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The Child's Body and the Novelistic Subject in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*

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While the novel as a genre witnesses an exponential growth in the Victorian period, the literary canon of the time reveals a very different image of Victorian society, through a deliberate silencing of conversations on sexuality and the body. Sex is conspicuously absent in all its forms in the Victorian domestic novel, which, along with conduct books, functioned in creating a stereotypical feminine subject/object whose physicality is consistently denied all importance. The heroine of these novels, the Victorian ideal of desirability, is consequently constructed solely through her social and moral consciousness, and bodily exercises like eating, laboring and sexual intercourse find no mention in her development. Alternative records of the Victorian age however, present sex and the female body in various forms. This paper attempts to analyze the child-subject's body in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, popular, non-canonical works of the Victorian Age, within the rubric of the domestic novel, as well as Victorian theories on childhood, to examine the role the body played in the construction and development of the female novelistic subject.

The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented growth in the popularity of the novel, owing to the successes of serialized novels in Periodicals and of Mudie's library, and led to what critic Michael Wheeler claims to be "a highly professionalized boom in the [novel's] demand". (Wheeler, 90) This demand was accompanied by the development of different sub-genres of the novel, like the penny dreadful, the sensational novel and fantasy novels- in addition to the realist form which had gained popularity in the eighteenth century- which were written to cater to different categories of readership. The Victorian age also gave predominance to a genre of writing which had hitherto not been considered as 'literature', namely children's fiction. The Victorian Novel is therefore a heterogeneous amalgamation of varied components, and reductive attempts to trace features of commonality present a flawed picture of the literary trends that defined the age. However, the novelistic category that has been canonized as being definitive of the period is that of the realist domestic novel, whose most famous practitioner was Jane Austen. The main focus of these novels was on the development of the individual (usually female) self, constructed entirely through development of its consciousness, through a deliberate negation of the corporeality of the body, and a denial of its needs and functions. Such a construction, though dominant, is countered by parallel socio-legal as well as novelistic discourses, which are fraught with an overarching presence of the body in various forms, which reveal a completely different approach towards the body than the one considered as quintessentially Victorian. This paper attempts to investigate the complex deployment of the body within the seemingly simplistic genre of children's-fantasy fiction, by examining the representation of the girl child's body and

its role in the construction of the novelistic subject in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

In her book *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong claims that the Victorian domestic novel was emblematic of the rising middle class, and consciously strove to create a feminine subject in accordance with the social, economic and moral dictates that governed it. Armstrong argues that the female self at the center of these novels was the socially desirable product of the conduct books which were circulated amongst the middle class 'ladies', as well as the Lockean model of the conscious self. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke had propounded his theory that the human subject is born in a state of *Tabula Rasa*, and has the ability of fashioning its own identity, by virtue of possessing sensory abilities to distinguish pleasure from pain, and the faculty of memory. He claims that an individual's identity is self-determinable, depending on Reason and Judgment. This Lockean Self reveals itself most explicitly in Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, which presents the gradually developing consciousness of the heroine Fanny Price. Fanny's final success in the novel, her marriage to her cousin Edmund which results in considerable social advancement, is shown to be the culmination of a series of well thought out decisions on her part, which reveal a stable consciousness developed through extensive education of the mind. It is significant that this education is achieved in the solitude of the domestic space, and mediated through Edmund, a male member of the family, to ensure her education does not overstep limits of propriety. Her feminine subjectivity then, though allowed development, is always deeply entrenched within middle class parameters of acceptability. Fanny's strength is shown to lie in her unflinching support to the Victorian social structure, as evidenced in her insistent opposition to the play her cousins want to stage, an activity considered potentially threatening to the rigid Victorian class structure by allowing participants to take on different identities. Fanny's refusal to marry the socially desirable Henry Crawford in spite of opposition from even her Uncle is another instance where her strongly developed selfhood displays itself. Armstrong begins the Introduction to her book by claiming that the domestic novel "changed the criteria for determining what was most important in a female. In countless educational treatises and works of fiction supposedly written for women, desire came into being along with a new kind of woman. And by representing life with this kind of woman as not only desirable but also available to virtually anyone, this ideal eventually reached beyond belief..." (Armstrong, iii) Fanny is constructed as the archetype of this Victorian ideal, an 'educated' woman deeply embedded in the socio-sexual ethic of the Victorian middle class. Her identity is defined solely through her mind and her decisions, and her physicality (sexual or otherwise) is never focused upon. The only mention of Fanny's body is to highlight her physical weakness, in comparison with the feisty, physically strong and attractive Mary Crawford. That Fanny and not Mary is the heroine of the novel establishes what Armstrong calls the "domestication" of desire, whereby desirability is consciously centered within the desexualized female subject.

