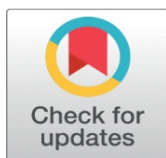


THE MIGHTY CHILD, AETONORMATIVITY AND CINEMA: A CRITICAL READING OF THE MOVIE SOUL

Devika T.S.¹  , Dr Sreena K²  

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi, Kerala, India

² Assistant Professor (SRGR), Department of English Language and Literature, School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi, Kerala, India



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Corresponding Author

Devika T.S.,
devikamohanachandran@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Power negotiations of various forms constitute any social structure and most literary theories have their onset inspired by such power relations. Aetonormativity is a recent theoretical development that focuses on the normative dominance of adults in children's literature, which has a wider scope and applicability in different fields including psychology, visual media and so on. The paper investigates the possibilities of interrogating Aetonormativity through cinema and studies its competence as a medium in endorsing the notion of the mighty child, thereby attempting a desirable power balance in adult-child or any age-based interactions. This study analyses Disney's 2020 animation movie Soul which involves the interplay between an adult protagonist and a child protagonist as the primary source text. It relies on schema theory and the concept of the cognitive script to interpret Aetonormativity and its ventured subversion in the aforementioned visual text. The paper also identifies the necessity to analyse the interpretive strategies used to educate and guide children and the impact of different media to which they are exposed to. The findings are useful in interdisciplinary research involving visual media, psychology, and literature. The study thoroughly investigates the advantages of breaking certain set standards that are taken for granted in adult-adolescent relationships. It also emphasizes the connection between cognitive psychology and fiction and how it can influence the comprehension and development of a child. It also establishes how visual media initiates a balance of power in texts intended for children compared to printed texts that tend to be Aetonormative as a medium.

Keywords: Aetonormativity, Cinema, Might, Power, Visual Media, Schema

1. INTRODUCTION

The depiction of age-based normativity in books and cinema has its inevitable presence from the very onset of its existence, though not addressed as such through a theoretical lens until recently. The significant implications of power, its various forms of manifestations as well as their impact on human relationships including

adult-child rapport require a thoughtful inquiry, especially from the perspective of cinematic universes, being the most popular medium of the contemporary era. The paper attempts to integrate a novel theoretical concept from children's literature called Aetonormativity with schema theory and the notion of the mighty child and interpret it in terms of the 2020 animation movie *Soul*. It also deciphers how the visual medium of cinema empowers a child in interrogating Aetonormativity more than a print medium employing its possibilities to place the adult and the child identically, despite their position in the power hierarchy.

2. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS AND TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

The term Aetonormativity was introduced by Swedish literary critic Maria Nikolajeva in 2010, influenced by the concepts of Heteronormativity and Queer theory. 'Aeto' is a Latin term meaning concerning age and the notion of Aetonormativity endeavours to foreground the questionable facets of adult power in children's literature. According to Nikolajeva's article, Aetonormativity is the belief that adults are the norm and have the right to exert their control and dominance over children to ensure their safety and well-being. In her book *Power, Voice and Subjectivity* Nikolajeva further explains that adults hold an immense amount of power in our society in comparison to children, who lack their own economic resources and have no voice in social and political decisions. Children are also expected to follow numerous rules and laws without question, which is considered the norm both in real life and literature. This study intends to expand this idea beyond children's literature and claim its relevance in any form of representation where children are portrayed according to adult prejudices.

Schema theory is a psychological framework that elucidates the cognitive processes through which individuals organize and process information in their minds. According to this theory, people construct mental structures, referred to as schemas, to categorize and make sense of information obtained from their environment. These schemas are mental representations of an individual's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about specific objects, events, or situations. They facilitate comprehension of new information by providing a framework for the interpretation and prediction of novel experiences. Schemas are created based on an individual's past experiences, cultural factors, and social interactions and serve to influence their perception, processing, and retention of information. [Sternberg & Sternberg \(2017\)](#) Schema theory has been applied in various domains, including education, visual media, cognitive psychology, and literature and has been used to account for a range of occurrences such as human behaviour, textual analysis, and problem-solving. [Nikolajeva \(2009\)](#), [Nikolajeva \(2009a\)](#)

Cognitive Poetics expert Peter Stockwell defines schema as a dynamic cognitive structure that can transform and develop by integrating new information, modifying existing facts, or forming novel schemas. [Stockwell \(2002\)](#) Another interpretation of schema analogous to Stockwell has been provided by John Stephens, who identifies schemas as clusters of ideas that human beings employ in their thought processes; those "knowledge structures, or patterns, which provide the framework for understanding". [Stephens \(2011\)](#) He intensively talks about the connection between schemas and fiction, specifically, the way schemas are applied in deducing fiction. According to him, when we engage with a verbal text or a picture book, the information within it aligns with a pre-existing schema stored in our memory, causing it to become activated. [Stephens \(2011\)](#) Both interpretations differ in that the former assumes schema as dynamic and the latter as static.

