

Literature and Pedagogy: Psychoanalytic Themes in Paro Anand's *I am not Butter Chicken* and Their Relevance in Educational Settings

*¹Kechegi Khing and ²Prof. Jano S. Liegise

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland, India

²Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland, India

Abstract

Paro Anand's short story collection, *I'm Not Butter Chicken* addresses today's predicament and issues that impact the lives of Indian children. The author cautiously approaches themes which concentrate on the suppressed, concealed or often under-represented issues that young people face in a society that ignores or is apathetic towards these concerning issues. Psychoanalysis is a tool to interpret literary texts to explore and understand characters. This paper critically analyses the short stories from a psychoanalytic lens, explores the psychoanalytic dimension of a parent-child relationship and examines their relevance in educational settings. Applying Freudian psychoanalysis, the paper examines important narratives in which the child characters manage emotions, trauma and psychological conflicts in the backdrop of Indian society. The study further situates these narratives within the context of educational setting, emphasising how such texts can promote empathy, emotional intelligence and literacy as well as help develop a child's critical thinking skills.

Keywords: Paro Anand, psychoanalysis, children's literature, defence mechanism, emotion

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*Author's Correspondence

 Kechegi Khing

 Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English, Nagaland
University, Kohima Campus,
Meriema, Nagaland, India

 kechegikhing03@gmail.com

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Introduction

Indian Children's Literature has developed from oral and ancient narratives over the centuries. Deeply established from orally transmitted narratives and ancient texts like *Panchatantra* and *Jataka tales*, it has seen a gradual evolution to a wider and more dynamic literary domain that reflects present day concerns. Taking a more formal structure during the colonial period in India, the early texts and materials for children were influenced from the West which saw a significant shift post India's independence. Children's books containing stories teaching about life values, morality, ethics, history, and cultural values gave way to embrace more themes of socio-cultural diversity, environment, identity, and gender. The growing body of literature contributed by imaginative, linguistic and culturally diverse writers adds to India's diversity and childhood lived experiences, with an increasing inclusivity and representation. Some notable Indian Children's Literature writers are Munshi Premchand, Vishnu Sharma, R.K. Narayan, Ruskin Bond, Vikram Seth, Satyajit Rai, Roopa Pai, Paro Anand, and Anushka Ravishankar.

Paro Anand is an Indian author best known for her significant contribution to children's literature. Her writings have been commended for their approaches to themes which concentrate on the suppressed, concealed or often under-represented issues that children face in a society that ignores or is apathetic towards these concerning issues. She has spoken about and written extensively on children's literature in India. Some of her popular works are *Wild Child and Other Stories*, *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*, *I'm Not Butter Chicken*, *Being Gandhi* and *Wingless*. For her anthology *Wild Child and Other Stories* (now released as "Like Smoke: 20 Teens 20 Stories") she received the

Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2017. She serves as the director, National Centre for Children's Literature at the National Book Trust India which is India's leading body for children's literature.

Anand's writings present a compelling and captivating lens into Indian society; cautiously from the perspective of a child or young adult. The stories depict the harsh realities encountered in a social landscape which is rapidly changing. In the short stories collection titled *I'm Not Butter Chicken*, we find twelve short stories in total. These stories delve into children's minds exploring their emotions and thoughts; stories of children forced to adapt to a changing and imperfect world while growing up. In the fictional stories which are acutely realistic with a touch of gentle humour, Anand cautiously approaches themes of identity, gender, belonging, peer pressure, parent-child relationships, loneliness, fear, and other concerning mental health issues which are often misunderstood or stigmatized.

This paper aims to explore the psychoanalytic dimensions of a parent-child relationship in the selected text. In addition, the paper also makes an attempt to link psychoanalytic themes in the short stories to educational settings/ pedagogical practices. The methodology used is qualitative analysis with close text reading and thematic analysis as main methods.

