

Confronting Child Abuse through Fantasy in Roald Dahl's THE BFG

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Abstract

Fantasy is commonly encountered as a deviation or a phenomenon that reflects what is impossible (unexplained) and outside the confines of reality as it know as a result of the accepted rules by which people observe the world around them as a phenomenon that represents what cannot be explained. The term "fantasy" is used to refer to stories that could never happen in real life. Modern Fantasy allows for a deviation and breaks from reality; anything is possible, from travelling to other worlds to having adventures with giants to flying cars. This paper seeks to examine Fantasy in children's literature by analyzing its fundamentals in Roald Dahl's "THE BFG". This paper examines how child abuse becomes a phenomenological issue, causing Dahl to write a number of novels in which the protagonists of his children's novels confront adult's abusive behaviors. This paper is divided into two sections. The first section is an introduction. It addresses Fantasy, its characteristics, types, and its connection with children's literature. Section two examines how child abuse damages the lives of children in the novel and how the protagonist who get abused from adults confront these abusive behaviours through Fantasy that Dahl used in order to make his child protagonist have the ability and to be brave to confront the abusive figures.

Keywords

Fantasy, Child Abuse, Roald Dahl, THE BFG, Children's Literature.

Fantasy is a complex genre. For years, critics have debated its definitions and how it should be defined. The term has been constant critical speculation; there is no acceptance or agreement on an exact definition (Clute and Grant, 1999).

Some critics say that "Fantasy" refers to the impossible and the unreal, imagining things that are not present. Like different literary genres, Fantasy is not bound by a specific ethos but is in a state of continuous development and is associated with the past. The events, in some cases, beings and places, could not exist or take place according to real life and do not apply to our natural laws. The genre of fantasy falls under the general category of "non-realistic literature," meaning that the

plot includes witchcraft, giants, magic, and action occurring on unknown and unusual planets areas that have not as of yet been mapped out by humans. Even the concept itself might be amalgamate of technology with something connected to a tale or legend. It could also involve some strange animals and creatures talking like humans.

However, C.S. Lewis clarifies the meaning of Fantasy in his book *An Experiment in Criticism* and gives examples of literary works that fall under the fantasy umbrella; he states:

The word fantasy is both a literary and a psychological term. As a literary term, Fantasy means any narrative that deals with impossibilities and preternatural. The Ancient

Mariner, Gulliver, Erewhon, The Wind in the Willows, The Witch of Atlas, Jurgens, The Crock of Gold, The Vera Historia, Micromegas, Flatland and Apuleius' Metamorphoses are fantasies. Of course, they are very heterogeneous in spirit and purpose. The only thing common to them is fantastic. I shall call this sort of fantasy literary Fantasy. (Lewis 50).

In other words, magic, adventures, impossibilities, and the preternatural are inevitable to a fantasist's imagination; yet, there is much more to read between the lines. The clue to this lies in the definition of Lewis of literary Fantasy as given above.

Apart from that, Roger Schlobin said that "Fantasy was born neither in literature nor art. It is one of the original qualities that distinguished humanity from flora and fauna of its first beginnings" (Schlobin xvii). In other words, Schlobin indicates that, in art and literature, Fantasy has not been born from either, but it is one of the qualities that distinguish humans from other creatures.

Additionally, every human being has a sense of imagination. Still, it is important to distinguish between "imagination" and "fantasy" because imagination is usually related to real life and common, such as daydreaming. The term "imagination" refers to a human being's inherent ability to conjure up images and ideas in their heads. For example, while he or she sits in his or her place, one can imagine going on a journey somewhere. Therefore it is a part of daily life. It can be associated with past experiences or events and may also link to the present. It is based on experience, while Fantasy is related to unreality.

