones* might find the images of families' flight from a war torn country within hard circumstances quite frightening, but the stories and illustrations tell them that they all will end up in a warm embrace and not in a monster's mouth. Certain suggestive expressions such as "we'll get to a place where we are safe and we can unpack",[134] "we will go there and not be frightened anymore",[135] "We tell each other new stories. Stories about the land we are heading to, where the big green forests are filled with kind fairies that dance and give us magic spells to end the war",[136] "I hope, one day, like these birds, we will find a new home. A home where we can be safe and begin our story again",[137] "At last we came to our future. New neighbors welcomed us with opened arms"[138] and "We have a new home now, a home with new sounds and smells, with smiles and people who help"[139] accompanied by corresponsive illustrations (see the pictures below) accommodate children from Western culture to understand the refugees' situation in a manipulative way; but there are nuances which vary from book to book (from an ambiguous but

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[132] Warnqvist,67.
[133] Warnqvist,69.
[134] Milner, *My Name Is Not Refugee*.
[135] Sanna, *The Journey.*
[136] Sanna, *The Journey.*
[137] Sanna, *The Journey.*
[138] Margriet Ruurs. *Stepping Stones* (Canada: Orca Book Publishers, 2016).
[139] Ruurs. *Stepping Stones.*

implicitly happy ending in *The Journey* to an idealised depiction of the host country in *Stepping Stones*).

Figure 15. The ending in *Stepping Stones*

Figure 16. The ending in *The Journey*

Research by Vassiloudi, has suggested that children's refugee stories are "produced" and "promoted" works of literature which serve certain ideologies. [140] She has sought to show that in refugee picture books authors tend to overlook the difficulties that refugees face, whereas they implant "an implicitly comforting faith in Western charity and happy narrative closure".[141] She suggests that these books mostly seek to mask the reasons behind catastrophes such as war, so they draw the audience's attention to the consequences of the phenomenon, which are easier to address than the challenging political reasons of war, and therefore probably provide better depictions of Western authorities as host countries. "War is mostly portrayed as a self-created condition",[142] she says.

> No mention of politics at all, local or international, even in the form of allusion, can be traced. Instead, after a passing reference to an unaccounted-for war, the majority of these narratives focus on the refugees' long journey to get away from the theaters of war, with hardly any exploration of what preceded to actually bring about their displacement.[143]

This research gives us a hint that there is a disciplining power encoded in these books that is politically so important that it cannot be ignored. This comes as no surprise that the conventions of conformist books are inevitably so dominant in war and immigration picture books. The interplay between home-new home and war-peace dichotomies is currently an important topic for both war and immigration books. Vassiloudi suggests that journey, the journey of salvation, is the "popular image and such a central motif to

[140] Vassiloudi, 35.
[141] Vassiloudi, 37.
[142] Vassiloudi, 38.
[143] Vassiloudi, 38.

refugee narratives that it seems to deflect attention from any other implication of the refugee condition" and therefore of all forms of political underlying conditions.[144] Yet still, some advocate this form of simplification of the issue without thinking that this may not be only simplifying the issue but manipulating:

> Some adults might argue in favor of happy closure on the grounds that exposing non-refugee children to the full extent of the trauma suffered by refugee children could inflict trauma on the former. In that case, we—as adults, academics, parents, educators, and critics – should ask ourselves in whose best interest we act when promoting such distorted images of rapturous acceptance and benevolence. Even if non-refugee child readers are our primary focus, how are we benefiting them by giving them half-truths and watered down stories?[145]

Consider, for example, the manipulative cultural and political information encoded in these images (below) from *The Journey.* Why are they carrying so many suitcases? What kind of family is depicted here as a refugee family? Adult readers who are informed and aware may see that this is a bourgeois family who have a comfortable life (also perceivable in other pictures of the book depicting their house and their holiday spending in a beach before the war) and flee the country while the mother drives a car! Based on the reality and the genuine information, those adults might understand that this is not a true depiction of a refugee family in trouble because bourgeois families in war torn countries usually leave the country with airplane having all their stuff in their too many suitcases or having them being shipped to the destination while for others there is not any possibility to carry too many stuff due to the hardship of the journey. But a child reader, living in a Western country, will probably not know this and that's why it matters to be meticulous about the boundary between simplification and manipulation.

Figure 17. From *The Journey*

Figure 18. From *The Journey*

[144] Vassiloudi, 38.
[145] Vassiloudi, 38.

It is probably true that "we make sense of our world through stories, and only secondarily through facts".[146] I do not believe anyone outside the war torn countries can understand the sudden abandonment of home, the end of a local life, that attaches to the act of immigration, from these kinds of texts and illustrations that we have discussed. This way many children and adults may make a wrong sense of war and immigration and of those who are traumatized - unless, of course, they gain the information from other trustable sources.

An interesting but highly manipulating example of political appropriation of war and immigration is the collaboration of Margriet Ruurs with the Syrian artist Nizar Ali Badr in *Stepping Stones*. It brings up everything associated with the issue of war (from the background of the war to the act of immigration and arrival to the new land), while making commodifying use of Nizar Ali Badr's art. We find in the introduction of the book some representations of what Vassiloudi calls "the myth of Western philanthropy"[147] and traces of a "sentimental tale that begs for the compassion of the implied reader"[148] when the author explains that how she found Badr's art in Facebook and with the help of a charitable publisher they made his art being introduced to the world.

Vassiloudi in her article argues that books about refugees do not help children to understand "why these people were uprooted in the first place".[149] Children may not grasp any information about the causes of war and the powers behind it, but instead they will receive a lot of positive images of "successful settlement in a Western 'welfare'".[150] What they do perceive are the smiling people in the host country, the new food and culture, the new language which becomes familiar soon and the peace in the new place. The picture books discussed till here doubtlessly follow the same ideology as well, but in *Stepping Stones* there is an allusion to the precondition of war which is more manipulating than informing:

> But Jedo said we weren't really free
> If we're not allowed to sing our songs,

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[146] Jeffrey Garret. "Screams and Smiles: On Some Possible Human Universals in Children's Book Illustration," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 46, No. 4 (2008): 16-24, 22.
[147] Vassiloudi, 43.
[148] Vassiloudi, 45.
[149] Vassiloudi, 39.
[150] Vassiloudi, 43.

To dance our dances,

To pray the prayers of our choice,

Are we truly free?

In an effort to introduce the problem of war and to justify the rightfulness of political conflict, the author questions the freedom of people before the war which is again related to the ideology of "we fix it for you" when the foreign authorities want to intervene in the territorial issues of a third world country. Though this is in contrast with what was described in the book concerning the family's life before the war, many beautiful and happy moments full of peace and freedom:

We laughed, ran across rocks and sand,

Free as birds.

[…..]

In that not-so-distant memory

We were free.

Free to play, free to go to school.

Free to buy fruit and vegetables at the market.

Free to laugh and chat, drink tea with neighbors.

To mark the beginning of the war, we only have a simple sentence implying the unknown origin of it: "Then war came to our country"; this is the same in *The Journey* where we have this simple sentence as an announcement of the beginning of the war: "The war began". The first presents the war in the form of anthropomorphism, renouncing any other responsible agents behind it. The second sentence by using a passive verb implies the unknowable source of the war, as if it just began like a natural disaster and no one knows from where it came.

A comparison of the different strategies used in these books to disregard the causes of war is particularly illuminating. Their distinctive choices of manipulation from not mentioning it at all and focusing only on the journey and destination (in *The Suitcase* and *My Name is not Refugee* for example) to the oversimplification (*The Stepping Stones* and *The Journey*) and falsified explanations of the reasons of wars (in David McKee's works for example) illustrate how these productions help shape the conformist literature as well as political stereotypes.

The political nature of these books – dominated by a capitalist ideology and economy – accounts for the popularity and striking effects of this genre of children's literature. By offering a comprehensive overview of the manipulating practices of literary masking of controversial aspects of war and immigration in contemporary children's picture books, Vassiloudi mentions an important and arguable issue: the problem of "avoiding politicization in spite of the fact that the issue explored is hardly apolitical".[151] Given that these kinds of picture books act as a key medium of children's political and cultural development but at the same time they seem to avoid politicization, there can be no doubt that they play an important part in confirming the dominant ideology and powers.

Although Vassiloudi's conclusion that there is a tendency in recent children books towards more journeying part and away from the phenomena of war itself may be so true, but there are also some conformist books that nevertheless offer conformist ideologies about the war and its causes in their own way. David McKee, who has written many books about human relations and counteractions (although mostly in the form of animal stories), has some works such as *Six Men* (1972)[152], *Tusk Tusk* (1978)[153], *Two Monsters* (1985)[154] and *The Conquerors* (2004)[155] which specially deal with the issue of war. In this analysis we refer to two of these works (*Tusk Tusk* and *The Conquerors*) and consider how these works represent negotiation of the two sides and offer their readers a different kind of conformist political point of view.

Like their conformist counterparts, these books suggest the negotiation of political sides by focusing on the cultural boundaries that exist between them and by neutralizing the concepts of home and homeland. These works advocate the beneficial effects of removing the boundaries and surrendering and illustrate that the process of conformism can lead to a peaceful end. Although many books for children may explore similar themes, those ones that look at cultural and political differences as the barriers of peace and freedom differ from similar books for children, as they do not resolve the conflicts by only negotiation in order to reach mutual satisfaction but they suggest mingled cultural identities and surrender as solutions. For example, at the end of McKee's *Tusk Tusk*, it is clear that the saviors, "the grandchildren of peace-loving" black and white elephants, have been

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[151] Vassiloudi, 45.
[152] David McKee, *Six Men* (London: A and C Black, 1972).
[153] David McKee, *Tusk Tusk* (London: Andersen Press, 1978).
[154] David McKee, *Two Monsters* (London: Andersen Press, 1985).
[155] David McKee, *The Conquerors* (London: Andersen Press, 2004).

assimilated into the grey color and embraced the hybridity. In this way, this book not only mentions the reason of the war, but can offer its readers a kind of solution: those who want peace form both sides, run away from the conflict and get together and their intermingled next generation will bring peace to the world.

Even though we are living in a world where intercultural marriages and partnerships are considered normal and encouraging – many people who are refugees or immigrants find their partners in the host country – it is clear that McKee finds the concept very triggering as a political solution. However, his depiction of cultural mingling in the time of war is a bit illusory. Although this depiction, especially when placed within the context of a children's story, seems to be used to demonstrate the positive function of multiculturalism, it nonetheless suggests that there does not exist any cultural and political hierarchies. Consequently, when telling his story, by ignoring the issue that during the war not the same amount of people run away from both sides where one side have more power over the other, McKee shelters those powers responsible for the war from being accused of the consequences of it. McKee's book demonstrates that the cultural (appearance) differences between the two sides and their arrogance are usually the reasons for the conflict and war. As a result, he implicitly suggests that appearance differences force individuals to fight with each other; this is also clear at the very end of the story where the grey elephants also appear to have some problem with each other because "recently the little ears and the big ears have been giving each other strange looks".

This reality that we are all human beings is clearly echoed in what Cai calls "multicultural literature". He and other critics of multicultural children's literature consider the representation of "the commonalities across cultures" an important characteristic and also the predominant literary focus of this genre.[156] In Cai's opinion children's books of this genre can "reveal to children whose vision may have been maimed by prejudice that people who have been described as alien and inferior are basically the same as they are in many ways".[157] The concentration of educators, writers and critics is in insisting on peoples' similarities as a way of seeking peace. However, the point is not to teach children that everyone is the same (because obviously not everyone is the same and cultural differences really matter) but to show them that no one is superior and that the reason of

[156] Mingshui Cai, *Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults*, 121.
[157] Cai, 121.

war and struggles does not refer to the fact that we are different but to the power imbalances which puts some special cultures in a superior stance. The truth is what Cai mentions later indicating that in some multicultural books "people and children everywhere seem to live in peace and happiness. You do not see poverty, famine, epidemics, or the other social disasters occurring in the Third World countries, which are the consequences of colonialization by Western imperialist powers and the present unequal global economic system. […] we see only the sunny side of the world".[158] At the end of these stories, children, after seeing all the wars and struggles easily resolved, do not think of the unjust reasons behind and therefore start to sync with the mainstream of conformist political thought.

Vassiloudi argues that refugee books mostly

> reproduce ideas of Western humanitarianism, while at the same time avoiding addressing the role of Western states in the predicament of refugees or assigning responsibility for the causes of displacement, dislocation, trauma, death, injuries, orphanhood, and violation of basic human rights. War is accountable for these vices. Yet, war does not emerge out of thin air; war has root causes and effects. It is only the latter that get explored, leaving unaddressed the crucial issue of why and in whose interests wars are conducted. The West is seemingly promoted as the benevolent Other, with no barracks, no detention camps, no fences, and no protests and hostile policies against refugees.[159]

Here, she foregrounds the importance of representing the traumatic consequences of war and the power institutions who are engaged and responsible for it. She also emphasizes that

> Many of these refugee narratives tend to educate Western children in corrective philanthropy, rather than in humanity: first you throw your bombs, you sell your guns, you rip off countries' natural resources, and then you turn into a great philanthropist to undo the very harm you have caused.[160]

This implies that conformist books about war and immigration perform and perfect their role as the ideological apparatuses to help with the maintenance of the dominant powers. These books, it seems, do what they are expected to do in order to create the illusion that not only everything is fine but there are certain authorities who make people's life fine. However, the plan to ignore the problem of war and its causes will not be efficient. As Foucault says, no power works only by censorship and repression, it also needs to produce

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[158] Cai, 122.
[159] Vassiloudi, 45.
[160] Vassiloudi, 46.

in order to carry on its existence. Consequently, as some refugee books misrepresent the issue of war and immigration, by not addressing and mentioning some parts of the reality (censorship and repression strategy), other books such as those ones by McKee assert that they have genuinely explained the issue of war and its causes and consequences (knowledge production) and in doing so they manipulate different aspects of the issue, which allows their aimed ideology to beseem true to their audience.

These books assert that the actual process of war and immigration can be quite painful and challenging for the people involved but that these problems are nonetheless solvable. They illustrate that it is not a problem for individuals to leave behind their identity and homeland and that they can easily adapt to new identities and cultures if they have to leave their home because of the war which has its roots in prejudice and resistance and not in some authorities' interests. These books, therefore, are able to offer their child readers a form of produced knowledge, as they not only produce manipulated data and visions of the complex issues of war and political struggles, they offer their audience keys to how to interpret and deal with these issues.

Also, both books about refugee's journeys and the ones about the phenomena of war itself illustrate that when the minorities begin to dissolve the cultural boundaries that are between them and the dominant power, they become happier and free from any struggle. These works therefore highlight the matter of surrendering and being adaptable to the cultural and political hierarchies that exist in the capitalist systems and institutions in order to forge conformist identities.

Ultimately, the other work by McKee, *The Conquerors*, illustrates that the unprivileged and minorities need not deny the authority of those in power and they should attempt to confirm to certain political hierarchies, as it is alright to embrace and surrender to the invaders while keeping their own culture and identity. This provocative account tells how a powerful General and his soldiers conquer countries in different martial and cultural ways. The General is depicted as a good guy who has the right to conquer. In this story, based on his memories of second world war and most importantly produced because of the Iraq war (according to the author himself in an interview in 2020),[161] McKee shows how the small country and their conformity helped General to conquer them in peace.

[161] 'The shock is hard to get over!' Elmer creator David McKee on winning BookTrust's Lifetime Achievement Award and his incredible career | BookTrust

Provocative and colorful illustrations, depicting the soldiers in blue and red colors resembles both UK and US flags, the countries which were invaders in Iraq's war. The text, easy enough to be read even by younger audience, tells a story to ideologically manipulate children and adults.

According to Vassiloudi

> As long as these narratives are circulated as educational material, it is our ethical responsibility to unearth hidden neo-imperialist and neocolonialist tensions in children's books that take as their focus the refugee condition, but implicitly and perhaps unintentionally reinforce the Western supremacy mythology.[162]

This kind of "neo-imperialist and neo-colonialist tensions" is not only prevalent in the refugee books but also in books about war and peace that we mentioned here. Despite the implicit mentions of Western benevolence and supremacy in other examples of war and immigration books, what we have in *The Conquerors* is an explicit depiction of rightfulness in power hierarchies. Both Denver in McKee's *Denver* and General in *The Conquerors* are the ones who are responsible for the welfare of villages and countries, but neither has a convincing legitimacy of the responsibility. Instead, there is an indisputable sense that the characters are simply benevolent, helping and rescuing people who don't know the correct way of living by themselves. McKee expresses this implication in an interview talking about *The Conquerors*, explaining, "there have to be other ways to deal with things than war".[163]

In *The Conquerors,* McKee inculcates a strong sense of the ethnic supremacy in the very beginning of the story. He writes:

> There was once a large country that was ruled by a General. The people believed that their way of life was the best. They had a very strong army, and they had the cannon. From time to time the General would take his army and attack a nearby country "It's for their own good," he said. "So they can be like us."

He recognizes the ethnic hierarchy between countries and associates the West with the powerful General and "a very strong army", instead; he views the Eastern side as simply conquerable or even as "such a small country that the General had never bothered to invade it".

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[162] Vassiloudi, 45-46.

[163] 'The shock is hard to get over!' Elmer creator David McKee on winning BookTrust's Lifetime Achievement Award and his incredible career | BookTrust

Children's books like this addressing explicitly the issue of colonialism and imperialism with an advocative point of view is an exception. The child audience of both *Denver* and *The Conquerors* should identify themselves as either conformists to the power of the conquerors or the resisting losers.

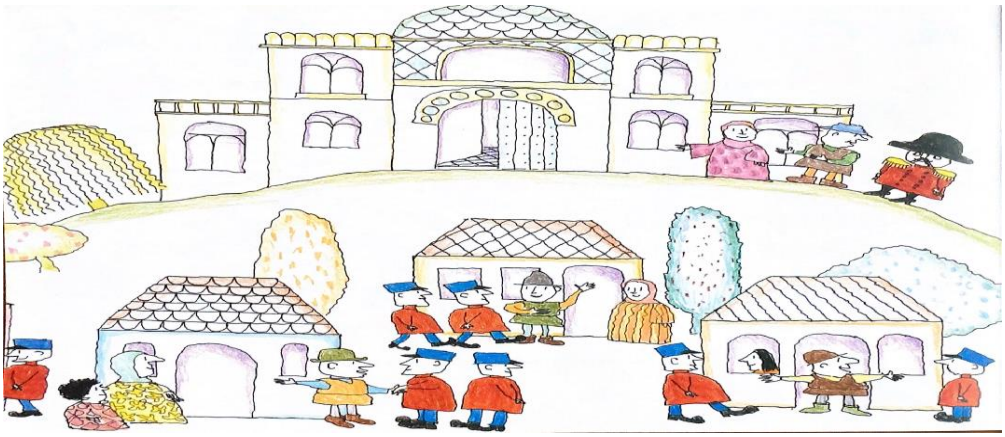

Figure 19. from *The Conquerors*: The conformist citizens of the small country

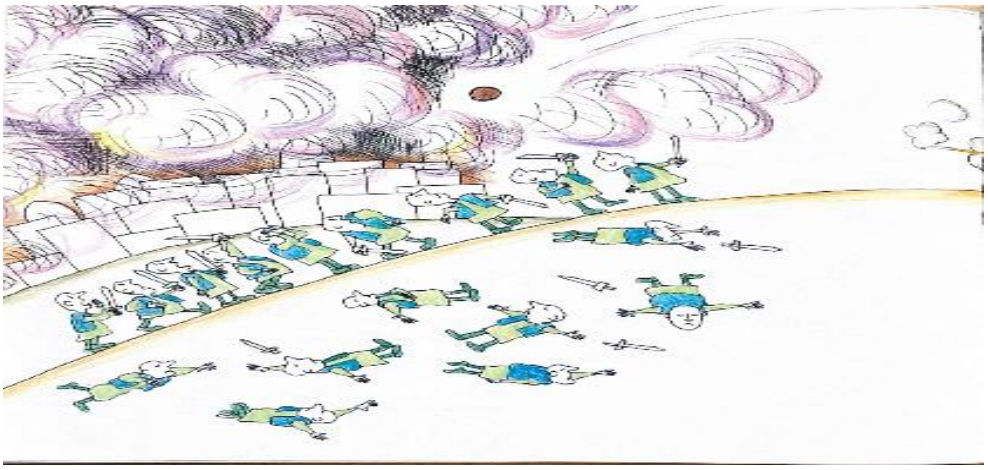

Figure 20. from *The Conquerors:* The resisting people of conquered countries

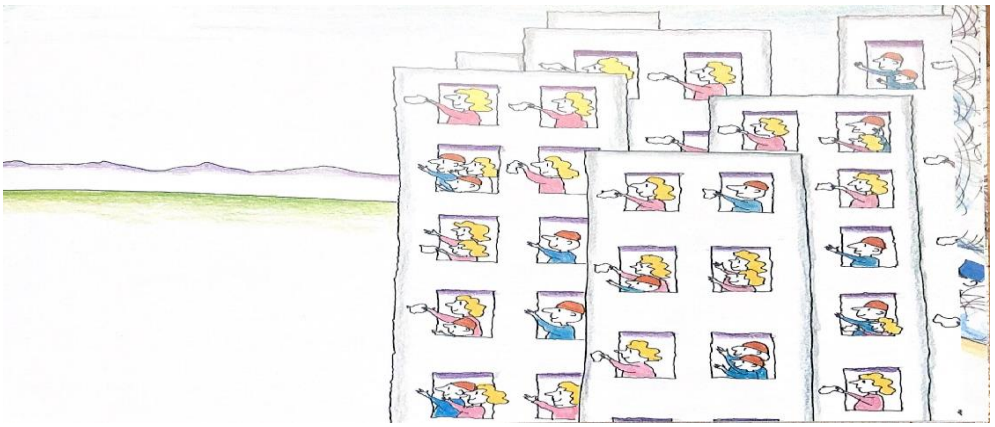

Figure 21. from *The Conquerors:* The conformist citizens of General's country

The children from both the dominant culture and minorities are targeted by the books. Both are supposed to be convinced that the existing power imbalance between the General's country and other countries is justified, and the children from both sides will have the impression that the war is the fault of those who resist against those in power.

