

Anthropology of Childhood and Its Literature: How Stories Contribute to the Transmission of Values and Traditions

أنثروبولوجيا الطفولة وأدبها: كيف تساهم القصص في نقل القيم والتقاليد

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Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between children's literature and socialization through the lens of cultural anthropology, focusing on how storytelling contributes to the transmission of values and traditions to younger generations. The central hypothesis is that children's stories are not merely entertainment tools, but symbolic mediums that help construct collective identity and reinforce cultural belonging. The study examines the use of symbols, archetypal characters, and narrative structures in shaping the child's understanding of the surrounding social world, with examples from Arabic children's literature. Employing a descriptive-analytical anthropological approach, the paper sheds light on the dynamics of socialization through childhood storytelling.

Keywords: Children's literature, anthropology of childhood, socialization, cultural values, symbols.

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An introduction :

Childhood is a pivotal stage in shaping the psychological and social structure of a human being, during which identity is formed and cultural norms and values are instilled. From an anthropological perspective, childhood is not viewed as a mere biological phase but rather studied as a socio-cultural phenomenon rich with symbolic meanings—produced and reshaped by social systems and collective representations. In this context, children’s literature emerges as an educational and cultural tool imbued with meaning, contributing to the process of socialization through the values it promotes, the representations it embeds, and the collective imagination it helps construct.

In children’s literature, stories evolve from mere narrative texts to anthropological mechanisms laden with symbols that reproduce the cultural system and facilitate its transmission across generations. Stories do not simply recount events; they convey societal visions of the world, the self, the other, and concepts such as good and evil, duty and prohibition—making them fertile ground for in-depth anthropological analysis. This article poses the following key question: How does children's literature, through its narrative and symbolic structure, contribute to the child's social and cultural socialization? And to what extent can children’s stories be considered tools for reproducing societal values and traditions?

To address these questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

- Children’s stories are cultural means that embody symbolic and social frameworks contributing to the formation of both individual and collective identity.
- Children’s literature serves an indirect function in transmitting value systems and social norms from one generation to the next through imagination and narration.
- The content of children’s literature varies according to cultural and social contexts, reflecting diverse methods of upbringing and conceptions of childhood.

This article employs a descriptive and analytical anthropological approach by analyzing a selected sample of children’s stories. It also applies semiotic tools to

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examine symbols, characters, and narrative structures, with reference to anthropological theories on childhood, symbolism, and cultural socialization—particularly the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Margaret Mead, and Pierre Bourdieu.

-The objectives of this article are:

- To highlight the anthropological dimension of children's literature as a medium for transmitting values and traditions.
- To analyze the construction of social meaning in children's stories through symbols, characters, and narrative forms.
- To illustrate how children's literature shapes a child's perception of the world and of self within a defined cultural framework.
- To contribute to anthropological studies of childhood by focusing on literary production directed toward young audiences.

I. Childhood in Cultural Anthropology

Childhood occupies a central concept in cultural anthropology—not merely as a biological stage but as a social and cultural construct defined by various representations and expectations that differ across societies. A child is not only born into a family but also into a symbolic system that determines what is expected of them, how they should be raised, what behaviors are permitted or prohibited, and the milestones they must pass on their journey toward adulthood. Thus, studying childhood from an anthropological lens provides insight into how societies construct individuals from the moment of birth.

1- Concepts of Childhood Across Cultures: Anthropologist Margaret Mead offered an early example of the cultural relativity of childhood through her research in Samoa, where she found that children enjoyed a high degree of freedom and responsibility compared to those in Western societies. This suggests that what constitutes "childhood" in one society may not be the same in another—implying that notions such as protection, innocence, obedience, or even play are not universal but contextually shaped. For Mead, "the child is born without a personality but acquires one through social interaction with their environment. Personality is the product of culture, and multiple cultures produce multiple types of personalities" (Hirsh Baghdad (2016), p 117).

2- Childhood as a Space for Symbolic Socialization: From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, childhood is the phase during which symbolic capital is

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instilled, as Pierre Bourdieu posits. Children are saturated with values and norms through daily practices and symbolic discourse—including literature, games, rituals, and miniature myths. “The individual is unconsciously shaped within their social environment, immersed in a flow of signs, meanings, symbols, and mental frameworks that collectively shape emotional depth, behavioral tendencies, and perspectives on life,” (Diab (2021), p 141). In this view, childhood becomes a “cultural laboratory” where a child’s perception of self, family, authority, and the world are formed.

3- Childhood in Traditional vs. Modern Societies: In his seminal 1960 book *"Centuries of Childhood"*, Philippe Ariès argued that the modern conception of childhood as a distinct phase only emerged in recent history. Pre-modern societies viewed children as small adults and integrated them early into social and economic life. With the advent of schooling, children's literature, and specialized clothing, modern societies began separating children from adults. Ariès, using psychoanalytic insights, explains how educational discourse renders the child invisible and suppresses their individuality, effectively "cancelling" the child (Groues, (2010)). This indicates that norms of upbringing vary across societies, shaped by their specific social and economic structures. In sum, childhood is not just a biological reality but a historically and socially constructed category (Ariès (1960), p.10), and thus, its meaning is constantly renegotiated depending on cultural context.

