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‘The Magic Spell of Fantasy’: An Exploration into the Alternate Worlds in the Enchanting Spectrum of Children’s Literature

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Abstract:

The evocation of alternate worlds enables the heart of fantasy fiction to beat exuberantly in the entire corpus of Children’s literature. Its association with imagination and desire has made it a unique province which is deliberately deployed to encourage the readers to plunge into make-believe landscapes. These fantastic terrains have always gained more credibility by being located in far-flung areas of the world or entirely in new universe, where their existence is harder to refute. With a vast panorama of enchantment, these worlds hold the primary position among the mesmerizing factors of this genre. Meanwhile, these variant worlds are evoked not only to captivate and enthrall the young minds; but also, to inspire and to elevate the child towards the values of life; thereby the present paper aims to explore how alternate worlds act as a vital tool for shaping the future of society by delving into the creation of fantasy fictional realms.

Keywords: Fantasy, Expedition of Alternate worlds, Children’s literature, Fantasy worlds.

Written with a perfect case of expression, each world presents a world of fantasy, astonishment, unsaid apprehension with the undertone of instilling ethics of existence with ecstasy and escapade. By creating alternate worlds, the writers extol the virtue of standards and not the value of venality. In spite of being based on fantasy, these worlds touch on the universal element of human nature that is common both to adults and children.

Meanwhile, persist with the abundance of fantasy, these alternate worlds have sturdy impressions on child’s psyche and they validate to be influential in deciding the direction of their consciousness in the totality of human experiences. Such alternate worlds in fantasy fictions are, as in the words of Anderson in *Elementary Children’s Literature*, “... culturally formative and of massive importance educationally, intellectually and socially. Perhaps more than any other text, they reflect society as it wishes to be, as it wishes to be seen as it unconsciously reveals itself to be.” (47). The autonomy of fantasy assists the children to develop the resistance of horror or reality that is likely to fall in the later days of their lives.

Hence, fantasy and amusement in these alternate worlds help to restore a balance of human personality.

However, the children’s curiosity, their thirst for knowledge, their questioning and seeking mind knows no bounds. They are always eager to venture into the realm of the unknown. Their enquiring nature goes beyond certain corporeal occurrences. Most of these pursuits enable them to develop a better comprehension of their lives. And this association of children with mysterious provinces enables the trait of fantasy to be embedded in most of the literary works for children. While it is evident that children from the classical antiquity to the modern digital era are succumbed to the magic spell of fantasy due to their inquisitive nature of probing into the incomprehensible prefectures. However, these alternate worlds gained more currency in recent times, since they have been a grand feast to the starving minds of young generation, who are deprived from the closeness of family. And Bettelheim Bruno in his prominent *The Uses Of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* elucidates the present need for this genre of fantasy with alternate worlds:

Today children no longer grow up within the security of an extended family, or of a well-integrated community. Therefore, even more than at the times fairy tales were invented, it is important to provide the modern child with images of heroes who have to go out into the world all by themselves and who, although originally ignorant of the ultimate things, find secure places in the world by following their right way with deep inner confidence. (13)

Thus, such heroes in fantasy worlds facilitate the children to face the challenges of real world robustly. By engaging with these fantasy worlds, children will undergo an emotional growth, which will enable them to have better futures.

Beyond the fulfilment of emotional needs, these alternate worlds have wielded a great influence on the mental growth of a child. Psychologists such as Jerome L.Singer and Dorothy G.Singer recognize the value of fantasy worlds in *The House of Make-Believe*. According to them, children’s make-believe play, which includes the creation of imaginary worlds called ‘paracosms’, plays a crucial role in the cognitive and emotional growth of them. Furthermore, they affirm, “... fantasy play may actually enhance memory and the ability to contemplate impossible situations in the interests of logical thought” (237). Similarly, Jerome Bruner in his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, argues that the emotional growth is as significant as intellectual level of a child to deal with the outside world. And he asserts that the fantasy stories will edify the young minds on how to go beyond their selves and the actualities of their everyday reality, and discover all kinds of human possibilities.

