

Treatment through Nature in Japanese Children's Literature: A Case Study of Kenji Miyazawa's *Yodaka no Hoshi* and Nankichi Nimi's *Ni Hiki no Kaeru*

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Abstract - Japan is enriched with treasures of children's tales. Miyazawa Kenji and Nankichi Nimi are regarded as one of the leading authors of children's literature of Japan. Both of them are often juxtaposed to each other for their unique artifacts in producing children's tales. Notably, both of the authors penned down their masterpieces depicting the elements of nature that prevail within their hometown. The present paper is an effort to bring Kenji Miyazawa and Nankichi Nimi into one literary canvas in terms of their endeavor to convey subliminal messages through the elements of nature that appear in the selected short stories.

Index Terms - Kenji Miyazawa, Nankichi Nimi, Children's Literature, Japanese Children's Literature, Nature

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the New World Encyclopedia, childhood is the time between the *phase of infancy and adulthood*. Physical and mental growth of human beings takes place during childhood. Food, clothing, exercise, and protection from danger— all play a pivotal role in their physical growth. However, the process of psychological development is more complex. John Locke believed that a child's mind is like a *blank slate*, innocent, and pure. Children try their best to mimic the behaviors they see around them. As he moves closer to early growth, he begins to develop language to express these imitations. Children usually create their imaginary world during this period by verbally hearing fairy tales, myths, legends, folklores and other stories from their grandparents. In this process, the mind of a child progressively adjusts to develop feelings and emotions.

The function of literature is that of a teacher who disseminates knowledge on diverse arenas. Additionally, it serves as a link between a person's inner and outward worlds, assisting with self-recognition in a subconscious way as well as analyzing the purpose for human beings on this planet. Hence, the primary question that arises is what constitutes children's literature and what characteristics does it possess?

Before defining children's literature, it is essential to understand what literature is and how it is created. The creative power of the human mind is greatly influenced by emotions and experiences, and it is the creative mind that is so crucial to the formation of literature. Thus, literature can be described as the medium through which artistically expressed human emotions, sensations, imaginations, and experiences are communicated in either spoken or written form. Defining 'children's literature' has been a matter of debate among critics, educators, and scholars for ages. Indeed, there are a wide spectrum of viewpoints on what exactly constitutes and signifies children's literature among scholars and researchers. However, the most recognized conception is that children's literature is the creative documentation that conveys entertainment, education, moral values, and positive messages toward children. In the words of Çakmak Güleç and Geçgel (2006), a book should contain the following qualities before being chosen for children:

a simple but well-planned subject, a slight surprise element in its subject, lots of direct conversations in it, repetitions, rhymes and phrases that children can memorize quickly, colourful and thoughtful language, cases from events that children know, simple but satisfying content, and characters that children can easily recognize. (p. 35).

In the postmodern era, the world has evolved into a global village. With the advancement of science and the profusion of electronic devices in our lives, we have unconsciously or consciously become more detached not only from one another but from nature as well. Mother Nature, mostly composed of flora and fauna, is often ignored. However, it is literature which has been continuously flowing over decades as a social device to enhance the connection between humans and nature. When a child is actively immersed with the interactions of natural elements as they are depicted in narrative, a psychological connection begins to form in their mind. Similarly, it goes without saying that teaching children through literature is essential in fostering their awareness of nature and developing a positive attitude toward the environment. With developing a child's growth in creativity, critical thinking, life lessons, entertainment and cultural values, children's books contribute in creating a distinctive fantasy land that allows a child to co-exist with elements of nature as well.

It is noteworthy that every country in the world has its own set of children's literature. Talking about western authors of children's literature, we think of Oscar Wilde, Jonathan Swift, Rudyard Kipling, Hans Christian Andersen; Indian authors of children's tales like Rabindranath Tagore, Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury, Ruskin Bond, Paro Anand and so on. In the same way, Japan is enriched with dynamic literary creations for children and young readers. Like most other authors, Kenji Miyazawa and Nankichi Nimi have a remarkable contribution in adorning the sphere of Japanese children's literature. Their work not only reflects a spectrum of childhood experiences but also conveys the vision of bringing nature to life.