Fantasy also serves to supply an aesthetic experience by making the children amuse with the action by giving senses on the creation of the characters who are selected either to be similar or not to the young readers, Gates et al. state that :

Whether seen as aesthetic, social, political, or religious, Fantasy, put as objectively and simply as possible, is imaginative fiction that can provide alternative realities, allowing us to explore issues of size, time, and space steeped in the human need to understand good versus evil" (Gates et al. 6).

Fantasy has a close connection with children's literature, it could be impossible to imagine children's literary works without fantasy and vice versa. Hence, There are many different varieties of fantasy found in children's literature. It could be Dark Fantasy, for

example, Stephen King's The Dark Tower series, Humorous Fantasy that seeks entertainment like Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, High Fantasy such as JRR Tolkien's The Lord of The Rings (1954), which represents the struggle between good and evil; Low Fantasy such as George Martin's A Game Of Thrones (1996), Heroic Fantasy is corresponding to legends and heroes of myths such as American Gods (2001), journey fantasy revolves around a protagonist who faces trials and encounters adventures in which they solve a mystery, defeat a threat or peril, and triumph over something strange. This can be done by a single protagonist or a group of protagonists, with or without the assistance of giants, wizards...etc. The BFG (1982) by Roald Dahl is one of the vital journey fantasy novels when the heroine, Sophie, challenges the giants with the help of her friend, the big friendly giants.

1.2. Abused Children: Struggle in THE BFG

In Dahl's selected works the girls protagonist are independent in their thinking. They have strong personalities. They are no more submissive to the orders and rules of their abusers. He gives them voice. give voice to the voiceless is a very essential element in such works: those which deal with fighting oppression and injustice. Both girls, Matilda and Sophie are clever. They deal with their problems in a wise way. Also, the reader can hear their thoughts through their speeches and actions. They express their dissatisfaction with their predicaments. They act friendly and wisely to get rid of all of the abusive actions towards their tiny innocent bodies.

Child abuse is one of the worst things that can happen to a child because it hurts their health, mental health, and social development. All societies have paid attention to this problem because it represents serious aggression against children, as the child is subjected to abuse in a variety of settings, including home by parents and brothers, and then school by teachers and classmates. Then, the children may be subjected to abuse or neglect in the large society by the common people. As a result, children from all levels of are constantly at risk of experiencing abuse. Abuse of children is a worldwide problem, and it affects both males and females. It does not relate to religion, culture or language. Child abuse is a critical issue that needs to be addressed because it can have devastating effects on a

kid's physical and mental health. In addition, the nature and perception of child abuse vary greatly from one culture to another; yet, these effects harshly damage children's lives.

The plots of Roald Dahl's novels for children revolve, in large part, around reoccurring themes in the author's work, such as allegations of racism, sexism, and vulgarity in his writing, and, most importantly, child abuse, on account of the fact that characters in Dahl's books are frequently subjected to abusive treatment at the hands of adults. Dahl says, "I have a great affinity with children. I see their problems ... all these bloody giants around you who are always telling you what to do and what not to do ... subconsciously in the child's mind these giants become the enemy" (Valle 13-14). Because Roald Dahl knew personally what it was like to be a neglected child, he never failed to address issues pertaining to children's rights in any of his writings. Works such as *The Magic Finger* (1966), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *The Enormous Crocodile* (1978), *George's Marvelous Medicine* (1981), *The Twits* (1980), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983), *The Minpins* (1991), and *Matilda* (1988).

In *The BFG*, Sophie, much like the other child characters in the Dahlian novels has been subjected to oppression in the form of discrimination, bullying, and confinement. Thereafter, Roald Dahl's works feature protagonists that are among the most disempowered and marginalized members of society. These protagonists confront numerous kinds of oppression through a commitment to justice and virtue in the face of physical, structural, and psychological violence.