In *The Conquerors,* McKee justifies the military intervention of the West in Iraq from a self-righteous point of view. The Western people depicted in the book are satisfied with their own way of life and encourage the General to slaughter other people in order to be "conquerors" and to enforce their wills on other people.

Foucault's expression of the state as "a new form of pastoral power" could be really illuminating here.[164] He writes:

> we may observe a change in its objective. It was no longer a question of leading people to their salvation in the next world but rather ensuring it in this world. And in this context, the word "salvation" takes on different meanings: health, well-being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, protection against accidents.[165]

Salvation is an integral part in all these children's stories. The strange animal in *The Suitcase,* claimed to be liberated from his homesickness by the other animals who open his suitcase when he is asleep and without his permission, explaining that "we fixed it as best we could". The refugee characters of *The Journey*, *My Name is not Refugee* and *Stepping Stones* fall into a pattern of a salvation journey.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (*Empire* 2000) explain that

> the ancient notions of Empire help us articulate better the nature of this world order in formation. As Thucydides, Livy, and Tacitus all teach us (along with Machiavelli commenting on their work), Empire is formed not on the basis of force itself but on the basis of the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace.[166]

They write that "Empire is formed and its intervention becomes juridically legitimate only when it is already inserted into the chain of international consensus aimed at resolving existing conflicts".[167] Despite their seemingly innocent nature, these children's books about war and immigration deal consistently with the effects of pretending and forced services of modern Empires. The most obvious account of encouraging consensus

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[164] Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, 783.
[165] Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, 784.
[166] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000), 15.
[167] Hardt and Negri, 15.

on the legitimacy of a certain power to resolve conflicts is *The Conquerors* addressing the General's Empire as the force in charge. Perhaps this is because the military act and the General's intervention in other countries' affairs are so explicitly justified. Unlike the other war and immigration books, where people are attacked and killed by anonymous and unknown forces, those killed in *The Conquerors* are obviously attacked by the General and his soldiers who are also encouraged by the people of their own country. In *Empire*, the authors claim that "the first task of Empire, then, is to enlarge the realm of the consensuses that support its own power".[168] The General succeeds in fulfilling this task. He gains his power firstly from supporting people of his own country and then moves to get the consensus of others by both ways of violence and peace. Foucault's description of a new form of pastoral power is equally as illuminating as Hardt and Negri's explanation of the modern Empire. Although all these forms of power circulate the claims of salvation, protection and peace, their subjects must deal with a kind of slavery in order to be leaded to redemption.

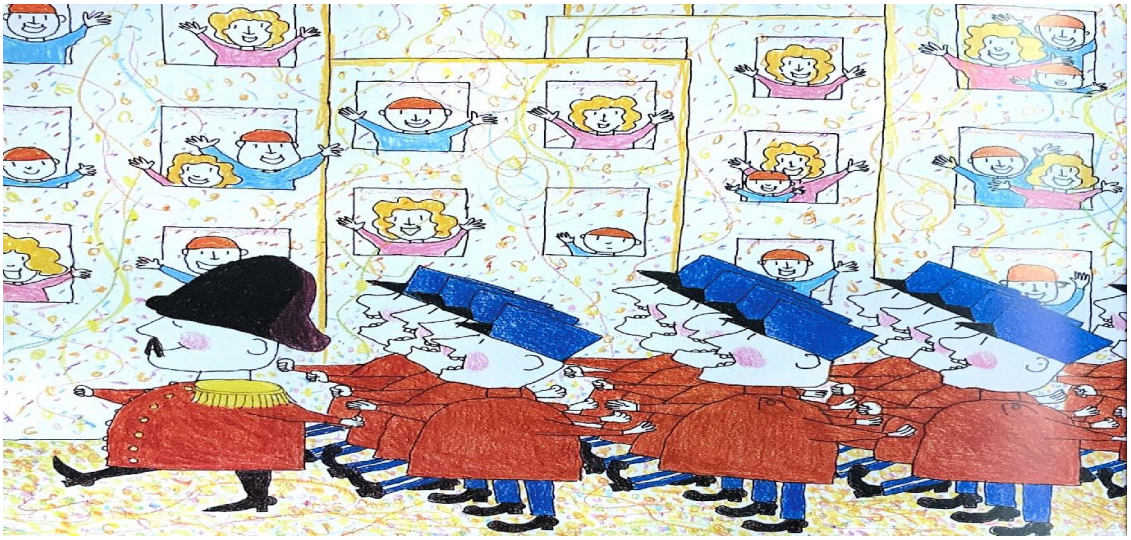

Figure 22. from *The Conquerors*: The General comes back triumphant from the small country

In *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (2010) Roger Stahl talks about the combination of war and entertainment in the contemporary world which he calls "militainment" and looks at this phenomenon as an "interactive war" which has a crucial role in constructing a new form of "citizen subject".[169] He writes: "The evolving quality

[168] Hardt and Negri, 15.

[169] Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: war, media, and popular culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

of this citizen is vitally important to the quality of contemporary war, especially in an ostensibly democratic system where one has a say in the approval and authorization of war".[170] The protagonists of this interactive war (the subject citizens who are participating in war through media, games, etc.) are much like the protagonists of children's stories, in a sense that they seemingly are given freedom to act and change the world, but actually they are not free. It is the institutions of power's struggle, and logically they should be the central characters of war, but States' democratic features make the masses the most prominent characters in the war. The majority of children's stories also highlight individuals' intelligence and championship, but with their origins as the author's subjects, they have to undertake their designed journey of salvation. War's transformation from a centralized military phenomenon to the engaging phenomenon of "militainment" has political and purposeful aspects. Stahl in his book tries to explain "how the consumer war works to construct the citizen's identity in relationship to war" and "describe two related aspects of the evolving phenomenon of militainment" as follows:

> The first might be described as the "wiring" of the citizen's relationship to war, the material arrangement of technologies and institutions that make war a phenomenon available for consumption. These interfaces normalize certain practices, habits, and dispositions toward war. Closely related is the second aspect, the symbolic and symbolic construction of military activity. This includes the dominant generic alignments, narratives, images, and language choices that not only paint a picture of state violence but also work to articulate the citizen subject within it.[171]

In contrast to this seemingly active situation of the "citizen subject" in relation to the war, Stahl mentions that "rather than reclaiming a place as an active *subject* of the military as in the days of the citizen-soldier, all indicators suggest that the citizen had become an even more potent *object* of military interest".[172] The wider the citizens' presence on the platform of the war the more they become objects of consumption; the result is better recruiting for the centers of power. Citizen's transformation as described by Stahl represents the power's reproductive way to recruit people through media, images and visions, especially young adults and children. According to Stahl, "the interactive war" encourages

> the citizen to engage in a closed, constructed system that channels the civic urge through fantasies of military participation. That is, instead of positioning the citizen as *subject* of war, this interactive war further cements the citizen's role as *object* of

[170] Stahl, 4.
[171] Stahl, 15.
[172] Stahl, 38.

> the military apparatus. The "interface" between citizen and military is therefore not one where the citizen has any real role in "playing the war," but rather should be thought of as a sophisticated means through which the military-entertainment complex "plays the citizen".[173]

Literary retellings of war and immigration comprise objective engagement as well, and each of them presents a different facet of militainment. Conformist versions for Western children often restrict themselves to what Stahl calls "replacing civic responsibility with a distant, personal sympathy"[174] and what Guy Debord calls "the dominant order's monologue of self-praise".[175] War and immigration narratives are made more attractive for children by emphasizing the illustrative and pictorial aspects of the books. For instance, in *The Conquerors,* McKee demonstrates all the citizens and soldiers in a cheerful mood in the time of peace and war.

Carol Fox and Peter Hunt (2004) explain that "the treatment of war as entertainment goes back to the earliest oral tradition, but the commodification of real war, and its packaging on television, has led to a problem in explaining to young readers what war is actually like".[176] Tracing the intermingling of war and game in children's books, they quote from one of Terry Pratchett's *Johnny Maxwell* trilogy (*Only You Can Save Mankind* (1992)) this thoughtful speech of Johnny: "That's what I mean. Games look real. Real things look like games … We always turn [war] into something that's not exactly real. We turn it into games and it's not games. We really have to find out what's real!" (115, 116, 117) [quoted from Fox & Hunt].[177] The intermingled positioning of war and game (or entertainment) results in successive manipulations and even inhibitions of representing the issue as some real political phenomena.

Stahl's book *Militainment* also deals with "the notion of the "spectacle" and its place as a dominant means of accounting for the control function of media in wartime. This conventional account considers the ways that media discourses work to exclude, distract, and ultimately *deactivate* the political subject".[178] In order to elaborate on the notion of

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[173] Stahl, 47.
[174] Stahl, 43.
[175] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 1967), 13.
[176] Carol Fox and Peter Hunt, "War", In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 499-506 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 503.
[177] Carol Fox and Peter Hunt, "War", 504.
[178] Stahl, 16.

"spectacle", Stahl discusses its origin in the work of Guy Debord *Society of Spectacle* (1967) where he introduces

> a social condition infused by images and representations that serve to distract and politically deactivate the masses. The spectacle consists of panoramic illusion, a "pseudoworld" that replaces the actual world and uproots society from its real conditions, ultimately producing an alienation that pervades all levels. This process is not simply a type of "false consciousness" perpetrated by the centers of power. In the society of the spectacle, the image itself comes to occupy the center, a place of endless self-reproduction, where "deceit deceives itself." Here, Debord writes, "The ruling order endlessly discourses upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is a self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence." The spectacle colonizes leisure time such that real engagement with actual political circumstances fades in its shadow.[179]

This strategy of deactivating political-bound elements is well established in children's literature, and as Debord states, it is done through the "spectacle" which is "the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep".[180] Children's literature of war and immigration also creates spectacles to abridge the real phenomenon into a form of dream. Their focus is on images and illusions such as how the Generous Authorities rescue the masses from their predestined misery. For instance, in reality, Iraq is occupied and captured by the US army in an intrusive way, but in McKee's version Iraq is occupied because it is in need of US' help for freedom and prosperity.

Regardless of its colonialist content, McKee's production of this mesmerizing spectacle and pictorial story has been well received by a different variety of audience. It is enough to mention that it has been published in several cases under the category of books about peace; more interestingly in a country such as Iran (which is politically against US strategies) it has been published with more than one translation and has been labelled as a story about friendship and peace and Self-discovery in children. The story was also received in the West as a humanitarian anti-war story. Setting the story in a multilayered context, gave the author the freedom he needed to suggest his colonialist ideology covered with peaceful, humanistic and benevolent appearance. Working with these kinds of stories become a real eye opener, not only about how a contemporary story could be interpreted in different ways, unlike the traditional form of children's story where we had

[179] Stahl, 31.
[180] Debord, 20.

an obvious didactic message without questioning it, but also about the importance of this multifaceted form of message as it can be manipulating as much as it is a valuable feature of contemporary literature.

The vision of spectacle is the most influential of the power strategies in the process of ideological reproduction and has continued to affect various forms of media including children's stories. War and immigration literature is one example of this process. In the examples that we have investigated, war is no longer a political issue. It becomes an image of an unknown sinister monster (except in *The Conquerors* where the act of war is justified in other ways) to represent the dilemmas people of the war torn countries have to encounter in reality.

Figure 23. from *The Journey*: War depicted as an unknown monster.

In Militainment, Stahl explains the difference between Debord's notion of the spectacle and propaganda. He points out:

> Whereas propaganda rationally engages with argument and narrative, the spectacle forgoes persuasion in favor of fostering disengagement. Whereas propaganda addresses an audience that matters, the spectacle presumes an audience that does not. And whereas propaganda seeks to answer the question of *why we fight*, the spectacle loses itself in the fact *that we fight*. Thus, rather than mounting an argument or even the "big lie," the spectacle operates mainly through the disappearance of debate.[181]

According to this statement, power's magic weapon, the reproduction of the spectacle, becomes the means of political disengagement. However, in our view of conformist

[181] Stahl, 31.

children's literature and from an educational point of view, propaganda and spectacle work together to form and represent an ideology of ongoing political occurrences. This way conformist literature arms itself with propaganda when it comes to illustrate the situation of war and its aftermath in the form of a big lie. Its refusal to answer the question "why we fight", however, relates mostly to the denying feature of the spectacle. These strategies convert the complex issue of war into a pathetic superficial story. The political struggles turn out to be easily solvable issues.

Pamela Karimi and Christiane Gruber in *Introduction: The Politics and Poetics of the Child Image in Muslim Contexts* (2012) approach Stahl's notion of militainment through an example of media representation of war's aftermath. In this essay, they explain how an Iraqi teenage boy's tragic life (named Ali Abbas who lost almost all his family members and his both arms by an American bomb) is depicted through Western media. Ali's sufferings have been exploited in several aspects, which constitutes the story of his life "as a metaphor for the fall, recovery, and liberation of Iraq".[182] One of these kinds of exploitation is the braiding of the narrative of his sufferings of the war and his charitable reception by Western authorities (depicted in photographs) to become one story of hope and gratefulness. [183] In Karimi and Gruber words,

> The message is muted but clear: he lost his arms but has been given an abundance of opportunities in large part thanks to his British caretakers. Despite the photograph's embracing of hope and recovery, it also seems to contain an unspoken apology for the violence committed by the United States, Britain, and their allies in Iraq. Perhaps more cynically, the photograph of Ali holding his passport between his toes speaks volumes to the sensationalized — even grotesque — ways in which the war has been mediatized outside of Iraqi borders. […] In this sense, the media constructs a narrative that is based on different episodes of Ali's life. The media also prevents Ali's shocking photographs from falling into the cracks of what Susan Sontag has called the "selective" imprint of reality. Instead, a more positive narrative has been constructed through a series of photographs that feature a hopeful denouement of Ali's life — from a helpless, limbless Iraqi child to a happy adolescent British citizen.[184]

This can be compared to the stories where refugee children are offered opportunities to become a part of the new society as they leave behind their sufferings. Through the symbolic relief of the refugee (as in *The Suitcase*, *My Name is not Refugee*, *Stepping*

[182] Karimi and Gruber, 281.

[183] See Karimi and Gruber's essay for more detailed account of Ali's life story and his photographs.

[184] Karimi and Gruber, 281, 283.

*Stones* and other similar stories), the issue of identity arises and then is eliminated by the time of settlement.

An inherent ethical dilemma arises in children's books that address themes of war and migration: the risk of commodifying and aestheticizing suffering for pedagogical ends. While these books often aim to cultivate empathy and understanding in young readers, they can inadvertently turn the lived trauma of refugees and displaced peoples into an object of moral consumption. This dynamic raises a key question: does the educational benefit gained by the privileged reader outweigh the potential harm of simplifying or co-opting the painful experiences of the marginalized? This ethical tension is particularly visible in texts that offer feel-good resolutions to complex geopolitical crises, which may reassure the reader without challenging them to confront the systemic injustices that caused the suffering in the first place.

Although the issues of war and immigration represented in children's stories deviate a great deal from what happens in reality, the interconnection between literature (here children's literature) and other media (news, photographs, movies, etc. which represent the issues related to war and refugees' lives) results in a dynamic manipulative understanding of reality and a superficial treatment of serious issues. While conformist immigration and war picture books do not tell the whole story of a disaster, they "tend to give an over-simplified or idealised view of particular societies in a troubled world".[185] In all of these stories, the political reason for struggles and disasters is not explicit for children, but they are those works mostly known as political ones. In fact, some of that subversive way of writings for children, that really has to do with important political issues, has remained neglected as worthy political works, I believe. In the next chapter, I will explore some examples of subversive literature for children and discuss in what ways they are functioning as non-conformist ones.

[185] Margaret Mallett, "Children's information texts" In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 622-633 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 629.

## 2. Subversive Literature

Children's literature critics and authors have examined several literary elements that can be viewed as subversive or provocative in children's books. Here we have a glimpse of some of the most important ideas around the modality of subversive literature and I'll then try to explain what this literary form means and how it differs from conformist literature in the context of this study.

Alison Lurie was one of the first critics in the twentieth century to bring up the subject of subversive children's literature and to define various aspects and characteristics of this form of literature. Lurie's discussion of subversive literature begins with a comparison of two types of children's books she encountered as a child. She mentions that the protagonists of some of those books were "depend[ant] on authority for help and advice, […] hardworking, responsible, practical […] and content with their lot in life" while in the other books "daydreaming, disobedience, answering back, running away from home, and concealing one's private thoughts and feelings from unsympathetic grown-ups" were "recommended" or even "celebrated".[186] Lurie explicitly calls this second type of books as "subversive" and compares them to the "rhymes and jokes and games" that she could learn in the playground.[187] She sees subversive literature as mainly those works which are written by authors who didn't forget their childhood and they take children's side in their writings.

One unique aspect of Lurie's argument is the distinction she makes between the two types of children's books. Each of these types presents a different perspective on the child; the child characters live in an unavoidable power relationship with adults, and their actions, whether conformist or subversive, are all related to this imbalanced power relationship. Lurie understood the significance of the child hero challenging the adult's authority as a criterion for classifying a literary work as subversive.

Some of the characteristics mentioned by Lurie (such as dependency on authorities and contentedness) can be seen in the examples of conformist literature that we discussed in the previous chapter, even though they are not limited to the child-adult relationship.

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[186] Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company,1990), X.
[187] Lurie, X.

However, when it comes to subversive literature, one can say that the revolutionary actions of child characters against adults, as well as the author's sympathy for children, are important but not sufficient criteria to call a literary work subversive. The main criterion is how the rebellions represented in the text is against the dominant ideology and status quo. There is also the element of social and political background which matters in calling a literary work subversive.

Lurie talks about the importance of "time and social change" and how it could "mute the revolutionary message of some children's classics". She brings the example of Little Women and indicates that the character of Jo March as a "tomboy" is not considered as radical anymore because of the time change.[188] Lurie mentions the change of time and social context as a criterion for radicalism of the text, but it is also important to take in consideration the political and cultural atmosphere in which the text has been created. There are books which are considered as subversive in certain cultures and countries while in other places they could be seen as normal. Indeed, the difference of political and social background in parallel cultures is as much important as the time and social change in a single culture in deciding the level of subversion in a literary work.

Rosemary Jackson is another critic who discusses the characteristics of subversive literature which in her argument refers to the genre of fantasy. Jackson defines fantasy as a form which replaces "familiarity, comfort, das Heimlich, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny" and introduces "dark areas, of something completely other and unseen".[189] This definition highlights the shocking aspect of subversive literature as a key differentiator from the soothing sensation that conformist literature creates.

Since subversion in any form always threaten the stability of established powers and ideologies, it becomes the subject of suppression or most effectively modification. In her argument, Jackson also mentions that "fantastic art has been muted by a tradition of literary criticism concerned with supporting establishment ideals rather than with subverting them".[190] This mutation of subversion is similar to what happened with the subversive contents of fairy tales within history. Jack Zipes who has done a lot of research about fairy tales, states that

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[188] Lurie, 13.
[189] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 104.
[190] Jackson, 101.