Such deliberate absence of women's bodies from the literary canon of the Victorian period and the desexualized vocabulary of desire that it popularized seems at odds with the intense focus upon the body of the child in popular children's fiction of the period. Children's literature, according to critic James R. Kincaid, began to be treated as a separate genre only in the mid-Victorian period, an occurrence that Kincaid attributes to the Victorian preoccupation with the idea of fixed categories. Many famous works of children's fiction of this period, especially those written in the 1850's and 60's, like Christina Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market* are centered

aroundfigures of children, whose physicality is crucial to their existence in a fantastical space which defies traditional structures of power. Arguably the most successful works of this newly christened genre, Lewis Carroll's fantasy-novels *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* similarly revolve around the figure of the "dream-child" Alice: a curious, often precocious seven and a half year old girl. Alice's dream adventures take the readers on a journey through her imaginative unconscious into a world where Victorian logic collapses. Like Lizzie and Laura of Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, the defining feature of Carroll's Alice is the intertwining of her body and consciousness. The two sisters in Rossetti's poem struggle for survival in an economy of desire dominated by the "goblins". Their successful negotiations with these exploitative creatures can only occur through a physical experiencing and transcendence of the desire that they are tempted with. Rossetti thus presents the body and its experiences as being central to the development of the female subject. Alice's body too, is not merely an exterior, but is crucial in formulating her interiority. Carroll's novelistic subject is remarkably different from the Lockean-self of Austen's novels. Alice is endowed with an unstable consciousness, which makes her identity equally prone to transformation. Locke stresses on the importance of memory in the development of an individual's consciousness, as memory ensures that the individual's decisions are always in accordance with social norms. Carroll uses the figure of the child, conventionally considered a developing individual, to present an alternative subject, whose consciousness of social dictums is not absolute and can be forgotten. This lapse of memory and consequent change in consciousness occurs through a transformation of her body. It is her body which determines who Alice is at different parts of the novels. For instance, Alice's reaction to her strange surroundings when she falls down the rabbit-hole is one of self-doubt. As her body constantly keeps increasing or decreasing, Alice begins to feel that her identity must also have changed-

She began thinking over all the children that she knew were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them. "I'm sure I'm not Ada," she said, "for her hair grows in ringlets, and mine doesn't go in ringlets at all; and I'm sure I can't be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she! Oh she knows so very little! Besides, *she's* she and *I'm* I, and oh dear, how puzzling it all is!"

(Carroll, 47)

This above paragraph presents an interesting conception of the child's identity, which comprises of both the body and the consciousness. Alice differentiates herself from one child on the basis of her physicality (difference in hair) and another on the basis of her mind. "She could have been changed for any of them" suggests the possibility of a fluid identity, which the domestic novel did not allow its protagonist to possess. This fluid identity can be attributed to the cultural association of children with growth, again connecting the child's body to his/her consciousness. This idea is discussed by Kincaid in his book *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*: "...the child seems often to have been identified directly with motion...where bodily changes recapitulate in abridged form the growth of life itself in its various stages." (Kincaid, 66) An unstable body thus represents an unstable identity and invests the subject with the choice to construct an alternative identity. For instance, in the midst of Alice's doubts about her identity, she recognizes the freedom that this dissolution of the absolute self has to offer: "No, I've made up my mind about it; if I'm Mabel I'll stay down here. It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying- 'Come

