

Imparting Empathetic Coexistence through Children's Literature with reference to 'Black Beauty' by Anna Sewell

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ABSTRACT: Children's literature can be described as the literature written for children and adolescents aging from 6 to 14. Children literature is a very important genre that resurfaced during the Victorian period. Children literature is just not entertainment, it is extremely important for a child's growth and success. One of the famous work belonging to children's literature is Black Beauty by Anna Sewell (1877), it is an interesting work known as animal autobiography. The work is about the life, experiences and feelings of a wonderful horse called Black Beauty. Sewell through the friends of Black Beauty, Ginger and Merry Legs brings out the experiences of horses and the different type of masters and attenders. The author makes it very clear that animals need love and care in order to work better. In the present pandemic scenario empathetic co-existence has become the need of the hour and the younger generation should be instilled with proper values and attitudes during their formative years. Soft skills and life skills like empathetic coexistence, tolerance, understanding the other point of view or the whole picture, are essential for a person to succeed in life, grow in an organization and it is imperative to be imparted from childhood. Life skills and soft skills are values that define a person's life and his success in life.

KEYWORDS: Children's literature, animal autobiography, life skills, empathetic coexistence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature can be described as the literature written for children and adolescents aging from 6 to 14. Children literature is a very important genre that resurfaced during the Victorian period. It is slightly different from Young adult literature which is more complex in literary structure. Children literature also has literary genres like contemporary realism, fantasy, historical fiction, poetry, folk tales, legends, myths, and epics. Children literature is just not entertainment, it is extremely important for a child's growth and success. As it is often said that a good book is the life experiences of a great personality, reading good books is sure to improve the cognitive skills, help understand the world, appreciate their own culture, heritage, develop emotional intelligence, creativity, nurture growth and develop a child's personality. Good literature inculcates social skills and helps children to develop into caring, intelligent, and friendly people. Exposing children to quality literature can help them become responsible, successful and caring individuals. In the present pandemic scenario empathetic co-existence has become the need of the hour and the younger generation should be instilled with proper values and attitudes during their formative years. Soft skills and life skills like empathetic coexistence, tolerance, understanding the other point of view or the whole picture, are essential for a person to succeed in life, grow in an organization and it is imperative to be imparted from childhood. Life skills and soft skills are values that define a person's life and his success in life.

Initially there were very few books written for children. The late 19th century and the early 20th centuries are known as the Golden Age of Children's Literature. There are some very good books like Growing Up with Dick and Jane that breaks sexist stereotypes. However popular classics like The Secret Garden, Pippi Longstocking, Peter Pan, The Chronicles of Narnia, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory have been criticized for their racial stereotyping. Tom Brown's School Days 1857, Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland 1865, Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer 1876, The Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby by Charles Kingsley 1862, are extremely popular and are enjoyed by children as well as adults. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a plethora of children's novels began featuring with realistic plotlines. Some of the best received works were Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island (1883) and Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1869). As children literature was written to entertain and educate young minds it had some interesting characters and plot lines like fantasy lands, UFOs, animal characters etc. There are a few interesting children works that have animals as main characters like the Pooh stories and The Chronicles of Narnia. One of the famous work belonging to children's literature is Black Beauty by Anna Sewell (1877), it is an interesting work known as animal autobiography. The work is about the life, experiences and feelings of a wonderful horse called Black Beauty. The novel is narrated by Black Beauty and the author attributes human qualities, feelings and expressions to the horse, known as anthropomorphism.

Black Beauty is called 'Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse' and is credited to have the greatest effect on the treatment of animals of any publication in history. The book succeeded in bringing out the animal pain and the traditional inhuman practices for human convenience that has caused a lot of suffering to the horses. This book caused much uproar and resulted in a legislation protecting horses and changed public perception of animals, especially horses. Anna Sewell's close association with horses as she was crippled at an early age and travelled by horse throughout her life gave her ample scope to examine the life of horses and man's attitude towards it. Although Anna Sewell sold the manuscript for a few pounds it is one of the most widely read books in the world and is reprinted almost every year and continues to be a timeless classic. In the work, the author mainly brings out the inhuman practices on animals like the use of bit, saddle, blinkers, shoes etc for the convenience of man at the cost of the hapless beast. Sewell makes the horse speak and behave like a human. The words expressed by the protagonist Black Beauty, about the inconvenience caused due to bit, clearly makes the reader feel the pain. "Those who have never had a bit in their mouths, cannot think as a man's finger to be pushed into one's mouth, between one's teeth and over one's tongue, with the ends coming out at the corner of your mouth....and held fast there by straps over your head, under your throat, round your nose, so that no way in the world can you get rid of the nasty hard thing, it is very bad!" (Pg 21)

The author also makes it very clear through the words of the pony, the misuse of dogs just for the sake of fashion, for example Black Beauty speaks about pain suffered by brown terrier puppies when their ears were cut just for the sake of fashion and the deep pain expressed by its hapless mother. This kind of human selfishness of hurting the animal just for the sake of fashion is brought out in various areas. One such example is Black Beauty's mistress who was obsessed with fashion, insisted on tightening the bit to make the horses stand upright. The author makes us realize the untold pain, discomfort faced by the animals just for the sake of fashion. Every reader would start feeling empathetic to the animals who otherwise cannot openly express themselves and thus taken for granted.