> Almost all critics who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe agree that educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time.[191]

According to Zipes and Jackson's arguments, the purposeful modification factor can be added to Lurie's earlier mentions of time and social change as a factor that mutes the revolutionary message in children's literature. This muting modification is reflected in the different rewritings of children's classics and fairy tales as well as in their adaptation in other forms of media such as films, cartoons, games, etc.

While Zipes defines subversion through fairy tale and Jackson through fantasy, subversive literature in our definition is not limited to any genres. Including traditional and contemporary forms, we will show that subversive literature is a literature which questions the authority and pushes the established borders. Less bound by semantic and structural conventions, subversive works tend to challenge and question the status que rather than suggesting solutions, and they are not constrained by happy endings but, in many cases, appear to have open endings.

As once mentioned, subversive literature, due to its challenging nature, can be easily the subject of censorship and modification. Nicholas J. Karolides in her book *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed On Political Grounds* (2006), explains that the books which were banned and censored in different countries were tagged and labelled as "subversive".[192] The practices of censorship and modification, however, are not the only strategies of power against subversive works. The other practice is exclusion which is a type of strategy used to deny the subversive work as intended for young readers. In her book, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, Maria Nikolajeva contends that "the best examples of children's fantasy have always been questioned as books for children".[193] This is again not a strategy limited to the genre of fantasy but a practice applied to lots of those children works which do not follow the conventions.

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[191] Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 3.

[192] Nicholas J. Karolides, *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Political Grounds* (New York: Facts On File, Inc, 2006).

[193] Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 42.

My definition of subversive literature in this study relates to the discussion that we had earlier about power and its productions. Because the power produces its opposition,[194] children's literature can be a form of resistance at the same time that it is a form of knowledge production. In this regard, what subversive literature does is to stand against or stop the process of reproduction of the conditions of production or the labour power for the dominant authority. What all subversive works have in common is that they are all subverting and questioning the confirmed conventions of literature and politics. As a result, they have unsettling and innovative content and form, which is primarily why they are subject to censorship, modification, or exclusion.

There is a growing trend among children's book authors to choose so-called challenging or/and political topics for their books in order to be perceived as concerned about the world and its problems. Attacks on the war and injustice in their works – including the examples that we discussed in the previous chapter- have never been expressed without concealing those acts with positive depictions of false hope, charity and sympathy. But subversive literature is never about reconciliation and toleration and here comes the difference between political literature and subversive literature. Whether children books are written about a usual or controversial topic is not decisive for categorizing them as subversive. The important question is whether the literary work succeeds in approaching the topic in an unusual way and in threatening the stability of established power orders.

While my analysis of subversive literature highlights its critical function, other scholars, such as those in *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education*,[195] focus on their pedagogical value. This perspective offers a valuable lens to view Maurice Sendak's work which we will discuss later; while it subverts traditional narratives, it also provides a framework for children to engage with thematic, cognitive, and aesthetic challenges in a way that fosters critical thinking and multimodal literacy.

## 2.1. Freedom and Rebellion: Children's Literature and the Challenge of Power Orders

[194] A point emphasized by New Historicist critics drawing on the Frankfurt School's understanding of repressive desublimation.

[195] Gunnar Haaland, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Åse Ommundsen ed., *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education: International Perspectives on Language and Literature Learning* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).

Throughout history, the ideal image of obedient child has been wonderfully persistent and present within literature and society. It has been propagandized by different religions, cultures and societies and it has been repeated until the obedient child grows to be an obedient citizen. The obedience obviously happens when there exists an imbalance of power between two individuals or groups. the examples are the obedience of child to the parents, student to the teacher, soldier to the commander, employee to the boss, citizens to the government, etc. It is a fact that obedience gives much authority to those in power and takes freedom from obedient in these unequal relations.

Michel Butor has discussed this inequality of power relations between child and adult (young and old) in his essay *On Fairy Tales* (1973). According to Butor, "The inequality between kings and shepherds concerns the society of adults" while "in the society of children, of brothers and sisters, we shall find a homologous inequality, the one between older and younger siblings".[196] However, Butor contends that the inequality between children and adults will diminish when the children grow up to be adults themselves: "the inequalities between kings and shepherds, older and younger siblings, can be diminished in reality. The child can advance himself socially and supplant his elders".[197] The diminishing of these inequalities, which relies on the matter of time, is not the best solution to overcome the power imbalances. For children in particular, the actual matter of power orders is in the time when the child is still a child and has to obey adults. In this sense, the child does not need to wait until adulthood to revolt against the authority of the adult. The other problem with Butor's argument is that the child won't be able to overcome the inequality later as an adult, if s/he has not learned how to challenge the power orders and seek freedom during the childhood.

Different forms of power orders, such as those between adult and child, state and citizen, human and animal, and even text and image, are challenged in subversive literature. The power dynamic between the child and adult has been most frequently questioned in modern children's books (such as in Roald Dahl's works), and in some instances, this challenge to authority and rebellion against adults symbolizes and denotes a greater quest for freedom and rebellion against the state. There are also examples of animal stories in

[196] Michel Butor, "On Fairy Tales." In *European Literary Theory and Practice* edited by Vernon W. Gras, 349–62 (New York: Delta, 1973), 354.
[197] Butor, 360.

which animals rebel against the human authority, although in almost all of them animals have been attributed to human characteristics so they can claim their rights. [198]

One of the most interesting and challenging power orders in children's books is the one between image and text. However, it is the most difficult one to investigate because the image in contemporary children's books has usually more power over the text. The most difficult challenge in this case is determining whether the image's (illustration's) power was used as a subversive element or to promote conformism. If we compare the illustrations of the conformist books that we discussed in previous chapter (and the similar examples) with that of subversive literature (some of which that we will discuss later), there are several differences that appears. First, we must notice the mutual connection between the text and illustrations in both conformist and subversive literature. In many cases of subversive works, illustrators have composed the illustration to evade censorship and to convey the story's subversive message through the pictures; for instance, Maurice Sendak has used this technique for some of his books.[199] The observation that illustrators may use their work to evade censorship and convey subversive messages raises a crucial point about the relationship between text and image in politically engaged children's books. While this interplay may seem analogous to the integrated text-image relationship of a comic book, its function here is distinct. In subversive works, the illustration often acts as a parallel or even a competing channel of meaning, a visual subtext that provides a commentary on or an alternative to the written narrative.

However, it is equally important to recognize that illustrations in conformist literature also function as a tool of ideological manipulation, though in a different manner. While the subversive illustrator uses images to resist censorship, the conformist illustrator uses them to reinforce the very ideology the text is promoting or simply to fill in the pages and make the book attractive so that the mediocre text stays in the shadow. This is often achieved through visual choices that simplify and idealize the world. For example, the use of bright, cheerful colors and a clean aesthetic can create a reassuring, utopian illusion that defuses the real-world complexities the narrative may touch upon. Observing these parallels shows that illustrations are never neutral; they are always an active participant in the ideological work of the text.

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[198] For example, Farmer Duck (1991) by Martin Waddell or Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type (2000) by Doreen Cronin.

[199] For example, in *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* which we will discuss in a later chapter

In subversive literature, two elements of freedom and rebellion considerably matter in order to challenge the power orders that we mentioned earlier and these elements should be reflected in both meaning and form. In both cases, the criterion is to resist against the literary and social conventions and to promote freedom seeking and revolting ideas.

According to Jackson, "Structurally and semantically, the fantastic aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient".[200] The main reason is that in fantasy we have an alternative world which is free of conventions that we experience in the real world and supernatural powers give the protagonist the possibility to revolt and challenge the orders. However, the rebellion could also happen against the stereotypes that we have in children's literature tradition. In Nikolajeva's point of view, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* [201] is classified as a unique text because "instead of empowering the fictional child through displacement in an alternative world, [it] explicitly disempowers and even humiliates her. Alice is hardly a role model, and her adventures are nightmares rather than pleasant dreams".[202] I would add that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is one of the rare cases of literary works which questions and underestimates power and authority in so many ways. The author challenges the authenticity of school and government as the two important institutions of power by underrating the produced knowledge that Alice learned at school and by mocking the queen's authority by depicting her as a card that will go away by the wind.

Beauvais describes "committed literature" as "a call for the freedom of the young reader, the expression of a desire to let them act unpredictably and fruitfully, transcending the situation that the adults themselves have helped to create".[203] Although Beauvais acknowledges that committed literature, or as we call it here subversive literature, should help children overcome the situation that we adults have created for them, we must remember that it is a difficult task for adult authors to rebel against the rules that they, as adults, have set for children. I believe that the subversive act begins when the author decides to write something that, first and foremost, calls into question his or her own authority as an adult.

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[200] Jackson, 105.
[201] Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (UK: Macmillan, 1865).
[202] Nikolajeva, 33.
[203] Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child*, 178.

## 2.2. Intercultural Differences in the Communist Tradition of Writing for Children in Iran and Europe

We discussed how the radicalism of a literary text is determined by the social and political context in which it was created. Writing about certain topics may be considered taboo in some cultures and societies, while talking about the same topics may be the most natural thing to do in others. In the first case, children's books on those topics could be considered subversive, whereas in the second case, they could only be conformist or, at best, neutral works. It demonstrates that a work's subversiveness is not determined by any particular subject matter, but rather by the context in which it is produced and the style in which it is written.

The same applies to the communist tradition of writing for children in different societies. In those societies where communist government was in power and acted as suppressive, writing about communism is considered as a propaganda for the dominant ideology while in societies experiencing the injustice of capitalism, it is an act of subversion and an opposition to the ruling government. In the following part, we will give an account of how communist and socialist views interpreted the children's literature as an invitation to revolution and how communist writing for children could act as subversive in some societies.

In *Learning from the Left* (2006), Julia L. Mickenberg discusses E. A. Schachner's definition of "revolutionary text" and compares it to "proletarian children's literature" and explains the different points of view of communists and socialists towards children. She argues that Schachner's definition of revolutionary text as "one which consciously supports the movement for the revolutionary destruction of capitalism" could be useful as a straightforward criticism of capitalism while "The term proletarian children's literature can be used to refer rather broadly to texts published in the late 1920s and 1930s, usually by Communist presses, that had working-class or poor children as their primary protagonists".[204] "Active resistance to the status quo" and the challenge of "dominant

[204] Julia L. Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52.

social order" are the most important elements of revolutionary and proletarian literature for our purpose when discussing these writings as a form of subversive literature.[205]

Nikolajeva mentions that in the Soviet stories "the child is typically constructed as uneducated and unsocialised, while adults are used as mouthpieces for "correct" views and values".[206] Once again, this may be true in a communist-controlled society but in the socialist point of view as an opposition to the dominant authority, there is a different notion towards children. "socialists […] addressed children themselves as subjects, viewing them not simply as helpless victims but as natural radicals and the seeds of a great and growing movement"[207] contends Mickenberg and continues with explaining the different points of view in communists and socialists' traditions:

> Unlike Communists prior to the Popular Front, who focused their energies on working-class children, socialists worked to nurture this spirit of rebellion in children of all class backgrounds. Also, unlike Communists, they did not believe that children should be activists in their own right.[208]

The first different notion of socialists mentioned by Mickenberg is really important since it situates revolutionary children's literature within a wider and diverse audience while highlighting a collective contribution to the social change. The second distinction regarding children' political activism may still be up for debate as to whether children are only potential future activists or if they can already be involved in a revolutionary process while they're still young.

The tradition of communist writing for children in Iran has been an important part of Persian literature in which different aspects of both communists and socialists' points of view regarding the child and his/her status in society have been reflected. In Iran, as well as in some other countries which didn't experience a communist-controlled regime, leftist ideologies were regarded as an opposition against the ruling government before the 1979 revolution.

Concentrating on children's activism, which was an important feature of Iran's revolution, Niloofar Mahdian in her essay "Children's Literature in a Revolutionary Era" (2007) convincingly illustrates how leftist children's literature was used as a political

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[205] L. Mickenberg, 52.
[206] Nikolajeva, 140.
[207] L. Mickenberg, 52.
[208] L. Mickenberg, 57.

medium for social change. Mahdian points to the role and presence of children and young adults in Iran's revolution and claims that literature was an important factor in their uprising.

Further, and most importantly, she mentions that

> Even though the roots of such literature, meaning revolutionary or rebellious literature, could be traced back to the 1950s or even before that, here the starting point is set with Samad Behrangi's works because he was the one who for the first time provided theoretical justification for his [revolutionary] works and initiated a new tradition in children's literature.[209]

She argues that Behrangi was the pioneer in writing symbolic literature for children with his work *The Little Black Fish* (1968) but his followers were mostly into literary realism due to the complexity of writing in symbolism. The most obvious function of this literary realism was to represent the working class of Iranian society and lots of works have been published with this function before the revolution. Mahdian mentions some of those works in her essay and explains that in many of them, some discussions around the ways of fighting with the regime have been reflected and in some stories (such as in Behrangi's works) there are even mentions of armed conflict. In some other cases, "ideological doubts"[210] are reflected in the story. Among those examples, she talks about one of Behrangi's stories *Olduz and the Crows* (1968) in which the two child protagonists have an argument over killing a dog that is an obstacle in their way to the land of crows.

The act of writing was also mentioned in revolutionary literature during this time period, and literature was portrayed as a means of struggle and awareness. A number of books have been written about students who participate in protests by creating wall newspapers in schools.[211] Schools were one of the most important places in Iran where children and young adults carried out revolutionary acts. This was reflected in the literature prior to the revolution, with various stories questioning the injustice and misuse of power by some students or teachers, or, on a larger political scale, the ruling government. In today's uprisings in Iran, again schools are an important part of revolutionary acts where students accompany with street protests by singing revolutionary songs in the schools' yard and they stop going to classes in order to show sympathy with their peers and teachers who

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[209] Niloofar Mahdian. "Children's Literature in a Revolutionary Era," *Bulletin of Children's Literature* 48 (spring 2007): 69-88, 71.
[210] Mahdian, 76.
[211] Mahdian, 76-77.

have been killed or arrested by the regime. The official children's literature nowadays, however, do not represent these revolutionary acts due to the strict censorship by the government.

The other important element to investigate in leftist literature prior to the 1979 revolution is the image of family. Niloofar Mahdian makes an attempt to show how families have been depicted in these stories as "weak" and "conservative". There are instances where the child is responsible for financial support for the family, and because the family is unable to provide the child with adequate education and awareness, the child's source of knowledge is always somewhere outside the family circle. There are also examples where the religious and superstitious beliefs of the family have been scrutinized and mocked by the leftist writers and in some other examples such as *The Little Black Fish*, family has been depicted as a conservative force which is on the way of change and revolution. However, as the revolution approaches, a type of Islamic literature emerges that is similar to the works of leftist writers in its realistic motifs; but the image of "family", an important figure in Islamic tradition, appears positively and becomes the main source of knowledge and awareness, and as a result, the role of the child as the focal point of the story fades away.[212] In these stories, we can see that the subversive aspect of literary text has been disappeared because the power of children is undermined by portraying adults as unquestioned source of truth and reliance.

An important dimension of subversive literature that could be found in Iranian leftist children books was the open endings. "These stories had open endings because their goal was to prepare children, whether the protagonists or the readers, to enter adult society,"[213] says Mahdian while mentioning that the aim of these stories was to give children a social awareness so that they can play an effective role in adults' world. In this context, it wouldn't be pointless to say some words about the concept of childhood in this era. From the very beginning of history until the development of modern societies, children were viewed as little adults. The modern era and literature also present a similar image of a child as a young or future adult, but with the distinction that in the former, including children in the world of adults was done out of ignorance and lack of interest, while in the latter, their rights and psychological capacities have been taken into account, and then

[212] Mahdian, 78-79.
[213] Mahdian, 81.

particular works have been created for them with awareness and artistry to introduce issues related to adults' society.

Niloofar Mahdian also points out to the fact that "what happened was a cultural turn towards a concept of childhood where the child deserved to get to know the realities of social life and participate in finding solutions for the problems".[214] She mentions that this idea of childhood was accepted by many writers of children's books in that time.[215] The depiction of child as a wise individual in leftist literature for children and young adult is usually linked with the motifs of disobedience, leaving home and seeking freedom and justice. These features are similar to the structure of what we call subversive literature.

In accordance with its revolutionary features, the communist (leftist) literature which acts as subversive was frequently the subject of censorship. Although literary realism continued to be dominant in the communist tradition of writing for children, a lot of writers such as Samad Behrangi chose to write in the form of fairy tale and fantasy for their subversive nature as well as for surviving the censorship. In Europe and United States as well leftists "employed fairy tales […] to convey moral lessons about the corrupt nature of capitalism and the ideal of cooperation for the common good".[216] The goal of introducing and rewriting fairy tales, however, is not only to give children a political and moral lesson, but to enable them to understand a tradition of storytelling which is shaped from the imagination and dreams of a mass and not a single author, to provide a kind of subversive message that they can understand and to maintain the literary heritage of different cultures. Leftists looked for those fairy tales with more subversive potential: depicting the injustice of kings, talking about good and evil forces, bravery, rebellion, etc.

Fairy tale and fantasy writing in the Soviet context went in two directions: conveying subversive messages while escaping the censorship; and confirming and propagandizing the ruling ideology. The basic nature of these genres is subversive as mentioned before but it "may vary radically depending on the society in which the texts appear, since they will be affected by the dominant ideology".[217] An example of how these genres worked both for and against the dominant ideology is Maria Nikolajeva's study in her book

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[214] Mahdian, 83.
[215] Mahdian, 83.
[216] L. Mickenberg, 59.
[217] Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, 139.

*Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young readers* (2010). Through this study, she truly explains that

> Literary fairy tales and fantasy written during the Communist rule (1917-1991) express the dogma of the ruling class while they at the same time often carry subversive messages for those who care to see those. Subversive strategies were an inherent feature of Soviet literature at large, often referred to as "Aesopian language," the language of a fable in which readers were encouraged to seek hidden messages between the lines. This cat-and-mouse game between authors and readers was aimed at circumventing censorship, but in the long run it affected the way writers constructed their narratives, including the choice of genre. Fairy tale and fantasy proved to be an excellent means both to propagate for and to question the official dogmas.[218]

The concept of "Communist writing" for children should not be confused with abstract subversion. It derives from a commitment to the dominant social order of communist-controlled regimes, but it can also refer to works written in opposition to the communist regime, as well as works that borrow ideas of justice and equality from communism in order to rebel against the ruling capitalist societies. The essence of literature as an ideological means is quite contradictory since it could both confirm or resist a certain ideology and this is not limited to any genre or topic but heavily dependent on the context and circumstances in which a literary work has been produced.

### 2.3. Social Criticism in Fairy Tales and Animal Stories

In his essay *Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale* (1975), Jack Zipes argues that by rereading the folktales while considering the history, we will realize that there are some political and power struggles behind these tales. He believes that the "durability" and "vitality" of folk tales are also related to their historical origins in "politics and class struggles". Zipes mentions that folktale was somehow a way for the humankind to create an alternative world both with their imagination and rational thinking.[219] In his definition "The folk tale is part of a pre-capitalist people's oral tradition which expresses their wishes to attain better living conditions through a depiction of their

[218] Nikolajeva, 139.
[219] Jack Zipes. "Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale," *New German Critique* 6 (autumn 1975): 116-135, 118.

struggles and contradictions".[220] Unfortunately, this true nature of folk tales has undergone so many changes and manipulations like other subversive literary forms.

Zipes' research, with a focus on German and French traditions of storytelling and recording the folktales, shows that

> Since fairies were associated with the supernatural and make-believe and since the upper-class recorders of the tale shifted the emphasis of the stories, the original basis of the tales became obfuscated, and it appeared that their contents and meaning were derived from bizarre occurrences and irrational minds and not from actual social and political condition.[221]

This manipulation has been appeared also in the language. The "Folk Tale" which "signifies that the people were the carriers of the tales" changed to "Fairy Tale" which signifies the phenomena beyond the real world.[222] This change in name and claimed origins of folk tales is incredibly important in the sense of their effectiveness and the power that they may have in provoking the reader/audience's emotions.

Making the reader/viewer imagine what is the real story behind the literary/art work that they perceive is usually an impressive technique working as a catharsis; consider for example the sentence "this film is based on a true story" in the beginning of a movie which can provoke and impress us much easier than a movie which is totally based on imagination and unreal life. In the latter instance, death and violence might be watched and simply accepted without having a profound emotional impact. Instead, when we watch a movie based on real life, we have less tolerance for violence and the impact it has on us after we leave the screening is considerably greater.

