

Kindness of the White and Happiness of the Black: a Brief Analysis of the 19th Century White American Children's Literature

Mukulika Dattagupta¹

Anti-slavery feelings in the United States of America were present before and during the 1820s. However, these remained unorganized and unharnessed. There were anti-slavery societies established here and there all over the nation. The New York City Manumission Society (1785) and Pennsylvania Abolition society (1789) were some such societies. The American Colonization Society (1817) was the first national society established with the same concern. In the year 1831, William Loyd Garrison started the publication of a newspaper called 'The Liberator' from Massachusetts, to address the issue of anti-slavery. In 1832 he established the New England Anti-Slavery Society. With this the anti-slavery movement in the United States of America seems to take a concretized form. Arthur and Lewis Tappan from New York joined him to form the American Anti-Slavery Society. This organization was successful to a greater extent and strengthened the anti-slavery feelings in the nation. The above picture of the anti-slavery movement in America apparently seems to be very impressive, but it has other interesting aspects too.

We know that as per Christian doctrines all human beings are created by the God. Thus, making other human beings slaves was against the Christian ethics. So it was very important to strip the slaves of their human identity and to negate the idea of slaves as human beings with a soul. This made it possible for the white masters to remain good and faithful Christians while enjoying the liberty of owning slaves. The idea of heaven was something for a slave to look forward to. The slaves were made to believe that whatever they had failed to achieve in this life would be theirs in heaven. This bait of reward for the slaves in heaven was a very useful one. (Broderick 11)

¹Guest Faculty at the Centre for Studies in African Literatures and Cultures, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and also pursuing PhD from the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata and currently working as a youth volunteer, Youth Radio Reporter Project, UNICEF.

The American story books for white children began to add a moral flavour with slavery. In these stories the comparison between good and bad master became prominent. These story books mainly tried to establish the fact that the slave of the good master is happy whereas, the slave of the bad master is unhappy. Though these stories advocated a kind treatment of slaves by their white masters, they never spoke of the issue of freedom as such. Though there was an inherent anti-slavery note, in reality, it was all about the kind treatment of slaves. These moral lessons were obviously for the white masters and their children, so that slavery could be affirmed in the name of kindness and mercy. The norms which get affirmed among today's children will shape up the future of the society. Children learn from their books, be that in school or outside school. They also learn a lot from the adults around them. Thus children become a target audience for the literature produced by the dominant group of the society and in this case it was the white American. This source of children's literature in the United States of America was not only shaping up the white children but after the abolition of slavery it was also influencing black children. After the abolition of slavery in schools and in other sources of children's literature black children were unable to see themselves under a different light but inferior one. The books were still not about them. We will have a look into this issue too as we proceed.

Samuel Griswold Goodrich (1793-1860) was one of the American authors who tried to challenge the European aspects present in American literature and to infuse an American flavour into it. He was well known as Peter Parley, which was his pseudonym. In 1827 he published *Tales of Peter Parley about America*. It was one of the earliest texts to discuss the moral aspect of slavery. In his work he has drawn a comparison between how the Indians live in Boston and how the whites live in Boston. He had called the Indians ignorant people completely unaware of the comforts and curtsies of the white community in Boston. He had also portrayed the picture of his father as a kind white man, who thus had the friendship and loyalty of the Indians. (Parley/Goodrich 11-12). Throughout his book we encounter moral lessons for the white American children regarding their behaviour towards other races.

Many years later in 1882 Louise Clarke Pynelle (1850-1907) published a book entitled *Diddie Dumps and Tot*. In his work Pynelle, who was another 'liberal', considers blacks as a lazy lot of people. He makes it very clear in his book that though God had big plans for them (Blacks) but denied them all of that because they were a lazy lot. He reaffirms

the concept that God has appointed the white man to carry the burden of the black man. The inherent message in this book is that black man can never match the white man. The myth of getting appointed from the God easily justified the Christian doctrines. This myth also has an inherent encouragement for the white master to continue his task as the task of the God.

To establish its authority, the dominant group has to create myths about the dominated one. Myth comes into existence with only one objective and that is to overshadow the TRUTH. With a continuous practice myth establishes itself as the fact. In the world of myth there is no space for questioning. To enter into the world of myth, one has just to believe without any doubt or question. Myth uses our day-to-day language as its foundation. We know that it is a signifier and a signified that gives birth to a sign. This is how language functions in our day-to-day speech. In case of myth sign changes itself into a signifier to give rise to a new sign, which can be referred to as the mythic sign. It is due to the effect of this new mythic sign that we fail to identify the original signifier. Myth dilutes the density of the original signifier. (Bandyopadhyay 6) Myth is thus one of the primary tools used by the dominant authority to affirm its dominance on the dominated group. We know that society is always changing. Myth also keeps on changing its appearance to cope up with the social changes as per the requirement of the dominant authority.