Along with these psychologists, Bettelheim Bruno declares in his *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* that the traditional fairy tales with the fantastic landscapes play a crucial role in the psychological development of a child. In accord with his views, reading these tales will enable the children to relieve from the unconscious pressures and foster their mind to confront the contradictory feelings and also assist them to make choices in diverse circumstances. Further he explicates:

In a child or an adolescent, the unconscious is a powerful determinant of behaviour. When the unconscious is repressed and its content denied entrance into awareness, then eventually the person's conscious mind will be partially overwhelmed by derivatives of these unconscious elements, or else he/she is forced to keep such rigid, compulsive control over them that their personality may become severely crippled. The importance of books and good literature gets authenticated as it creates the fictional world where the unconscious mind can release the fears and insecurities in the mind of children and adolescents.
(7)

Furthermore, he claims that apart from contributing to the personal growth of an integrated individual, these fantastic worlds, from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* to *Harry Potter* "... are not loved merely because they teach how to deal with good and bad mothers, sub- and superhuman helpers, personal wishes and fears inside the self, but because they show how to deal with weird and complicated worlds *outside*" (16).

The occurrence of fantasy in the alternate worlds serves two main purposes: on the one hand, it feeds the needs of a child both emotionally and intellectually; and on the other hand, it satisfies the wishes of a creator by giving lives to their dreams. Thus, these fantasy worlds have a strong psychological basis for a creator, where he/she can make a rummage around for a safer outlet for undesirable fervours that often lead to perversity or incomprehensive realization of human sensibility. Perhaps, the caprice for a dreamland seems to be deeply entrenched in the nature of a human mind. For instance, Margaret Cavendish vehemently unveils the depth of such desire, while writing about her *Blazing World*:

I have neither power, time, nor occasion to conquer the world as Alexander and Caesar did; yet rather than not to be mistress of one, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made a World of my own: for which nobody, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every ones power to do the like.
(11)

Invariably, this fancy of creating a world on its own presents itself the vision of making life better and achieves the optimum out of the limited resources and capabilities.

Meanwhile, fantasy and desire embraced each other. Desire has its origin in the experience of satisfaction. As Sigmund Freud analysed in his illustrious essay "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming", "We may lay it down that a happy person never fantasizes, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of fantasizes are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality." (38). Additionally, in this seminal essay, he expounds the source and inspiration of a creative writer, to sketch his imaginary world, by relating with the playing activity of a child in his own imaginary world. He finely spells out:

... every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? ... The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He

creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality. (36)

He further finds the psychological reason for the realm of fantasy in the sphere of creativity in his another influential "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning". In this essay, he distinguishes two principles of mental functioning as pleasure principle and reality principle, in which the former looks for continual enjoyment and gratification and also seeks to maximize the pleasure, as the highest human value, while the later forms as a psychic representative of the resistance on the part of the world to pleasure seeking. He strongly believes that the unrelenting conflict between the pleasure and reality principles forms the basis for the human mind to create a space of stress-free, in which pleasurable wishes are not subject to the testing of reality. And he strongly affirms that this space paved way for the realm of fantasy or pure imagination, which includes a child's play, dreams, day-dreaming, fictions and especially literary or artistic creativity.

While Freud analyses the creation of fictional realm, J.R.R.Tolkien, the Father of modern fantasy, denotes the making of fantasy world in his "On Fairy Stories", as "... the human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present."(46). To describe an artist's talent for shaping the image into an external form, which is perceptible by others, he uses the term 'fantasy', as to imply the "... power of giving to ideal creations, the inner consistency of reality." (46). Thus, he is one of the prominent critics to articulate the importance of making the alternate world which he has been termed as 'secondary world'.

However, the uniqueness of creating alternate world is the liberty for the creator from the restricting postulations of the real world. Predominantly governed by magic rules, the entire settings and places are remarkably varied from the factual world. Habitually, stories set in such imaginary worlds provide bizarre and exotic feeling to the readers, which are seldom populated with inventive creatures like unicorns, elves, giants and goblins. But the goal of the writer is not to convince the readers that there are ogres or elves in another world, but to lead the human race to the better comprehension of real world, by citing the struggles of the alternate world.