II. MIYAZAWA KENJI & NANKICHI NIMI: A GLIMPSE OF THEIR LIFE AND LEGACY

Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933) was born into a wealthy merchant family that had committed to Buddhism in Iwate Prefecture of Japan. He encountered with the Lotus Sutra at his teenage which had a lasting impact on his writing of traditional tanka poems. Miyazawa left his family business in pursuit of learning contemporary farming techniques at an agricultural college. Following graduation, he moved back to Tokyo where he did a job of proof-reading and also kept up his writing. However, he had to return home in 1921 to take care of his ailing sister. He spent the rest of his life in Iwate and dedicated himself to the task of aiding and guiding the poor farmers. Being a Lotus Sutra adherent, his health started to deteriorate as a result of the restricted diet and he died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-seven. He published two of his remarkable works – *Haru to Shura* and *Chūmon no Ōiryōriten* with self-endeavor during his lifetime. These two works notably earned immense popularity confirming Miyazawa as a prominent young author of that era. However, he did not receive much recognition during his lifetime, for most of the works were published posthumously.

Nankichi Nimi (1913–1943) – ‘The Hans Christian Andersen of Japan’, is one of the foremost authors of children’s literature of Japan. He was born at the city of Handa in Aichi Prefecture. He suffered a solitary childhood after his mother’s demise when he was only four years old. Later, he was adopted into his maternal family. He started penning down an array of children’s tales at the time of his junior high school. At the age of eighteen, *Gongitsune* – the most prevalent work of his lifetime achievements was published for the first time in the ‘Akai Tori’ (1918) magazine; one of Japan’s epoch-making children’s magazines of the time. He initially enrolled at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies to study English literature, but he was compelled to return back to hometown owing to illness. However, he still continued his writings while serving as a teacher at a girl’s high school. In this time, he penned down most of his remarkable works like *Ojisan no Ranpu*, *Gongoro Kane*, *Hananoki Mura to Nusubitotachi* and so forth. Nankichi Nimi suffered a premature demise due to tuberculosis on March 22, 1943 at the age of twenty-nine leaving behind his creative endeavors inviting critics and reader’s interpretation.

The masterpieces of Kenji Miyazawa and Nankichi Nimi are captivating enough for both young and adult readers. The inclusion of natural phenomena, how they interact, and their vivid depictions transport readers to a world of fantasy. Remarkably, both of them has penned down their literary works by incorporating number of elements of nature that prevail within their hometown. Both authors skillfully incorporated each entity of nature that conveys a subliminal message to readers in some way. Their vivid portrayal of nature and her element inspires readers to think about what they want to convey through their works.

III. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

(1) *Yodaka no Hoshi* by Kenji Miyazawa

One of Kenji Miyazawa’s notable works, *Yodaka no Hoshi* demonstrates his magical artifact that forms the basis for the quest of his literary creativities. The narrative goes on about an ugly Nighthawk (*Yodaka*) who encounters lot of humiliations and taunting remarks from other birds for his ugly appearance. However, he is able to transform that suffering into a source of energy to fly up to heaven and, in the end, could sparkle as the nighthawk star.

Through this story, Kenji Miyazawa makes an attempt to provide a socio-behavioural message to the readers. Portrayal of characters by using natural entities gives a rational approach rather using human characters. Give message of fundamental life learning through the protagonist bird character *Yodaka*, though the readers would feel the situation directly or passively and would identify the same that is happening around them every day. Kenji Miyazawa begins the story with the limped characterization of *Yodaka*. The very first few lines describe the protagonist bird character,

よだかは、実にみにくい鳥です。顔は、ところどころ、味噌をつけたようにまだらで、くちばしは、ひらたくて、耳までさけています。足は、まるでよぼよぼで、一間とも歩けません。

The nighthawk was really a very ugly bird. His face had reddish brown blotches as though someone had daubed it with bean paste, his beak was flat, and his mouth stretched right around to his ears. His legs, too, were so unsteady that he could barely walk even a couple of yards. (Tran. by John Bester)

The story goes on narrating about the contemptible approach of other birds towards *Yodaka*. When *Taka* (Hawk) enters into the scene, Kenji Miyazawa portrays the scene with conversation between *Taka* and *Yodaka*. As *Yodaka* in Japanese literally combines two words *Yoru* (Night) and *Taka* (Hawk); the *Taka* forces *Yodaka* to change its name because *Yodaka* does not possess any quality of *Taka*, and threatened to kill if *Yodaka* does not do so.

