

Language, Culture, and Narrative Discourse of Maturation in Priki Serial Books

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Abstract

Books for children are designed with specific purposes, whether it is to educate them, pass on certain moral values, or manifest adult ideology about life and the world. Our central thesis in this presentation is that the characterization in children's book is represented through language and culture, which symbolise important ideas about change and otherness in relation to childhood and maturation. Focusing on The Pricki Series written by Maharani (illustrated by Herlina Kartaamadja), this presentation will endeavor to reveal the use of language and culture in the book series' characterization to signify the changes and maturation in childhood. Using the narrative framework proposed by John Stephens (Language and Ideology in Children's fictions, 1992), the language and the culture in the books will be analyzed based on story, discourse and significance scheme. It is expected that the use of language and cultural practices in the books imply the stages of maturation in childhood development in relation to children social interaction close to their real environment.

1. Introduction

Literature for children is often decorated with characters which are different in physical appearances, such as animal or alien characters. These "other characters" that are presented in narrative, according to Chappell (2007) represents the phases of maturation which is seen as a process of self-change and physical empowerment during childhood to adolescent period. Thus, children relate easily to these stories with the "other" characters, since primary they talk about their experience in growing up. In other words, children "relive" their experience in growing up, including the feeling of "alienated" (Theories of Childhood) and exploring new environment, through characters that are changed into animal or alien characters.

Another interesting point in these children stories with the “other” characters narrative is that it also presents gender maturation paths. Lassén-Seger (cited in Chappell, 2007) argues that “the other” male and female characters in children fantasy stories reveal stereotyped gender roles which are accepted within a certain sociocultural beliefs. Hence, the language use in such narrative also signifies the experience of growing up male or female.

Taking the above issues as departing points, this paper will endeavor to investigate the use of language in The Pricki Series written by Maharani (illustrated by Herlina Kartaamadja) that represents the sociocultural beliefs about gender maturation paths. The language in the narrative will be analyzed within the framework of how the story is built by discourse and significance of growing up as the “other” female child. The theory of narrative discourse will be adopted from John Stephens’ *Language and Ideology* (1992).

2. Narrative Discourse of Maturation in the Priki Series

Stories with themes about growing up are often brought up in children’s fiction, since they represent children’s life experiences. More specifically, such perception regarding children’s experience in growing up is mirrored in children’s literature through the exploration of ‘individual psyche’ as the predominant focus in many children’s books (Stephens, 1992: 3). Indeed, the process of growing up as part of an individual life process entails the idea of children’s maturation, which will be discussed in this paper. As mentioned earlier, this paper tries to analyze the narrative discourse of maturation in the Priki Series books, which will be obtained mainly from the language use and Priki’s characterization as a child female alien.

Referring to the discourse of maturation, it is necessary to define the term ‘maturation’ in relation to its use in this paper. Piaget (cited in Atherton, 2003) argues that:

“the role of maturation (simply growing up) in children's increasing capacity to understand their world: they cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so.”

From the above excerpt, we then define the term ‘maturation’ used in this paper as *the stages of development, both physically and psychologically, in which children perform or*

undertake certain tasks, in their attempts to understand the systems that the society used in the world. In association with Priki character in the books, we refer to the term maturation in examining Priki's psychological development, where she performed certain tasks as part of her interactions with her world. In the following discussions, we will constantly interlink the theories of childhood development and narrative discourse to encapsulate the narrative discourse of maturation in the stories.

Priki Book Series are picture books which tell about an alien character named Priki who lived in a world that resembled earth¹. The text (verbal) and pictures (visual codes) in picture book support each other to convey meaning in the story that it tells (Nodelman, 1988). Therefore, Priki Book Series provide two areas of analysis; those are verbal codes and visual codes, from which we can investigate the narrative discourse of maturation in Priki stories (Christensen, 2003). We shall reveal how the images in Priki book series display *relay* or *ironical* relationships with the text later on.