Literature Review

Paro Anand's short story collection *I'm Not Butter Chicken* brings out and amplifies the voices of children navigating fear, prejudices, anger, confusion and hope in the Indian societal backdrop.

Shetty in a book review notes that "The stories range from everyday issues like fights with family, exam jitters and parental pressure to more intense ones like dealing with death and being faced with domestic violence." (Shetty 2012). These stories resonate with readers with its informal language as it targets children readers. At the end of every story, the author adds a note on where the story came from, for instance inspiration from her children, her experience while interacting with children, adults, etc. This gives readers an interesting insight into her creative process.

The short stories collection titled *I'm Not Butter Chicken* by Paro Anand brilliantly captures the teenage mind, as reviewed by Goodreads of the chaotic, hilarious, wise, magical years, and priceless years; Teen stories that are heartbreakingly wise and realistic. (Goodreads 2020)

The select text has not been critically studied in academia, the growing readership proves Anand's creative genius and the realistic approaches makes both children and adults readers relatable to the narratives.

In an interview on writing for children, published in The Hindu, Anand speaks on her choice to address difficult topics "— war, terrorism, sexual abuse, mental illness and more — that most adults would want to hide from children." adding that "Never once has a child said that what she has written is inappropriate". As adults, one may believe that a child may not speak about or discuss it, "but actually is; just not with you", the sooner this is recognised the better it will be for us and children. (Krithika 2019)

Anand in another interview with The New Indian Express, speaks on children's literature that "we still need to do a lot, and rethink our strategy of creating and disseminating children's literature. It has a lot of power to bring up generations of discerning and socially-aware human beings." (Tanka 2021)

As such the paper emphasises the importance and value of literature in the educational setting. Many critics and researchers have previously provided the groundwork and conducted theoretical and practical studies. Children's books play a foundational role in a child's overall growth. Notable critics and scholars such as Maria Nikolajeva, Perry Nodelman, Peter Hunt, Aiden Chambers, Usha Mukhunda and Radhika Menon have greatly pioneered and contributed to children's literature.

Theoretical frameworks

The selected text is critically analysed from the psychoanalytic lens through key concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis like unconscious mind, id, ego, superego, and defence mechanisms particularly repression and denial to explore and understand the child and other characters in the stories. These key concepts have been introduced by Sigmund Freud and further developed by his daughter Anna Freud and others. Although Freud's psychoanalysis leads empirical evidence, some of his concepts and terms continue to be relevant for the understanding of the unconscious, exploring unconscious conflicts and childhood experiences. In the Freudian structural model of the mind- the id is the psychic agency of instinctual life, the basic driver of the unconscious mind; ego is the mediator between the id and superego; superego is that which holds ideals for perfection based on ideals of the parents/ family and culture.

These defence mechanisms help in maintaining one's emotional stability but can also distort one's realities. Repression is the human capacity to push distressing thoughts or painful emotions into the unconscious, an attempt to forget traumatic experiences. Denial is refusing to accept reality. The fictional character's mind, fears, desires, internal conflicts and motivations are studied to reveal and understand human psyche and behaviour.

Discussion

In Paro Anand's collection of short stories, she eloquently describes the emotional and psychological impacts of family relationships, peer pressure, teachers and schools on developing brains. Psychoanalytic reading of the stories helps reveal themes of guilt, desire, longing, fear, trauma, identity and a hope in the future to come.

The first story of this collection opens with the line, "I'm not Butter Chicken, you can't order me!" (Anand 2016) which is not a wise move to yell at one's father, but Nitya lashes out in her frustration and anger. Nitya rushes to her room upstairs and locks herself. In her loneliness, confusion, anger, tears and a constant feeling that everyone has abandoned her, engulfs her as she hears echoes of laughter of her family from downstairs. Looking critically at the narrative from a psychoanalytic perspective, we find the character Nitya engulfed by her Id, forcing her to think negatively even to the extent of dying and her imagined funeral. A train of questions ran across her mind in her frustration which projects her internal turmoil of being in want of companionship. In addition to this, we also can observe a hint of Electra complex, since she wants to be heard and loved by her parents, especially her father. Later in the story, she manages to cool down with the affections and gentle touch of her father as he hugs and talks to her.