Slavery did not go out of operation even when it became illegal in the United States of America. Paul DuChaillu (1831-1903) was a French American traveller. During the 1850s he travelled within the African continent for hunting adventures. He later on recorded his experiences in a book entitled *Stories of the Gorilla Country* (1868). In his work he had mentioned that he had the opportunity to watch a ship getting loaded with slaves. He records his sentiments at this point as follows, "I actually felt ashamed of being a white man!" (DuChaillu 23)

Though the title of his book sound a bit controversial, as also some of his descriptions of the continent, from the above remark it is very clear that anti-slavery feelings were becoming stronger with time. In his work he has also recorded how the African slave suppliers helped the white slave traders with the slaves. He has mentioned that community heads in Africa especially in the coastal regions were the major suppliers of slaves. They themselves had slaves for their own services. He talks about such a supplier named King

Bango. He does not portray him as a very pleasant personality. According to him there were slave depots in several territories in the area. (DuChaillu 112)

African slaves were mainly the victims of the internal warfare within the communities of the continent. The white slave traders cast the spell of the material comforts and benefits on the slave suppliers. Under this spell they never knew how the slaves and the slave suppliers were dehumanized in the United States of America, as the news from the other side of the Atlantic never reached them. We for sure have to keep this fact in mind before condemning the Africans responsible for the slavery of their fellow men and women.

It is interesting to note that in early American children's literature, the history of the origin of the slaves seemed to be completely missing. It was very much like the presence of the slaves in America from the very beginning. It was as if blacks were born on the American soil to serve the whites as their slaves. We have already discussed the aspect of morality attached with slavery, which resulted in the idea of the kind master and the happy slave. In white American children's literature this trend remained strong till the end of the century. A happy slave had a few fundamental characteristics:

“they were more than resigned to their positions; they accepted it without complaint, with good grace and enthusiasm. ...They were dumb, but loyal, grateful to their masters for providing for them, and proud to belong to a man of quality.” (Broderick 27)

We get one such image in Thomson Nelson Page's (1853-1922) *Two Little Confederates*, published in 1888. Though the slave, Old Balla does not appear to be a fool. Books like this portray the pride of the slave in the financial worth of his/her respective master. For the white readers this was a funny and foolish aspect of the slave. We get another such foolish but happy slave in the portrayal of Aunt Chloe in *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867) by Martha Finley (1828-1909). How far this loyalty and happiness of the slave towards the white master was due to the kindness of the white master, and how far, due to the fear of the Ku Klax Klan could be a matter of further debate.

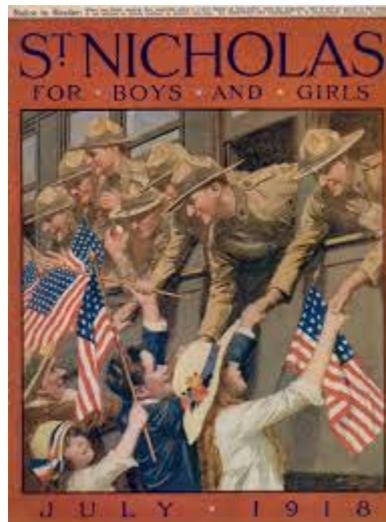
John Townsend Trowbridge (1827-1916) was a popular American author. His first novel was *Neighbor Jackwood* (1857). Then he published *Cudjo's Cave* in 1864. This work

talks about a runaway slave named Cudjo. No doubt that Cudjo's white master was not at all a kind master. On the other hand we also get another black slave with a happy master. He is called Pomp. Pomp was happy because his white master was kind. Trowbridge was a northerner and was well known as a 'liberal', but in his work too there is very little about the freedom of the slave. He seems to harp more on the moral issue of the white masters. He urges them strongly to show mercy and have kindness towards their black slaves.

