



Depictions of Childhood Hunger and Poverty in Pakistani Children's Literature: A Study of Marginalized Childhoods, Survival, and Social Hope

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature serves as an important cultural space where societies represent childhood experiences, social realities, and moral values. In Pakistan, children's narratives frequently reflect diverse social conditions, including economic inequality, poverty, limited access to resources, and the struggles of marginalized communities. This article explores the representation of childhood hunger and poverty in Pakistani children's literature, focusing on how narratives portray deprivation, survival strategies, family relationships, and possibilities of social hope. Drawing on the perspectives of childhood studies, food studies, and social justice approaches, the study examines how hunger functions not merely as a physical condition but also as a symbol of social inequality, emotional vulnerability, and unequal opportunities. Through qualitative textual analysis of selected Pakistani children's narratives, the article investigates the ways in which child characters experience poverty, negotiate hardship, and demonstrate resilience within challenging social environments. The study argues that Pakistani children's literature often presents marginalized children not only as victims of poverty but also as active agents capable of hope, creativity, and resistance. Furthermore, these narratives encourage young readers to develop empathy and awareness regarding issues of inequality, food insecurity, and social responsibility. The article contributes to the growing field of children's literature studies by highlighting the relationship between literary representation, childhood experiences, and broader social concerns in the Pakistani context.



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Introduction

Children's literature occupies a significant position in shaping understandings of childhood, society, and cultural identity. Traditionally, children's books have often been associated with imagination, entertainment, and moral instruction; however, contemporary children's literature increasingly addresses complex social realities such as poverty, displacement, inequality, environmental challenges, and social injustice. By representing children's

experiences within specific cultural and economic contexts, children's literature provides valuable insights into how societies understand childhood and social responsibility.

In Pakistan, childhood is experienced through diverse social realities shaped by economic differences, geographical conditions, cultural traditions, and unequal access to education, healthcare, and nutrition. While some children experience secure and privileged childhoods, many others face challenges related to poverty, food insecurity, child labor, and limited opportunities. These realities influence the production of children's narratives, where themes of hunger, deprivation, survival, and hope frequently emerge as important literary concerns.

The representation of hunger in children's literature extends beyond the absence of food. Hunger may symbolize broader forms of deprivation, including lack of education, emotional neglect, social exclusion, and unequal access to opportunities. Food, in contrast, often represents care, family connection, cultural identity, and community support. Therefore, examining representations of hunger and nourishment allows researchers to explore how children's literature engages with questions of inequality, dignity, and human relationships.

Pakistani children's literature provides a valuable space for examining these issues because it reflects the social and cultural complexities of Pakistani society. Narratives about economically disadvantaged children often reveal tensions between vulnerability and agency. Although child characters may experience poverty and hardship, they are frequently portrayed as creative, resilient, and capable of finding hope through family bonds, education, friendship, and community support.

The study of marginalized childhoods in literature is particularly significant because children's voices and experiences have historically been overlooked in discussions of social inequality. Childhood studies scholars argue that children should not be viewed merely as passive recipients of adult decisions but as social actors who interpret and respond to their circumstances. Children's literature provides opportunities to examine how young characters understand poverty, negotiate challenges, and imagine possibilities for change.

This article investigates how childhood hunger and poverty are depicted in Pakistani children's literature. It explores the following questions:

1. How are hunger and poverty represented in Pakistani children's narratives?
2. How do literary texts portray the experiences of marginalized children?
3. What role do food, family, and community play in narratives of survival?
4. How do children's stories construct themes of hope and resilience in the context of poverty?

The study argues that Pakistani children's literature presents hunger and poverty as complex social experiences rather than individual failures. These narratives reveal structural inequalities while simultaneously emphasizing children's agency, emotional strength, and capacity for hope. By examining the relationship between deprivation and resilience, this research highlights the important role of children's literature in promoting social awareness, empathy, and critical understanding among young readers.

