

CHITRA FERNANDO'S SHORT STORY "ACTION AND REACTION": A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.

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ABSTRACT: *Chitra Fernando is the most prominent and important writer and critic in Sri Lankan English fiction. One of her major works include the short story 'Action and reaction' from her short story collection 'Three women'(1984). It is necessary to bring her short stories which contain various social problems as the contents into the area of research. Her short stories can be analyzed in different perspectives. Hence, this study was conducted based on Chitra Fernando's short story "Action and Reaction" from her short story collection 'Three women'. Main objective of this research is identifying the challenges and issues related to adoption and child labour in the story. One of the research questions of this article is why children from poor families are adopted by the adopters in order to meet their needs and the other question is how the adopted children are used as child workers under these adopters and act according to their demand and orders. The third question of this research is what the mental and social problems are those adopted child labourers face eventually when they grow up. In this research, the short story "Action and Reaction" has been used as the primary data source. books, research journals and websites related to the study have been used as secondary data too. A sociological and rights-based approach has been applied for the textual analysis of the story. As a result, psychology, physical and social challenges related to adoption and child labour faced by the character 'kusuma' – the child labourer of this short story were found and discussed in this study. Therefore, it is recommended that policies that are made for fighting against adopting children illegally and engaging them as child labourers should be implemented.*

Keywords: Chitra Fernando, short story, Adoption, child labour, challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Fernando (1935 – 1998) who was born in Kaluthara, was a female writer and a critic from Sri Lanka. Her short story "Action and reaction" criticizes how children from poor families suffer the cruelty of being adopted from their own parents and being robbed of their childhood, condemned, and criticized by their adopters and subjected to exploitation in various ways throughout their growth.

The title of this short story is very relatable throughout the course of the story as we come to realize how the protagonist of this short story " Loku Nanda" suffers the karma of her own doings in her later life as an old aged woman and how the adopted child "kusuma" turns to be the exact replica of how Loku Nanda had been to her when she was a child. The adopted child turns out to be a cold hearted, buff lady because of the way she was treated in her childhood. This conveys the idea that children, when they are mentally and socially condemned in their childhood, turn out to be rude, emotionless, and egocentric individuals once they grow up as a result of their own disconsolate experience they had as children.

This research mainly focuses on adoption and child labour with some questions to be answered such as Who adopts children, What are the motives for adopting children, Interaction between the adopter and adopted, What is the future of the adopted child, How the adopted child is forced to be a labourer? How adopted children get deprived of studies which is their basic right etc.

By getting all the above questions answered, this essay would help to explain how the children are treated as laborers in the name of adoption within the family, how the adopters treat them, and how these children face social, psychological, and emotional problems within the society.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Main objective: Identifying the challenges and issues related to adoption and child labour faced by the character 'kusuma' in Chitra Fernando's short story 'Action and reaction'.

Sub objective: indicating Misconception of religious thoughts leads to the behaviors of character 'Loku Nanda'.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research studies Chitra Fernando's short story 'Action and reaction' from her short story collection 'Three women' (1984) based on qualitative data. It mainly focuses on themes such as Challenges and issues of adoption before the laws of child adoption were implemented in Sri Lanka as well as internationally. (Psychological challenges, Physical challenges, social challenges, [I would like to bring in the topic's poverty, unequal opportunity, deprivation of education in my study as the aspects to elaborate kusuma's social challenges.], Issues related to child labour, Misconceptions of religious thoughts and behaviors). The short story 'Action and reaction' is used as a primary data source. books, research journals and websites related to the study have been used as secondary data. Sociological and rights-based approach have been applied for the textual analysis of the story.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

As it is explored with the representation of adoption and child labourers in this study, it is necessary to understand the plot of this short story Action and reaction, to study this phenomenon in detail. The story is being narrated by a character named Mahinda who is nephew of one of the protagonists of the story, Loku Nanda. The story's plot starts with the narrator Mahinda's childhood memories of Loku Nanda who lives in a village called Payagala which is situated in Sri Lanka's southern part.

This woman 'Loku Nanda' always keeps saying that "karmic law" is her constant guide. Everyone of society - people from her village and her relatives respect and honour her for her Piety and generosity and her high moral standards. She adopts a

small girl named 'Kusuma' as a further step for her meritorious acts. This adoption is the lynchpin to the flow of the story. While this adoption is considered as a pious act done by Loku Nanda, but in reality, she just adopted kusuma as adopting someone to work for her as a wage less servant. For that she teaches kusuma crocheting and other household chores but didn't teach her to read and write. Kusuma is also kept a maiden all through her life by Loku Nanda without marrying her off to someone just because she needed kusuma's help in her chores and in her old age. Kusuma, continuous to live in Loku Nanda's house, following the path of her meritorious acts. Eventually kusuma becomes the exact replica of Loku Nanda and gets charge of the house. The story lines end up telling us how Loku Nanda become so silent in kusuma's presence and how kusuma runs the household and do all meritorious deeds, even selling some of Loku Nanda's Ebony furniture and jewelry.