The main character Prashant describes the perils of invisible things that are like parasites, creeping and eating him away in the second story of this book, titled 'Invisible things to look out for.' He refers to this invisible force as his inner voice, which surfaces whenever his parents argue. His emotional state is severely affected each time he hears the term "divorce" due to the ongoing trauma. With these ideas racing through his head, his Id tempts him to consider killing himself, to which he calls himself a coward. Then he resolves to run from home believing that his parents' marriage depends on his safety and actions. Psychoanalytically considered, the character's Ego and Superego are working against his impulse to end his life. This repression of his recollection into his unconscious mind can be seen as a coping method known as repression.

The theme of repression and silence as a defence mechanism also finds its way in the next story 'Crying'. The child narrator Aftab represses his emotions and remains silent even when news broke of his father's death and even when his teacher Miss Tandon offers to lend an ear whenever he wishes to open up. Although his mother wept for weeks, he showed no signs of sadness and only thought it would be brave to support his mother by dropping out of school and finding a job. On returning back to school and attempting an exam one day, Miss Tandon suddenly leaves the classroom on being summoned by the office. That day, everyone cheated in the maths class test. After three weeks, the teacher returns and shares that her mother had been ill and passed away. In addition, she only praised her students for scoring well in the class test. Aftab was disgusted when no one was bold enough to confess their cheating, and he felt sick and burst into tears at the thought of taking advantage of the teacher's misfortune to score well in the class test. Aftab's outburst shows his way of coping with despair,

expressing repressed emotions and empathy. The teacher silently comforts Aftab which amplifies the significant role a teacher has in the life of a student.

In 'The Process of Becoming Groan-Up,' the main character Baalika, fake-faints in the middle of her exam since she was not well prepared but did not want to fail the exam. On a pretext, she claimed to be sick and was taken to rest. The expectations of parents and exam pressure was heavy for her to bear. The doctor speaks with her in private after examining her and concluding that it was all pretentious and there was no significant health condition. The unconscious mind Id forces her to deny her action and her silent denial as a defence mechanism to not accept the truth made her feel afraid to tell the truth. However when the doctor tells her of a similar incident and that her head would have to be opened to check her brain condition, fear was generated and eventually the mind's ego takes control and she eventually tells the truth. The privacy of the conversation and the disclosure she makes to the doctor, gives solace to her suppressed thoughts.

'IQ unbelievable' also delves into the theme of parental and societal expectations which can take a negative turn in a child. In this story, the main character, a fourteen-year-old boy, is regarded as foolish, silly and stupid at home. However, when his IQ level was tested as 140, he was treated differently. The people around him at home and school started treating him very differently. This negatively impacted him since his friends now avoided him as though he was carrying a contagious disease. This very treatment caused internal turmoil in the narrator's mind, of whether he was actually a genius or a total failure. The narrator embodies the Ego, as though balancing the Id and Superego since he feels guilty for being a failed genius yet he does not succumb to it but rather overcomes the guilt as he buries himself into books. He does not live to other's expectations and disappointment, rather translates it to happiness as he becomes an ordinary teenager again. Parental, societal and academic expectations enforced on a child not only changes their personality but also their attitude towards life. The question of perspectives also open a discussion in this case of whether a child with good marks has to be pushed to science stream always or given the chance to choose as per his interest and talent.

In the story 'Caught', the narrator attempts to cheat in his geography exam since he was poor with maps. With peer pressure, his defence mechanism at work denies that it was not his first time cheating when actually it was his first attempt. With cheating sheets in his hands in the hall, it only evoked fear and invited the attention of the teacher's gaze. His classmate praises him for cheating while his teacher summoned him to speak in private. On being asked to tell the truth, his unconscious mind pushes him to confess his mistakes and promises never to cheat again. This moral attitude of the child is also a reflection of a concerned teacher who handles the situation with compassion rather than public shaming of the child's mistake.