The article contributes to scholarship on children's literature by connecting literary representations of childhood with broader discussions of food insecurity, social justice, and cultural identity. It demonstrates that stories about hunger and poverty can function not only as reflections of social realities but also as meaningful interventions that encourage readers to imagine more equitable and compassionate communities.

Literature Review

Children's Literature and the Representation of Social Reality

Children's literature has increasingly been recognized as a significant field of cultural production that reflects social values, historical experiences, and ideological perspectives. Earlier approaches often viewed children's texts primarily as tools for entertainment, moral education, or imagination; however, contemporary scholarship considers children's literature a complex site where issues of identity, power, class, gender, and social justice are negotiated.

Nodelman (2008) argues that children's literature is shaped by adult perceptions of childhood and often reflects social assumptions about what children should know, experience, and understand. At the same time, children's texts can challenge dominant ideas by presenting alternative perspectives on childhood experiences. Through fictional narratives, young readers encounter different social realities and develop awareness of communities beyond their own experiences.

In societies marked by economic inequality, children's literature frequently becomes a medium for representing marginalized childhoods. Narratives about poverty and deprivation provide opportunities to examine how children experience social structures and how literature responds to issues of inequality. Such texts can encourage empathy while also questioning the social conditions that produce disadvantage.

Childhood Studies and Marginalized Childhoods

Childhood studies has transformed understandings of children by challenging the idea that childhood is a universal or purely biological experience. Scholars such as James and Prout (1997) argue that childhood is socially constructed and varies according to historical, cultural, and economic contexts. Children are not simply dependent individuals but active participants who interpret and respond to their social environments.

This perspective is particularly relevant when studying representations of poor and marginalized children. Literature often portrays disadvantaged children through narratives of struggle; however, contemporary childhood studies encourages researchers to examine children's agency, creativity, and resilience alongside their vulnerability.

In the Pakistani context, childhood experiences are deeply influenced by socioeconomic inequalities. Factors such as poverty, food insecurity, unequal educational opportunities, and labor conditions shape the lives of many children. Children's literature that engages with these realities provides insight into how Pakistani society represents vulnerable children and their struggles.

Hunger, Food Insecurity, and Childhood Experience

Hunger is not only a physical condition but also a social and cultural experience. Food studies scholars emphasize that food represents relationships, identity, belonging, and power. The absence or presence of food in literary texts often communicates meanings related to care, exclusion, social status, and emotional connection.

Food insecurity during childhood affects physical development, educational opportunities, and psychological well-being. However, literary representations of hunger frequently extend beyond nutritional deprivation by exploring themes of dignity, family responsibility, and social inequality.

In children's literature, hunger may function as a narrative device that reveals differences between privileged and marginalized groups. Stories depicting children who lack adequate food often highlight broader inequalities related to class, employment, education, and access to resources.

Poverty and Social Inequality in Children's Narratives

Representations of poverty in children's literature have received considerable scholarly attention because they influence how young readers understand social difference. Poverty narratives can either reinforce stereotypes of helplessness or challenge them by presenting poor children as capable individuals with agency and aspirations.

Zipes (2001) suggests that children's literature has the potential to challenge social injustice by encouraging readers to question existing power structures. When poverty is represented critically, children's texts can expose inequality and promote values of compassion, fairness, and social responsibility.

In South Asian children's literature, poverty is often connected with issues of family survival, education, migration, rural life, and social hierarchy. Pakistani children's narratives frequently reflect these realities by portraying children negotiating between hardship and hope.

Pakistani Children's Literature: Cultural and Social Context

Pakistani children's literature has developed through diverse traditions, including oral storytelling, folk narratives, religious stories, school textbooks, magazines, and contemporary fiction. These texts often combine moral education with reflections on cultural identity and social values.

Historically, children's literature in Pakistan has emphasized themes such as family relationships, honesty, courage, education, and moral development. However, contemporary writers increasingly address social issues affecting children's lives, including poverty, inequality, environmental concerns, and social exclusion.

