

BOOK REVIEW

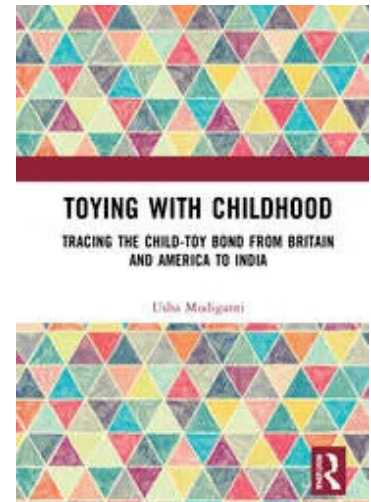
Toying with Childhood: Tracing the Child Toy Bond from Britain and America to India by Usha Mudiganti



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Usha Mudiganti's **'Toying With Childhood'** is a descriptive, engaging and interdisciplinary exploration of the cultural construction of childhood, essayed in particular through the toy-child bond. The author conducts her analysis through a layered review of historical literature as products of spatial, cognitive, familial and religious intersections as she examines the objectification of childhood. Childhood has been constituted within transnational and comparative paradigms, as norms and notions. My review of this work shall be penned as a summarized analysis of each chapter, with the hope that I am able to do justice to this reflexive and theoretically posited account. I also enjoy the lucid, almost conversational presentation of text in particular, which is accompanied by inquisitive titles. Opening with an introspection on the socio-cultural construction of childhood in reference to the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, Mudiganti draws our attention to the spatial, social and relational inequities emerging from a globally enforced quarantine. She opines that it is all the more necessary to analyze the cultural construction of childhood when childcare workers are trying to comprehend the longitudinal repercussions of these changes.



CONTENT, INTROSPECTION AND ANALYSIS

In Chapter 1 (Introduction), the author argues that the reductive structuring of childhood as a formative period simplifies its complexities, resulting in its fictionalization that provides adults the power to construct childhood. This construction is essayed through the propensity of 'notions', that later become norms by gaining acceptance and currency within society. The changing imagery associated with childhood is historically contextualized and culturally specific. The 'civilizing' process is concurrent with the performance of norms, which are disseminated through fiction, poetry, songs and toys. This dissemination propagates a sense of an homogenized ideal, that institutions collectively aim to cultivate and replicate. This means that while every stage of childhood is evaluated through normative metrics, every child is also trained to attain this ideal. Employing Chris Jenks's conflation of the social and the natural, the author opines that the belief in the uniformity of childhood experiences across cultures constructs the myth of the universally ideal childhood and child.

From the 19th century onwards, the bond between a child and their toys has been centralized. The author wishes to deconstruct how the fictional depictions of this bond in 19th century Britain conflated ideals of boyhood and girlhood in 20th century India. With the transfer of power from the East India Company to the

British crown, one could observe a heightened dissemination of 19th-century British notions of conduct. At the height of the Industrial Revolution, familial economic structures became highly segregated and thus, the 'home' was structured by feminine docility as a space of 'innocence'; a longing for which was narrativized through Victorian literature. This 'cult of domesticity' also emphasized emerging roles for children, as essayed in 19th century British society. The presence of children within the workspace was altered as child labor reduced drastically in the latter half of the 19th century. I believe that it is important to bring into focus the author's review of the characterization of Victorian 'innocence', confined within the barriers of law and religion. The child was a pristine, asexual being; representative of the 'purity' lost by mankind after banishment from the Garden of Eden. This definition shall become important in our analysis of succeeding chapters.

In Chapter 2 (**Constructing Childhood**), the author integrates the work of Philippe Aries who attests the periodic isolation of childhood as a way of familiarizing children with socialization and the critiques of deMause. A common consensus is that it was only after the middle of the 17th century that there were some recorded instances of empathy towards experiences of childhood. Daniel T Kline has criticized 'the Aries effect' and opines that the paradigm rejects the inclusion of childhood in Middle English texts.