Thus, in the context of an alternate world, the author triumphs, not only in his chore of captivating the mind of the readers but also in his intention of exploring a world with enhanced comprehension of moral values to the rising generation. While examining the necessitating factors for the conception of these worlds, Eric S.Rabkin in his *The Fantastic in Literature* finds:

... although the dictionary may define the fantastic as 'not real or based on reality', the fantastic is important precisely because it is wholly dependent on reality for its existence.... But this is reality nonetheless, a fantastic narrative reality that speaks the truth of the human heart. (28)

If such 'realities of human heart' are devalued, then the writer looks for the alternate world, where these realities may be restructured with credibility and human values. Akin to this

view, John H. Timmerman firmly asserts the reason for creating an alternate world in his *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre* by comparing with the concluding lines of William Butler Yeats's poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion":

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart. (33-35)

And Timmerman evaluates, "I believe the author of fantasy is attempting to construct just such ladder. When values seem fractured, one must begin with new structure; perhaps even the creation of a whole new world." (50-51). While accomplishing the task of structuring the society, the writer facilitates the readers to structure their minds, by inducting the choice of 'good' and 'bad' values of life in those alternate worlds, perhaps which features the main rationale of children's literary canon.

However, an examination of the roots of the early conception of alternate worlds clearly exhibits the same notion of structuring the society, which has started its expedition from ancient religious myths and legends. Insinuations of 'Heaven' and 'Hell' in Hindu and Christian mythology, 'Olympus' in Greek mythology and 'Valhalla' in Norse mythology clearly accentuate the presumption of such worlds. References to these worlds clearly indicate that the perception of these worlds is quite familiar to the human populace since olden days with the focus on imbibing values of life. Similar concept is highlighted in 'Karma theory' of Hindu mythology. The older Vedic notion of 'heaven' and 'hell' is simply folded into the newer Upanishadic idea of rebirth to assert the underlying motive of shaping the minds towards righteousness. To encapsulate these views, Wendy Doniger avers in *On Hinduism*, "The first and most basic meaning of karma is action... which begins to be operative in the Upanishads, is morally charged action, good or bad, a meter that is always running, that is constantly charging something to one's account."(72)

Almost every culture had some sort of next world or afterlife destinations such as Hades, the Elysian Fields, the Fortunate Isles, Adivun, Hawaiki and Xibalba, all of which were thought of exist somewhere in unknown parts of the world or beyond the horizon of reality. Perhaps, all these worlds exhibit certain disparity in accord with their respective society, in which they conceived. Therefore, all myths combined to create a fantastic vision of the world, either pictorial or discursive and these philosophic-religious variant worlds are the treatise on the ideal states and stories about imaginary havens, where the indispensable ethics of an optimum humanity expounded.

While these worlds existed in the myths as other worlds, in literature it has started to subsist with the insight of utopian milieu, which can be traced in the classical antiquity of many noteworthy master pieces, pioneered by Plato's *The Republic*. This is avidly observed by Mark J.P. Wolf in his *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*:

The Kallipolis, the ideal city of Plato's *Republic* is a secondary world used as a philosophical thought experiment, a world in which the foundation and parameters of a human society are reset... Plato's city is perhaps the first imaginary world whose societal structure was given serious consideration and

described in detail. It is also among the earliest secondary worlds created for reasons beyond that of providing a backdrop for a story, and thus is more of interest in and of itself as a world. (27)

Subsequently, the notion of imaginary world is being utilised for satire as well. For instance, in Theopompos's *Philippica*, the 'island of Meropis' is a parody of Plato's *Atlantis*, where everything was exaggerated such as the continent's dimension and the size of the people, beyond Plato's claims for his continent. Another make-believe world created for comic effect is Aristophanes's city of 'Nephelokokkygia' or 'Cloudcuckooland' in his comedy *The Birds*. By the end of classical antiquity, secondary worlds had appeared in several of the literary modes such as in tales, histories, satires, thought experiments like utopias and dystopias and the description of proposed made-up landscapes.