This study proposes to utilize Stockwell's interpretation of schema theory, as the experiences of a child and related assumptions are always in a state of flux which involves constant learning and unlearning, in the course of which, he identifies instances of Aetonormativity and chooses either to disrupt or embrace it. To clarify further, a child comprehends the realities of the adult world over time, developing continually, thereby enriching pre-existing schemas with new meanings. Stockwell states that the negotiation of schematized knowledge is evident in the comprehension of literary genres, fictional episodes, and imagined characters presented in narrated situations. [Stockwell \(2002\)](#) Literary schema thus is "a higher-level conceptual structure that organises our ways of reading when we are in a literary context". [Stockwell \(2002\)](#) It also involves the anticipations one has for a type of literature. [Stockwell \(2002\)](#)

Akin to print literature, visual media can contribute to this conceptual structure through the interaction with different forms of media such as cinema. Disney's animated family drama *Soul* stands apart from the movies involving adult-child interaction which are consciously or unconsciously Aetonormative in nature. Most of such interplays follow the general trend of children's literature where the child is provided with a temporary allowance of power and freedom by the end of which he has to return to the safety and control of the adult community. Contrastingly, the movie *Soul* explores the prospects of an adult learning life lessons from a child without the child being forced to admit adults' ideological superiority and wisdom by the end. This difference in the conventional power structure creates a "schema disruption" [Stockwell \(2002\)](#) which becomes "a challenge to the reader's existing knowledge structure" [Stockwell \(2002\)](#) thus initiating a balance of power desirable to adult-child interactions. The infant soul called 22 from the movie can be considered a mighty child concerning Beauvais's conception of might.

In "The Problem of 'Power'" Clementine Beauvais outlines might as the child's or younger generation's capability towards creating a better future. Two French nouns, *le pouvoir* and *la puissance*, both derived from the Latin root for power, are used interchangeably to describe an intriguing concept that combines the ideas of power and potential. This concept, which can be translated in English as potency or might, embodies the notion of power that is closely linked to the possession of a future. In other words, it represents a form of power that is rooted in the potential for future achievement. [Beauvais \(2013\)](#) Malin Alkestrand contrasts the notion of the mighty child with that of the controlled child, representative of traditional children's literature which she expands in terms of cognitive scripts in her article "Harry Potter and the curse of Aetonormativity". She recognizes two kinds of cognitive scripts addressing them as the controlled child script and the mighty child script inspired by the assumptions of Nikolajeva and Beauvais. [Alkestrand \(2020\)](#)

Humans acquire cognitive scripts, templates for typical daily life behaviours. According to David Herman, schematized knowledge refers to the cognitive frameworks that contain a limited set of causally and chronologically ordered actions. These actions are necessary for completing specific tasks. [Herman \(1997\)](#) of a sti Cognitive scripts are not static but rather dynamic in nature, and they can vary depending on the situation. Additionally, these scripts have a temporal aspect to them, as they can extend over time. [Herman \(1997\)](#) Analysis of the interaction between the adult Joe Gardner and the child, 22 demonstrates the mighty child script whereas the initial dialogues between Joe and his mother establish the controlled child script that exemplifies Aetonormativity. This controlled child script eventually becomes a mighty child script with the interference of the infant soul 22.

Delineating further, the adult Joe learns from the child, 22 the necessity to be true to oneself as well as to others.

The movie portrays the story of Joe Garner, an aspiring jazz musician who learns from his acquaintance with a child, more precisely, a not-born-yet infant soul, who is devoid of the experiences of the world, therefore, the most innocent, that the life is not about finding one's purpose but truly enjoying simple moments it offers. Joe accidentally reaches the "Great Before", where infant souls are assisted by assigned mentors, dead adults who are specialists in different fields to discover their "spark" after which they can initiate their journey to earth. The movie certainly mocks the conventional education system that compels children to be experts in a specific field and the accompanying trauma they endure when they are unable to discover their passion. 22 is such an infant soul who has no interest in life on earth and is left hopeless by many assigned mentors including famous personalities from history. The child ridicules the adult system and its insistent compulsion to discover one's spark thus interrogating Aetonormativity, alongside accentuating her status as a mighty child.

Three significant conversations that happened on earth between 22 and Joe's acquaintances turn out to be Joe's moments of realization regarding the need to demonstrate authentic concern for others, maintain personal authenticity and effectively communicate one's thoughts and emotions at the appropriate time. During their chaotic voyage from the "Great Before" [Decter \(2020\)](#) to earth, the soul of 22 accidentally enters Joe's body while Joe's soul ends up in a therapy cat who accompanies him throughout the pursuit. When 22 expresses his genuine opinions that are unfiltered by the norms of society, Joe's real-life situations take a surprising turn and he finds himself enlightened by the wisdom of the infant soul speaking from his body. The conversations that change the course of happenings are those between 22 and Joe's student Connie, his barber and ultimately, his mother.