According to the theme of my research article, one can find as many proofs and social views on adoption through this short story and how those adopted children work in their adopter's house as mere workers and lacks their basic rights such as right to study and right to spend their quality time engaging in play activities.

The general understanding of child adoption is having another person's child into one's family and raising him or her as one's own kid. However, before the laws of child adoption were implemented in our country, child adoption was practiced in traditional affluent families in various ways. The writer of this short story very subtly explores one aspect of child adoption in traditional societies in past Sri Lanka.

Generally adopted children face some common challenges. Among such challenges are grief of being separated and loss of love and care from their beloved ones, the issues related to attachments, schooling challenges and other mental health problems. Although the first aspect of challenge is not explicitly revealed in this particular short story, the second aspect of challenges are a bit revealed through kusuma's life experience. Children who were adopted at an older age and who experienced trauma earlier in life such as neglect, abuse, poverty may have additional developmental, social, and emotional difficulties.

"Kusuma, her father said, was twelve but she looked about nine. She was small and skinny and her huge dark eyes half – filled her little face. Lice crawled in her curly black hair. There was a sore on her knee. In the village, she had lived in a hut one of eight children half starved, beaten, and bullied." (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.25)

Psychological challenges

Adopted children like all the other children, have their own and unique individual behaviours and needs. When these needs are being neglected by foster parent, it lead the child towards violent tantrums and/or sensory self-stimulation in times of either stress or excitement, oppositional behaviours, aggression, depression and anxiety (Children's hospital of Philadelphia, Behavioral and Emotional issues in adopted children, <https://www.chop.edu/conditions-diseases/behavioral-and->

emotional-issues-adopted-and-foster-children#:~:text=and%20emotional%20issues-,Types%20of%20behavioral%20and%20emotional%20issues,%2C%20aggression%2C%20depression%20and%20anxiety. Kusuma, being deprived to even show this syndrome, later, as an adult lets out her bottled-up emotions in the form of controlling and ruling over the woman who adopted her when she was a little girl of twelve years.

“I had never seen Loku Nanda weep before. Great rivers of tears streamed down her shrunken cheeks. I noticed she wasn’t wearing her ruby earrings. I didn’t need to ask what had happened to them. I supposed all Loku Nanda’s jewelry would be gradually sold to pay for the shrine room and other meritorious acts.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.41)

Exerting control over the child at all times, making fun of the child constantly, ordering the child around, threatening the child, isolating the child, overtly undermining the child’s confidence, always criticizing the child or using put downs, labelling the child and name – calling, accusing or blaming the child, bullying or intimidating the child, using sarcasm are some types of psychological threats which are adoptor uses against the children (Mina Dilip, Doing all these things makes you an emotionally abusive parent, <https://www.parentcircle.com/emotionally-abusive-parents/article>) All these experience leads to the mental trauma of the adopted child. Kusuma from this short story Action and reaction is no exception to all these mental tortures.

‘Aren’t you thoroughly ashamed girl? You eat a mountain of rice every day. Yet you steal! Greedy, Disgusting, filthy girl! Ch! Ch!’ (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.39)

‘Kusuma didn’t look up, didn’t utter a word. The Kavum held tight in her clenched fist crumbled and the bits fell on the floor. Nangi and I left quietly a few minutes later. We could still hear Loku Nanda shouting at Kusuma. Tears of disappointment were streaming down Nangi’s cheeks: yet Kusuma hadn’t shed even single tear.’ (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.40)

‘After the Kavum incident Loku Nanda kept Kusuma very busy. She was always cleaning, polishing, sweeping, or crocheting. There was little time for play.’ (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.41)

The character of Kusuma portrays many other adopted children from the same perspective. The above-mentioned ill treatments and harsh language have a very negative influence in the behaviour of Kusuma.

Physical challenges

In this short story Action and reaction, it is shown how adopted children face many physical challenges through how kusuma is deprived of having enough food to her cravings and likings. She is punished for taking ‘kavum’ without Loku Nanda’s knowledge. Although, any real parent who thinks of the child as their own wouldn’t accuse them of taking something extra and without them knowing it as ‘stealing’.