Despite the importance of children's literature in Pakistani society, academic research on its representation of social issues remains relatively limited compared to studies of adult Pakistani literature. Examining themes of hunger and poverty therefore contributes to expanding the field by highlighting how children's texts engage with pressing social realities.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship has extensively examined children's literature as a medium of cultural transmission, identity formation, and moral education. However, limited attention has been given to representations of hunger, food insecurity, and poverty in Pakistani children's literature.

Much research on poverty focuses on economic and sociological dimensions, while literary studies often overlook how fictional narratives represent children's experiences of deprivation. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Pakistani children's literature constructs meanings of hunger and poverty and how these representations balance vulnerability with resilience and hope.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining childhood studies, food studies, and social justice perspectives. These approaches allow a comprehensive analysis of how Pakistani children's literature represents hunger, poverty, and marginalized childhood experiences.

Childhood Studies Perspective

Childhood studies provides the primary framework for examining representations of children as social actors. James and Prout (1997) argue that children should be understood within their social and cultural contexts rather than viewed only as incomplete adults.

This perspective enables the study to explore how child characters experiencing poverty exercise agency, develop coping strategies, and negotiate their identities within challenging circumstances. Rather than representing poor children only as victims, the framework highlights their voices, creativity, and resilience.

Food Studies Perspective

Food studies examines the symbolic and cultural meanings attached to food. Food in literature represents more than physical nourishment; it can symbolize love, family bonds, cultural identity, social belonging, and inequality.

Using this perspective, the study analyzes how hunger functions within children's narratives. The absence of food may represent economic hardship and social exclusion, while shared meals may symbolize community, care, and hope.

Social Justice Framework

The social justice approach examines literature as a space where inequalities can be revealed and questioned. This framework draws attention to representations of marginalized groups and investigates whether narratives challenge or reinforce existing social structures.

Applied to Pakistani children's literature, this perspective helps analyze how texts portray poverty, class differences, and unequal opportunities. It also explores how narratives encourage empathy and awareness among young readers.

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory provides an additional lens for understanding how children respond to adversity. Rather than focusing only on suffering, this approach examines children's ability to develop strength, maintain hope, and create meaning in difficult circumstances.

Through this framework, the study investigates how Pakistani children's narratives represent survival, emotional strength, friendship, education, and community support as sources of resilience.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional understanding of childhood hunger and poverty in Pakistani children's literature. They allow the analysis to move beyond simple representations of deprivation and examine how literary narratives negotiate issues of inequality, dignity, agency, and social hope.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on textual analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research aims to explore meanings, representations, and ideological assumptions embedded within literary narratives. Rather than measuring children's experiences statistically, the study examines how hunger, poverty, deprivation, and resilience are constructed through language, characterization, narrative structure, and symbolism.

The study employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to childhood hunger, socioeconomic inequality, family survival, and social hope in Pakistani children's literature. This approach allows the researcher to investigate both explicit representations of poverty and the deeper symbolic meanings attached to food, hunger, and nourishment.

Research Corpus

The study focuses on selected Pakistani children's literary texts that represent marginalized childhood experiences. The corpus includes children's stories and narratives that address themes such as poverty, unequal access to resources, food insecurity, family hardship, and children's efforts to overcome social challenges.

The selection of texts is based on the following criteria:

- Representation of child characters experiencing socioeconomic challenges.
- Presence of themes related to hunger, food, poverty, or deprivation.
- Exploration of family, community, and survival strategies.
- Contribution to discussions of social inequality and childhood experiences.

The selected texts are analyzed as cultural documents that reflect broader social concerns within Pakistani society.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The selected literary texts were closely read and analyzed through multiple stages.

First, the researcher identified passages related to hunger, poverty, food practices, family relationships, and social inequality. Second, recurring concepts were coded into broader thematic categories. Finally, these themes were interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of childhood studies, food studies, and social justice.

The major analytical themes include:

1. Hunger as a representation of socioeconomic inequality.
2. Poverty and the vulnerability of childhood.
3. Food as a symbol of care, identity, and belonging.
4. Children's agency and survival strategies.
5. Hope, resilience, and community support.