Knowing that all these seemingly strange happenings are derived from real life stories and struggles will make a significant difference in the stimulating effect of folk tales as well. The subversive occurrences of folk tales, however, appear to belong to an entirely different world than that of the common people when placed between the manipulative rewritings and colorful depictions in contemporary media.

One example of manipulative modification, or what Zipes refers to as "bourgeoisification" of folk tales may be seen in his analysis of the changes Disney made to the form and purpose of those tales. There is little doubt that Walt Disney had

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[220] Zipes, 122.
[221] Zipes, 119.
[222] Zipes, 119.

"revolutionalized" and "commodified" this genre using different forms of media;[223] but as Zipes put it very well, "his revolution was a major regression and caused many of the liberating aspects of the fairy tale to be tamed and to turn in against themselves. The Disney civilizing process leads to the degeneration of utopia".[224] Through his mastery of production, business and attracting the popular taste, "Disney managed to domesticate the fairy tale and restore its conservative features so that it lost its rebellious and progressive features". [225]

Our study, however, focuses on the subversive nature of the folktales, as well as the key elements and factors that signify this subversion, rather than on the altered and manipulative versions of the stories. One of the best ways to show the subversive nature of the folk tale is to contrast the freedom of speech and expression in oral tradition of storytelling with the restrictions of written form. Exceeding the limitations set by adults when writing stories for children is more difficult than it is in the oral tradition from which folk tales originated.

Lurie successfully draws our attention to the fundamental effect of the written form in altering the ways folk tales were perceived:

> As long as these stories remained part of an oral culture, related to small audiences of unimportant people, they were largely overlooked by the literary and educational establishment. But as soon as they began to surface in printed texts there were outcries of horror and disapproval; cries that have continued to this day.[226]

Folk stories' actual subversive nature only becomes obvious after a particular author begins to write them down on paper because in this case, the writer is conscious and responsible of every word s/he uses to portray the story. Children were exposed to the same content through oral tradition, whether as intended audience or by overhearing it, but there was no author to blame for the supposedly inappropriate content. In our daily communication as well, this limitation of freedom is somehow inevitable when it comes to the written format. We are normally more attentive in choosing words throughout the writing process because the created information is documented and attributed to us.

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[223] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 193.
[224] Zipes, 193.
[225] Zipes, 193.
[226] Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature*, 16.

The frequent and polymorphic representation of power struggles, while questioning and changing the power orders, is another subversive feature of folk tales. As Lurie explains,

> they support the rights of disadvantaged members of the population — children, women, and the poor — against the establishment. Law and order are not always respected: the master thief fools the count and the parson, and Jack kills the giant and steals his treasure. Rich people are often unlucky, afflicted, or helpless: kings and queens cannot have children or suffer from strange illnesses, while the poor are healthy and enterprising and fortunate.[227]

Through justice-seeking themes and narratives, these stories highlight the positive features of the underprivileged characters. And such stories not only contribute to the representation of different forms of power imbalance and struggle Between child and adult, poor and rich, king and common and even human and animal but they also challenge and question the validity of these power orders. This literary genre "does not restrict itself to stressing the inequality – it overcomes and recompenses it: the poor man becomes rich; the laborer becomes, or is revealed to be, a prince".[228] Moreover, it raises awareness of political and social issues among young readers by showing examples of good and evil conflicts and encouraging youngsters to take a stand. In subversive folk tales, the happy ending comes from a change in the situation and not by peaceful confirmation of status quo.

Another reason to regard folk tales as subversive literary works for children is the very fact that they were always subject to censorship and appropriation by adults and that's why we have so many versions of them. Under pressure from the adult community, which has little tolerance for subversion, folk tales were "infantilized and sanitized" in order to prevent children from being "harmed by some of the more nefarious fairy tales that might be allegedly too violent or indecent for them";[229] thus they changed to be means of confirming the expected manners instead and were used exactly against their original purpose.

According to Zipes the folk tale "never lost its suspicious and pagan aura for the church and conventional educators and parents and was always censored and controlled as it became a major staple of children's culture".[230] However, church and educators were not

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[227] Lurie, 16.
[228] Michel Butor, "On Fairy Tales.", 353.
[229] Zipes, 193.
[230] Zipes, 193.

the only Ideological influencers in controlling and censoring the folk tales. Although they influenced the genre by expressing their concerns about immorality and violence in folk tales, it was the bourgeoisie that diluted the subversive aspect of these stories by controlling and censoring the way power struggles were depicted in the stories.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, there was an effort to censor all literary forms that seemed rebellious in two ways: modifying the original forms of the tales created by storytellers of the lower classes and replacing folktales with didactic tales and anecdotes.[231] As a result, bourgeois writers did more than merely censor or delete folktales; they began to develop didactic tales to promote adherence with rules and behaviors of their preferred social class.[232] Recent children books have witnessed an impressive comeback of this practice as well when it comes to the representation of power struggles in the modern era.

As I see it, most of the folk tales are revolutionary as long as we have a protagonist there who tries to change the situation. The story of *Hansel and Gretel*, for example, has been considered as a "story of hope and victory".[233] Zipes points out that "the struggle depicted in this tale is against poverty and against witches who have houses of food and hidden treasures".[234] When we consider Zipes' interpretation of this story, we realize that even folk tales that do not appear to be revolutionary depict class conflicts and efforts to overcome oppression. I think it all depends on where we place the emphasis in the folk tales. For example, in the story of *Hansel and Gretel*, children's wandering in the forest and their efforts to escape from the witch is always considered to be the main focus of the story. But what if we think about poverty as a motivation for the father to abandon the kids in the forest? This could also lead us to think about Hansel and Gretel's mother's death as a result of poverty, considering the fact that "women died young due to frequent child-bearing and unsanitary conditions. Thus, step-mothers were common in households, and this often led to difficulties with the children from former wives".[235] I feel that these details in folk tales aren't usually considered as the main focus and are ignored while they are really significant and determinant in tracing back the subversive and revolutionary nature of folk tales. By the same token, we have to keep in mind that

[231] Zipes. "Breaking the Magic Spell: Politics and the Fairy Tale," 120.
[232] Zipes, 121.
[233] Zipes, 127.
[234] Zipes, 127.
[235] Zipes, 128.

"no matter what has become of the fairy tale, its main impulse was at first revolutionary and progressive, not escapist, as has too often been suggested". [236]

When discussing fairy tales or folk tales, it is also important to remember that this genre has changed over time due to various attitudes regarding the idea of childhood. Here I want to identify three stages of folk tales based on the idea of childhood in each era. The old versions of folk tales belong to the time in which the child was considered as an imperfect creature who needs punishment and control to be a well-behaved adult. That's why these tales contain lots of overt violence and are known as cautionary tales.

The second era is the time that adults changed their thoughts about children and children became the center of attention and being regarded as innocent creatures who need care and control. At this point, folk tales were adopted and modified to be suitable for children and to prepare them to become conservative and conformist (proper) citizens.

The third and most recent era is the time with the image of the child as a wise creature with critical thinking. Having this image of the child in mind, more and more writers started to rewrite the folk tales with totally new and different settings and narratives. In this point of view, children are eligible to receive enough social and political awareness in order to become revolutionary individuals.

We should consider the fact that within the larger context of contemporary literature, there is not a consensus on the third approach, and the previous way of modification still exists as a dominant trend when it comes to the rewriting of folk tales for children. The point is to reflect on how and why the early folk tales narrated by common people and workers were harsh and subversive; then they have been transformed by bourgeois and conservative adults to purely didactic and charming fairy tales and afterwards some authors tried to recreate those tales with their original function as subversive literary means.

Jack Zipes, elaborating on Butor's idea of folk tales' "subversive potentiality", mentions that

> He perceives how certain fairy tales can disrupt the normative structure and affirmative discourse of the classical fairy-tale tradition that are locked into the bourgeois public sphere. In particular, experimental fairy tales for children are

[236] Zipes, 131.

> endowed with a subversive potential, but the degree of their "subversiveness" must be qualified.[237]

An effective strategy to highlight the subversiveness of this literary genre is to concentrate on the power conflicts that are portrayed in old folk tales and minimize the didactic elements of these tales. Among the folk tale authors who tried to bring out the subversive nature of this genre were MacDonald, Wilde, and Baum. The main focus of these authors were "the oppressed lower classes'" point of view and "questioning the arbitrariness of authoritarian rule and the profit motives of rulers".[238] When Jack Zipes compares these authors to the conservatism of Perrault, Grimms and Andersen, he emphasizes on "their singular contributions to the genre because they represent a turning point in the fairy-tale discourse on civilization and set examples for contemporaries and later innovators".[239] Zipes also mentions That

> Neither one of the writers [MacDonald, Wilde, and Baum] is revolutionary in the sense that they called for "violent overthrows" of the government, but it is their intense discontent with domination and the dominant discourse that propelled them to invert and subvert the world with hope in their tales.[240]

Whereas classical revolutionary authors attempted to bring out the subversion of folk tales by focusing on power struggles reflected in these tales, contemporary authors tend to question and eliminate didactic aspects in order to diminish the conformism of modified folk tales. A common thread that runs through some of the subversive modern retellings of folktales is the importance of humor as a means of challenging conventional thinking and holding to opposing viewpoints. Humor allows for the questioning of authority and prevailing power orders, as well as the promotion of subversion and new orders. The claim that humor can be a tool for questioning authority is a well-established concept in literary and cultural theory. This dissertation argues that humor is a powerful tool for subversion in children's literature, a claim supported by scholarly work in the field. For instance, Julie Cross's *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature* explores how humor, often dismissed as mere entertainment, can function as a tool for transgression by allowing young readers to engage with ambiguous and complex ideas.[241] Similarly, other scholars argue that humor's ability to create a sense of detachment or incongruity allows

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[237] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 107.
[238] Zipes, 109.
[239] Zipes, 109.
[240] Zipes, 109.
[241] Julie Cross, *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

children to critically evaluate social norms and authority figures. By making light of serious or intimidating subjects, a humorous text can provide a safe space for children to question the very power structures that a conformist narrative seeks to uphold.

Prolific children's author, Roald Dahl frequently challenges the power orders (especially the one between adults and children) in his works using humor. In *Revolting Rhymes* (1982),[242] Dahl writes the parody of six well-known fairy tales representing rebellious characters. As the title of the book suggests, these poems are supposed to be revolting. The general structure of the stories is somehow the same as the old versions. Thus here the revolt happens within the same structure when the fairy tale characters revolt against their own stereotypes.

Here, I will focus on the ways in which the protagonists act differently in Dahl's narration of *Cinderella, Jack and the beanstalk, Snow-White and the seven dwarfs* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. It's important to mention that in some translations of this book, the title has been changed. This may be happened due to adults' usual fear of provoking rebellious feelings in children. As an example, I refer to Persian and French translations of this book. In Persian version the title is *In Ham Joore Digar* (2009)[243] which means "And this is another version" and the French title is *Un conte peut en cacher un autre* (2017)[244] which means "A story could be hidden within another one". As we can see there is a huge difference between the original title and its translations. It's also noteworthy that in 2014 the book has been pulled from Aldi's supermarket shelves because of some customers' complaint about the word 'slut' which has been used in the book.

In all the four stories that I want to go through, the sequence of accidents is somehow the same as the old versions. Therefore, the revolt here happens in the language and the manner of characters. Considering the fact that the book is written for children, there is a kind of harshness in both the language which is used in the poems and the behavior of characters. Girl protagonists in these revisions aren't elegant and gentle as they are in fairy tales. The character in *Cinderella* isn't the polite and kind girl as we know but very bold and rude even with the fairy who tries to help her:

> She said, 'My dear, are you all right?'

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[242] Roald Dahl, *Revolting Rhymes* (UK: Penguin Random House, 1982).
[243] Roald Dahl, Translated by Razi Hirmandi, *In Ham Joore Digar* (Tehran: Cheshme, 2009).
[244] Roald Dahl, Translated by Anne Kreif. *Un conte peut en cacher an autre* (Paris: Gallimard jeunesse, 2017).

‘All right?’ cried Cindy. ‘Can’t you see

‘I feel as rotten as can be!’

She beat her fist against the wall,
And shouted, ‘Get me to the Ball!
‘There is a Disco at the Palace!

‘The rest have gone and I am jalous!
‘I want a dress! I want a coach!
‘And earrings and a diamond brooch!
‘And silver slippers, two of those!
‘And lovely nylon panty-hose!
‘Done up like that I’ll guarantee

‘The handsome Prince will fall for me!’[245]

As we can see, there is a kind of roughness both in her speech and behavior (when she beat her fist against the wall) which doesn’t have anything to do with the delicacy of an assumed feminine fairy tale character. Her manner with the prince is not very elegant as well. While dancing, she holds him very tight and pressed that he cannot easily breath. Again, there isn’t any sign of femininity in her behavior. This image of feminine protagonist is the same in *Snow white* and *Red Riding Hood*. Snow white turns to be a robber who goes back to the palace and steals the queen’s mirror and she is going to be a gambling associate with dwarfs. Red Riding Hood has a violent character as well when she shoots the wolf with the gun and makes a coat for herself out of its skin.

On the other hand, the behavior of the prince is also associated with violence which represents a more realistic image of kings and princes than the charming one in the old fairy tales. In Dahl’s narratives, princes are not simply life saver heroes but cruel humans in charge of power. Another rebellious act of Cinderella is that she ignores the prince when she realizes his brutality and get married to a man from working-class. This could be a revolting theme as well representing the resistance against monarchy and reliance on the proletariat. The theme of “living happily ever after but not with a prince” here is similar to the story of *Twelve Dancing Princesses* (1989) by Jeanette Winterson when one of the princesses claims that they lived happily ever after but not with their husbands.[246] There is again no prince as a life saver in this version of *Snow White* as there doesn’t exist a prince character at all.

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[245] Dahl, *Revolting Rhymes,* 1-2.
[246] Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1989).

Apart from violence, overt sexuality as another controversial issue in children's literature appears in these poems. In *Snow White* the sexual irony is obvious in the description of magic mirror: "… a curious toy/ That seemed to give her endless joy".[247] Again in the same story, the king sleeps with several women till he finds his wife and this has been explained in poem satirically:

> At least ten thousand girls replied
> And begged to be the royal bride.
> The king said with a shifty smile,
> 'I'd like to give each one a trial.'[248]

This can also be a kind of mockery for the monarchy's corruption and at the same time destructing the holy image of marriage which exists in most of fairy tales.

The concept of home and the theme of home/away/home are of important elements of children's literature in general and in fairy tales in particular. In most of the fairy tales, the first home is not a safe place but the protagonist finds another safe home. As Nodelman mentions

> In a number of the traditional fairy tales that figure so prominently in the history of fiction for children, characters do quite literally end up in different homes after their journeys away. Consider, for instance, ''Cinderella'' and ''Snow White.'' The characters in such tales gain their new residence as a result of a marriage – a marriage that not only ends any perception listeners and readers might have had of them as being children but that also gives them the power they earlier lacked in a home that stifled and oppressed them.[249]

I would like to add here that marriage cannot always provide the better home for the protagonist as itself could be another form of suppression for the female character. Dahl's narratives are also revolting because of their disobedience of this established structure. In *Cinderella* the other safe home changes from the Palace to the house of a man from working class. In *Snow White* dwarfs' house stays the safe home instead of being a transit home. In *the Red Riding Hood*, there is not any sign of the home from which the girl comes. Instead she continues roaming in the forest. But the most interesting case of all is the Jack in *Jack and the beanstalk* who never leaves the house but changes the situation of the present home by sending his unpleasant mother (an adult) out of it.

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[247] Dahl, 21.
[248] Dahl, 21.
[249] Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 65.

Talking about the concept of safe home in children's literature and its relation to the role of adults, Nodelman argues that

> As these texts tend to understand it, home is equivalent to what the texts are themselves: a controlled and limited space provided for a child by a more knowing and more capable adult in order to protect the child from the less limited but more dangerous world outside – the world away from home, the world as represented in literature for adults. As a result, the texts tend to focus frequently on justifying the need for home and the desirability of staying there. Their central thrust is, in a very real sense, a justification of their own existence – a celebration of safely limited places for children.[250]

As he mentions, in most of the fairytales, child (girl) characters are finally protected whether by an adult or a man. Jack in *Jack and the beanstalk* is an exception who protects himself and that's because he is a boy. In *Revolting Rhymes*, Cinderella doesn't escape from the stepmother's house with the help of prince but with her own choice, Snow White doesn't come back to the life by a man's kiss but she tries hard for her survival and finally the Red Riding Hood doesn't need a huntsman to arrive in a crucial moment to rescue her but she uses her own gun.

Finally, *Revolting Rhymes* is a very critical work which actually revolted against lots of norms both in content and in the form. It is a kind of revolt against the institutions of powers, adults, patriarchal society and established institutions like marriage. On the other hand, it's a kind of revolt against the tradition of fairytales while changing the structure of narratives and using the bold satirical language.

In Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *Squids will be Squids* (1999),[251] a book of short stories imitating the form of traditional fables and their morals, the authors also try to use humor in order to question and mock the pedagogical animal stories by using the same form of traditional fables but with a totally subversive content. The subtitle of this collection, *Fresh Morals Beastly Fables,* presents well the intention of authors in subverting the didactic function of fables. In particular, this piece provides ironic background information on Aesop's rebellion and ability to communicate political criticism through the telling of what we refer to as fables or "animal" stories:

> YOU have just finished reading fables about all kinds of bossy, sneaky, funny, annoying, dim-bulb people … I mean animals. 'What fun,' you are thinking. 'I should write some of those myself,' you are thinking. BUT before you get started,

[250] Nodelman, 63.

[251] Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. *Squids will be Squids* (UK: Puffin Books, 1999).

> it just occurred to me that you might want to know one more little bit about Aesop. AESOP used to tell this one fable about a real bossy jerk 'Lion' who ruled a city. When the real bossy jerk guy who ruled Aesop's city heard this fable, he didn't like it. So he had Aesop thrown off a cliff.
>
> (Moral: If you are planning to write fables, don't forget to change the people to animals and avoid places with high cliffs.)[252]

The significance of fables' multidimensional and metaphorical use has been also highlighted at the beginning of this book:

> Fables have been around for thousands of years. And it's no wonder. Because even thousands of years ago people were bright enough to figure out that you could gossip about anybody – as long as you changed their name to something like "Lion" or "Mouse" or "Donkey" first.[253]

Evocative and ironic morals such as "Sometimes the names are changed to protect the not-so-innocent"[254] in the introduction and the other ones following each story show that animal stories as well as folk tales are good means of both confirming and subverting established norms. Like Roald Dahl, a professional author who found folk tales a way to question and mock stereotypes, the authors of *Squids will be Squids* use animal stories as a way to "liberate their readers from the instructional and moralistic power of such traditional tales" and "invite [them] to consider the extent to which such stories can acquire the power to subdue individuality and freedom of thought (see Thacker and Webb 2002: 157–63)".[255] In order to see how some of these stories represent social criticism and are subversive in the sense that they challenge the norms, we will go through some examples.

A convincing case is the very first story called *Grasshopper logic* where a child grasshopper goes out with friends immediately after school arguing with his mom that there is only one small homework that needs to be done. Finally, when he came back home, his mother realized that the tiny homework which needs to be done is to "Rewrite twelve Greek myths as Broadway musicals. Write music for songs. Design and build all sets. Sew original costumes for each production".[256] The mother freaks out and asks him "How long have you known about this assignment?" and the Grasshopper's answer is a

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[252] Scieszka and Smith, np.

[253] Scieszka and Smith, np.

[254] Scieszka and Smith, np.

[255] Deborah Cogan Thacker, "Criticism and the critical mainstream", In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt, 44-56 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.

[256] Scieszka and Smith, np.

simple “I don’t know”.[257] Then the moral of story comes saying that “There are plenty of things to say to calm a hopping mad Grasshopper mom. “I don't know” is not one of them”.[258]

The moral of the story is subversive in and of itself because, in contrast to how the morals of fables were originally developed – to tame the young readers and teach them to be docile – here, it offers a mock-advice to the child reader to challenge adult authority and expectations. The story implicitly questions the two important ISAs (school and family) in a mocking way by demonstrating the inefficiency of their pedagogy.

The other challenging story is *Frog’s New Shoes*, in which a frog, who was much influenced by a skateboard shoe advertisement on television, purchases them and tries to perform the same unbelievable things as the man in the advertisement, but he fails. The moral of the story is: “Everyone knows frogs can’t skateboard, but it’s kind of sad that they believe everything they see on TV”.[259] We’d notice that the story is a sarcastic rendering of media’s propaganda and the consumer society but the real sarcasm is hidden in the paradoxical implication of the moral.