Greg Littman in his article states that "Many of Dahl's children character are threatened by horrific death, either as the punishment for their sins or simply as a form of bullying behavior they have to face" (Littman 173). At the orphanage where Sophie used to live, there are rules and regulations that all children are required to obediently follow and practice. Sophie, the main character of *The BFG*, is an orphan; she suffers through a life in an orphanage where the punishment consists of being locked and bounded in a small room in the cellar with the rats. Sophie endures this life. After the lights have been turned off, it is not safe for children to get out of bed or walk to the bathroom. They are responsible for folding their garments in the appropriate manner. Children's lives are significantly disrupted by the fact

that they have to live in the orphanage. Mrs. Clonkers has a strict set of rules that the children who live there must follow, and if any of the children break those rules, they will be punished.

The majority of abuser figures in Dahl's works are adults. In *The BFG*, there are adults, but they have fantastical appearances, Dahl in *The BFG* portrays adults in two different ways: one as a human being represented by Mrs. Clonker and the as fantastic human eaters giants who are powerful figures. Mrs. Clonker has the authorial power in the orphanage she abuses the children psychologically by putting them under the pressure of her strict rules, Sophie states that "you got punished if you were caught out of bed after lights-out" (Dahl 1982 2).

Theoretically, food and drink are included in the list of human being's basic needs (Maslow 375). The consumption of food and drink is considered to be one of the fundamental requirements for the survival of a human being, a human being needs not just oxygen (air), a place to sleep, a place to remain (shelter), and clothing, but also food and water to survive. If a human being is forced to go without food or drink, that person will suffer tremendously from the effects of the ordeal. Sophie says "She locked us in the dark cellar for a day and a night without anything to eat or drink" (Dahl 1982 31).

According to the preceding quotation, it is possible to infer that all of the girls at the orphanage are subjected to a number of physically demanding practices on a regular basis. It is possible that the orphaned children would develop a variety of health issues as a result of being deprived of food during the day and confined to a dark cellar during the night. These victimized children naturally question the abusive behaviour, and Sophie will sometimes spend time thinking about why their abusers do such misconducts.

Furthermore, Dahl uses fantastic and imaginary creatures to be the antagonist in his novels. The giants in *The BFG* are used to represent the narrative's primary fictitious antagonist, who has the intention of physically abusing the children. At the hands of the giants, particularly the bloodbottler, Sophie is put in multiple situations where she is at risk of being killed or eaten alive. When Sophie asks the BFG that if the giants eat children, he replies "Often chiddlers" The BFG says "Little chiddlers who is building sandcastles on the beach. That is who the swimmeling ones are after. Little

chiddlers is not so tough to eat as old grandmamma" (Dahl 1982 68). This is undeniable proof that these enormous creatures prefer to feast on young children as opposed to older people since children have a distinct flavour that is different from older people.

Roald Dahl imbues the adult villains and their metaphors for the adults with similar fantastical qualities throughout the novel. Many of the creatures and fictitious characters are designed to have fantastical skills of their own with extraordinary capabilities. The giants are "tall figuers... their skins were burnt brown by the sun... they were simply colossal... many of them had large brillies and all of them had long arms and big feet" (Dahl 1982 25-26). Although the Big Friendly Giant (BFG) is a giant, he is not at all like the other giants. When Sophie first encounters the BFG, the author describes him as follows:

It wasn't a human. It couldn't be. It was four times as tall as the tallest human. It was so tall its head was higher than the upstairs windows of the houses. Sophie opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Her throat, like her whole body, was frozen with fright. (Dahl 1982 4)

But the other predatory giants, whose names allude to the meals that they like the most: the Fleshlumpeater, the Bonecruncher, the Manhugger, the Childchewer, the Meatdripper, the Gizzardgulper, the Maidmasher, the Bloodbottler, and the Butcher Boy as Sophie says are twice as tall as the BFG. The BFG compares himself to the other giants by stating that "Those giants is all at least fifty feet tall with huge muscles and cockles alive alive-o. I is the titchy one. I is the runt. Twenty-four feet is puddlenuts in Giant Country" (Dahl 1982 28). Each of these nine giants has a favorite food, which is of course children. These fantastic characters are the allegories of the adult characters who, like other adult villains in Dahl's children's stories, have their roles as the oppressors of children or the violators of children's rights. Adults who use their power and control over children are often described as monstrous, strong, and powerful, as well as hideous, offensive, careless, evil, uneducated, pretentious, and so on. In other words, one may say that in Dahl's *The BFG*, the fictitious creatures that are metaphors for the adults in the real world are represented as being highly dangerous, frightening, and unlikable for the children. This can be deduced from the appearance of one of those giants, which refers to as the Bloodbottler, whose:

skin was reddishbrown. There was black hair sprouting on his chest and arms and on his stomach. The hair on his head was long and dark and tangled. His foul face was round and squashy-looking. The eyes were tiny black holes. The nose was small and flat. But the mouth was huge (Dahl 1982 49).

Not only are the children in *The BFG* subjected to abusive behaviour, whether it is psychological or physical, such as abusive verbal words or locking them in the cellar and not getting fed them for a day. Rather the children in this novel are also more likely to be eaten and swollen by the unmerciful man-eating giants. The BFG further asserts this when he tells Sophie about the nine giants' nightly journey from the giant country to the other countries of the world in search and catch their food which is of course children.

When the BFG asks about the giants' whereabouts, one of them, known as Fleshlumpeater, responds by stating that "We is all of us Fleshlumpeater off to England tonight... we is fancying a few nice little English chiddlers", then The Maidmasher answers "I is knowing where there is a gigglehouse for girls", The Gizzardgulper then responds "I knows where there is a bogglebox for boys!... English boys is tasting extra lickswishy!" (Dahl 1982 106). The preceding quotations make it abundantly clear that children, both little boys and girls, make the best meals for these nine giants, and that the primary objective of these giants is to consume a large number of children until they are satisfied with their food supply. This demonstrates the risk that the children face each and every night. Children from around the world are eaten and reported to the media as missing; however, the reality is that the evil giants are the ones who are eating them each and every night without pity. As a result of what has been said, it has become abundantly clear that the novel *The BFG* by Roald Dahl contains numerous instances in which children are treated cruelly.

Dahl's work in the field of children's literature has made the treatment of children in abusive situations one of the most important aspects of his overall body of work. Further, all of the children in *The BFG* have been physically abused and emotionally neglected by some of the adult antagonists or metaphors for adult abusers represent by the giants. The depiction of children's oppression that permeates Roald Dahl's writings for children is initially influenced by the author's traumatic experiences in boarding schools as a child. As a result,

Roald Dahl's identity is shaped in part by the mistreatment he received at a young age at the hands of his schoolmasters and older classmates. As an essential aspect of Dahl's identity, oppression, which is the primary source of his writing inspiration, is evident in many of his novels.

However, Sophie defends herself and immediately uses the technique of withdrawal whenever she notices adult giants antagonists approach to her. Sophie is subjected to a great deal of oppression. However, this Dahlian child character does her best to accept and put up with all of the adversities that are imposed on her. Readers will notice that Sophie attempts to avoid direct confrontation with the adult adversaries she encounters, particularly at the beginning of the novel. Hence, children make efforts to remove themselves from the danger, contempt, and exploitation posed by their adult antagonists. However, if it is necessary, mistreated children confront their abusers regardless of who or what the abusers are. As asserted in Jane Yolen's *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*, "without evil and the knowledge of its continuance, there can be no hope for redemption... the working through evil in order to come at last to the light" (Yolen 72). To put it another way, adults whether humans, monsters or giants hatred of the children and adverse qualities have always been clearly accentuated in Dahl's stories with the purpose to highlight the good or heroism of the child characters. Hence, no matter how strong and powerful the adults and their metaphors are, the Dahlian children will be better empowered with supernatural, magic or intellectual power and capability. Whenever the battle between the adults and the children takes place, the latter will always be allowed to "win in the end" (Nicholson 324). The adults in Sophie's life make her suffer from isolation and put her through a number of unnecessary hardships. Therefore, it is necessary for Dahl to create the child heroines who are powerful, courageous, intelligent, and capable enough to fight against their opponents.