Research Methodological Approach

The study follows a critical literary analysis approach. It does not treat children's literature as merely fictional entertainment but as a cultural space where social realities are represented and negotiated. The analysis considers how narratives position poor children, how poverty is explained, and whether marginalized children are represented as passive victims or active individuals with dignity and agency.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Hunger as a Representation of Social Inequality

In Pakistani children's literature, hunger frequently functions as a representation of broader social inequalities rather than merely a lack of food. Narratives involving poor children often reveal unequal access to basic resources and highlight the difference between privileged and disadvantaged childhood experiences.

Hungry children in these narratives are commonly positioned within larger systems of economic hardship, unemployment, unequal opportunities, and social exclusion. Hunger becomes a narrative symbol of the ways poverty limits children's choices and affects their educational, emotional, and social development.

From a food studies perspective, the absence of food represents more than physical suffering. It reveals the relationship between economic structures and everyday childhood experiences. A child's inability to access adequate nourishment reflects wider questions of social responsibility and justice.

These narratives encourage readers to understand hunger not as an individual problem but as a consequence of social conditions. By presenting children's experiences of deprivation, Pakistani children's literature creates awareness about inequality and invites readers to consider the importance of compassion and collective responsibility.

Poverty and the Vulnerability of Childhood

Representations of poverty in children's literature often highlight children's vulnerability. Poor children may experience limited educational opportunities, inadequate living conditions, and social marginalization. However, Pakistani children's narratives frequently avoid portraying disadvantaged children only through suffering.

Instead, many stories present poverty as one aspect of a child's identity rather than the defining feature of their existence. Child characters continue to demonstrate curiosity, imagination, emotional strength, and aspirations despite economic difficulties.

This representation challenges stereotypes that associate poverty with helplessness. Through child-centered narratives, readers encounter children who negotiate difficult circumstances while maintaining hope and dignity.

The childhood studies perspective is useful here because it recognizes children as active participants in their social worlds. Even within conditions of poverty, children interpret their experiences, develop relationships, and create meanings around their lives.

Food as a Symbol of Care and Belonging

Food occupies an important symbolic role in Pakistani children's narratives. While hunger represents deprivation, food often represents love, family connection, hospitality, and cultural identity.

Scenes involving meals frequently reveal relationships between children and caregivers. A simple shared meal may symbolize emotional security and family solidarity even in conditions of economic hardship.

Traditional foods and communal eating practices also connect children with cultural identity. Food becomes a marker of belonging, linking personal experiences with wider cultural traditions.

However, when access to food is unequal, these narratives reveal social divisions. The contrast between abundance and scarcity highlights differences between social groups and draws attention to issues of fairness and inclusion.

Marginalized Children as Agents of Survival

A significant feature of Pakistani children's literature is the representation of marginalized children as resilient individuals rather than passive victims. Although poverty creates obstacles, child characters often demonstrate creativity, determination, and emotional strength.

They may rely on family relationships, friendships, education, or personal abilities to navigate difficult circumstances. Such representations emphasize children's agency and challenge narratives that reduce poor children to symbols of suffering.

Through these portrayals, children's literature provides alternative understandings of poverty. It acknowledges hardship while also recognizing children's capacity for action, adaptation, and hope.

Family and Community as Sources of Nourishment

In many Pakistani children's narratives, nourishment extends beyond physical food to include emotional and social support. Family members, neighbors, and communities often provide forms of care that help children survive difficult conditions.

The idea of nourishment therefore includes affection, protection, moral guidance, and belonging. These narratives suggest that human relationships can provide strength even when material resources are limited.

This theme reflects cultural values emphasizing family responsibility and collective support. At the same time, it raises questions about whether communities alone can compensate for larger structural inequalities.

Education and Hope for Social Transformation

Education frequently appears as a pathway toward overcoming poverty in children's narratives. Schools and learning are represented not only as sources of knowledge but also as opportunities for personal growth and social mobility.