The series consist of 8 titles; *Priki Just Hatched*, *Priki Got Itchy*, *Priki Helped Her Mommy*, *Priki Was Chased By A Snake*, *Priki Was Almost Drowned*, *Priki Found a Shining Box*, *Priki's Cake*, and *A Visit For Priki*. In a glance, we see that the series were set to narrate Priki's growing up experiences as a child; starting from the time she hatched to the time where she had a visit from her grandparents. The discourse of maturation can be identified in each book by carefully looking at the use of language in the context of each story and the visual codes used to uphold it.

The first series, *Priki Just Hatched*, more or less described Priki's origin, which symbolizes the initial phase of a child's life. What is more interesting in the narrative is the cultural adaptation of Priki's origin. Despite the fact that the series were written for Indonesian children audiences, the narrative of Priki's origin has intertextual affiliation with western culture tale. That Priki was hatched from an egg and delivered to her parents by means of an alien spaceship is a narrative adapted from western culture tale 'where

¹ There was no clear explanation where Priki lived in the stories. However, Priki's surrounding environment is described as something in resemblance to earth, for example the woods, ponds, and the animals that lived in the woods.

babies come from², passed down from parents or other adults to children when they inquire about their primary existence in the world. Put in Indonesian cultural context, such narrative construction is certainly uncommon, since parents do not tell their children that they were delivered by a crane post or hatched from an egg. Although Priki was described as an alien, but the construction of children and childhood represented through her character should allow for sociocultural repercussion.

That Priki was hatched from a hairy egg, dropped from an alien spaceship, confirms Priki's characterization as "the other"³. In fact, her otherness defines her characterization which built in the narrative discourse of maturation throughout the series. The hatching process in the first series represents the initial stage (Stage 0) in children's development. In Stage 0, a child develops her/his reflexes by sensing and moving (Kegan, 1980), which is partly described in the first series. The phase of sensing and moving is illustrated in the narrative by the using of several past action verbs, such as:

- *She cleansed her hair with her hand.*
- *She rubbed her round ears.*
- *Then, she walked to find her mommy.*

In spite of this, the idea that Priki cleansed her hair and rubbed her round ears is somewhat semantically improper. According to Stephens (1992), the analysis of verb use in a narrative discourse may help readers to look for significance. As the actor that actively does the cleansing and rubbing, Priki is fully conscious of her purpose in cleansing and rubbing, which is unlikely to happen to babies in Stage 0, regardless of the sensing activities. Nonetheless, Priki's characterization as an alien is advantageous in this case, since she can be physically and psychologically "mature" in her Stage 0.

Moreover, in the course of looking for her mommy, Priki leaped from Stage 0 to Stage 1 and Stage 2, which are more impulsive. The narrative allows her alien child character to make perceptions as she explored her surroundings, as seen in the following sentence:

- "So, this is how I look! I have to find a creature like me!"

² A western cultural site, that when a child ask his/her parents where they had come from, parents would tell them the story of how babies are delivered by crane post to their parents.

³ We refer the term "the other" here for non human characters, such as alien or animal characters.

The text above is accompanied by images (visual codes) that illustrate how Priki was making inferences to her physical shape. The light bulb idea appeared as she concluded what her shape was and that she needed to look for a creature that looked like her. According to Kegan (1980), making inferences and perceptions are the skills that a child developed in Stage 1 and Stage 2. The fact that Priki had fully developed from Stage 0, 1 and 2 within a single narrative discourse is made possible by her alien characterization.

Priki's characterization as an alien creates a different atmosphere in the idea of childhood construction reflected in the narrative. In the next series, *Priki was Chased by a Snake* and *Priki was Almost Drowned*, Priki's character developed more interactions with her surrounding environment. Her modes of interactions with the environment are indicated with mere observation, without further exploration of the environment. The only physical exploration was when she collected the blueberries which she found in the woods. However, the act of collecting blueberries does not contribute to any larger significance in the narrative. In fact, it is not clear why she was narrated to pick blueberries in the woods in the first place. Instead, the narrative moved to Priki's amazement in discovering a whole new world set in front her:

- Priki also *saw* many animals in the woods.
- She *saw* one snail on the rock... two caterpillars on the green leaves...
- Priki *waved* hands at the butterflies flying around her.

Here, we recognize the verbs used in the narrative as verbs that signify the act of observing. So her interaction is merely observing the other creatures in her surroundings.