The early Middle Ages pursued the formation of secondary worlds like St. Augustine's *City of God*, where he described a utopia not to be found on the real world and centuries later Dante envisioned heaven, purgatory and hell in his *Divine Comedy*. Later fictional fantastic islands emerged in literature like Brissonte and Polyglot in *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* in eighth century and the desert islands which provided the settings for Ibn Tufail's *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan* and Ibn al-Nafis's *Al-Risalah al-Kamiliyah fil Siera al-Nabawiyyah* in eleventh century. Another notable work in the fourteenth century *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *Arabian Nights*) contains stories which include an underwater society of 'City of Brass', and travel to other worlds. And in the sphere of hilarity, the secondary worlds continue to exist as in *Aucassin et Nicolette* (anonymously authored), in the late thirteenth century, which featured the kingdom of Torelore, where the king is pregnant and the Queen leads the troops.

However, the list of fabricated worlds is ensued by distinguished territories of imagination with the concept of utopia, where the writer envisages a 'better world' through a 'better society'. Despite of the fact that, the term 'utopia' was coined by Thomas Moore for his work *Utopia* in 1516, where he sets out for an ideal society, there also existed a few notable fictitious regions before the influx of his utopian insight. And such provinces include the island paradise of Panchaea in Euhemerus's *Sacred History*, Datong in *Chinese Classic Rites*, *Tao hua Yuan (The Beach Blossom Spring)* of Tao Yuanming, which describes a beautiful secluded community not affected by the rest of the world. Consequently, there grew a long array of literary utopias with the rich tradition of imagining the best society through alternate worlds. These utopias came to denote the manifesto for ideal societies, choice of values and constitutions that dispensed with the fictional apparatus altogether.

As the prospect of a better society always lies ahead, it is quite evident that the craving for dreamland is not only universal but also perennial as it has featured in many of the master pieces in the mainstream of literature. Thus, the yearning for utopia or alternate world is embedded everywhere, as Oscar Wilde puts it eloquently in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, with his typical wit and elegance:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (28)

However, along with utopia, the desire for alternate world has also spawned other concepts such as ‘dystopia’ where the society is exposed and headed to an irrevocable oblivion, ‘ecological utopia’ in which a utopian society is envisaged with perfect harmony to nature, ‘economic utopia’ where the writer aims for utopian idealism with commercialism and capitalism and ‘scientific utopia’ in which advanced science and technology will allow utopian living standards such as the absence of death and the artificial means of reproduction.

The insinuations of these wide-ranging utopias have alluded to several literary works such as Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Gilman’s *Herland*, Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Jack Vance’s *Rumfuddle*, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, William Morris’s *News From Nowhere*, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* and Bradley’s *The Ruins of Isis*. These imaginary worlds explore the assumption that by gaining control over nature and finding the appropriate arrangement of individuals, one can achieve a harmonious ordering of society. Furthermore, Ratnakar D. Bhelkar in *Science Fiction: Fantasy and Reality* succinctly puts:

The classical motivation of utopia is to present it as a promising prospect of an achieved order of perfection which is superior to the existing order. Thomas Moore, Bacon, Morris, Wells and Samuel Butler, are all prophets who combine, in their sensibility, moral realism and lyric affirmation, radical thought and active reform, organic vision and vital optimism.

(13-14)

Every alternate society or world is bound to replicate the stage outlook of its particular world as well as its fixation with existing social tribulations. Great utopia astounds and yet is recognized as conceivable. It is not a sluggish vision but it satisfies a hunger or stimulates the mind and the body to the recognition of a new potentiality. Undeniably, the use of imaginary milieu is as varies as the number of authors creating them. While in the genres of fantasy fiction and science fiction, the imaginary province has elevated itself by totally detached from the known world and has dwelled in an entirely new universe. In science fiction, the alternate world is exhibited into two ways. On the one hand, it is predicated upon another world with imprecisely recognizable scientific trappings such as interstellar travel, technological mechanisms like robots, lasers and computers. And on the other hand, it is envisaged upon existing world with the projected foreseen events or time spans.