いいや。出来る。そうしろ。もしあさっての朝までに、お前がそうしなかったら、もうすぐ、つかみ殺すぞ。つかみ殺してしまうから、そう思え。おれはあさっての朝早く、鳥のうちを一軒ずつまわって、お前が来たかどうかを聞いてある。一軒でも来なかったという家があったら、もう貴様もその時がおしまいだぞ。

Yes, you could. You’ve got to! If you don’t do it by the morning of the day after tomorrow, I’ll come and crush you in my claws. Don’t forget, now. The day after tomorrow in the morning, I’ll go around to all the other birds’ houses and ask whether you’ve been there or not. If there’s a single one that says you haven’t, that’ll be the end of you! (Tran. by John Bester)

From this scene onwards, Kenji Miyazawa evolves the story with strong life-learning messages conveyed through *Yodaka*. For instance, killing winged beetles for food reminds *Yodaka* that *Taka* will also do the same if *Yodaka* does not change its name. So, *Yodaka* decides not to kill innocent creature rather starving, and visits the relatives and conveys the same message. *Yodaka* decides to sacrifice its life for common cause rather killed by *Taka*. *Yodaka* flies on afar to the sun, stars requesting them to burn *Yodaka* with their flames. It may produce a tiny light but would help the world in a way.

Finally, story ends with Yodaka becomes a star just beside Cassiopeia, and burning forever.

それからしばらくたってよだかははっきりまなこをひらきました。そして自分のからだがいま隣の火のような青い美しい光になって、しずかに燃えているのを見ました。すぐとなりは、カシオピア座でした。天の川の青じろいひかりが、すぐうしろになっていました。そしてよだかの星は燃えつづけました。いつまでもいつまでも燃えつづけました。今でもまだ燃えています。

A while later, the nighthawk opened his eyes and saw, quite clearly, that his own body was glowing gently with a beautiful blue light like burning phosphorous. Next to him was Cassiopeia. The bluish white light of the Milky Way lay just at his back. And the nighthawk star went on burning. It burned forever and forever. It is still burning to this day. (Tran. by John Bester)

Kenji Miyazawa concludes with the narration of that the ugly, bullied and threatened *Yodaka* ends up its life with sacrifice for common cause and earns the universal recognition posthumously for its pure intention.

Kenji Miyazawa indeed makes an attempt to portray the condition of marginalized people in the society through the allegorical portrayal of the bird *Yodaka*. These people remain neglected and are often dominated by the privileged sections of the society. Moreover, the dominated sections try to manipulate and mould the underprivileged class according to their own needs. In a patriarchal society, the men are the powerful and dominated sections while women are regarded as weaker sex. Men not only try to dictate the ways of women but also try to the role of women within four walls and just consider women as mere child producing machine. In our patriarchal society, women with fair complexion are given more preference than the darker ones. Women are not treated at par with men and are not provided with equal opportunities. Additionally, male child gets priorities over the female ones when the question of getting higher education comes to the fore, and a female child gets involved in household chores just after completing the formal education. Similarly, the marginalized and the weaker sections are relegated to the periphery, and it is only the dominant group which remains within the Centre of the power structure. Taka represents the powerful and dominated class while *Yodaka* speak for the oppressed sections of the society. The entire story foregrounds the dichotomy between the oppressors and the oppressed on the one hand and also throws adequate light on the silent sacrifices made by the *Yodaka*, a representative of the marginalized class.

(2) *Ni Hiki no Kaeru* by Nankichi Nimi

Similarly, *Ni Hiki no Kaeru* – one of Nankichi Nimi's remarkable work eloquently conveys the truth about humanity through symbolic storytelling. This short tale is written in the year of 1935 – the eve of Second Sino-Japanese war. It is worth mentioning here that, Nankichi Nimi may have implicitly wanted to convey the significance of peace through this short narrative.

This short story goes on narrating about two frogs—one green and the other yellow who came across each other in the middle of a field. Both of them engage into intense fighting over their skin color. The frogs temporarily settle their conflict due to the arrival of winter by going to sleep because of hibernation. They decided to face-off each other after the winter. However, they came to appreciate one another after realizing that both of them are beautiful frogs having different colors. In the end, they start living together and become good friends.