When the issue of abolition of slavery in the United States of America was at its peak it was necessary for the dominating white community to create the mythic sign of the happy slave. The slave who needed the supervision of the white man for his/ her salvation during the early stages of slavery in the United States of America were now projected as happy under the supervision of a kind white master. So the myth was that if the white master is kind his slaves are ought to be happy. Even in the texts which were published after the abolition, the dominant white America constructed the myth that the African Americans need the mercy and kindness of their white counter parts to lead their lives happily. To answer the question why African Americans need the kindness of their white counterparts even after the abolition of slavery, the dominant white created the myth of African American being innocent and stupid. For the dominating white America blacks were like children, who were unable to take care of themselves, unable to protect themselves and also were unable to make their own decisions. That was the reason there were images where white children were depicted to be more mature than a black adult. In all its forms the myth of the white dominant has functioned to affirm its dominance over the dominated black. Myth keeps on harping on the superiority of the dominant group and the inferiority of the dominated one. In the world of myth the belief of the dominant authority poses itself as the social belief. It negates the existence of any other ideology or belief of any other group.

Scribner's magazine *St. Nicholas* began its journey under the editorship of Mary Mapes Dodge (1831-1905). It was a very popular American children's magazine. Well-known authors like Joel Harris Chandler, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling and many others have written for this magazine. This magazine too maintained the rift between the black and the white by retaining the stereotypicalities attached with the people of two colours. Throughout the magazine, whenever a black person has appeared, he/she has always appeared as a stupid, dumb, foolish and thus, incapable of taking care of themselves. In this

way their slavery gets justified. In some of its stories, white children are shown to be kind enough to take care of an old black slave. Also, the blacks in the stories published here seemed to be very happy and satisfied with their good luck for getting a kind white master. Not only in its language but also in its illustrations, it made very clear that America is the land of the whites. In many cases the magazine even considered blacks as uneducable people. Even long after the abolition of slavery the magazine continued to retain the stereotypical aspect of the two races.

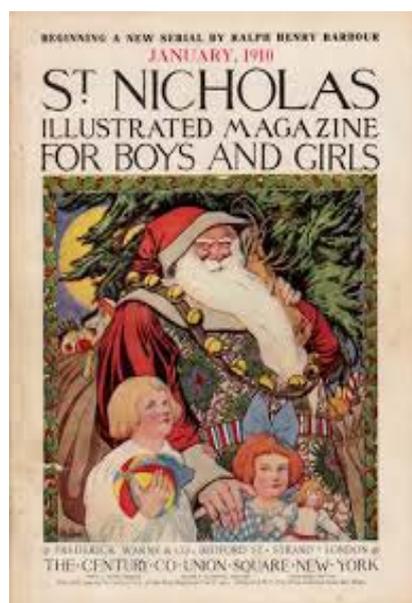


Above us we can see the cover page of the issue of July, 1918 of the same magazine. It has only white faces. Children waving the soldiers are white and also the soldiers. The inherent message of this illustration is that all the American nationals are whites and the protector of the nation are also whites. So, there is no place for people of any other colour.





Above are the cover pages of the issues of August 1919 and May 1918 of the same magazine and we can see the portrayal of a young white boy and girl. Black children can never see themselves on the pages of this magazine. Children always want to see their own images within the books they read. In case of this magazine only white children of America are able to identify themselves on its pages. At the same time they get the message that it is an all-white world. Also it tells the white child that it is the kingfish in the pond. In reality this reduces all the chances of developing humanity to respect the diversity among children. These contains gentle doses of racism for the white children of America. (Larrick 1)



Again, on the cover page of the issue of January, 1910, we see a white Santa Claus with only white children. Though at the very beginning of the first issue of this magazine, the editor refers to St. Nicholas as the own dear saint of all the children, the cover page of this particular issue does not support that. We can see very clearly that there are only white children portrayed here. This again affirms the idea that America and Americans mean whites and only whites.

The above discussion depicts a very clear picture of the power equation that functions in between the dominant and the dominated group of people. It is the dominating authority, which imposes its own ideology on the society and gives it the name of the social ideology. This imposed ideology showcases the cultural practices and the moral values of the dominating group as the right one to be followed. Thus, not only the culture but also the language of the dominant emerges as the one and only refuge of the dominated group.

There is a power equation between the relation of a child and an adult. It is the same power equation which is present in between the dominated group and the dominant group. The adult always seem to enjoy a dominant position and poses as the superior one. Thus in this case the adult creates the image of the child as the inferior one and promotes it in its ideology. As the child is unable to protect itself so the adult always takes the responsibility to protect the child. The adult trains the child not to question but just to obey the authority. An obedient child gets the reward of recognition from the adult whereas, a child who dares to differ and question gets punishment which may amount to rejection also. Adult punishes the child posing as the well-wisher of it and showcases its responsibility towards the child as its guiding light.

The dominant white man in the United States of America has always acted as this adult who has to take care every responsibility of the black man. Though this attitude of white superiority was not only limited within the boundaries of the United States of America, but for the convenience of our analysis we have restricted ourselves up to it. Black is the child here who needs protection and guidance of the white man.