Anna Sewell through the friends of Black Beauty, Ginger and MerryLegs brings out the experiences of horses and the different type of masters and attenders. The author makes it very clear that animals need love and care in order to work better. The powerful attitude of men is brought out through the words of Ginger that all said and done man is most cruel and powerful that he could break a healthy horse and work against its temper. Speaking about the human conception of using blinkers, (considered to guide horses and prevent it from getting distracted or frightened by other vehicles on the road), the author clearly states through Black Beauty that blinkers in fact causes problems which results in accidents. The suicidal use of blinkers that leads to many untoward accidents and leaves the beast incapable is brought through the words of Ginger. Ginger clearly expresses the problems faced by horses through these words "...that these men, who are so wise ... they always think they can improve upon nature and men what God has made." (pg 50).

The novel Black Beauty begins with the happy and innocent life of a beautiful horse in the hands of a responsible and caring owner and ends with a happy life in the country side. The fresh and healthy oats, cool country breeze, vast tracts to move about freely and the shade of apple trees to take rest. In between is the roller coaster journey of Black Beauty and its encounters with different owners and care takers, some incapable, some treacherous, some ruthless like Nicholas Skinner whose whip had something sharp that drew blood every time he hit with it. Anna Sewell contrasts the simple, contented life of Barker to the treacherous, rude and ruthless temperament of Mr. Smith and other selfish men.

Anna Sewell in Black Beauty expresses the other point of view and makes us realize the pain caused due to the selfishness of man. The sad disposition of the animals like horses or bulls that are stronger but are controlled and misused for the benefit of man is expressed through Ginger's words, "Indignities like these took the heart out of me terribly, but still I did my best and never hung back; for, as poor ginger said, it was no use men are the strongest." (pg 199) This reminds us of the reverse position of a land filled with powerful horses and where man is looked upon like a weakling in Jonathan Swift's social satire Gulliver Travels 1726. In Gulliver Travels, the protagonist Gulliver visits the land of Houyhnhnms, a race of intelligent horses who are clean, rational, and benevolent than men and consider men (Yahoos) inferior. It is an ironic twist between human-beast relationships. On the other hand the Houyhnhnms by contrast are the epitome of reason and virtuous simplicity. Gulliver's identification with these horses and his subsequent disdain for his fellow human beings who are selfish and imbalanced throws light on man's limitations and his inability to live in harmony with nature. The words in the novel "And then another slash of the whip, when all the time we are doing our very best to get along, uncomplaining and obedient, though often sorely harassed and downhearted." (pg 120) brings out the inhumanness in man.

Thus Anna Sewell through the simple book *Black Beauty* drives powerful lessons to the children. It imparts life skills like understanding the other point of view, empathy, living in harmony, happy coexistence etc. These skills and values are very important for a person to live happily and to succeed in life and it is all the more important to inculcate it during childhood itself. *Black Beauty* states that “where we saw people who loved their neighbors, and were kind to man and beast, we might know that was God’s mark, for ‘God is Love.’” (pg 60)

There have other famous children’s books that were written to bring about the subtle difference in the thought process of the child and to make it analyze and realize the lapses in the society. The best example would be Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Although the novel is perceived as a funny trip to a fantasy world filled with nonsense, oblivious to time and space, the novel portrays the shortcomings of Victorian England in a subtle way. The work can be considered as a wonderful revelation of political, social and cultural discrepancies of the age and this is imparted through Alice’s dream and her experiences in the fantasy land with animal characters, the Queen and the King of Hearts etc.

Another powerful lesson that Anna Sewell wants to drive home is standing up for the oppressed, speaking out and having a stand point. “My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.” (pg 165). Such powerful thoughts are sure to influence the thought process of young minds and help them grow as responsible members of the society. There have been several instances, and any person would have encountered in real life where beasts of burden like bullocks, elephants, and horses are misused and ill-treated just to fulfill human greediness. Bulls are made to pull double the load in the cart just because of the inhumanness and greediness of man. Similarly since Ginger’s owner had to pay rent for his cab and feed his family he misused Ginger a lot. For many of us, it is a regular scene to see bullock carts overloaded and the animals froth and even break down due to excessive weight and terrible misuse. Sewell’s appeal to treat animals as our helpers and not slaves is sure to have a positive influence on young minds.

Thus it could be said that children’s literature plays a major role in shaping the mindset of the children during their formative years. A proper mindset will foster a positive personality and social development. As children are very impressionable during the formative years, and children’s literature can help them develop into caring, intelligent, and friendly people. According to a famous developmental psychologist Jean Piaget when students move from the pre-operational to the operational stage of cognitive development, they become less egocentric. Being able to understand other people’s viewpoints and to not be selfish are important skills that adults must nurture in children, as Norton says that “acceptable relationships require an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of others” (2010, p. 27). Children’s literature can foster social development by encouraging students to accept other people and their difference view points and Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* is an excellent work towards this end.

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