There is no attempt to represent animals as animals in these stories, and they are mostly depicted with human characteristics; however, here comes the surprising indication that “Everyone knows frogs can’t skateboard” while the animals in these stories do other human activities such as watching TV, which has been mentioned as a normal activity for a frog; So the comparison in the moral is not about frogs not being able to skateboard and watching TV but between their inability to skateboard and their naivety in believing the propaganda of the media and this is where the satirical part comes in: it is completely understandable and acceptable that frogs cannot skateboard (referring to the frog as an animal) but they are not expected to behave naïve when it comes to being influenced by the TV advertisement (considering the frog as an intelligent human).

Scieszka and Smith’s other story *Little Malrus* is also very subversive since it appears to bring up and challenge a fundamental moral (honesty) which is considered to be a sensitive topic to be discussed with children specially if it is not discussed in an affirmative way. The story is as short and as telling as follows:

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[257] Scieszka and Smith, np.
[258] Scieszka and Smith, np.
[259] Scieszka and Smith, np.

> Little Walrus's mom told her to always tell the truth. One day the phone rang. Little Walrus was the only one home, so she answered it. "Hello," said Little Walrus. "Hello, Little Walrus," said Whale. "Is your mom home?" "No," said Little Walrus. "She's out having the hair taken off her lip."
>
> ***Moral:*** *you should always tell the truth. But if your mom is out having the hair taken off her lip, you might want to forget a few of the details*.[260]

This story, and others like it in this collection, could be considered subversive literature because they subvert the original function of animal stories, which was to serve adults' desire to tame children by using animal stories as cautionary tales with unquestionable morals.

The humorous aspect of animal stories, as well as their metaphoric potential in general, will resonate with modern subversive writing, while yet remaining consistent with didactic conformist literature in various ways. The fact that animals in children's stories mostly play the role of humans rather than being representatives of their own species (even in stories about animal lives) effectively conveys a form of human power over animals and the fact that animals are slaves of humans not only in the real world, but also in the world of literature.

Nodelman mentions that there are lots of children books which are about animals rather than children. But those animal characters behave like people in the stories because we usually assume that children are in a way like animals as they are less advanced than adults. Therefore, children will believe animal stories easier and take the lessons they are offering to them.[261] Nodelman's argument contributes to the fact that conformist animal stories were and are used to educate children through identification where adults are in control of both animals and children and as the characters in the story or as the authors, they appear to be able to solve all problems related to animal life as well as problems of children in the stories and thus the happy ending and the home/away/home theme are essential parts of these stories.

While Nodelman emphasizes the children's identification with animals where they both have the same level of power and are inferior to human adults, Nikolajeva gives us a chance to look at power relations in animal stories from another point of view:

> Animals and toys are usually inferior to children in strength and intelligence. This includes both the fictive children in the narrative and the young readers. It is not

[260] Scieszka and Smith, np.
[261] Perry Nodelman. "Fish is People," *Book bird* 57, No. 2 (2019): 12-21, 12-13.

> accidental that the most common animals in children's books are small: such as mice, rabbits, guinea-pigs and kittens. In the company of toys and small animals, the child can feel strong, clever and protective.[262]

The aforementioned theory highlights an additional facet of the relationship between children and animals, wherein youngsters learn from the story not by identification but rather by experiencing control over animal characters. Because the child is in charge, this viewpoint on animal stories might initially seem to be more indicative of subversive literature, but the more closely we examine, the more conformist patterns we uncover. Unlike their position in the real world, children in such animal stories are very powerful and able to change the order of things and act as heroes. When giving children this fake power over animals (or in other cases over the toys or nature) in the story world, we confirm and restrict their power only within the fictional world and simultaneously diminish the need for being powerful and rebellious when it comes to the real world and dealing with humans; specifically, human adults with their unquestionable power over both children and animals' lives.

Now, readers may wonder how animal stories may be considered subversive literary works. Naturally, animal tales have always been a part of subversive literature because they serve as excellent representations of power inequalities and have been used as allegorical narrative tools since ancient times. However, similar to fairy tales, animal tales have also been employed to both enforce conformity and raise questions about it. In this regard, animal stories can be subversive when they break some of the confirmed clichés either in content or in the form: where animals revolt against the stereotypes that humans built for them in fictions, or against the humans themselves, for example, and by doing so they challenge the didactic aspect of these stories as well as questioning the conventional human-animal relationship within and outside the story world.

The humorous animal stories could be good examples of subversive literature (as mentioned before in case of *Squids will be Squids*) in challenging the established form of pedagogical animal stories and their morals where animals don't behave as expected while some other animal stories such as *Farmer Duck* [263] are subversive in a sense that animals revolt against humans' power over them. While *Farmer Duck* and other such stories primarily portray subversion by displaying animal-human power imbalance, they

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[262] Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, 155.
[263] Martin Waddell, *Farmer Duck* (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 1992).

also have "potential for serious discussion of economic class and the injustices of capitalism" on an allegorical level.[264]

Another way in which animal stories can be subversive is when they have rebellious or political content, and in this situation, pushing the boundaries is about the subject of the story rather than the format of fables or the human-animal relationship. Even though animal stories are the most common in the body of children's literature, it could be challenging to find this particular type of subversive story where the content/subject is provoking. This could be for a variety of reasons, including the fact that fables were originally intended to serve as teaching tools, a legacy that can still be seen in contemporary animal stories, and the difficulty modern writers have in moving past the *cuteness* of animal characters to use them to convey more serious and thought-provoking concepts.

Samad Behrangi is a versatile Persian author whose famous animal story *The Little Black Fish*[265] is a good example of subversive animal story where the political content is conveyed in a metaphorical form. In the following chapter, I will explore Behrangi's life and how it influenced his works for children (particularly the aforementioned animal narrative). He has also contributed to the collection and rewriting of certain local folk stories, with a focus on their subversive potential, which we shall go over in depth in the next chapter.

## 2.4. Revolution and Censorship in Samad Behrangi and His Works for Children and Young Adults

This analysis of the work of Samad Behrangi, is situated within the complex political and cultural landscape of 20th-century Iran. For much of this period, the nation was governed by a monarchy, the Pahlavi dynasty, which pursued a rapid, Western-oriented modernization program. This era, however, was also characterized by a deep ideological conflict between state-sponsored secularism and traditional religious and cultural values. This tension manifested in the country's educational system, which became a key

[264] P. Shannon. "I am the canon: Finding ourselves in multiculturalism," *Journal of Children's Literature* 20, 1 (1994): 1-5, 3.

[265] Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish* [Mahi Siah-e Kouchouloo]. Illustrated by Farshid Mesghali (Tehran: Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults [Kānoon-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-e Koodakān va Nojavānān], 2017).

ideological apparatus for the monarchy to instill its values. It was in this environment that writers like Behrangi, many of whom were associated with leftist and socialist movements, began to produce works that subtly and overtly challenged the state's authority. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the political system shifted dramatically, and with it, the state's ideological goals. While the specific nature of state control changed, the fundamental role of children's literature as a tool of ideological reproduction remained. This historical context is essential for understanding how both conformist and subversive literature functioned within these shifting political realities.

The Ministry of Culture and Art was in charge of book censorship during the second Pahlavi dynasty (1941–1979) in Iran. They would also assess the children's books from literary, political, social, educational, and religious perspectives. They would mostly censor or reject those books which were representing a negative image of kings and princes or those which had provoking contents. The governmental auditors were also vigilant towards the metaphoric stories since they were a popular format in conveying political ideologies and therefore the animal stories as a main form of metaphoric literature were under strict supervisions. They were also vigilant about some specific children's writers such as Samad Behrangi whose works were banned and considered as a red flag. Even the works which were referring to his work or they had similar contents were banned from publishing. The same happened to those books that had themes related to poverty or would advertise the communist ideology.[266] In this chapter, I will present an outline of Behrangi's life and works, as well as examine and demonstrate why his works and name were subjected to strict censorship before and after the 1979 Revolution.

Samad Behrangi (1939) was born into a working-class family in Tabriz.[267] After completing his preparatory studies, he began working as a teacher in disadvantaged areas near his hometown. Meanwhile, he was writing pieces on art and literature criticism and publishing them in magazines under a pen name. He had an important role in promoting book reading and also in establishing libraries in suburban schools for underprivileged children. To mention some of his literary works for children, we can name *Talkhoon: A collection of stories (1966), Olduz and the Crows (1968), Olduz and the Talking Doll*

[266] M.H. Mohammadi and Zohreh Ghaeni. *The History of children's literature in Iran* (Tehran: Cheesta Publishing Co, 2001-2007), 464-468.

[267] To avoid confusion between Samad Behrangi and his brother Asad Behrangi, I sometimes refer to the former by his first name (Samad) throughout this dissertation, while still acknowledging him in full at first mention. Asad Behrangi is referred to by his first name only when necessary to maintain clarity.

*(1967), The Little Sugar Beet Vendor (1967), The tale of love (1967), One Peach Thousand Peaches (1969), 24 Restless Hours (1969) and The Little Black Fish (1968).*

Samad's position as both a critic and a children's literature author is significant. He was among the first Persian critics to attempt to provide a framework for his theories regarding children's literature. Samad's definition of children's literature also reflects his view of childhood, which is crucial to take into account in order to comprehend his works on a deeper level:

> That time is past when we limited children's literature to propaganda and indoctrination; dogmatic advice on things such as personal hygiene, obedience to parents, listening to adults, not making noise in front of guests, being an early riser, in order to be successful; smile and the world smiles with you: helping the poor in the style of Charity Institutions, and many other examples like this, the total sum of which contributes to keeping children ignorant of the major issues and crucial problems of life and their living environment. Why should we smother the child in an unfounded cocoon of hope and happiness and joy while his elder brother is craving for one free breath, one breath of fresh air.[268]

In addition to outlining his conception of childhood in his writings, which sees children as intelligent people capable of comprehending and tackling difficult topics, Samad describes his ideal readers in the foreword to *Olduz and the Crows*[269] from the perspective of the protagonist (Olduz), who allows the writer to tell her stories:

> Mr. "Behrang" was intrigued [by my life story] and asked if he could write a story about me and the crows. I agreed, but on some conditions: First, he only writes my stories for children since grownups are so busy that they do not comprehend and so do not enjoy reading them. Second, he should write my story for underprivileged and unspoiled children. So, these children can't read my stories. 1. Those who attend school with their servants. 2. Those who arrive at school with expensive cars. [270] [271]

In the foreword to *Olduz and the Talking Doll*, he describes his preferred audience once more, this time through the eyes of the talking doll:

> My final words are that spoiled and arrogant children aren't allowed to read the story of me and Olduz. Especially those privileged children who brag while sitting in their cars, seeing themselves as superior than homeless impoverished children sitting on the streets, and who ignore the working children. Mr. "Behrang" told me that he primarily creates stories for homeless and poor working children.

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[268] Behrang. "Sokhani Darbareye "Avaye Nogolan" (Some Words about "Avaye Nogolan")," *Negin* 36 (1347 [1968]):12-13, 12.

[269] Samad Behrangi, *Behrang's Stories [Ghessehay-e Behrang]* (Tehran: Sorayesh, 2003).

[270] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Persian used in this research are my own.

[271] Behrangi, 12-13.

> Of course, bad arrogant children can read Mr. "Behrang"'s stories once they change their behaviour.[272]

The aforementioned quotations sum up Samad's approach towards children's literature. As individuals who experienced the suffering may relate to it more, Samad actually likes his audience to be young working-class people. In order for children from different socioeconomic groups to blend into the readers of his books, he also lures them into changing their mind set. As a result, Samad was concerned with having his books published at a low cost that would be affordable for all children. Asad Behrangi (Samad's brother) in his book *My Brother Samad Behrangi: The Narrative of his Life and Death* (2007) mentions that even after Samad's death, they tried to publish his books with a fair price to comply with his request saying that "My books should be priced in a way that students can afford buying them with their pocket money".[273] Pricing is an important aspect when analysing Samad's works and particularly when contrasting them with so-called political contemporary children books (some of which we discussed in the previous chapter). This is because pricing plays a key role in determining the target audience. The power hierarchy comes into question anytime certain children's access to literary works is restricted or denied, or when they are singled out or included as the intended audience due to their socioeconomic status. In addition to challenging the economic power hierarchies, the low cost of children's books could also challenge the existing power relation between the child and the adult since it creates the opportunity for children to afford and select their desired books without dependency on adults' intervention.

Samad challenged the established power imbalance between children and adults in numerous ways, both within and outside of his stories. He began his career as a teacher, and he gave his students the opportunity to be the first reviewers of his stories, and they were always writing letters to him expressing their thoughts on his stories. Samad emphasised the importance of putting children in the shoes of literary critics in order to offer children more authority in the entire process of literary creation.

This characterisation of child as an intellectual powerful individual is also clearly demonstrated by the protagonists of almost all of his stories. Samad's works are very diverse and innovative in the sense that he used several literary forms to tell his stories,

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[272] Behrangi, 83.

[273] Asad Behrangi, *Baraadaram Samad Behrangi: Revayat-e Zendegi va Marge ou (My Brother Samad Behrangi: The Narrative of his Life and Death)* (Tabriz: Behrangi, 1386 (2007)), 125.

making him a pioneer among his peers. Aside from realism, which was popular at the time and in which the majority of his works were written, Samad incorporated fantasy (or, more accurately, surrealism) in some of his works, including *Olduz and the Crows* (1968) and *Olduz and the Talking Doll* (1967) and his best-known piece of metaphorical writing, *The Little Black Fish* (1968), is written in the format of animal stories. But what is common in all of these stories is that the child characters have freedom of thought and action. For instance, the Olduz stories show a young, self-reliant girl who resists against her father and stepmother's repressive actions. Readers learn about the brutal reality of Olduz's life through her eyes, including an understanding of cowardice, resistance, and heroism.

Samad's works also challenges the gender inequalities by representing female heroes as the main characters which again differentiates his works from his peers. *Olduz*'s books are not his only works with a female protagonist; his other stories, such as *Talkhoon*, also feature a female heroine who is the primary agent of change. In his discussion of *Talkhoon*, Asad Behrangi noted, "with the hope that he had for Iranian women, he [Samad] once again chose the protagonist of his story to be a 'woman'".[274]

Among his numerous ways of challenging established power imbalances (by giving more power to children both inside and outside of the stories, by portraying female characters as the main heroines, by using unconventional storytelling techniques such as open endings, etc.), Behrangi's most important way of challenging power is through the subversive and provocative topics he chooses for his stories. Michael Hillman believes that Samad was one of those writers who would bring the bad news of the adults' world to his young readers.[275] In one of his essays, Behrangi himself explains why and how children's literature should introduce the dark side of the world to children:

> Now is the time to consider these two points in children's literature and basically make them the core of the work:
>
> 1. Children's literature should be a bridge between the colourful world of childhood which is full of ignorance and sweet dreams and the dark conscious world of adulthood which is full of bitter, painful and tough realities of adults' society. Children should be able to pass this bridge and arrive to the grown ups' dark world consciously, armed with the light in their hands. In this way, they can help their

[274] Asad Behrangi, 137.

[275] Michael C. Hillmann. "The Modernist Trend in Persian Literature and Its Social Impact," *Iranian Studies* 15, No. ¼ (1982): 7-29, 11.

> fathers and be their true friends and act as real game changers in a dull collapsing society. […]
> [2]. In short (and here is the second point) we should give children a scientific and precise worldview; some criteria with which they can examine different moral and social issues in altering and diverse social circumstances.
>
> We know that morals do not have eternal consistency and something which was considered as a good thing last year could be considered otherwise in two years. Some acts could be known as ethical for a certain nation or social class while it is unethical elsewhere.[276]

These statements suggest Behrangi's avant-garde views on the child and the concept of childhood. The moral questions he suggested for children are among the topics being debated in the field of philosophy for children nowadays. He views children as intelligent readers while also positioning them as literary critics and therefore emphasizes on teaching children how to read literature. Behrangi's concept of the ideal child and childhood is similar to his own childhood, which was full of social and political challenges; he witnessed and participated in power struggles both within his family, which was experiencing social and financial hardships, and in the outside world, where important political events were taking place. He has been observing and experiencing the Pishevari revolution[277] in Azerbaijan next to other political changes during his young ages followed up by active political dissuasion in his family about the current events which helped him develop a critical way of thinking in a very young age.

Samad Behrangi and his brother Asad were children when they contributed to adult political life. There were always political debates in the household with children present, and there was no fear of bringing up political concerns in front of them. The children would speak their opinion without censorship and as is. Those interactions are good examples of adult-child power relations and how Samad thought children had more authority even when he was a youngster himself:

> The father pretended that he didn't hear [what the mother said] and continued: "people will have a terrible time, arresting has been started, tomorrow the executions will also start, just like the Pishevari time," Samad said: "Father, things have not been finished yet, let the schools be opened tomorrow, then you will see, you weren't in school to see that children were raising hell. There was not a moment without conflict when someone was reading their writings. The writing teacher was so desperate". I [Asad] confirmed what Samad said: "our teacher went crazy during

[276] Behrang. "Sokhani Darbareye "Avaye Nogolan" (Some Words about "Avaye Nogolan"),"12.

[277] Pishevari Revolution refers to the revolutionary movements of Ja'far Pishevari who founded and led the Azerbaijani Democratic Party and was known as a national hero for Azeri nationalists or a socialist revolutionary by the Iranian Left.

> the writing class, one day after a conflict over one of the student's writing, the teacher said: "writing is forbidden until the exam day, this is not working, I ask you to write about spring; then one of you writes about that day when the street was flowered by the red bloods, the other one writes "Tulip has been growing out of the country's young people blood" another one analogize the nightingale to that murdered person and the thorn to the bayonet, someone writes a "manifest" for me instead of an essay, some agree with writing, the others disagree…"[278]

These conversations are very expressive, showing not just an equal power dynamic between the child and the adult in political discussions, but also Samad's vision of school and students' roles in a larger political community. Behrangi's childhood memories depicts that school as a powerful Ideological State Apparatus (in Althusserian notion) has been challenged by students who are gaining as much power as adults in the political atmosphere:

> One of the guys who was a top student last year always brought the news to the classroom: "the students of Ferdosi high school started to strike, why are you sitting?" or "that newspaper wrote this and certain manifest has been published." Because of so many news that he used to bring, students called him Mr. what's up. He stood up and said: "Sir, there is always time for study, now tell us what's happening to this country? What is our duty in this situation? Should we do anything else besides studying?" The history teacher became pale. After taking a moment, he said: "this is not a good time for these kids of conversations and now we have to focus on studying." Mr. what's up angrily said: "today is a different time than yesterday, Mosaddegh[279] has been prisoned, many others are prisoned too, parties have been plundered, newspapers are suppressed, some of our teachers and friends are prisoned too, or they ran away. What's the point of studying in this situation? We are not your parrots to repeat whatever you ask us to say." It made the students come out of their shell. They started to cheer and applause. The teacher stood terrified and dumbfounded by the blackboard.[280]

Asad Behrangi's book has numerous examples of these moments when students were deeply involved in political conversations and activities. The protagonists in Samad's writings are thus representations of his own and his classmates' childhoods, revolting against the ruling class and seeking a utopia in which the world is a better place. In his writings, he not only depicts reality, but also allows his child characters and readers to take an active role in society. Keeping in touch with children (mostly his students) as a teacher was his way of subverting the existing status quo power dynamics in schools, as opposed to what he witnessed as a child, when conservative teachers tried not to challenge

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[278] Asad Behrangi, 76.

[279] Mohammad Mosaddegh (born 1880, Tehrān, Iran—died March 5, 1967, Tehrān) was an Iranian political leader who nationalized the huge British oil holdings in Iran and, as premier in 1951–53, almost succeeded in deposing the shah. (Britannica)

[280] Asad Behrangi, 77.

and be challenged by meddling in politics and education. Some of his stories capture children's closer relationship with their teacher, based on real-life dilemmas where the teacher is involved in his students' struggles which are caused by poverty and social injustice. In *The Little Sugar Beet Vendor* (1967), for example, the narrative of a little boy who lives in poverty with his mother and sister is told through the eyes of the boy's teacher who witnesses his student's struggle with social injustice. In addition to this story and others where Samad portrays the lives of teachers and students beyond the classroom, engaging with real-world challenges, his first short story, *Habitude* (1960), focuses on a teacher whose primary goal is to raise literacy levels. The story is set in a remote village and centers around the teacher's interactions with the villagers and the dynamics within that society. This narrative reflects elements of Samad's own life, as he spent time teaching in rural villages in Azerbaijan. As the title suggests, the story highlights the normalization of poverty, a persistent issue in the society for years. Through the story, readers gain insight into the villagers' struggles and the forces hindering their progress. The teacher, aware of these problems, makes great efforts to change the situation, but finds himself frustrated as all avenues for improvement seem closed. He is bewildered by the attitudes and behaviors he encounters, which he attributes to the detrimental mind set of previous generations. This has led to a societal acceptance of misery, ignorance, and failure, shaped by a harmful habitude.