The representation of the two frogs allegorically showcases the larger aspect of human life. In practical, people, much like the frogs, often engage into rivalry with each other over trivialities. The rivalry turns up fatal when it owes to humiliate one's self-esteem. Nankichi Nimi implicitly conveys this fact through the narrative just as the following scene describes:

緑の蛙と黄色の蛙が、はたけのまんなかでばったりゆきあいました。「やあ、きみは黄色だね。きたない色だ。」と緑の蛙がいました。きみは緑だね。きみはじぶんを美しいと思っているのかね。」と黄色の蛙がいました。こんなふうに話しあっていると、よいことは起こりません。二ひきの蛙はとうとうけんかをはじめました。緑の蛙は黄色の蛙の上にとびかかっていきました。この蛙はとびかかるのが得意でありました。黄色の蛙はあとあしで砂をけとばしましたので、あいてはたびたび目玉から砂をはらわねばなりませんでした。するとそのとき、寒い風がふいてきました。

A green frog and a yellow frog bumped into each other in the middle of a field. “You are yellow, yuck! What a dirty colour!” The green frog said. “And you are green. You think you are pretty?” The yellow frog said. If you go on talking like this, nothing good is going to come out of it. Finally, the two frogs started fighting. The green frog sprang onto the yellow frog. He was good at springing on others. The yellow frog kicked up sand with his hind legs, so the green frog had to remove sand from his eyes from time to time. (Tran. by Nissim Bedekar)

However, the end of rivalry lies under human hand if resolved with composure. It is seen that the two frogs, although took a break for hibernation by deciding to face off again once the spring arrives. The end of the narrative renders a happy ending when readers find that both of the frogs came to appreciate each other instead of fighting. If both of them would have continued their confrontation over trivialities, the upshot would have been a bitter outcome. As Nankichi Nimi ends the story in the following manner:

池には新しくわきでて、ラムネのようにすがすがしい水がいっぱいたたえられてありました。そのなかへ蛙たちは、とぶんとぶんととびこみました。からだをあらってから緑の蛙が目をぱちくりさせて、「やあ、きみの黄色は美しい。」といいました。「そういえば、きみの緑だってすばらしいよ。」と黄色の蛙がいました。そこで二ひきの蛙は、「もうけんかはよそう。」といいあいました。

よくねむったあとでは、人間でも蛙でも、きげんがよくなるものであります。

Both the frogs went towards the pond to wash off the mud and soil from their bodies. The pond was full of new bubbling water, as refreshing as lemonade. The frogs jumped into it with a splash. After they had washed their bodies,

the green frog said, blinking his eyes. “Hey, your yellow colour is pretty!” “Well, your green is also wonderful,” the yellow frog said. And then the two frogs said to each other, “Let’s not fight any more”.

After a sound sleep, anyone gets in a cheerful mood, be it a human or a frog. (Tran. by Nissim Bedekar)

Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, an Irish Novelist in her novel “Molly Bawn” argues that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’. The aforementioned short story travels much beyond the conflict of colors—yellow and green. It is more of a personal enmity that brings the two frogs in the battle field. What is worth mentioning here is that the two frogs who at once hated each other and was burning in a self-consuming ego of possessing a better ‘body color’, ultimately transcends these narrow boundaries and develops a greater world view and a matured mindset which not only makes them appreciate each other’s looks but also binds them together in the evergreen bond of friendship.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This research paper titled “Treatment through Nature in Japanese Children’s Literature: A Case Study of Kenji Miyazawa’s *Yodaka no Hoshi* and Nankichi Nimi’s *Ni Hiki no Kaeru*” made a study of the two aforementioned texts situating them in a larger plane to grasp a much deeper meaning of the story. Although it belongs to the realm of children’s literature and the medium of conveying the message is a short story, the message conveyed through these short stories are indeed very complex and demands the reader’s full attention. Reader can very much relate these stories with themselves, for these works depicts the burning incidents of contemporary society. The first short story describes a constant clash between powerful and the relatively powerless groups in the society. It further depicts how the superior class tries to control and manipulates the oppressed section and often threatens to kill the later if it fails to carry out the orders. Moreover, it also shows how the sacrifices made by the marginalized class are paid no heed at all. The second story moves much beyond the concept of ‘colour clash’ and advocates friendship as a bond to keep all conflicts away and keep people united. Both the stories urge the society and its people to change their one-eyed perceptions and embrace larger world views which propagate notions like equal rights for everyone, mutual co-existence, peace and harmony, and, above all, friendship. In a nutshell, both the two short stories conform to the famous phrase of John Dickinson — “United we stand, divided we fall.”

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