Confronting Child Abuse through Fantasy in THE BFG

Roald Dahl makes Sophie confronts child abuse through fantasy. Dahl creates a new fantastic world that he called the giant world. Then, Dahl created another world, which is the dream country to make the BFG

captures the dreams that Sophie needs and wants in order to ensure the success of her plan.

In the works of Roald Dahl, the mistreatment of children is strongly condemned, and the adult villains who are responsible for such mistreatment receive harsh punishments. It has been formed that Sophie, along with the other Dahlian characters, suffers from oppression at the beginning of the novel. The Big Friendly Giant, who acts as both her spiritual and physical guardian angel throughout the course of the novel, provides guidance to Sophie and ultimately saves her life. In this novel, Dahl chose to address the issue of child abuse and how to confront this issue through the lens of fantasy. He does so by demonstrating how Sophie's fantastic friend the BFG supports her in her fight against giants and assists her in formulating a strategy to capture and imprison them in the hole.

In fact, the fantasies written by Dahl have all of the elements that make good stories for children. Based on Bonnie Stephens' article "Taking the Second Step in Reading", the books that children read should "reinforce the traits they are developing which will help them cope with adult problems and become healthy, successful adults (Stephens 585 -586). Dahl's stories, in accordance with Bonnie Stephens's opinions on what makes a good book, show how children can cope with the challenges of daily life despite the presence of oppressive adults in the story's antagonist roles.

As a consequence of this, the children's stories that Roald Dahl wrote are used as instruments to make his dreams come true. These dreams involve defeating the cruel adults who oppressed him when he was young. Dahl's determination to regain the sense of selfhood, voice, victory, happiness, and freedom that he felt were taken from him during his childhood led him to write stories in which the child protagonists always emerge victorious over their conflicts and uprisings against their adult foes. Nonetheless, there is a very slim chance for the children to win their fights against the adults in the real world.

The use of fantasy is required by Roald Dahl because he must bring about the realization of seemingly impossible dreams. Still, fantasy is a theory that "contains an element of unreality" (Bromley 27).

Abused children, whose rights are being violated, have a responsibility to adjust and respond to their abusers. These children may turn to their dreams or fantasies for assistance in confronting and standing up to

the abusers who are responsible for their oppression, misery, and the violation of their rights as children. To put it another way, in the world created by Roald Dahl, one could argue that children are on par with or even surpass the power of adults. This is the reason why Roald Dahl decided to set his novels in a different world: one in which children either have the same rights as adults or even have more rights than adults. He uses fantasy to make his own dream come true by creating a world in which abused children have the power to exact revenge on their abusers adults. In order to make Sophie aware that child abuse occurs not only in her orphanage but also in other parts of the world, he creates the giant world. He creates a fantastic friend for Sophie in order to assist her in carrying out her strategic plan of ousting the child oppressors.

The BFG tells Sophie that those nine giants eat children from all over the world every night, he says "they snatching little boys and girls from their beds ... they popping them straight into their mouths like a popcorn" (Dahl 1982 113). The fact that Sophie hears about eating defenseless children every night has put her under a lot of pressure and stress, and she wants to put an end to it. In the field of psychology, oppression can result in feelings of pressure, stress, tension, or anxiety in children who have been neglected or abused. When a person is confronted with stressful situations, anxious feelings, or feelings of disappointment, they will resort to coping mechanisms in order to alleviate or manage these unpleasant feelings (Cramer 1).

After being locked up and denied food, it is natural for Sophie to feel resentment and desire for revenge toward Mrs. Clonkers, who is the sadistic head of the orphanage. Sophie is unable to suppress these feelings. In light of this, when the BFG inquires about her life in the orphanage Sophie does not hesitate to tell him how much she "hated" living there (Dahl 1982 30). In other words, Sophie does not actually engage in any form of retaliation with Mrs. Clonkers, even though Sophie does not put this vengeful attitude into practice, one can say that it is instilled in her by the strict management of Mrs. Clonkers.