Some critics of Samad's writings argue that his stories are overly ideological and may mislead young readers. Based on this perception, they have not engaged with his work in depth, instead forming biased opinions about his ideas. In response to those who view Samad's works as propagandistic, revolutionary, and ideological, Mahdian counters by stating:

> Those who label that era's literature ideological and claim to be devoid of all ideologies speak as if they don't take sides or have no intends when writing. The actual meaning of ideology, however, is that ideology permeates everything and that, once we postulate our own standards and beliefs, the standards and beliefs of others appear to be politically biased and "ideological". We will never be able to maintain a completely impartial and prejudice-free worldview.[281]

The debate surrounding Samad's works, including concerns about what is appropriate for children, is not solely about the presence of ideology. Rather, the issue is that the ideology represented in his works does not align with the dominant ideology. As Mahdian noted,

[281] Mahdian. "Children's Literature in a Revolutionary Era," 129.

no work of children's literature is entirely devoid of some form of ideology. Samad explores themes (or questions established ideologies) which are even challenging for adults; for example, he asks "why do we advertise 'helping the poor' but we never mention how one became 'poor' and the other one 'rich'?".[282] In all of his books harsh reality is addressed through fantasy or pure realism. Most of his stories revolve around how one can relate to injustice and suppression correctly and concretely.

Samad's works held a unique place not only within Iranian literature but also in the broader landscape of international children's literature due to their complex reception – at once celebrated and censored across diverse cultural contexts. His stories, rooted deeply in socio-political critique, enjoyed significant popularity outside Iran, with translations and publications emerging in countries as varied as Turkey, Baku, Iraq, several Arab nations, Germany, France, Sweden, Hungary, Japan, and China.[283] However, the ideological nature of Samad's narratives led to a similarly widespread and intense censorship in some of these regions. In Turkey, for instance, following the military coup d'état in 1980, authorities conducted targeted searches of the homes of young anti-coup activists, frequently discovering copies of Samad's books. This prompted the Turkish government to ban the publication and distribution of his works, ordering them to be removed from bookstores to suppress their influence among dissenting youth.[284] This widespread reception and repression of Samad's works illustrate the duality of his impact – widely influential and, at the same time, perceived as politically subversive.

In Iran, the reception of Samad's works has shifted dramatically across different political eras, with starkly different approaches to his stories before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Prior to the revolution, Samad's works were strictly censored, and many were outright banned by the state. His exploration of themes like poverty, injustice, and the hypocrisies of authority conflicted directly with the dominant ideology, and authorities saw his works as too subversive for the public, especially for young readers. This intense censorship meant that some of Samad's works were never even published before his death, and those that did circulate often did so unofficially.[285] Samad's narratives

[282] Behrang, 12.
[283] Asad Behrangi, 127.
[284] Asad Behrangi, 127.
[285] Asad Behrangi, 258.

encouraged readers to question the social order and to view power critically, making his work especially dangerous in the eyes of authorities who feared his influence on young, impressionable minds.

After the revolution, however, the revolutionary zeal and social consciousness embedded in Samad's stories found new relevance. For a short time, his works were welcomed and appreciated as they resonated with the revolutionary ideals of justice and anti-authoritarianism that characterized the new regime. His stories were published as they appeared to align with the ethos of the time. Yet as the post-revolutionary government solidified its own power, Samad's continued influence grew problematic. The same themes that had been praised for their revolutionary fervour began to pose a threat to the new authorities, as they transcended specific political contexts and criticized oppression in any form. His works faced renewed criticism, labelled as overly ideological or even violent, as they promoted a level of honest social engagement that the new authorities found subversive.

In contemporary Iran, this discomfort has evolved into a strategy of reinterpretation and neutralization. Rather than straightforward censorship, intellectuals now attempt to diminish the impact of Samad's works by reinterpreting them in ways that strip away their socio-political critique. Some label his stories as unsuitable for children, citing their violence or ideological stance. Others seek to depoliticize his work, reframing his stories as historical or fictional artefacts rather than potent critiques of power. Such strategies reflect an enduring reluctance to accept Samad's works in their original form: deeply honest, subversive, and inherently critical of authority. This reinterpreted approach aims to defuse the radical nature of his works, rendering them more palatable within the bounds of contemporary ideological frameworks.

Throughout his career, Samad used folk tales and allegory to navigate censorship, embedding his socio-political critiques within familiar, seemingly innocuous cultural narratives. Many of his folk stories were adapted from Azeri traditions, which he would either translate directly or transform into new stories with subtly critical edges.[286] This strategic use of folklore allowed him to communicate his ideas while avoiding direct governmental scrutiny, even as he connected deeply with his readers' cultural heritage.

[286] Asad Behrangi, 309.

Behrangi's use of fairy tales to critique a totalitarian regime is a clear example of the genre's subversive potential. This point is further supported by Cristina Greenhill and Pauline Bacchilega, who argue that contemporary fairy tales can be used to explore and promote "justice" in different areas. By using "wonder" to address real-world injustices, these authors provide a powerful parallel to Behrangi's use of allegory to incite revolutionary thought, refuting the conservative, patriarchal, and merely nostalgic Disnified narrative of the genre.[287]

Samad's experience with suppression and reinterpretation aligns with D. Sutherland's description of strategies often employed to silence ideologically challenging literature. Sutherland outlines methods such as the outright rejection of manuscripts by publishers, negative reviews designed to dissuade readers, the official silence of educators and librarians, and, ultimately, direct censorship and banning.[288] Samad's work encountered nearly all of these tactics during his life, with publishers and educational authorities labelling his books as inappropriate, and critics often attempting to discredit his work through scathing reviews. In contemporary Iran, this suppression has transformed further, with scholars attempting to reframe Samad's narratives, casting his stories as overly ideological or reinterpreting them in ways that strip them of their radical, subversive intent.

Ultimately, the evolving reception of Samad's works – from suppression prior to the revolution, to initial acceptance, and finally to reinterpretation and criticism in modern Iran – underscores the enduring power of his storytelling. Despite ongoing efforts to discredit or dilute his legacy, Samad's stories continue to resonate with readers as authentic, uncompromising examinations of justice, inequality, and power. His works endure precisely because they refuse simplification, challenging readers to engage deeply with their themes, and reaffirming the role of literature as a force for social awareness and introspection, even in the face of changing ideological landscapes.

Samad Behrangi's most controversial work is *The Little Black Fish* (Mahi Siah-e Kouchouloo, 1968), a story that he wrote originally as a children's story, became a political allegory once it was known as a story against the dominant government prior to

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[287] Pauline Greenhill and Cristina Bacchilega. *Justice in 21st-Century Fairy Tales and the Power of Wonder* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2025).

[288] Robert D. Sutherland. "Hidden Persuaders: Political Ideologies in Literature for Children," *Children's Literature in Education* 16, No.3 (1985): 143-157, 151.

the 1979 revolution. *The Little Black Fish* was not his last work; it was the last story which was printed while he was still alive but only published a few days after Behrangi's death, thus marking it as his parting message to readers.[289] Asad Behrangi states that "the book was given to the institute[290] as *Little Wise Black Fish* but the word "Wise" was eliminated for some reason".[291]

Figure 24. Original cover of Samad Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish*

This children's story, using animal characters, expresses the character of a *stranger* in multiple ways. Firstly, child figures in literature have always been seen as the other or stranger when compared to adult figures. Throughout history, children have consistently been regarded as strangers. The only difference has been the way adults perceived them in different eras: what once was seen as immodest in children became innocent, and what was neglected before became a subject of amusement. A child, therefore, has been a stranger, while adults have had familiar roles. When animals in literature take on childlike characteristics, this strangeness is amplified because animals, like children, are seen as strangers due to their perceived inferiority to adult humans, who are traditionally at the center of history. In children's books, and animal stories in particular, animal characters are strangers even to themselves, as they primarily represent human behaviors rather than

[289] Asad Behrangi, 322.

[290] Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults: Centre for the Intellectual Development of Child and Adolescent (CIDCA, Persian: کانون پرورش فکری کودک و نوجوان, Kānoon-e Parvaresh-e Fekri-e Koodakān va Nojavānān, better known as Kanoon or Kānoon) is an Iranian institution with a wide range of cultural and artistic activities in the field of mental and cultural development for children and young adults. The organization was at the centre of the vanguard of cultural production in the late 60s and early 1970s and is the platform through which many of Iran's most regarded artists and filmmakers launched their careers. (Wikipedia)

[291] Asad Behrangi, 126.

their own species. The concept of the "stranger," as presented in *The Little Black Fish*, does not always imply an outsider. The story reveals that strangers can be longstanding members of a society who, for one reason or another, are not integrated with the norms of their community. Behrangi's protagonist is precisely this kind of stranger, misunderstood by his society for wanting to explore beyond its boundaries.

The story also became a political allegory after being interpreted as a narrative against the oppressive government that ruled Iran before the 1979 revolution. Niloofar Mahdian notes in "Children's Literature in a Revolutionary Era" that

> In the years of censorship when the growth of literature containing the real scenes of people's life was almost impossible, Behrangi with the creation of *The Little Black Fish* became a leading figure for using symbolism in children's literature who could express his radical thoughts without a direct encounter with the ruling system.[292]

In this sense, Behrangi's work provided a medium through which subversive ideas could flourish even under strict censorship.

The most important way in which this work has been read as a political allegory is that there is a protagonist here that rises against the power which limits the freedom and s/he may be successful or killed on their way to the freedom. Although the story is predominantly about freedom seeking, it also contains other symbolic elements: the old fish speaks to her 12,000 children and grandchildren, and describes the journey of a little black fish who was bored of the repetitive life in the river and wanted to go and discover the world which is beyond the river. Although the other fish including his mother think that he is wrong and they try to convince him that there is no other world than the river, the little black fish is so determined to go and he takes the way to the sea and goes through lots of dangers and adventures. Finally, he is caught by a pelican, and in the end, we will not know if he will survive or not. As the old fish finishes the story, all 11999 fish go to sleep but one little red fish stays awake the whole night and thinks about the little black fish's adventures. This kind of journey tale exists in different forms around the world, and it is mostly with the same standard motif as the one in folk-tales which is the motif of home/away/home. It is essential to see that Behrangi's story is, thus, also a tale of a journey, although we can see that his approach to the story is not based on the common motif of home/away/home but the unusual motif of home/away/away. Behrangi makes

[292] Mahdian, 74.

key choices in picturing the hero as a stranger and a different person in order to best engage his target audience, the children.

Critics have also raised several points about *The Little Black Fish*, interpreting its elements in conflicting ways. Asad Behrangi explains that some critics allege that the protagonist's sword signifies an inclination toward violence. They suggest that the fish's decision to embark on his journey alone reflects a disregard for previous generations, an attitude verging on anarchism, and an emphasis on individual heroism. These critics question why the story portrays the protagonist's solitary quest, suggesting it fosters a hero complex. He claims that many such interpretations overlook the story's essential message: that children must seek knowledge for themselves, learn the distinction between friends and foes, and face life's challenges independently. For Samad, the purpose of living lies not in mere survival but in boldly confronting unknowns and battling evil. He believes in the idea that anyone content to passively "stay alive" is already spiritually dead, and to fight against societal ills, one must equip themselves with the appropriate tools of the time. Sometimes, this tool might be wisdom; at other times, a weapon may be necessary. Asad Behrangi believed that every era interprets Samad's story differently; children in his era of armed resistance viewed the tale accordingly, while children today might find its meaning in alternative, nonviolent interpretations.[293]

The ambiguity of *The Little Black Fish* is notable. Literature for young audiences often resolves the destinies of its rebellious protagonists through symbolic or literal conclusions, such as death, separation, or loss. As Nikolajeva observes, tales with open endings can even hint at mortality as an inevitable result of a rebellious journey.[294] In *The Little Black Fish*, however, the ambiguous ending suggests continuity rather than a tragic finale, inviting readers to imagine the little fish's journey as something that persists beyond the story's limits. Thus, Behrangi allows his character a freedom not confined to the narrative's pages, offering readers the space to imagine ongoing exploration.

The critique that denying a happy ending deprives children of empowerment is valid if we accept a narrow definition of empowerment as the passive reception of a reassuring conclusion. Here, however, we argue that true empowerment lies not in the pre-packaged promise of a happy or sad ending, but in the narrative's ability to foster the child's

[293] Asad Behrangi, 128-129.
[294] Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, 7.

interpretive agency. An open ending, or one that resists a simple resolution, does not deprive the child; it empowers them by inviting them to participate in the narrative's completion. The child becomes an active co-creator of meaning, learning to live with ambiguity and to critically engage with a world that does not always offer simple solutions. This approach stands in direct contrast to didactic or propagandistic literature, which closes off the potential for dialogue and critical thought by providing a singular, predetermined ideological outcome. In this way, open-ended narratives become a powerful tool for cultivating the child as citizen, a person capable of independent thought and moral reasoning.

Absence of parental authority is another significant aspect of children's literature, one that provides protagonists with a space for self-growth. Nikolajeva argues that "the removal of parents is the premise in children's literature", as it allows young protagonists the freedom to mature, develop, and assert independence.[295] In *The Little Black Fish*, this concept is highlighted by the protagonist's departure from his mother, symbolizing his readiness to challenge the norms and explore the world unrestrained by authority. This absence enables the fish to develop his understanding and form his identity outside parental or societal control, fulfilling his role as the archetypal young seeker.

A broader ideological theme links *The Little Black Fish* to other revolutionary tales. In works like Zur Mühlen's collection, young characters grapple with societal injustices, driven to question social inequalities. For example, as Mickenberg describes, in one tale a boy named Paul is punished for persistently asking why the poor suffer. [296] *The Little Black Fish* embodies a similar spirit, as the protagonist questions established beliefs, challenging adults and authority alike. The association of Samad Behrangi's work with socialist ideas provides a crucial context for this comparison. While much of Soviet literature, as Nikolajeva notes, forces characters toward assimilation and conformity,[297] texts like *The Little Black Fish* bravely subvert this tendency. By promoting individual thought and encouraging young readers to value questioning and discovery, Behrangi's work maintains a path of one's own rather than merely adhering to social expectations, creating a powerful counter-narrative to a culture's dominant ideological stream.

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[295] Nikolajeva, 16.
[296] Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left*, 60-61.
[297] Nikolajeva, 144.

The continued reimagining of *The Little Black Fish* also raises the question of whether subsequent works seek to continue Behrangi's mission or address themes he left unresolved. Does this ongoing interest suggest that Behrangi's narrative remains incomplete, or is it simply that each new generation sees itself reflected in the little fish's courage and curiosity?

Behrangi's representation of strangers further complicates this concept in scenes where the protagonist encounters and rejects other fish communities' values. When the little black fish encounters the tadpoles, their behaviour reflects a closed-off, conceited worldview. Proudly identifying as "nobles," they ridicule the little black fish for his appearance and differences, seeing him as an outsider unworthy of their company. Instead of submitting, the fish's response suggests the importance of independent thought. He dismisses their elitist views, criticizing their lack of individuality – "You don't even have names of your own"[298] – underscoring his own strength as a stranger within these societies.

This interaction not only reveals the complexities in perceiving "strangers" as either enemy or ally but also raises questions about self-awareness and adaptation within groups. Behrangi's little fish is conscious of his strangeness and accepts his otherness, which he declares to several communities along his journey. This acceptance enhances his identity, showing the power of recognizing oneself as a stranger and embracing it. The little black fish's self-awareness contrasts with the collective conformity of the communities he meets, reinforcing Behrangi's message that belonging should not come at the cost of individuality.

In his essay "Fish is People," Perry Nodelman critiques the anthropomorphizing of animals in literature, suggesting that by assigning human attributes to animal characters, we strip them of their unique qualities. He argues that such depictions of animals promote anthropocentrism, potentially diminishing empathy toward non-human lives.[299] Like other allegorical tales, *The Little Black Fish* follows this tradition by presenting animals whose characteristics align more closely with human struggles. However, the illustrations in Behrangi's work do not anthropomorphize the fish in typical ways (e.g., clothes or human faces); instead, they allow the characters to retain a degree of otherness that fits

[298] Samad Behrangi, *The Little Black Fish,* 12-13.
[299] Nodelman. "Fish is People,"13.

their symbolic role as societal outsiders. This symbolic stranger aspect also applies to children in children's literature, who are often depicted from an adult's viewpoint, portrayed as imaginative but fundamentally alien to the adult experience.

Behrangi's allegorical work remains meaningful because it captures both strangeness and freedom, prompting readers to appreciate the little black fish's resilience and adventurous spirit. The fact that this story could serve as the foundation for countless other narratives illustrates the depth and flexibility of Behrangi's work. *The Little Black Fish* continues to inspire because it encourages readers, young and old, to question norms, understand the value of being a stranger, and confront societal constraints while exploring broader truths about the world.

As previously discussed, in children's literature, one of the notable power imbalances is often seen between text and illustration. This dynamic is evident in Samad's stories, where the text holds a dominant role over imagery. Samad relies primarily on words to communicate his messages to young readers, with his stories originally lacking illustrations altogether. Even in *The Little Black Fish*, which includes a few images, the primary message resides in the text, while the illustrations serve mostly as decorative elements.

While the textual narrative of *The Little Black Fish* is a clear act of ideological subversion, the illustrations are equally critical to its revolutionary message. The illustrations, which are primarily black and white or in muted tones, employ a simple, almost sparse, aesthetic that stands in stark contrast to the colorful, consumerist-driven illustrations of many contemporary picturebooks. This minimalist style avoids the aestheticization of the natural world and focuses instead on the raw, unadorned reality of the little black fish's journey. The illustrations of the fish itself are particularly powerful; it is depicted not as a cartoonish, anthropomorphic character, but as a small, solitary figure moving through a vast, often dangerous, landscape (Figure 27). This visual choice reinforces the existentialist themes of the text, emphasizing the individual's struggle against overwhelming forces. The lack of vibrant, happy colors ensures that the reader's focus remains on the allegorical weight of the story, rather than being distracted by visual flourishes. The illustrations, therefore, function as a form of visual dissent, mirroring the text's ideological break from convention.

However, in the Turkish translation, additional illustrations accompany the text, often with exaggerated elements that subtly manipulate readers by reinforcing a particular interpretation of the story. This selective use of imagery impacts the way the story is perceived, steering it towards a specific narrative emphasis. Furthermore, the Hungarian translation adopts the same illustrative style as the Turkish version, which suggests a shared editorial choice that further amplifies a single interpretive angle.

In the next chapter, we will examine the works of the American writer Maurice Sendak, whose approach to storytelling contrasts sharply with Samad's. Sendak's works are heavily reliant on illustrations, where subversive and revolutionary ideas are conveyed through a profound interplay between text and image. Both Samad and Sendak are recognized as rebellious figures in children's literature, though they emerge from distinctly different cultural and literary contexts. By analysing these two authors side by side, we will delve deeper into the similarities and differences in how they challenge conventional narratives and explore the role of imagery in shaping children's understanding of complex ideas.

## 2.5. Politics and Pedagogy in Maurice Sendak's picture books (*Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993))

This chapter critically examines the works of Maurice Sendak in comparison with Samad Behrangi to justify a central argument of this dissertation: that subversive children's literature is shaped by its specific cultural, political, and literary contexts. By analyzing these two authors side by side, we can highlight the similarities and differences in how they challenge conventional narratives and power structures, even when operating in distinct traditions. The comparison is particularly valuable because it contrasts Behrangi's revolutionary focus on broad ideological and societal change with Sendak's subversive focus on a child's internal, psychological experience as explored across his body of work. By juxtaposing these two approaches, we reveal the multifaceted nature of children's literature, where the boundaries between rebellion and conformity, and subversion and affirmation, are often blurred.

Maurice Sendak's oeuvre is characterized by its profound exploration of power dynamics, emotional depth, and societal critique, making his picture books enduringly relevant in both children's literature and academic discourse. This chapter examines *Where the Wild*

*Things Are* [300] and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* [301] in light of their subversive qualities, contrasting and comparing their themes and structures with the work of Samad Behrangi, particularly *The Little Black Fish*. While Sendak's approach is rooted in the picture book format, his narratives challenge traditional norms and power structures, resonating with the ideological subversiveness of Behrangi's stories.