Complication in the narrative developed when Priki ran into a snake during her walk in the woods. When the snake chased her, Priki was saved by an owl character named Olli. This narrative suggests Priki's stage of development that had moved into Stage 3 and 4 where she developed interpersonal skills. In these stages, she was able to perform full formal operation which has societal orientation that is related to her gender construction in the narrative.

3. Gender Problem and Gender Maturation Paths

Priki's gender characterization in the book series is highly problematic. Nevertheless, through sociocultural associations, we can confirm that Priki is a female alien child. In *Priki Just Hatched*, it was never clearly described that Priki is indeed a female alien child. The narrator immediately refers to the round hairy creature which just hatched as "her" and named her Priki. In Indonesian culture, the name "Priki" is hardly used to refer to a girl's name or a boy's name. We assumed that the using of the name Priki, which is associated with a female's name in the narrative, is due to the sound /i/ in the last syllable that is commonly attached to a female's name in Indonesian context.

Priki's gender problem is also evident in her visual image. She was a round pink creature wearing a bow tie with dots motif, a pair of white hand gloves, and a pair of red shoes. The color pink can be culturally associated with female color, as it often symbolizes femininity. However, accessories such as bow tie and white gloves are commonly ascribed to male's formal dressing style. Thus, such portrayal generates confusion towards readers, both young and adult.

When readers are engaged into narrative, they will learn that Priki is a female character. But then again, confusion may reemerge when they read *Priki Got Itchy*. In the beginning of the narrative, Priki was described playing a ball on a grassy hill, an activity which is generally assigned to boys. Both language and pictures in the book displays how Priki played the ball, that is by *tossing*, *kicking*, and *dribbling* the ball. The pictures on page 4 show how Priki dribbled the ball skillfully, as steps for dribbling were clearly written. It seems that the author disregarded the aspects of gender role in this story, since her main focus of writing the story is to deliver a moral value, that is punished for being naughty, to child reader.

Gender discussion in the series has brought us to also analyze gender maturation path in the Priki series. There are two titles which noticeably articulate Priki's gender maturation path, *Priki Helped her Mommy* and *Priki's Cake*. The narrative in *Priki Helped Mommy* sets Priki, as a female alien child, to perform the impossible chores of cleaning a house

when her mother was ill. Priki swept and mopped the floor, washed piles of dirty dishes, and tidied up her messy room. She also made a chicken soup for her ill mother where she prepared the ingredients all by herself. The idea of Priki completing all of those house works by herself was hardly unthinkable, considering that the narrative describes her as a child. The construction of childhood in this story fits more into adult description of how to be a good child, more specifically, how to be a good girl. That Priki was to complete all of the house works in the absence of her mother demonstrates sociocultural beliefs that women is responsible in taking care of all the housework and that all female child must inherit the same role and path in the future. Thus, children will make sense of gender by adopting stereotyped gender roles that operates in their society (Jackson, 2007).

In *Priki's Cake*, the issue of gender maturation path is carved right after Priki settled on her Stage 3 and 4, where she performed social interaction with her friends. The narrative tells about Priki's experienced in making a cake for her two visiting friends, Olli and Tracy. The tradition of cooking, in this case making a cake, is again conveyed as a stereotyped gender role for female.

What is more interesting is the portrayal of how skillful Priki was in preparing the ingredients to make a cake. She carefully prepared eggs, butter, flour, milk, and even went into details on using mixer to make cake dough. As a child, Priki had done the impossible again here. The only flaw that Priki made was just when she forgot to turn the oven on after putting the dough in. The narrative does not reveal too much adult interference or parents-child interaction. Priki's father and mother appeared in the narrative when they checked on Priki's cooking and when they welcomed Priki's friend into the house. Therefore, we can see that the author is advocating her gender ideology on how to be a good independent girl.

Conclusion

In summary, Priki book series symbolise important ideas about change in relation to children's development and maturation. The narrative discourse of maturation in the

books series does not only represent stages of children's development but also delve into more possibilities through Priki's characterization as a female child alien. Although this kind of narrative strategy does not always work in accordance with sociocultural perceptions about gender and children's development in general.

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