

**THE FICTION OF CHILDHOOD:
TOYS AND GENDER IN ANGLO-AMERICAN NOVELS OF
THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES**

by

Usha Mudiganti

Submitted

**In fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
to the**

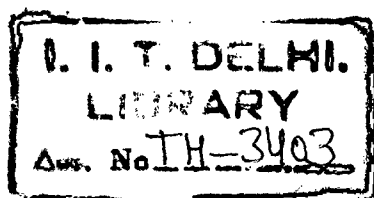


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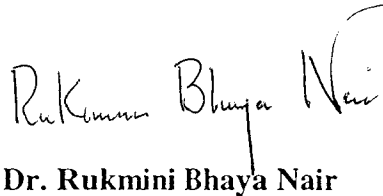
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “**The Fiction of Childhood: Toys and Gender in Anglo-American novels of the late 19th and early 20th centuries**”, being submitted by **Usha Mudiganti** to the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is a record of bonafide research carried out by her under my guidance and supervision.

This thesis or any part thereof has not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.



Dr. Rukmini Bhaya Nair

January 10, 2005

Professor and Thesis Supervisor,

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,

Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi.

For

Baba, Amma, Sudhir and Purnayya

because they believe in the efficacy of talking

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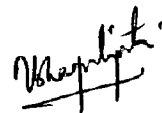
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Abstract

There is no child without a toy of some sort. The toy could be one given to the child, bought from a store, handed down by an older sibling, made by the child or even imagined by a child. Depictions of childhood in literature create and reiterate the norms of childhood and gender. Yet the toy, as an iconic object in fiction, has not been studied. This thesis attempts to unravel the constructions of childhood and gender by examining the representation of the child-toy bond in the fiction written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The last decade of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a period of intense intellectual activity in England and America. The Industrial Revolution in England had gained momentum and spread to most of Europe and America, bringing about enormous changes in lifestyle. These changes included a major reconstitution of the spheres of home and the world in the era. In 1859, Charles Darwin published the *Origin of Species* which set off serious debates about Genesis and theology, and at the exact turn of the century – 1900 – Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, raising unprecedented questions about the functioning of the human mind. For the first time, after the Enlightenment, European thinkers once again questioned the old order. They engaged in heated discussions about religion, the individual, home, women, children and many other issues that were perhaps not quite actively debated by their 18th century predecessors. This process of transition led to a dramatic increase in new hypotheses regarding the universe and to germinated new social movements. Victorian literature, in particular, was instrumental in initiating, encouraging

and evaluating the 'disturbing' changes occurring in society. Among these changes was a renewed focus on children and childhood as a formative period in the making of 'good' adults.

It was during this time that Kenneth Grahame published, in 1895, a novel for children called *The Golden Age*. Grahame's book subsequently lent its name to an entire movement in writing for children. This unprecedented 'Golden Age of Children's Books'¹ extended to the years just before the advent of the First World War. The period witnessed not only a good deal of writing for children but also many new ways of looking at the phenomenon of childhood itself. There is evidence that the notions of childhood in America were informed by those in England before the Golden Age of Children's Literature. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the fiction of childhood published in England and the United States of America between 1895 and 1915.

My interest in the fiction of childhood in England and America in the period mentioned above stems from my belief that India's colonial past influenced the norms of childhood and girlhood in India in terms of both representation and practice. Stereotypes formed in England in the 19th century coloured the perception of girlhood in India even during the 20th century. This is evident from works of fiction such as Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997). Some autobiographical works such as Urmila Haksar's *The Future That Was* (1972) and W. D. Merchant's *Home on a Hill: A Bombay Girlhood* (1991) show that the influence of stereotypes from England was as pervasive in their lives as it was in the literature written in English in the 20th century in India.

¹ This term was used by Roger Lancelyn Green to describe the period from the publication of Kenneth Grahame's book to the beginning of the First World War in an essay by the same name in 1962.

In this thesis, various novels and stories about childhood produced during this period, irrespective of their original target-audience are studied under the broad category of 'The Fiction of Childhood'. However, the focus is on two novels of Frances Hodgson Burnett exemplifying the fiction of childhood written *for children* and a short story and a novella written by Henry James illustrating childhood in fiction written *for adults*. Apart from the fact that these stories embody some powerful depictions of girlhood, they have also been chosen because the presence of a toy is implicated in all these stories.

In Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1910), Sara Crewe becomes an exploited servant in a girls' boarding school from being a favourite student at the place after it is discovered that her rich father died bankrupt. Until she befriends another exploited servant, her sole companion during her turmoil in the school is her doll. In *The Secret Garden* (1911), by the same author, Mary Lennox is sent back to her uncle's mansion when her parents die in an epidemic in India. Mary is disliked, almost instantly, by all the adults she meets on reaching England and is left to her own devices in the huge mansion, where she discovers a secret garden and an invalid cousin, Colin. She also meets Dickon who had discovered the garden on his own. Playing in the garden transforms three socially unacceptable children into 'likeable' children. These novels are examined in this project to show the construction of the girlhood of Sara Crewe and Mary Lennox.

Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* (1897) is examined to show the construction of Maisie's girlhood amidst a complex web of philandering by her numerous guardians. Maisie herself becomes a doll tossed between warring parents. Abandoned by them, she is used again as a toy by her step-parents to further their interest in each other. This game

goes on till Maisie gets to *know* that she will achieve a self and stop being a toy when she asserts herself. Moving away from its conventional reading as a 'ghost tale', James' "The Turn of the Screw" (1898) is studied to draw out the complex relationship between the governess in the story and her two wards. Owing to her inability to resolve her sexual feelings for her employer the governess is unable to do her duty efficiently. She starts hallucinating about the presence of two former employees of the household. She believes that the male 'ghost' is influencing the boy, Miles and the female 'ghost' is influencing the girl, Flora. She leads the prejudiced housekeeper into believing this and tries to extract a 'confession' out of the children with catastrophic consequences. The governess literally *toys* with the children in her struggles to deliver her role efficiently.

In studying this group of novels, the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and those of Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott are used to define the toy. Using these psychoanalytic theories, the project explores the implications of the child's play with her toy to draw a parallel between the child-toy relationship and that of the child and her care-giver. This study of the constructions of childhood and gender in Anglo-American fiction written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is carried out through five chapters.

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