Connie's interaction with her music teacher Joe whose body is possessed by the infant soul 22 makes her realize that her animosity is directed towards the educational system and its Aetonormative regulations, rather than towards the act of acquiring knowledge itself. The actual Joe would have spoken from an adult perspective and might not have succeeded in making Connie rethink her decision to quit the music class. She immediately feels a connection with her teacher after listening to 22's views on the pedagogical structure. The movie modifies George Orwell's original lines from the novel 1984 which is a metaphor for the oppressive and dehumanizing nature of the Party's control over every aspect of people's lives and interprets it in terms of education. In the presence of 22's quote, which likens state-sponsored education to a futile endeavor, Connie expresses her preference for pizza. However, she eventually changes her mind and decides to continue with her jazz lessons, which Joe confirms as her true passion despite her claim of disliking everything else. Joe later comments that although Connie may voice her dislike for many things, playing the trombone is undeniably her true calling. [Decter \(2020\)](#)

Joe understands that what he initially thought was a stimulating conversation, during his regular visits to the barber shop was focused on self-interest. He used to ignore the personal sparks of his listeners and always focused on his ambitions regarding jazz. Joe had never taken the initiative to inquire about the personal life of his long-time acquaintance, the barber. However, 22 inhabiting Joe's body prompts him to do so, ultimately altering the nature of their friendship and deepening it. Being an infant soul, 22 is genuinely curious about everything around her. She talks about her experiences in the Great Before which comes out as philosophical ruminations to every listener as they are not self-centred but

universal concerns concerning life, death, and purpose. 22 also responds frankly to the deteriorating comment of a fellow musician Paul that he is criticizing him to veil his insecurities, the truth which the adult Joe might not have dared to speak to fit himself into the adult codes of public behaviour. 22 also teaches Joe that debates are not supposed to be personal by immediately reconciling with Paul reinstating his mighty child status. [Decter \(2020\)](#)

The scene that portrays the dialogue between 22 and Joe's mother emphasises the mighty child script that accelerates the plot and highlights the controlled child script between Joe and his mother. (00:39:08) The beginning of the movie reveals Joe's anxieties about accepting the full-time job offer from school which will hinder his ambition to be a professional jazz musician. He is afraid enough to confess this to his mother whose greatest wish is to see him get a secure job. Age-based normativity is intensely apparent in the relationship between the mother and the son, where the younger one feels voiceless and powerless before the authority of the mother consequently manifesting the controlled child script. It is through 22 that the adult Joe enacts the mighty child script and convinces his mother that music is not about his career but is his reason for living. Here the mother as an adult learns from his son the necessity to consider children's passions rather than imposing theirs upon them while Joe, the adult comprehends the requirement to disclose one's truth despite being controlled by circumstances from the infant soul 22. [Decter \(2020\)](#)

In addition to the disruption of Aetonormativity employing the mighty child script in the plot line, cinema as a medium plays an important role in curbing the unhealthy supremacy of adults in the adult-child dichotomy as well. The act of viewing itself acts as a subversive tool compared to the process of reading where the dual address replaces the double address. [Alkestrand \(2020\)](#) Meghann Meeusen further expands on the concept of dual audience and how it varies according to a film and a text for children while analysing the dual audience and Aetonormativity in a picture book to film adaptations in. She underlines the balance in power, the cinema as a medium initiate in comparison to books catered for children throughout her work. From both frames of reference, cinema offers possibilities for dual addresses and reduces the chances for double addresses compared to printed texts. [Meeusen \(2018\)](#)

To develop further, dual address can be defined as a communication strategy that aims to treat both children and adults equally with respect, regardless of their age differences. In contrast, double address is innately Aetonormative where adults communicate using language and concepts beyond children's comprehension, completely disregarding their perspectives and needs. The act of viewing becomes a dual address when the adult has to watch the movie together with the child or administer him while he watches it. Alternatively, in the act of narrating a text to a child, the adult is granted more power in the meaning-making process thus facilitating the double address. [Meeusen \(2018\)](#) The visual medium significantly scales down Aetonormativity in the mode of addressing itself where a children's text becomes a family movie. As Meeusen asserts, there is a distinction even in the terminology as the films are inclusive enough to use family movies instead of children's movies while children's books remain as such. [Meeusen \(2018\)](#)

3. CONCLUSION

The movie Soul, therefore, interrogates Aetonormativity in adult-child as well as elder-younger interactions by upholding the mighty child script and contemning the controlled child script creating schema disruption in the conventional age-based

dichotomy. Nevertheless, the movie cannot be defended as entirely bereft of Aetonormativity as it validates the contribution of some adults and their insights including Joe in helping 22 find her spark. At times, the wise words uttered by the infant soul 22 are also displayed as accidental, such as those at the barber shop and with the mother, where 22 delivers only what Joe intends to say, though he is afraid of being an adult. Despite that, *Soul* recapitulates its relevance in subverting Aetonormativity in that the adult protagonist Joe's foresight which he attains by the end of the movie is daringly manifested as an accident thus ascertaining a balance of power in the involved adult-child interaction.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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