up again, dear!' I shall only look up and say, 'Who am I then, tell me that first', and then if I like being that person I'll go up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else!"(Carroll, 48)The pigeon she encounters in the forest mistakes her for a serpent due to her elongated neck- "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent, and there's no use denying it!" (Carroll, 77) This again places the focus on the body as the constructor of identity. The freedom from social constraints through an erasure of memory is also shown through Alice's incorrect recitation of her nursery rhymes. These rhymes, reflective of the Victorian education system, are transformed into nonsensical poems, highlighting that the education which goes into the construction of the Victorian middle-class subject ceases to have any meaning when the social structures supporting it collapse. But the construction of Alice's subjectivity is ambivalent, complicated by her own adherences to the conventions of her society, as is seen in her conversation with the Gnat about the importance of names in *Through the Looking Glass*. To the Gnat's question "Why do people have names at all, if they are not useful?" Alice's reply "No use to *them*, but it's useful to people who name them, I suppose" (Carroll, 185-86) reveals a surprising understanding of the functioning of Victorian society. Another subsequent dialogue with the Gnat highlights this ambiguity-

"I suppose you don't want to lose your name?" he asked. "No indeed," Alice replied, a little anxiously. "And yet I don't know," the Gnat went on in a careless tone: "only think how convenient it would be if you could manage to go home without it! For instance, if the governess wanted to call you to your lessons, she would call out 'Come here -,' and there she would have to leave off, because there wouldn't be any name to call, and of course you wouldn't have to go, you know". That would never do, I'm sure", said Alice.

(Carroll, 188)

Alice's anxiety at the prospect of losing her name, an indicator of her social identity reveals, as Kincaid states, that "despite her curiosity, however, she is generally a well-ordered quasi-adult: prudent and respectful of social conventions, even when she fails to recognize the basis for or implications of these conventions." (Kincaid, 291)

Alice's encounter with the Fawn in the Forest-without-names also highlights the possibility of shedding social markers of identity. Her closeness to the Fawn could only be possible in a place where her identity as a human, and the threat it entails for the Fawn has been discarded. The mixture of dismay and relief that Alice feels on remembering who she is- "Alice stood looking after the Fawn, almost ready to cry with vexation at having lost her dear little fellow-traveler so suddenly. 'However, I know my name now', she said, 'and that's some comfort'." (Carroll,190) aptly represents this duality in her.

Even though Alice's adventures in Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land are ultimately shown to be her dreams, her experience is not merely imaginative but also physical. Alice's dreams have often been interpreted through Freudian studies as being symbolic of an unconscious wish-fulfillment, a desire in Alice to escape the oppressive monotony of real life. But her experience is not limited to the level of consciousness. Freud, in his "History of Infantile Neurosis", claims that unlike adults, the conscious and unconscious are not well divided in children. ¹Elements of fantasy spill over to the real world, to the extent that it is difficult to segregate the physical from

the imaginary. In his Introduction to these two novels, critic Michael Irwin claims that Alice's "dream world is a transliteration of her physical world" (Irwin, 19). It is significant that Alice's body becomes the site and means of her experience. Her characterization as a curious child seeking sensual adventure is highlighted right from the first page, where peeping into her sister's book to combat boredom, Alice is easily dissatisfied- "What is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversation?" (Carroll, 37). Alice's preference for books which appeal to the senses, instead of the mind highlights the importance of her senses in determining her identity.

The fantasy world she enters in first marks its presence on her body, which undergoes changes in size when she eats or drinks anything in the hall connected to the rabbit-hole. Critic U.C. Knoepfelmacher, in his book *Ventures Into Childland*, interprets these changes as external manifestations of her own oscillating desires. Eating the cake and drinking the liquid that Alice finds in the hall, signify for Knoepfelmacher a sensual appetite which needs to be mediated through her reason. The Caterpillar that Alice encounters after she enters the garden becomes the agent who oversees this mediation of desire, as he gives her the Mushroom which allows her to control her size. These changes in size also reflect the changes that Alice's character has to go through to adapt to her changing situations. Alice's body is therefore reflective not only of her changing consciousness, but also of the effect of external occurrences. The tropes of eating and drinking are also significant, as these bodily activities, so vital to the sustenance of an individual, hardly find mention in the dominant literature of the period. The presence of the body in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* is also marked by the stress on physical activities like games and the overwhelming threats of physical violence.