It is a very effective way to make people think how happy and lucky they are – and this is by making them look down upon others who are not happy or lucky to that extent. This makes us forget our miserable situation and delivers a sense of satisfaction within, which in turn soothes the grudge one holds against authority and against the present situation. Behind the happiness of these slaves was the hint of security provided by the ‘kind’ master, which can never be an alternative to freedom. The kindness of the white master can make the rebel runaway slave forget his/her urge to become free.

Works Cited:

- Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji. *Gopal-Rakhal Dwandiyasamas: Upaniveshavad o Bnagla Sishusahitya*. Kolkata: Papyrus, 1991. Print
- Bonte, Willard. "Magazine Cover.January 1910".----- . Online Image.www.stnicholascenter.org. 08/08/2016.
https://www.google.co.in/search?q=cover+pages+of+st.+nicholas+magazine&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=623&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwirl9egt7bOA_hXMsI8KHakWC2sQ_AUIBigB#imgrc=ZHL0Xlhz2tUBCM%3A
- . "Boy with fishing pole". ----. Online Image.www.best-norman-rockwell-art.com. 08/08/2016.
https://www.google.co.in/search?q=cover+pages+of+st.+nicholas+magazine&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=623&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwirl9egt7bOA_hXMsI8KHakWC2sQ_AUIBigB#imgrc=8qxu9AQ_h38eGM%3A
- Brodrick, Dorothy M. *Image of the Black in Children's Fiction*. New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1973. Print.
- . "Cover page of the May 1918 issue of the St. Nicholas Magazine". ----. Online Image.www.printerest.com. 08/08/2016.
https://www.google.co.in/search?q=cover+pages+of+st.+nicholas+magazine&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=623&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwirl9egt7bOA_hXMsI8KHakWC2sQ_AUIBigB#imgrc=JCsvqksY0SCQuM%3A
- Dodge, Mary Mapes, Ed. *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Vol. I. New York: Scribner and Co., Novemeber 1873 – November 1874. Hathi Trust. www.hathitrust.org. 12 January 2010.
- DuChaillu, Paul. *Stories of the Gorilla Country*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1871. Internet Archive.<https://archive.org/details/storiesgorillac00chaigoog>. 15 June, 2016.
- Finley, Martha. *Elsie Dinsmore*. ----,----. The Literature Network.
<http://www.online-literature.com/martha-finley/elsie-dinsmore/>. 01 July, 2016.

Goodrich, Samuel Griswold. *The Tales of Peter Parley about America*. Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait and Co., 1947. Internet Archive.<https://archive.org/details/talesofpeterparl1847good>. 25 July, 2016.

Larrck, Nancy. "The All-White World of Children's Books". *The All-White World of Children's Books and African-American Children's Literature*. Ed. OsayimwenseOsa. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1995. 1-12. Print.

OsayimwenseOsa, Ed. *The All-White World of Children's Books and African-American Children's Literature*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1995. Print.

Page, Thomas Nelson. *Two Little Confederates*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888. Internet Archive.<https://archive.org/details/twolittleconfede00page>. 13 July, 2016.

Pyrrnelle, Louise Clarke. *Diddie Dumps and Tot*. New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, ----. Internet Archive.<https://archive.org/details/diddiedumpstotorpyrn>. 10 June, 2016.

----. "St. Nichols-July 1918". ----. Online Image.www.freepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com. 08/08/2016.
https://www.google.co.in/search?q=cover+pages+of+st.+nicholas+magazine+july+1918&espv=2&biw=1366&bih=623&tbm=isch&imgil=AzUuf4P7mto1aM%253A%253BEb_CZ3L-L9WP8M%253Bhttp%25253A%25252F%25252Ffreepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com%25252F~worldwarone%25252FWWI%25252FHomeFront%25252FHomeFront.html&source=iu&pf=m&fir=AzUuf4P7mto1aM%253A%252CEb_CZ3L-L9WP8M%252C_&usg=__W8TUQzsSgZ9F7WoeEbA6eyeUNHk%3D&ved=0ahUKEwjIlo3rurbOAhVERo8KHQwuBQoQyjcILg&ei=wumqV8itG8SMvQSM3JRQ#imgrc=AzUuf4P7mto1aM%3A

Trowbridge, John Townsend. *Cudjo's Cave*. Boston: J.E.Tilton and Company, 1864. Internet Archive.<https://archive.org/details/cudjoscave00trowrich>. 01 August, 2016.