'Babloo Bhabhi' narrates a story of a pre teen Babloo living in a joint family wherein alcoholism and domestic violence prevailed on a daily basis. Munni was the victim wife to Babloo's elder brother Dinu who beats his wife almost everyday under the influence of alcohol or its after effects. Babloo thinks a thousand ways to stop it but like a coward he turns away every time and even begs his mother to correct his brother. However, the mother replies that she had also experienced the same and it is "just a women's kismet" (Anand 2016) The generational gender expectations and societal expectations of a woman to be always silent and submissive to her husband projects along the lines of this story. Munni's silent denial of her everyday abuse as her defence mechanism. When she breaks down into tears as Babloo helps her and slowly touches her bruises, Babloo sympathises and emphasises his sister in law. The next day, Babloo finds courage, confronts and threatens to call the police on his brother who is beating his wife again. The story ends with the sensible hero of a boy becoming a responsible man.

In the story 'If I were brave', we find that the narrator is a young teenager who desires to be brave yet has so many fears. Hinted by his sister, he lists down his fears making an alphabetical list of his fears from A to Z. On a family outing, his little cousins Angad and Neha flick water onto him if he is scared of water, to which he lies. This denial is a form of his defence mechanism to hide the inner truth as he did not want to appear fearful in front of younger ones. Later when his cousin Neha was drowning, he was forced into a situation to save her which he does despite his fears. He overcomes his fear of drowning and hydrophobia when it mattered the most, thus the imperfect underdog triumphs. The main character here wears his fears bravely like a badge of honour;

from a psychoanalytic perspective, we can understand this as his defence mechanism in action and later accepting himself and slowly overcoming or channeling his fears into heroic action in time of emergency.

Conclusion

The author Anand captures the everyday stories in households and schools offering psychological insights into the child's mind. The parent-child relationship in the stories help explore the psychological dimensions to better understand the impact of parents and family on a child's growing mind. The discussion of difficult topics—divorce, death, gender roles and expectations, trauma, fear, domestic violence, dishonesty, parental and social expectations on children — for some adults may be protective of the child's exposure to these issues. However, from a realistic perspective, we cannot eradicate the fact of what a child goes through in reality.

How a child reciprocates, behaves and displays emotions, are greatly influenced by the environment a child is exposed to. In the above stories, peers and teachers also greatly influence a child's emotional development and character, which supports the statement in *Child Psychology*,

“Emotional development during childhood is more susceptible to the influence of friends circle than of the parent...his emotional development is now open to such influence as the teacher's behaviour and the atmosphere within the school and classroom.” (Sharma 2022)

The paper further contends that the selected text holds important features and can be used as a useful pedagogical tool to help students recognise and discuss internal experiences. In addition to encouraging inclusivity, guidance towards psychological and emotional awareness.

Classroom activities such as story book reading, storytelling and discussions can be considered a reflective tool to learn and diagnose children's experiences. This further caters to the child's needs as educators, parents and adults; although ethical considerations must be looked into. The collection of short stories in *I'm Not Butter Chicken* with its myriad psychological dimensions promote empathy, emotional intelligence and literacy as well as help develop a child's critical thinking skills. This is achieved with an insight into the child character's mind and experiences relatable to readers even though these are fictional stories.

The gap in research still stands as this paper is based on theoretical analysis. To understand the perceptions of the new generation learners and also apply these theoretical interpretations practically, further research is recommended for the use of literature as a reflective tool to understand psychoanalytic themes and its relevance in academia or classroom. To recommend further research, applying Educational psychology and Pedagogy to better understand socio-emotional learning (SEL) and Emotional literacy would greatly contribute to understanding a child's mind in a culturally diverse country.

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