However, alternate world in fantasy fiction is not contemplated upon the real world, as C.N. Manlove in his *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* has argued that, while science fiction is a projection of the existing world, in fantasy fiction it is juxtaposed to the real world. He also labels fantasy world as a ‘diametric reversal’. And claims, “...the fantasy world must be an internally consistent, but wholly other world.” (50). While observing the significant traits of

the fantasy world, John H. Timmerman in his *Other Worlds: the Fantasy Genre* vividly expounds:

First, the world matches our world in reality. It is not a dream world, a never-never land, but a world in which characters confront the same terms, choices and dilemmas we confront in our world... Second, this world is 'evoked', or called forth for us, and we have to cross the threshold to it in our minds... Third, the world of fantasy, however, should not be considered an escapist world, but a world in which we live. There is always this reciprocating action in fantasy, an inter-change between two worlds. (49-50)

Besides, the knowledge of real world is necessary to invent or comprehend the imaginary alternate world. Because of its relationship with reality, alternate worlds must be necessarily related to and comment on factual world. Altogether, 'fantasy' in the alternate worlds cannot be claimed as 'unreal'. Rather Ursula Le Guin clearly pronounces the real dimension of fantasy in her *The Language of Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science fiction*:

Fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too... They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phoney, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. (40).

Furthermore, she affirms that fantasy is a different approach to reality and it is an alternative technique for apprehending the existence. "It is not anti-rational, but para-rational; not realistic, but surrealistic, super-realistic; a heightening of reality." (79).

Yet another prominent writer, Kathryn Hume defines fantasy in her *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* as "... the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal" (xii). She asserts that fantasy relies on factual world from where the fantasy writers derive and manipulate sources. She proposes that fantasy is the desire to alter reality from its monotonous tone. Moreover, she adds, "Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations." (21). Here, the term 'consensus' refers to both the world of the writer and the reader and the 'consensus reality' refers the reality which is accepted by the inhabitants of the primary world.

Furthermore, John H. Timmerman, through his *Other Worlds: Fantasy Genre*, firmly emphasizes that fantasy "... offers a parallel reality, which gives us a renewed awareness of what we already know." (2). He also views that the world of fantasy is created and purposefully evoked for the human beings to apprehend the known world in new perspectives:

... (fantasy) world matches our world in reality. It is not a dream world, a never – never land, but a world in which characters confront the same terms, choices and dilemmas we confront in our world... the world of fantasy, however, should not be considered an escapist world, but a world in which we

live. There is always this reciprocating action in fantasy, an inter-change between two worlds. (49-50)

Moreover, Ann Swinfen, in her *In Defence of Fantasy: A study of Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945*, approaches fantasy in accord with the primary and secondary worlds. She writes, "... fantasy located entirely in the primary world. The secondary world ... still maintains close contact with normal experience in the real world." (24). The world of fantasy is perhaps designed from the actual world. It does not copy empirical world; conceivably based on this existing world, it creates a world which follows its own rules and laws. Though it deals with a different world which does not exist in pragmatic sense, it finds its root in the existent world.

While Timmerman concentrates on 'other world', Kathryn Hume and Ann Swinfen, on the association between primary and secondary worlds, to prove the existence of reality in fantasy, J.R.R.Tolkien in his seminal essay "On Fairy Stories" attempts to establish the same by emphasising that, fantasy is not opposed to reason:

It (fantasy) certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, or obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary, the keener and clearer is reason, the better fantasy will it make... for creative fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; as a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. (50)

The fantasy world relieves the readers from their daily monotonous life by offering a pleasant and unfeasible world. But reading fantasy is not to be considered as an escape, rather as Deborah O'Keefe declares in his *Readers In Wonderland* is a "... liberation into something, into openness and possibility and coherence. All fiction blatantly or subtly conveys its author's values, but with fantasy everything is hypothetical, subject to examination."(11). And he adds, "Readers get perspective on their own worlds by exploring a strange fictional place. The world of fantasy fiction doesn't pretend to be a real reality... The fantasy world is just there, to understand, to love – to enter." (12).Such is the enchanting thrill of the fantasy world, which is enjoyed and experienced by the reader from the primitive time to the recent digital era.

Fantasy thus widens both the mind and the heart by suggesting many choices and varied perspectives of life. It poses many queries and nudging the readers toward a new openness.

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