“Aren't you thoroughly ashamed girl? You eat a mountain of rice every day. Yet you steal! Greedy! disgusting! Filthy girl! Ch! Ch!” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.29)

Unlike other children kusuma is even denied to play that is a basic right of every child according to human rights of United Nations organization (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, states that the child has a right to leisure, play, and participation in cultural and artistic activities. Every child should be provided with these opportunities, and they should be able to experience their basic rights in order to secure a healthy future generation. Unfortunately, in some cases children are being deprived of these basic rights.

“After the kavum incident, Loku Nanda kept kusuma very busy. She was always cleaning, polishing, sweeping, or crocheting. There was little time for play.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.30)

Another physical challenge kusuma faces in her teenage is, she is deprived of liking someone romantically and pulled off from the concept of marriage by Loku Nanda. Kusuma, who was initially adopted by Loku Nanda is forced to stay with her adopter throughout her entire life till the end. According to the article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that: (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality, or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. But kusuma is denied to get married by her foster parent.

“kusuma, of course, never married. I never heard Loku Nanda talk about arranging a marriage for her again.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.36)

Social challenges

In addition to psychological and physical challenges, kusuma who represents many adopted children like her had to face social challenges inevitably. Speaking of social challenges, I have quoted from the original text.

“In the village, she had lived in a hut one of eight children half starved, beaten and bullied.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.25)

This shows how the children born in poor families are practically sold to rich people to serve as servants as they find no alternative to end their miseries of being beaten, bullied and starved even in their own houses.

When discussing the aspect, 'unequal opportunity', the writer subtly elaborates the idea by comparing kusuma with Mahinda's sister who are both of same age group. Chitra Fernando precisely portrayed while kusuma suffers in the house of Loku Nanda, how Mahinda's sister Mala enjoys the fruits of life with her parents and sibling.

She is all free to go wherever with her parents while kusuma is trapped within the walls of Loku Nanda's house.

“Mala, you have been spoiling her with all this talk of Colombo – all these lions and zebras! She is getting quite disobedient. No Colombo for her, no new cloth and jacket.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.29)

The right to get education is dispossessed from kusuma in this particular story, which is considered as a basic right of a child. The right to education is a fundamental human right. Every individual, irrespective of race, gender, nationality, ethnic or social origin, religion or political preference, age or disability, is entitled to a free elementary education. The adopted child has been forbidden and confined from getting educated. This is explicitly Shown through the following lines quoted from the text.

“ Loku Nanda wondered whether she should teach kusuma to read and write. She thought about it a bit. Then she told us that to teach kusuma how to crochet would be far more useful.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.27)

“Kusuma had never held a book in her hands before. She turned over the pages carefully. Nangi lent her the books for a few days. She couldn't read, of course, but she loved looking at the pictures. Then Loku Nanda ordered Nangi to take the books away.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.36)

Challenges and issues faced by child labourers

Child labour refers to the exploitation of children through any form of work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, and is mentally, physically, socially, and morally harmful. (Child labour- Wikipedia https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labour#:~:text=Child%20labour%20refers%20to%20the,physically%2C%20socially%20and%20morally%20harmful) Child labour include a group of working children who are too young to work. The work can be harmful to their physical, social, mental and educational development. Child labour has many faces. One of them is, like market work (paid in cash or kind) identifiable by the society, while other faces of child labour are scarcely visible to the society. There are so many visible forms of child labour and even though only a minority of child labourers engage in this obvious explicit labour. Many children in developing countries don't attend school nor engage in paid employment. Many of them tend to work in the household, at the family farm or in the family business. According to estimates by the international labour organization studies (2002), there are about 250 million working children between the ages of five and fourteen years old in developing countries alone, 120 million are working full- time.

“State parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.” (Article 32, UN Convention on the Rights of the child, 1989)

In the short story Action and reaction, kusuma being the child labourer is hardly noticed as a labour because she has been adopted. This tactic was tactfully practiced in those times by the adopter, so that they don't have to pay for the working children.

“Child labour has serious consequences that stay with the individual and with society for far longer than the years of childhood. Young workers not only face dangerous working conditions. They face long term physical, intellectual and emotional stress. They face an adulthood of unemployment and illiteracy. Few human Rights abuses so widely condemned, yet so widely unnoticed...” (Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, March 1999).