There exists a *dichotomy* between the romanticization of childhood in 19th century literature as opposed to the enormous quantity of children joining the workforce during the Industrial Revolution. Thus, the subject of child labor became one that necessitated agitation, elaborated through legislation ensuring the providence of education for children of all classes. While these measures protected children, it conversely led to their objectification within the household as they became economic dependents. This objectification is pertinently internalized, as evidenced by David Gryll's view of the treatment of childhood as historically abominable and Durkheim's etymological deconstruction of the word 'infant'; the child does not yet exist until molded into the adult, when existence is socially legitimized. What becomes important to this discourse is how Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development deconstructed the view of the child as a reified asexual entity, transitioning to the recognition of the same as a developmental stage. Employing the psychoanalytic method, Freud drew a connection between childhood and adulthood through the interpretation of dreams, rooting behavioural responses in suppressed sexual instincts. His youngest daughter Anna Freud distinguished between adult and 'infantile' cognition by elaborating on the distinctive separation of the inner and outer worlds within adults. The chapter closes with a review of the post-analytical paradigm in the discourse associated with childhood, including the work of Hermine Hug-Hellmuth, Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott among others.

In Chapter 3 (**Saving the child**) and 4 (**The child and toy bond**), the author approaches the fictional, literary and social conflation of the 'toy' with the child, tackling three works of literature in the late 19th century to explore the repercussions of the reification elaborated above. Though the myth of innocence is recognized to be one, it is created and perpetuated to act as a mechanism of social control. The child is 'saved' through its characterization as innately innocent as it retains its role within the family. Ideals of childhood were narrativized as experiences came to be homogenized as one of the primary roles of children became to emotionally contribute to the family's contentment. Though the role of the Victorian woman was perceived as ornamental, one of their primary duties was to socialize children towards gendered roles, as established in the work of Carol Dyhouse. The daughter in particular became a miniature replica of their diminutive and sheltered mothers, with much literature being focused on the conduct of girls and young women. The poem '*The Angel in the House*' by Coventry Patmore allegorized this idealism and the phrase 'angels of the house' came to be embedded within the ideals of childhood.

These ideals of femininity and masculinity developed into established gender roles, elaborated by the author's intricate exploration of literary and fictional depictions of femininity. Once again, the work of Freud is brought into discussion with reference to psychoanalytic treatments of feminine maladies and the scientific demonstration of the patriarchal construction of femininity. '*What Maise Knew*' by Henry James and the works of Charles Dickens are referenced in specificity.

We are introduced to the development of children and childhood literature in specific detail within chapter 4. A major portion of children's literature in 18th century America was constructed around their perceived spiritual proximity as the child was objectified through its pedestalization. Gradually, 'otherness' in relation to children's literature was structured on the notion that children were '*special creatures*'. Prescriptive literature dominated the market, ranging from books on etiquettes to encyclopedias. However, the author also explores the development of the ways in which fiction aimed at children evolved, with child protagonists braving the adult world through ingenious ways. A common theme among these stories was the usage of the toy as a central prop to socialize children into culturally acceptable behavior, with the doll in particular employed to awaken sensitivity within these fictional children, as in Gertrude's Child.

Stories that subtly aimed to 'civilize' children earned approval from parents while the prospect of child protagonists getting away with harmless mischief enamored younger readers. The toy-child continuum is perpetuated through literature and the toy is dualized as both the transition object and the projection of a self in many narratives of childhood.

Chapter 5 (**Resonances and Repercussions**) focuses upon the repercussions of the reification of childhood (elaborated through the cultural construction of childhood by the toy-child bond) and the ways in which these repercussions intersected within English Indian literature. Both World Wars led to the re-examination of domestic space as children had to rapidly adapt to conditions. A theme that became apparent in literature was the loss of innocent childhood, illustrated by the author through her voracious recount of literature. The author then examines childhood experiences in India and the work done to ensure children possess the right to dignity of life.

Formal education in India had been structured by colonial intent as R.K.Narayan captured the experiences of Indian middle-class boyhood in a colonized state in *Swami and Friends* (1935). Meanwhile, Ruby Lal's work allows one to explore intersecting expectations of good conduct for young women and its literary proliferation.