In *Where the Wild Things Are,* Sendak constructs a narrative that is deceptively simple yet rich in symbolic and psychological layers. Max's journey follows the classic "home/away/home" structure, a hallmark of children's literature that grounds fantastical explorations in the comfort of familiar reality.[302] The story begins with Max rebelling against his mother, a challenge to adult authority that is explored within the confines of a child/adult power dynamic.

Unlike Samad Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish*, where the protagonist's journey extends to challenging broader societal and political hierarchies, Max's rebellion remains personal and contained. As Nikolajeva notes, despite Max's imaginative empowerment – being crowned king of the Wild Things – he ultimately remains subordinate to his mother's authority: "Even though Max is empowered and enthroned through his creative imagination, he is still wholly at his mother's will".[303] This tension reflects a subtler interrogation of power, one that acknowledges the limitations of childhood agency within familial structures.

The illustrations in *Where the Wild Things* Are play a critical role in amplifying this dynamic. Sendak's mastery of visual storytelling – where images hold equal, if not greater, power than text – underscores the subversive potential of the picture book format. As scholars have noted, picture books challenge adult power by blending visual and textual narratives in ways that invite interpretation and ambiguity. The dreamlike, surreal quality of Max's adventure symbolizes a child's quest for autonomy and freedom, yet it is ultimately tethered to the reality of parental care and the "still hot" supper awaiting Max's return.

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[300] Maurice Sendak, *Where The Wild Things Are* (US: Harper & Row, 1963).

[301] Maurice Sendak, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers,1993).

[302] Jacqueline Rose, *The case of Peter Pan, or, The impossibility of children's fiction* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd: 1984), 33-34.

[303] Nikolajeva, 175.

Figure 25. from *Where the Wild Things*: Max coming back from his rebellion to the warmth of the house.

While the book's surface may suggest a rebellion against authority and a celebration of imaginative freedom, its conclusion reveals a more pedagogical and confirmative intent. Max's return to the safety of his home and his mother's care reaffirms traditional familial structures, suggesting that the imaginative adventure serves as a temporary outlet rather than a transformative rebellion. The comedic portrayal of the Wild Things – depicted with humorous and exaggerated features – further mitigates the story's potential for subversion, rendering Max's journey more entertaining and less threatening. This contrasts with Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish*, where the stakes of the protagonist's journey are palpably higher, and the dangers faced are real and consequential.

The differing visual and narrative tones underscore this distinction. In Sendak's work, the Wild Things, despite their ferocious roars and sharp claws, are ultimately benign and even

endearing. This humour and whimsy diminish the stress of Max's journey, framing it as a playful exploration of emotion rather than a profound existential quest. By contrast, Behrangi's Little Black Fish navigates a perilous world where survival is uncertain, and the threats encountered carry significant weight. The journey in *The Little Black Fish* is one of ideological resistance and sacrifice, while Max's journey is primarily a resolution of personal emotions within a safe and loving environment.

Figure 26. from *Where the Wild Things*: the playful "Wild Things"

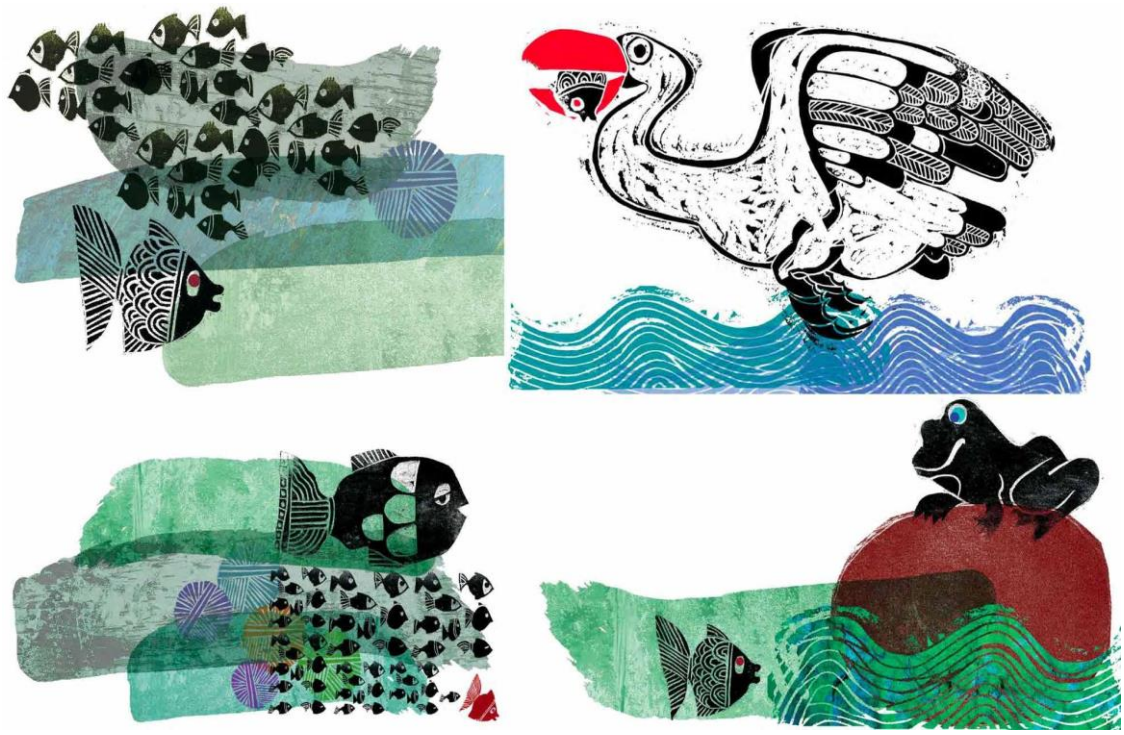

Figure 27. from *The Little Black Fish*: portraying a realistic picture of animals and the Pelican as a real threat swallowing the little black fish

This structural divergence reflects the broader thematic intentions of the two authors. While Behrangi's work seeks to inspire radical change and challenge oppressive societal norms, Sendak's narrative, despite its subversive elements, ultimately reinforces the stability and importance of home and parental authority. The juxtaposition of these two approaches highlights the multifaceted nature of children's literature, where the boundaries between rebellion and conformity, subversion and affirmation, are often blurred.

Behrangi's *The Little Black Fish* diverges from Sendak's work in its structural and thematic ambitions. While Max's journey concludes with a return to the safety of home, *the Little Black Fish*'s home/away/away structure signifies an irrevocable departure from comfort and familiarity. This narrative trajectory aligns with Behrangi's ideological commitment to critiquing oppressive systems and advocating for social change. *The Little Black Fish*'s defiance of societal norms and ultimate sacrifice positions the story as a radical exploration of power and resistance, whereas Max's story remains a personal negotiation of emotions within the family unit.

While at first glance a comparison between Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and Samad Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish* might seem to flatten their respective

complexities, this analysis deliberately places them in dialogue to illuminate the different axes of subversion at play in children's literature. The contrast is not one of simple happy versus sad endings, nor is it an attempt to draw a broad, essentialist conclusion about Western versus Eastern traditions. Rather, this comparison reveals a fundamental distinction between what can be termed domestic-psychological subversion and externally-directed political resistance. Where Sendak's work explores a rebellion against the domestic order and the psychological containment of the child, a subversion that ultimately seeks a return to a more comfortable, if now renegotiated, home, Behrangi's narrative of a protagonist who leaves home forever to confront systemic injustice offers a paradigm of revolutionary, political defiance. By contrasting these two influential texts, I would like to demonstrate that the ideological work of a subversive picturebook is contingent upon the nature of the power it chooses to challenge.

In *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, Sendak's critique of societal structures becomes overt, aligning more closely with Behrangi's ideological stance. This work combines two traditional nursery rhymes into a grim narrative that addresses homelessness, poverty, and marginalization. The imagery – homeless children wrapped in newspapers, with headlines highlighting societal neglect – is strikingly subversive, targeting both child and adult audiences with its unsettling depictions. The interplay of text and image in this book reaches new levels of complexity. Words are scattered across the illustrations, hidden in boxes and scraps of paper, forcing readers to engage actively with the narrative. The visual dominance in this work underscores Sendak's belief in the power of images to convey meaning and provoke thought. The moon, a recurring motif, undergoes a transformation throughout the story, symbolizing cycles of hope, despair, and ambiguity.

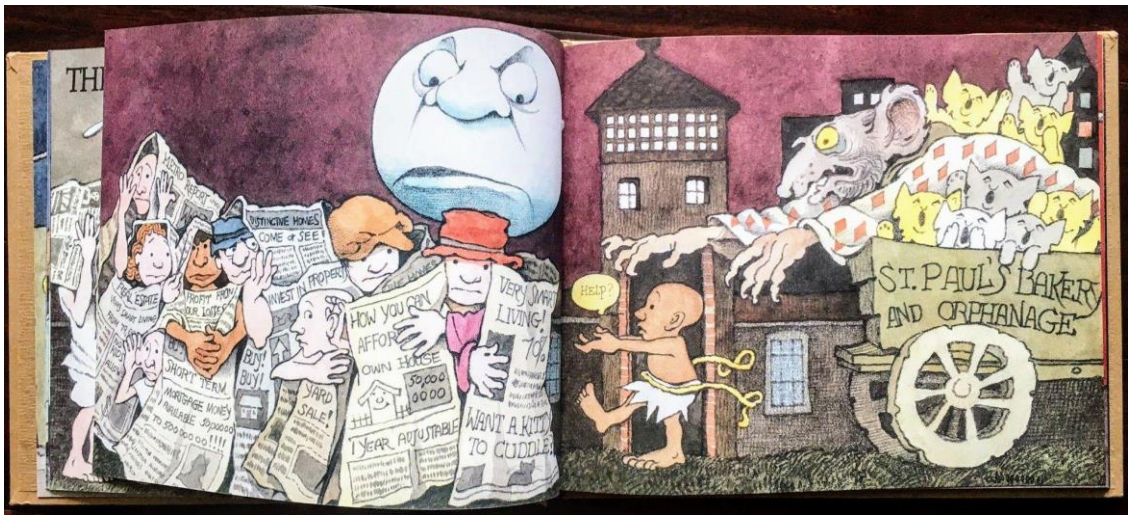


Figure 28. from *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*: Texts scattered in the illustrations

The text on boxes and newspapers, which serve as clothing and shelter for homeless people, becomes crucial in exposing the intersections of capitalism and societal neglect. For instance, the phrase "Private Property" ironically marks the box in which a homeless individual sleeps, evoking Marx's critique of private property in capitalism and exposing the dehumanizing commodification of space. Similarly, phrases on the newspapers, such as "Real estate, very smart living," "No kids allowed," and "Profit from our losses," carry layers of irony. These fragments reveal the extent to which capitalist logic pervades even the margins of society, where the vulnerable are rendered invisible or irrelevant. The obscured words, such as "your" hidden beneath a fold in "Profit from your losses," underline this exclusion, suggesting that systemic privilege thrives on the erasure and exploitation of the poor.

The newspapers themselves serve a dual purpose, simultaneously shielding the homeless from the elements and exposing the systemic inequities that shape their plight. This tension mirrors the paradoxical role of capitalist structures, which often present themselves as solutions to problems they perpetuate. For example, the phrase "Short term mortgage money" points to predatory systems that exploit financial instability, while "Buy! Buy!" mocks the commodification of basic needs. These visual-textual juxtapositions compel readers to confront the complicity of capitalist systems in perpetuating cycles of poverty and homelessness.

In the same vein, the card game introduced by the rats, where "diamonds are trumps," underscores the systemic inequalities that privilege the wealthy. This game is inherently

rigged, symbolizing a capitalist system where wealth guarantees victory. The visual detail of a rat wearing a diamond-patterned coat further reinforces the inevitability of this outcome, as the rats – representing the privileged elite – benefit from a game in which the poor can never truly participate.


Figure 29. from *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*

The "Saint Paul's Bakery and Orphanage" serves as another critique of capitalist exploitation. Its dual function as a bakery and orphanage reflects the commodification of human labour and suffering, particularly of children. Rather than providing sanctuary, the institution becomes a site of production, embodying a broader critique of societal structures that exploit the vulnerable under the guise of benevolence.


Figure 30. from *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*

The story's shifting power dynamics are also significant, particularly in the relationship between the rats and cats. Initially, the rats dominate, capturing kittens and reinforcing their control. However, this hierarchy is inverted when one of the cats grows to an enormous size and captures the rats, symbolizing a potential subversion of oppressive systems. This reversal, while visually satisfying, remains unresolved in terms of broader systemic change, reflecting the complexity and ambivalence of Sendak's critique.

Figure 31. from *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*

The question of heroism in *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* remains deliberately unresolved. Is the protagonist "Jack", "Guy", or the little boy they rescue? Jack's initial response to the boy's plea for help ("Beat it!") reveals apathy, while Guy's insistence on compassion ("Buy him some bread") introduces the possibility of collective responsibility. Their eventual collaboration to rescue the boy suggests that meaningful change requires solidarity, even as the story resists offering clear moral or emotional closure.

The ambiguous ending reinforces this resistance to resolution. Jack, Guy, the boy, and the kittens lie motionless beneath angelic figures, leaving readers uncertain whether they are sleeping, dreaming, or dead. The moon's transformation from a face to a faceless sphere intensifies this ambiguity, shifting the narrative from surrealism to realism. This unresolved conclusion echoes the story's broader critique of societal failures, challenging readers to confront the complexities of power, marginalization, and responsibility.

Figure 32. from *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*

Both of Sendak's works exemplify the potential of picture books to subvert adult power and interrogate existing social orders. As critics have noted, the hybrid nature of picture books –where visual and textual narratives intersect – enables them to challenge traditional hierarchies of meaning and authority. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, the surreal dreamscape becomes a metaphor for the freedom of imagination, tempered by the boundaries of reality. In *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, the disturbing imagery and fragmented text create a visceral critique of societal indifference, pushing the boundaries of what children's literature can address.

Maurice Sendak's works, while rooted in the picture book tradition, transcend conventional boundaries to explore themes of power, freedom, and resistance. *Where the Wild Things Are* and *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* illustrate the evolution of his subversive vision, moving from the personal to the societal. When viewed alongside Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish*, Sendak's narratives reveal both their limitations and their radical potential. While Max's journey remains within the confines

of childhood rebellion, Jack, Guy, and the boy venture into a darker, more complex exploration of societal failures. Together, these works underscore the transformative power of children's literature to challenge and redefine the status quo.

These works, while seemingly crafted for young readers, actively challenge traditional norms and dominant ideologies, aligning with Alison Lurie's and Rosemary Jackson's views on the disruptive potential of children's literature. Sendak's ability to balance the unsettling and innovative elements of subversion with the conventions of the picture book format illustrates the dual role of children's literature as both a site of resistance and a tool for knowledge production. By interrogating power dynamics, societal neglect, and ideological frameworks, Sendak's works embody the principles of subversive storytelling, pushing the boundaries of what children's books can achieve and questioning the cultural processes that define their reception. This reflection affirms the unique potential of subversive literature to transcend conformity and provoke deeper engagement with the socio-political structures it critiques.

## 3. Violence and Terror in Children's Literature

Sex and violence have always been regarded as two major controversial issues in children's literature. Many parents, teachers, and critics believe these subjects have no place in children's books and that children shouldn't be exposed to these issues. As Kimberley Reynolds mentions,

> for much of the twentieth century, a combination of received wisdom and a strong sense of what the main purchasers of children's fiction (librarians, parents, and teachers) wanted to see in the books they gave to children resulted in an unwritten code of practice: no sex, no violence, and no 'bad' language (meaning that the writing should refrain from swearing, slang, and most aspects of colloquial or idiomatic use, and be grammatically correct).[304]

While children in their everyday lives are exposed to different forms of terror and violence, it seems absurd to worry about the representation of violence in literature. Today, children encounter violence in various ways – from domestic violence and bullying at school or on the streets to living in war zones. Many children experience the death of family members or come to understand the concept of death at a very early age. Even children who lead relatively happy and secure lives are exposed to violence through news about war, murder, terrorism, refugees, and other distressing realities via media. This omnipresence of violence highlights the disconnect between adult anxieties about children's literature and the actual conditions children face. By representing violence thoughtfully, literature can provide a constructive outlet to process such challenges, turning exposure into a tool for learning and emotional growth.

In such situations, omitting the representation of violence in children's literature could itself be considered a form of violence, both against children who suffer from real-world violence and those who are not directly exposed to it. Literature can serve as a crucial medium to help young readers navigate these realities, offering them ways to process, understand, and contextualize their experiences. As S. Lehr argues, "Violence cannot be avoided in literature, even literature for children, for literature serves to explain the human condition".[305] By presenting violence in a controlled and thoughtful manner, literature can act as a safe space for children to explore their emotions, fears, and questions about

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[304] Kimberley Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

[305] S. Lehr, ed., *Battling dragons: Issues and controversy in children's literature*. Portsmouth (NH: Heinemann, 1995), 40.

a complex and often harsh world. This perspective challenges the notion that children should always be shielded from difficult subjects, advocating instead for a nuanced approach that acknowledges children's resilience and capacity for understanding.

Books or picture books labelled as challenging are called so not just because they contain controversial issues but due to their potential benefits and dangers. Janet Evans, in her book *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks* (2015), explains that books addressing topics like violence, death, and depression can serve as valuable supports for young readers confronting these issues.[306] Such stories can validate children's feelings, provide a sense of solidarity, and foster empathy by exposing them to different perspectives and experiences. For instance, a story about bullying might resonate deeply with a child who has faced similar challenges, helping them feel less alone while also offering strategies for coping or seeking help.

At the same time, there is the risk of reducing the reading experience to a merely "functional" one, ignoring the aesthetic and pleasurable dimensions of literature. A purely therapeutic or didactic approach to such books risks undermining their narrative and imaginative qualities. Another potential danger lies in the unintended harm that can be caused when these books are discussed without sufficient knowledge or sensitivity. For example, a teacher might inadvertently amplify a child's fears by presenting a story about death without addressing the emotions it evokes or contextualizing its themes. It is essential to adopt strategies tailored to each reader's mental and emotional capacity when addressing these sensitive themes. Adult mediators, such as parents, educators, and librarians, must approach these texts with care, balancing their potential benefits against the risks they might pose to particularly vulnerable readers.

Young readers react differently to the violence depicted in stories. One story may provide joy and a sense of pleasant terror for one child while being a source of nightmares for another. A child's reaction to a story containing violence depends on several factors, the most important of which is how seriously the child interprets the story and relates it to their own life. As Immanuel Kant observes, "it is impossible to like terror that we take seriously".[307] This implies that the way violence is presented and the context in which it

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[306] Janet Evans, *Challenging and Controversial Picture Books* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[307] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (US: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 120.

is encountered can significantly influence whether it is experienced as frightening, thought-provoking, or even enjoyable. For example, a fantastical story in which a villain is vanquished may be empowering for one child, while another may focus on the villain's initial acts of cruelty, finding the narrative distressing.

How can a work containing "terror" be enjoyable for a child reader? According to Edmund Burke,

> if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions.[308]

Burke also asserts that "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close".[309]

Two elements – modified violence and distance – make terror enjoyable. In children's literature, modified violence is often achieved by adding humour or omitting particularly graphic elements. For example, a humorous retelling of a potentially frightening story might soften its impact, turning terror into something playful and manageable. However, the concept of distance is more complicated in children's literature, as children's imaginations often cause them to take fictional events more seriously, even when the story's setting is entirely imaginary. Despite this complexity, distance plays a significant role in making terror enjoyable for some children, enabling dark or fearful themes to become a source of pleasure in certain contexts. This dynamic explains why children continue to enjoy fairy tales containing elements of "delightful terror". The thrill of fear, when mediated through a safe narrative framework, can be exhilarating and even cathartic for young readers.

The distance from terror is achieved differently in fairy tales, fantasies, animal stories, and realistic stories. In fairy tales, time creates distance. Many fairy tales specify no exact historical period, often beginning with the phrase "once upon a time," which lends the story an unreal, timeless quality. This temporal ambiguity provides readers with a sense of safety when confronting the violence in the narrative. For example, the events in *Snow*

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[308] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry* (US: Oxford, 1990), 123.
[309] Burke, 42.

*White* or *Hansel and Gretel* feel removed from contemporary life, allowing readers to engage with their themes without becoming overwhelmed by their immediacy.

In fantasies, distance is created through place. Fantastic stories unfold in fictional worlds crafted by the author, and the violence and horror occur in a separate, imagined realm. This separation allows children to explore complex themes in a way that feels detached from their own reality. For instance, the battles and dangers in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* take place in a richly imagined universe, creating a buffer for readers.