In general, whenever the adult aggressors have mistreat the children, the latter defense mechanisms will be automatically prompted to function in order to protect themselves. In order to combat the oppression that they are subjected to, Sophie needs to make use of a variety of defensive strategies. Sophie learns from the

BFG that other giants plan to capture and consume all of the children in England "A lot of little girlsies and boysies is no longer sleeping in their beds tonight" (Dahl 1982 127), Sophie devises a plan that she calls "The Great Plan" in order to save other children from the cruel killers. After convincing the BFG that they "can't just sit here doing nothing" (Dahl 1982 107) Sophie collaborates with The Big Friendly Giant to increase awareness about their fight against the giants who eat children.

Therefore, fantasy is an excellent choice that can assist Dahl in being endowed fruitfully with his vision of a wonderful world for children's fiction. Dahl creates strong characters in order to inspire and motivate his young readers. In his novels, the child takes on the role of a more mature and guardian adult. "the child who is helpless and frequently humiliated in his own world becomes omnipotent in the world of his toys, transferring his own shortcomings onto them" (James and Mendlesohn 55).

Beverly Kingston, Bob Regoli and John Hewitt agree in what has been said above in their article "The Theory Of Differential Oppression" which states on regarding conscious reactions, When children are subjected to oppression, they may respond in one of four primary ways: they may passively accept it, they may engage in delinquent behaviour or the exercise of illegitimate coercive power, they may redirect their negative emotions toward their peers in a variety of ways, or they may seek retribution against the adults who have abused them. (Kingston, Regoli and Hewitt 237). This is demonstrated when Sophie travels back to the giant country with the assistance of the queen's army as well as The BFG. She exacts her retribution in a hostile manner by hurling the queen's brooch at the giant's feet as she exacted her punishment "When she was right up close to the great naked hairy legs, she rammed the three-inch-long pin of the brooch as hard as she could into the Fleshlumper's right ankle. It goes deep into the flesh and stayed there" (Dahl 1982 184).

Sophie has been subjected to abusive behavior since the beginning of the novel. Sophie, the young girl, begins to consider how she will retaliate and confront her tormentors, and she devises a plan to capture them. Sophie, when returning to the kingdom of the giants, seeks vengeance by physically harming the giants, like Sophie does when she slams the brooch into the giant's leg. Although confronting child abuse by children is

regarded as the rarest kind of children's adaptive response to oppression, but Dahl makes everything possible in his fantastical works. Revenge, which may include delinquent acts like violent offences makes children engage in retaliation at the individuals they believe are the source of their oppression. This reaction can be a confrontation to Sophie's adult abusers and oppressors representing by these heartless nine giants and this is may be the best way for preventing abuse and oppression to happen to other children in the future.

Eventually, the bloodthirsty giants in *The BFG* are defeated by Sophie and her friendly companion. Sophie's wittiness defeats them because they are not smart enough to understand Sophie's plan to catch them. All of them are finally captured and imprisoned in a big hole and supplied with "snozzcumber" so that they will never want to eat humans again (Dahl 191–195). After the BFG blows the dream into the Queen of England's bedroom, she understands what kind of deadly situation will happen to all English children. Under her majesty's supreme command, the army assists Sophie and her kind hearted giant friend. Finally, they can deceive all the giants to be detained in the biggest and deepest pit ever. Without the protagonist's witty plan, children would be subjected to the cruelty of hideous giants. Sophie sits on the window in the queen's room for a purpose. The girl herself is included in the dream, therefore, when her majesty wakes up and sees her in reality, she will believe the dream. In fact, Sophie tells her friend, the maker of dream, what to include in the queen's dream. Hence, her efforts are rewarded when an army is ordered to follow her to get the giants and their crimes against the little once.

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