Another aspect of Carroll's novels which highlights the visibility of the body is the use of illustrations. Conceived by Carroll in 1863, when he was on a picnic with the three Liddell children, the books were initially presented to Alice Liddell- the child he had written for and dedicated his book to- with his own illustrations, but the illustrations for the published version were made by John Tenniel, a famous Victorian illustrator. The original manuscript, titled *Alice's Adventures Underground*, had a portrait of the seven year old Liddell on the front. This sustained emphasis on a visual representation of the characters highlights the importance of their bodies in the readers' understanding of their consciousness. The central focus of these illustrations is on Alice's body- Alice is present in most of the sketches, more than any other character. Moreover, while the creatures belonging to these fantastical lands are visually caricatured, Alice's image is constructed in accordance with Victorian ideals of desirability. At the same time, the depiction of Alice with the elongated neck flouts these ideals, creating a complex subject.

Carroll's representation of Alice, a pre-pubescent girl child, in these two novels has been the source of great critical interest, and critics have attempted to explore the nature of Carroll's admiration for Alice Liddell. Biographical accounts of Carroll's letters and photographs that he took of young girls suggest that his interest in these girls bordered on the sexual. His affection for Liddell was especially strong. Even though there are no accounts of actual sexual activity to support these claims, critics have recognized a complexity in the construction of the figure of Alice in the books: there is a simultaneous celebration of her innocence and eroticization of her person.

Kincaid begins his book by stating that childhood in the Victorian period was a social construct created through a vocabulary of opposition, the “other” of the adult. One of the primary ways in which this opposition was sustained was on the basis of sexuality, and the defining characteristic of childhood was an absence of sexual desire, which was naturalized as innocence and purity. Armstrong had claimed that one of the main reasons behind a conscious absence of the body from the domestic novel was the threat it posed due to its sexual potential. The child’s body thus, existing in a pre-sexual stage, was less potentially dangerous through its presence, as was the desire it aroused. But such a view of the politics behind representation of the child’s body in Victorian literature has been countered post Freud’s analyses of infantile sexuality. Kincaid too, asserts that the relationship between the child’s body and desire was fraught with sexual tension. According to Kincaid, the “innocence” of the child was not an innate but an imposed quality only available to the children of a certain class. He cites William Acton and Henry Mayhew, two influential Victorian medical writers to highlight that the actual plight of young working class children would have made it impossible to retain what they call “that sense of delicacy and shame, which so long as they are preserved, are the chief safeguards of [their] innocence”. (Kincaid, 39) Acton’s concern, therefore, is to protect the children from exposure to corruptive sexual content, which challenges dominant Victorian perceptions of a child being completely devoid of sexuality. According to Knoepflmacher, the eroticism of the Victorian child stems from the pre-pubescent child being defined by qualities like softness and gentleness that are markers of a woman’s desirability. The innocent child is thus desirable within the Victorian sexual economy, and its presence within literature had the potential of arousing similar desire. The monstrosity associated with child-sexuality thus becomes a means of ensuring that such desires are never openly articulated, but find expression through unconventional means. “Foucault points out”, claims Kincaid, that “the agencies of power in the nineteenth century worked to reinforce the concept of regular, normal (adult heterosexual) sex by being increasingly silent about it, armoring it with the strength of an unspoken acceptance. What was spoken about incessantly (though not directly), were matters which had previously scarcely been noticed, among them, children’s sexuality...” (Kincaid, 22) These articulations sometimes took the form of socio-legal documents, for instance the constant changes in the age of sexual consent, which was raised from 10 to 16 between the years 1861 and 1885,² exposes the anxiety that the child’s body caused.

That the children’s novel was also one such mode of articulation can be seen through an analysis of the depiction of Alice, whose anatomy is made the center of visual as well as linguistic focus. The poems which frame the stories focus on parts of Alice’s body, and help in establishing definitive characteristics. For instance, Carroll describes Alice as having “little arms” and “gentle hand” in the prefatory poem. Gentleness is one of the primary traits associated with childhood, and Carroll intertwines this aspect of Alice’s consciousness with her body.