In animal stories, the characters themselves create distance. As non-human protagonists, they offer a buffer for readers, although children often empathize deeply with animals and may feel the violence more acutely. For example, in Samad Behrangi's *the Little Black Fish*, the use of animal characters adds a layer of abstraction, making its exploration of power and freedom accessible to younger readers.

Realistic stories present the least distance from terror, as their settings and characters closely mirror the real world. In this genre, children can easily imagine themselves in the place of characters experiencing or perpetrating violence. The proximity to reality in such stories can make them more impactful, encouraging readers to confront and question real-world issues more directly.

When discussing fairy tales, it is essential to recognize that the genre has undergone significant changes over time. These changes reflect shifting ideas about childhood and what is deemed appropriate for children. Three distinct stages in the evolution of fairy tales can be identified based on societal conceptions of childhood. In the earliest stage, children were seen as imperfect beings who required discipline and control to become well-behaved adults. Consequently, fairy tales from this period often contain overt violence and function as cautionary tales. Stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and other similar stories served to teach moral lessons through fear and consequences.

In the second stage, children came to be regarded as innocent and in need of care and protection. Fairy tales were adapted to align with this perception, with controversial elements often being removed. For instance, the Grimm Brothers altered traditional folktales to fit nineteenth-century ideals of childhood, removing overtly sexual content while retaining violence. These adaptations reflect a belief in the instructive value of violence, which was thought to impart moral lessons without endangering children's innocence.

In the most recent stage, children are viewed as critical thinkers capable of engaging with complex narratives. Writers have rewritten fairy tales with new and varied settings, narratives, and themes to reflect this perspective. For example, contemporary retellings often subvert traditional narratives, offering new interpretations that challenge stereotypes and explore themes of power and agency.

Despite these changes, fairy tales across all eras contain significant amounts of violence and terror, contributing to their enduring popularity. For example, older versions of fairy tales often naturalize violence, a feature that modern adults tolerate in these traditional tales while rejecting similar content in contemporary children's literature. Janet Evans notes that controversial themes such as death, love, violence, and sadness are not new to children's literature. She observes,

> In the early nineteenth century the Grimm Brothers were recounting stories such as these; traditional folktales that reflected life as it existed at that time. Subjects such as murder, cannibalism, incest, child cruelty, sex and violence were all significant elements in the original Grimms' folktales and were accepted in their stories. The Grimm Brothers' stories and those, half a century later, of Hans Christian Andersen, who also wrote stories with disturbing themes, have always been viewed as suitable for children. Many adults allow, even encourage, children to read these traditional stories dealing with dark, psychological, sometimes harrowing themes and yet, those same children are often denied access to contemporary picture books covering similar themes.[310]

In rewriting the fairy tales, Grimm brothers most intention was to make them suitable for children in a sense that they won't contain controversial issues anymore. The point here is that for Grimm brothers sex was not a suitable subject for children, therefore they censored it but the violence was still there in most of their revisions of fairy tales. In some cases, they even heightened the violence while removing sexual parts. In the story of *Hansel and Gretel*, violence appears in the form of cannibalism. There is a witch who eats children. Here the modification of violence happens with a happy ending which itself is accompanied with violence too as the children burn the witch in the fire. In almost all of other famous fairy tales we can perceive some form of violence like child labour in *Cinderella*, asking for the heart of a child in *Snow White* and the violence act of wolf in *Red Riding Hood*. In case of *Red Riding Hood*, Jack Zipes believes that "the reason for this story's enduring popularity is clear. it is because rape and violence are at the core of the history of *Little Red Riding Hood* that it is the most widespread and notorious fairy

[310] Evans, 11.

tale". [311] To mention some other cases of violence in fairy tales we can refer to the very sad story of *Little Match Girl*. In this story we confront the death of a little girl out of starving and cold. Both death and suffering from hunger are very difficult and violent issues for children which could be a source of definite horror. This violence is modified in the story not with an expected happy ending but with the religious idea of death which is known as a source of unlimited peace and the continuation of life in another world.

The question of how violence is portrayed in children's literature raises significant ethical concerns. Whose stories are being told, and whose experiences are being erased? For instance, narratives that address systemic violence – such as racism, colonialism, or war – often face resistance and censorship under the guise of protecting children's innocence. However, by excluding these stories, we risk perpetuating a limited and sanitized understanding of the world.

Censorship of such works can inadvertently perpetuate ignorance and diminish children's ability to engage with real-world complexities. For example, the Canadian Jewish Congress successfully advocated for the removal of *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* (2006) from elementary school libraries, citing concerns about age-appropriateness. However, as Mickenberg points out, "Rejecting the idea that the book is "age inappropriate," *the Globe and Mail's* Rick Salutin wrote that "the *world* our kids live in is age inappropriate, but they have to live there" (A17)".[312] By excluding such stories, we risk denying children the opportunity to develop empathy and a critical understanding of global issues as such stories offer valuable perspectives that challenge dominant narratives, providing children with the tools to question injustice and imagine alternative futures. By engaging with these narratives, young readers can develop a deeper sense of empathy and agency, empowering them to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

The representation of violence and terror in children's literature is a multifaceted and often contentious issue. While these themes may provoke discomfort among adult gatekeepers, they serve a vital role in helping young readers navigate the complexities of

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[311] Evans, 203.

[312] Julia L. Mickenberg and Philip Nel. "Radical Children's Literature Now!," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 36, Number 4 (Winter 2011): 445-473, 454.

their own lives. By providing a safe and imaginative space to confront difficult emotions and questions, literature can foster resilience, empathy, and critical thinking.

However, the inclusion of violence in children's stories requires thoughtful mediation. Authors, educators, and parents must consider not only the content of these stories but also the context in which they are shared. By striking a balance between authenticity and sensitivity, children's literature can empower young readers to engage with the darker aspects of life while nurturing their capacity for hope, courage, and compassion.

As society continues to grapple with questions of power, justice, and human suffering, children's literature must remain a space where even the most difficult truths can be explored—with honesty, imagination, and care. In doing so, it can help equip future generations with the tools they need to navigate an increasingly complex and challenging world.

## 4. Stolen (Unheard) Voices

Children's literature, as both a cultural product and ideological instrument, reflects and reinforces prevailing power dynamics, often at the expense of marginalized voices. Throughout this dissertation, we have traced how these voices are systematically silenced, co-opted, or reshaped to fit the agendas of dominant ideologies. In this final chapter, I aim to weave together the diverse threads of these stolen voices to uncover their interconnectedness and to emphasize the urgency of reclaiming authentic narratives in children's literature. This chapter synthesizes insights from the erasure of refugee and immigrant voices, the bourgeoisification of peasant folklore, the silencing of children themselves, and the marginalization of revolutionary and subversive authors. Together, these instances reveal how children's literature, a medium ostensibly for the young and powerless, serves as a silent battleground for cultural hegemony.

This chapter proceeds in four movements that build on one another: first, how refugee and immigration narratives sanitize displacement; next, how peasant folklore is bourgeoisified through editorial mediation; then, how children's own perspectives are ventriloquized by adult gatekeepers; and finally, how revolutionary and subversive authors are marginalized by the field itself. Read together, these movements accumulate into a single argument about silencing that sets up the concluding synthesis and the epilogue's call for interconnected voices.

I begin with refugee and immigration narratives because they make visible a primary mechanism of erasure: stories that profess to witness trauma yet redirect attention to the benevolence of host nations, translating structural violence into individual uplift. This pattern, as we shall see across contexts, is not accidental but symptomatic of how children's books naturalize unequal arrangements while soliciting the privileged reader's empathy.

The representation of war and immigration in contemporary children's books offers a striking example of how narratives are sanitized to align with bourgeois sensibilities. Stories that ostensibly address the plight of refugees often prioritize idyllic portrayals of Western nations as benevolent havens of peace and prosperity. These narratives, by

focusing on the charity and goodwill of host societies, obscure the structural and geopolitical forces that cause displacement in the first place.

For instance, in picture books such as *The Journey* by Francesca Sanna, although trauma is visually represented, the narrative arc ultimately centers on the hospitality of the host country, subtly reinforcing the notion of Western moral superiority. In doing so, they replace the raw, unvarnished voices of children enduring war and migration with tales that perpetuate a savior complex, reinforcing the moral superiority of the privileged reader while ignoring the agency and lived realities of displaced children. While these narratives may be comforting to Western audiences, they gloss over the harsh truths that war-affected children endure – the trauma of displacement, the dehumanizing experience of being treated as *others*, and the systemic inequalities that perpetuate their suffering.

This erasure is deeply ideological. By framing migration as a journey toward utopian Western lands, these stories perpetuate myths of universal refuge while depoliticizing the conditions of displacement. The refugee child, whose life is shaped by war, loss, and resilience, is reduced to a passive recipient of charity. This stance of pity evokes compassion without challenging the underlying systems that produce inequality and displacement, thereby ensuring the continuation of dominant power structures. Such narratives are emblematic of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, in which literature becomes a tool for reproducing the ruling class's worldview.

One must also question why these narratives consistently emphasize the benevolence of host nations rather than the voices of those who are displaced. Rather than serving as sites of critique, many stories act as mechanisms of integration, subtly shifting the narrative emphasis from structural injustice to personal adaptation. Instead of delving into the trauma of war or the alienation of living in a new land, these stories often focus on themes of assimilation, subtly reinforcing the idea that cultural difference is a problem to be solved rather than a strength to be celebrated.

The muted refugee voice is not an isolated anomaly of contemporary publishing; it has a genealogy. The same logic by which displacement is softened for consumption also governs the historical editing of folk materials, where the voices of the lower classes are filtered through the tastes and interests of cultural intermediaries. The next movement turns to that earlier archive to show how silencing is manufactured at the level of collection and revision.

Consider the nineteenth-century fairy-tale archive: here, editorial mediation performs silencing by converting peasant storytelling into petit-bourgeois morality, a shift extensively traced by Zipes and legible in the progressive revisions of well-known tales.

The case of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales provides a historical lens through which to understand the erasure of marginalized voices. As Jack Zipes elucidates, the Grimms did not faithfully record the oral traditions of peasants but instead relied on educated, bourgeois informants who infused the tales with middle-class values. "Until the 1970s, it was generally assumed that the Brothers Grimm collected their oral folktales mainly from peasants and day laborers," Zipes notes, "but these assumptions have been proved false".[313] The Grimms' sources were primarily petit bourgeois informants whose versions of the tales already bore the imprint of their class position. Over decades of revisions, Wilhelm Grimm further altered these stories, transforming them into tools for cultural hegemony that reflected bourgeois morality and aspirations.

Zipes argues that "the Grimms contributed to the literary 'bourgeoisification' of oral tales that had belonged to the peasantry and lower classes and had been informed by the interests and aspirations of these groups".[314] This transformation not only silenced the authentic voices of the peasantry but also reshaped the tales to reinforce class hierarchies and patriarchal norms.

The tale *Hansel and Gretel*, for example, originally reflected economic hardship and familial tension during famine, but its later iterations shift the moral focus toward obedience and resilience, abstracting away from the socioeconomic conditions that underpin its origins. The earlier versions of these tales often contained elements of humour, subversion, and resistance against authority – qualities that were systematically removed or softened in later editions to align with bourgeois values of obedience, industriousness, and conformity.

This bourgeoisification is emblematic of a broader pattern in cultural production. By sanitizing and reworking these tales, the Grimms effectively erased the original social and political contexts in which they were created, replacing them with narratives that upheld the status quo. The result was a collection of stories that celebrated individual

[313] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, 61.
[314] Zipes, 61.

achievement and moral righteousness over collective action and social critique. This aligns with Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, in which dominant ideologies are internalized not through coercion but through cultural artefacts that render them natural or inevitable. The Grimms' fairy tales thus became vehicles for the reproduction of submission to the established order, as Althusser might describe it, serving to socialize children into accepting the values and expectations of a hierarchical society.

If peasant narrators were overwritten by classed intermediaries, children's perspectives are likewise overwritten by adult authorities within the field. What changes is not the mechanism but the target: editorial purification gives way to pedagogical ventriloquism, in which adult aims structure what children supposedly say – and are allowed to hear. The argument therefore moves from class mediation to age mediation.

Ironically, in a genre ostensibly created to them, children rarely speak for themselves; adult surveillance and didactic form function, in Foucauldian terms, as a pedagogy of visibility that produces compliant subjects while presenting itself as care. Adults dominate every aspect of children's literature – writing, publishing, selecting, and critiquing – thereby ensuring that the narratives reflect adult concerns and ideologies.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the recurring narrative structures and happy endings that dominate children's books. These tropes, while comforting, impose a form of ideological discipline that masks the complexities of life. By positioning children as passive recipients of moral instruction, these stories deny them agency and perpetuate a cycle in which they are spoken for rather than allowed to speak for themselves.

The pervasive adult gaze in children's literature functions as a form of surveillance, akin to Foucault's concept of the panopticon. Children are not only the subjects of these stories but also their objects, positioned as passive recipients of adult wisdom and guidance. This dynamic raises important questions about the extent to which children's literature can genuinely represent the perspectives and experiences of its intended audience.

Yet silencing is not only enacted upon represented subjects; it is also enforced upon the authors who refuse these constraints. The field disciplines not just characters and readers but its own dissenters. The next movement therefore shifts from representation to production and circulation, tracing how revolutionary and subversive writers are contained, co-opted, or sidelined.

The trajectories of Samad Behrangi and Maurice Sendak exemplify how the field polices its margins: revolutionary critique can be censored or appropriated (Behrangi), while politically urgent work can be eclipsed by more marketable titles within the same oeuvre (Sendak).

Behrangi, whose works inspired revolutionary fervor in Iran, was celebrated for his ability to articulate the struggles of the oppressed. However, both before and after the revolution, his voice was systematically suppressed. Before the revolution, his writings were censored by the monarchy; after the revolution, they were co-opted and then discarded by the dominant ideology. His erasure exemplifies how dominant powers discard revolutionary voices once they no longer serve their purposes.

Similarly, Maurice Sendak's politically charged work *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* has been overshadowed by his more commercially successful books. Maurice Sendak is celebrated as one of the most influential figures in children's literature, yet even his body of work reveals how certain voices are marginalized within the field. While books like *Where the Wild Things Are* have been extensively studied and celebrated, his darker, more politically charged work *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* has received comparatively little attention. Critics have often reduced this complex text to an allegory about AIDS and Sendak's sexual orientation, ignoring its deeper critiques of poverty, capitalism, and systemic corruption. Its haunting illustrations and fragmented narrative style resist narrative closure, demanding interpretive engagement from readers rather than offering didactic moral resolution. Works like Sendak's *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* remain side-lined precisely because they confront these contradictions too directly.

This marginalization reflects a broader discomfort with narratives that challenge the status quo. Revolutionary and subversive voices in children's literature are often dismissed as inappropriate or too dark for young readers, reinforcing the idea that children must be shielded from the complexities of the world. This protective stance, while ostensibly well-intentioned, ultimately serves to limit children's capacity for critical thought and engagement.

Read consecutively, these strands reveal a single apparatus operating across frames – topic, archive, audience, and author – so that no silence stands alone. This convergence sets up the chapter's closing synthesis.

What emerges is a pattern of interconnected silences that is structural rather than incidental. These instances of stolen voices – whether of refugees, peasants, children, or subversive authors – are not isolated phenomena but interconnected manifestations of systemic power dynamics. Each case reveals how children's literature serves as a site for ideological reproduction, reinforcing dominant narratives while silencing those that challenge them. The sanitized war stories, the bourgeoisified fairy tales, the absence of children's perspectives, and the marginalization of revolutionary authors all reflect a broader pattern: the use of literature to shape the worldview of future generations in ways that maintain existing hierarchies.

Taken together, these patterns form a mosaic of silencing that is not accidental but structurally embedded. By understanding these interconnected silences, we can begin to challenge the structures that perpetuate them. Reclaiming the unheard voices in children's literature requires not only amplifying marginalized perspectives but also critically examining the mechanisms through which stories are produced, circulated, and received. It demands a commitment to narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of human experiences, empowering young readers to engage with the world as critical thinkers and active participants.

The erasure of marginalized voices in children's literature is both a reflection and a tool of systemic power. Yet, by exposing and challenging these silences, we can transform children's literature into a medium of resistance and empowerment. This requires not only elevating authentic voices but also reimagining the very structures of storytelling to prioritize inclusivity, agency, and critical engagement. By doing so, we can create a literary world that not only entertains but also inspires children to envision and work toward a more just and equitable future.

**Epilogue: The Emergence of a Brave New Literary World**

Children's literature, long regarded as a simple medium of entertainment and education, functions as an interactive theatrical stage where the adult gaze is always present. This resonates strongly with Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon – a structure of power that operates through constant surveillance. In the realm of children's literature, the adult's watchful gaze not only dictates the production and content of stories but also governs their reception. Adults write, select, critique, and control what children read, ensuring that the narratives align with societal norms and reinforce prevailing ideologies. Consequently, the child is both the audience and the subject of this performance, shaped and disciplined by the narratives that unfold on the literary stage.

But this stage is more than a space for performance; it is a factory with a tangible output. Children's literature, like a theatrical factory, produces desired citizens. After attending a revolutionary theatre performance, one often leaves inspired to take action, to challenge the status quo. By contrast, a feel-good, happy-ending production leaves its audience relaxed and complacent, content to maintain the existing order. This dichotomy captures the essence of children's literature: it can either provoke and inspire or pacify and conform. Subversive literature embodies the former, challenging power structures and encouraging young readers to question authority and embrace agency. It disrupts the norms and dares to envision a different world, inviting its audience to reflect and act.

Josefine Ottesen's *the Crystal Heart*[315] *(2006)* (the third part of *The Mira Chronicles*) exemplifies this tension. The story depicts a king and queen who, in their desire to shield their daughter from sorrow, ask a wizard to exchange her bleeding heart for a crystal one. The daughter, now free from pain, lives a life of perpetual contentment until her parents urge her to marry. At this point, the wizard's warning proves prophetic: "Once you've chosen the crystal heart to avoid the pain and sorrow of life, then you'll never be able to

[315] Josefine Ottesen, *Krystalhjertet* (Denmark: Høst & Søn, 2006).

love".[316] This narrative confronts readers with a profound question: will you give your children crystal hearts to spare them the pain of life, or will you allow them to keep their human hearts, capable of both suffering and love? While the instinctive response may be to reject the crystal heart, the reality is far more complicated. By presenting children with only the bright side of the world, by offering false hope and sanitized realities, we effectively hand them crystal hearts. These choices, made in the realm of children's literature, shape the emotional and intellectual capacities of young readers, stripping away the depth and resilience that come from engaging with life's complexities.

This phenomenon is further entangled with the notion of modern childhood. As Stearns observes, the concept of childhood, particularly as it emerged in the West, cannot be universalized. Modern childhood's emphasis on schooling, reduced family size, lower infant mortality rates, and state intervention has created a specific framework that often serves as the benchmark against which other childhoods are measured. Stearns warns against reducing the complexity of childhood to Western patterns or critiquing other regions for failing to achieve Western-defined milestones.[317] This critical perspective is vital when envisioning a brave new literary world. Children's literature must break free from its tendency to impose universal narratives and instead embrace a plurality of experiences, honoring the diversity of childhoods across cultures and histories.

To create this brave new literary world, children's literature must shift from being an instrument of control to a platform of liberation. It must dismantle the panopticon-like structures that enforce surveillance and conformity, replacing them with spaces that encourage exploration and rebellion. Subversive literature provides a blueprint for this transformation. By challenging dominant narratives, addressing difficult truths, and amplifying marginalized voices, such works expand the horizons of young readers and cultivate critical thinking. They reject the false promises of the crystal heart, instead nurturing resilience, empathy, and a willingness to engage with the complexities of the world.

Ultimately, the brave new literary world envisioned here is one that prioritizes inclusivity, diversity, and critical engagement. It recognizes children not as passive recipients of adult

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[316] Josefine Ottesen. "The Story of History: Being One of "Them"," *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 47, Number 2 (April 2009): 36-42, 42.

[317] Stearns, *Childhood in World History,* 15.

knowledge but as active participants in the storytelling process. It values narratives that provoke and inspire, that refuse to shy away from pain and complexity, and that empower children to imagine and create a more just and equitable future. By reclaiming the radical potential of storytelling, children's literature can move beyond its role as a theatrical factory and become a stage for genuine transformation. In this brave new world, the child's voice is not only heard but celebrated, and the stories they encounter are not mere reflections of the world as it is but visions of what it could become.

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