Most children work because their families are poor and their labour is needed for their survival. This is the exact issue faced by kusuma from this short story. Being born in a very poor family leads her to work in the house of Loku Nanda and she wouldn't have been adopted by someone if she had been born in a not so poor family. Employers often exploit children because, they are more vulnerable, cheaper to hire than adults and they are less likely to demand higher wages or better working conditions.

The child servant is often deliberately isolated. The child servant spends majority of their time inside their employer's house. They are deprived of making friends or going outside and are often prevented from all carefree activities. In addition to this isolation from the outside world, child servants are also often isolated within the house, as they are treated in a different way and viewed as inferior (2002).

Children want recognition for their problems, their initiatives, proposals, and their process of organization. They want respect and security for themselves and the work that they do. They want an education system, whose methodology and contents are adapted to the reality. They want the root causes of their situation, primarily poverty, to be addressed and tackled. They need their own dignity and time for education and leisure (2002). The characters kusuma represents all the above needs and wants of child labourers irrespective of their gender, age and race.

While child labourers are in many ways victims of the development process, they are also active participants within it. The real causes of child labour are basically–widespread poverty, gross inequality, unequal income distribution, poor education, malnutrition, ignorance etc. The elimination of all child labour will require that these issues are addressed. Development projects which aim to tackle the inequities of child labour must also address national and international, political, social, and economic inequalities.

Children are less aware of their rights; they accept works more readily and are more obedient. Children are easier to exploit. So, one of the ways to eradicate child labour is education. Education, to be effective in combating child labour, must be compulsory, allow equal access for all the children, be relevant, be of high quality, be free and flexible.

In addition to being affordable for even the poorest families, education must be of good quality. It is possible to eradicate child labour. In the short term we should aim at eradicating the most extreme forms of exploitative labour. Over the long term, governments, consumers, child rights groups should work together to ensure that all children have the opportunity to have their full development potential realized and their fundamental human rights met.

Misconception of religious thoughts.

The story subtly reveals how people's piety is just a showoff. The author repeatedly brings in the narrator's ironical description of Loku Nanda – the practical woman to indicate Loku Nanda's hypocrisy, the dual role she plays between her piousness and wickedness. In the first part of the story, Loku Nanda's actions display both piety and iniquity. However, the motives behind most of her pious actions are deeply and primarily rooted in her self-centered longings.

Religious principles are blindly practiced in society, perhaps to suit the needs and desires of people. The story sarcastically reveals how some of those so called meritorious acts done by Loku Nanda are only practiced to gain social prestige and power.

1. donates a loudspeaker to publicize her piety.
“it was not donating a loudspeaker to the temple for the relay of the daily Bana preaching so that all the Payagala townsfolk could not but benefit from the loadness of Loku Nanda's piety.” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.41)

2. puts up the best pirith mandape to compete with another woman in the village

“This is the most successful pirith and dane I've ever given everything went off beautifully! Did you notice how Mrs. Welikala was eyeing the pirith mandappe? It's ten times nicer than hers!” (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.41)

3. Punchi Nanda hides the truth of the Mandape to maintain some power and to hurt the other donator.

“Punchi Nanda laughed. 'She asked me who had made it and where we had got all that white paper from. I muttered something but didn't tell.' (Fernando C. Three women 1984 – p.41)

These practices reveal that even by being involved in religious acts people try to be Competitive and to hurt others. Thus, the story is a subtle critique of such blind religious practices and people's ignorance.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this study, a textual examination of adoption and child labour in the short story *Action and reaction* by Chitra Fernando with a critical and analytical view through various aspects has been discussed.

In this Study, it is explored through the view of an adopted child labourer named Kusuma, the character in 'Action and reaction' and in relation to her perspective even though the voice of kusuma is directly not given in the text of the short story. This symbolically denotes how the voice of that girl has been condemned by the society because we don't have her point of view to voice out her sufferings. The story grows with Kusuma from the time she was brought into Loku Nanda's house as an 'adopted servant' till the time she grows into a middle-aged lady where she knowingly or unknowingly takes the revenge for her robbed childhood.

In this research, the psychological, physical, and social breakdowns adopted children mostly face throughout their lives are explored. In addition, issues related to child labour, false piety (religious misconceptions) have also been analyzed. Therefore, it is engaged with the narratives of adoption and child labour by scrutinizing it through the short story 'Action and reaction'.

The main findings in this research through analyzing these representations, I study their needs, wants and actions that should be given consideration by the government and the individuals to give them a better future.

Adding to the above challenges, there are many more issues that can be taken as a theme for doing research on this literature work by Chitra Fernando. Karmic law, false piety, misinterpretation of religious beliefs can be considered as important issues to conduct researches in the future as well.

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