The main cause of this anxiety in Carroll’s novels is Alice’s impending puberty, which was conventionally considered the period of transition from childhood to youth. Literary criticism of the Alice books has pointed towards Carroll’s writings as being attempts to recapture his own childhood. That the shy, stammering Charles Dodgson, the alter-ego behind the creator of the Alice books was most comfortable in the presence of children is a view held by most critics, and the exercises of writing these works of fantasy and clicking Liddell’s photographs are interpreted both as wish-fulfillment, and as an attempt to freeze Alice’s fleeting childhood through art. According to both Kincaid and Knoepflmacher, what makes the child figure desirable is a

freedom from an overt sexuality, the same quality which ensures the transience of this desire. The child is desirable by virtue of being untainted by adulthood, which the child is constantly moving towards. There is thus a sense of nostalgia and pathos in the Alice books, which is closely related to Alice's body. Her body is subject to change not only by the magic of Wonderland, but also through passage of time.

Exploring the gender-politics behind the construction of the child-protagonist, Knoepfmacher argues that a crucial difference between works by male and female writers is in their portrayal of the transition from childhood to adulthood. While women writers like Rossetti present the shift as harmonious, and the last stanzas of *Goblin Market* presents Lizzie and Laura as grown women content in their domesticity, Carroll displays an antipathy towards the adulthood he is trying to protect his subject from, and his helplessness in preserving her perfection is manifested in various ways. The hostility of many characters like the Hatter, the Caterpillar and Humpty-Dumpty reflects Carroll's own frustrations in being unable to arrest the passage of time: The Mad-Hatter's tea-party explores the possibility of existence free from constraints of time. Alice's meeting with Humpty-Dumpty-

'Seven years and six months!' Humpty-Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. 'An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you'd asked my advice, I would have said leave off at seven! But it's too late now.'...Alice felt even more indignant at this suggestion. 'One can't help getting older', she said. 'One can't, perhaps', but two can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven.'

(Carroll, 221)

-and his sinister reference to death as a means of arresting childhood indicates an intense anxiety about keeping the child's body intact.

Another interesting manifestation of this is the pathos generated by figures who attempt to wrench Alice away from the constraints of the real world but fail- the Gnat and the White Knight. The latter has often been seen as an alter-ego of Carroll. Their attempts to convince Alice to belong completely to their world of nonsense is never taken seriously by Alice, who is deeply rooted in the outside world to which she belongs. According to Kincaid, Alice's attractiveness lies in her ability to escape definition: there are childlike as well as grown up characteristics in her- "Alice remains so distant and desirable because she vacates the position of the child for us, and becomes the false child, the child who betrays by growing up....The erotics in *Looking Glass*, like *Wonderland*, depend on this fluid, shifting other" (Kincaid, 295) This is what seems to drive the nostalgic tone of the penultimate poem of *Through the Looking Glass*, where Carroll claims to be haunted by the memory of Alice, "phantomwise". Moreover, Carroll's love for Alice, Irwin argues, can never find fulfillment because indulging in it would destroy what was to him the most attractive quality- Alice's purity, which was already a transient quality in the light of her approaching puberty. This, he claims, is the reason behind the "series of narratives of inaccessibility and loss- which run through the books". (Irwin, 22) This signifies yet again, the importance of the child's body both in generating desire as well as frustrating it. The child of the "pure, unclouded brow" is doomed to change, and this change will occur through the body.

The child's body therefore, occupies a vital position within Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, which present the novelistic subject as being

inseparable from its corporeality. Such a discourse, belonging to a novelistic genre which was not considered as presenting as accurate a picture of Victorian society as the domestic novel nevertheless has the potential to challenge the dominant discourses relating to the body that were being propounded in the literature of the period which functioned on a systematic erasure of the body, and expose the politics underlying it.

Notes:

1. Quote taken from James R. Kincaid. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 64. Print.
2. Statistics taken from Kincaid, 70.

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