For marginalized children, education symbolizes possibility and future improvement. Stories that connect learning with hope encourage young readers to value education as a means of addressing inequality.

However, these narratives also reveal the barriers that poverty creates. Children who struggle with hunger or financial insecurity may find educational opportunities difficult to access. Through this tension, children's literature highlights the connection between social justice, nourishment, and education.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that Pakistani children's literature presents hunger and poverty through complex narratives that combine vulnerability with resilience. These texts do not simply portray marginalized children as victims of unfortunate circumstances; instead, they emphasize their humanity, creativity, and capacity for hope.

The representation of hunger reveals social inequalities, while the representation of nourishment highlights cultural values of care, family, and community. Together, these themes demonstrate that food and poverty operate as powerful literary symbols through which children's literature explores broader questions of dignity, belonging, and justice.

The findings support childhood studies perspectives that view children as active social participants. They also align with food studies approaches that recognize eating practices and hunger as culturally meaningful experiences. Furthermore, the narratives contribute to social justice education by encouraging readers to recognize inequality and develop empathy toward marginalized communities.

Ultimately, Pakistani children's literature provides a significant platform for discussing childhood poverty while maintaining narratives of hope and possibility. Through stories of struggle and survival, young readers are encouraged to imagine more compassionate and equitable social relationships.

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of childhood hunger and poverty in Pakistani children's literature, focusing on how narratives portray marginalized childhoods, survival strategies, and possibilities of social hope. The analysis demonstrates that hunger and poverty in children's texts function not only as descriptions of material deprivation but also as complex symbols of social inequality, emotional vulnerability, cultural identity, and human resilience.

The study reveals that Pakistani children's literature presents poverty through multidimensional perspectives. While economic hardship creates significant challenges for child characters, these narratives often move beyond representations of suffering by emphasizing children's agency, creativity, and capacity to overcome adversity. Marginalized children are not portrayed merely as helpless victims; rather, they are represented as individuals who negotiate difficult circumstances through determination, family relationships, education, and community support.

The findings also highlight the symbolic importance of food and nourishment. Food in children's narratives represents more than physical survival; it signifies love, care, belonging, cultural identity, and social connection. Conversely, hunger reveals broader structural inequalities related to poverty, unequal access to resources, and social exclusion. Through these contrasting representations, children's literature encourages readers to reflect on questions of justice, compassion, and collective responsibility.

The theoretical perspectives of childhood studies, food studies, and social justice provide valuable insights into understanding these representations. Childhood studies allows an examination of children as active social participants rather than passive recipients of social conditions. Food studies reveals the cultural and emotional meanings attached to nourishment and hunger, while the social justice perspective highlights how literature can expose inequalities and encourage ethical awareness.

The study further argues that Pakistani children's literature has significant potential as a medium for developing social consciousness among young readers. Narratives dealing with poverty and hunger can foster empathy by allowing children to encounter experiences different from their own. When thoughtfully represented, stories of marginalized childhoods can challenge stereotypes and promote understanding of social diversity.

However, the representation of poverty in children's literature requires careful attention. Writers and educators must avoid presenting poor children only through narratives of suffering or dependence. Instead, literature should recognize marginalized children's dignity, agency, and aspirations. A balanced representation of hardship and hope allows young readers to understand social problems while also imagining possibilities for change.

Future research may expand this study by examining a larger corpus of Pakistani children's texts, comparing representations across different regions and languages, or exploring children's responses to narratives of hunger and poverty. Further studies may also investigate how Pakistani children's literature can contribute to education about social justice, nutrition, and equality.

In conclusion, depictions of childhood hunger and poverty in Pakistani children's literature reveal important connections between literary representation and social reality. These narratives demonstrate that childhood is shaped by economic and cultural conditions, yet they also emphasize resilience, compassion, and hope. By bringing marginalized experiences into literary discussion, Pakistani children's literature contributes to broader conversations about creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

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