4- Representations of Childhood and the Reproduction of Cultural Systems:

Childhood reflects societal perceptions of time, development, and moral order. The way children are treated and the texts produced for them reveal the roles they are expected to play within the social structure. Analyzing childhood thus unveils the underlying dynamics of power, gender, class, and cultural belonging.

From an anthropological point of view, childhood is not a static or natural state but a culturally produced and continuously reshaped reality. It is the primary field in which the individual is formed as a social being, making it a critical entry point for understanding how culture and values are reproduced. It is a foundational phase in human development—biologically, psychologically, and socially. Here, seeds of identity, social norms, and symbolic frameworks are sown, enabling the child to enter the social order as an active participant.

Émile Durkheim emphasized that a child is not born a social being but becomes one through education. This process, however, is not merely about

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instructions—it is a complex mechanism through which values and societal norms are transmitted. Margaret Mead echoed this view, asserting that culture begins with childhood: a child's early interactions with adults shape their integration into society. Children do not passively absorb culture; they reinterpret and reproduce it through everyday interactions within the family and community. Bourdieu reinforces this perspective by describing how childhood socialization engrains what he terms *habitus*—a system of acquired dispositions that guide behavior in various life domains. A child is not born with this habitus but acquires it gradually through social experience (Bourdieu (1972), p 282).

These theoretical approaches affirm that childhood is a decisive phase in constructing the human being as a social entity. It is the space where the symbolic and behavioral foundations for social integration are laid, and through which the cultural and social system of society is continuously reproduced.

II. Children’s Literature as a Symbolic and Social Discourse

Children’s literature falls under the category of cultural discourses that go beyond aesthetic or entertainment purposes. It performs multiple symbolic and social functions. It is a discourse directed at shaping the imagination of childhood; while also reflecting society’s orientations and the value systems it seeks to instill in the younger generation. As (Lotroux (2013), p 79) states: “It is part of a society’s general culture and a powerful tool for education and developing taste among the youth.”

1- The Symbolic Function: Encoding Values and Reproducing Identity:

Children’s literature acts as a carrier of societal symbols, representing concepts of good and evil, masculinity and femininity, obedience and rebellion, and other dichotomies reframed in simplified language. Stories often feature symbolic characters (e.g., the lion representing strength, or the rabbit representing cleverness), and symbolic elements like animals, colors, spaces, or actions. These create an encoded discourse that contributes to socialization by transmitting mental patterns and cultural representations.

Children’s literature also rewrites reality into mythological or fantastical forms, allowing the child to assimilate and internalize it without resistance.

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2- The Social Function: A Tool for Socialization and Citizenship Formation:

Children’s literature is an effective tool for transmitting social, political, and cultural values, and for cultivating a sense of belonging and collective identity. It is a medium for producing the “young citizen,” instilling values like respect for others, cooperation, order, environmental preservation, and national loyalty.

As Dr. Lotrous states: “Children’s literature must play a role in reinforcing spiritual values in children, a sense of national belonging and pride in their language and history, and in strengthening the relationship between children and society, especially the school as a second family” (Lotrous (2013), p 85).

Children’s literature also often mirrors the gendered division of roles, which calls for critical examination to understand how it reproduces social hierarchies.

3- Children’s Literature as a Mirror of Social Change:

As social structures evolve (family, education, technology), so too does children’s literature. Contemporary texts now address issues like divorce, migration, cultural diversity, and even climate change—reflecting growing awareness of current questions and shifting away from authoritarian tones toward more participatory storytelling that respects the child’s intellect and interpretive abilities.

A new form of discourse has emerged in the digital age, combining text, image, movement, and interactivity, thereby altering the structure of reception and interpretation.

4- The Ideological Debate in Children’s Literature:

Children’s literature is not free from ideological dimensions—whether nationalistic, religious, or liberal. Political and educational institutions often employ it to promote a certain image of the “ideal child.” Texts for children are subject to censorship and value-based filtering, reflecting what society deems acceptable or unacceptable.

Children’s literature has thus become a symbolic battleground between tradition and modernity, local values and globalization. It can be approached through discourse analysis, symbolic anthropology, and the sociology of childhood. It is a rich field for studying how meanings, values, and representations are constructed to shape the child’s identity within the larger cultural fabric.

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III. Stories as Tools of Cultural Regulation and Tradition Transmission

In both traditional and modern societies, stories are viewed as symbolic mediums for transmitting systems of values, social rules, and behavioral norms. Their function extends beyond entertainment—they play a central role in the reproduction of culture and behavioral regulation according to prevailing social structures.

Cultural regulation refers to symbolic and informal mechanisms that organize collective behavior within socially accepted boundaries, while the transmission of traditions refers to the passing of symbolic and behavioral heritage from one generation to the next through recurring narratives and cultural codes.

1- The Story as a Mechanism of Symbolic Regulation: Stories create normative behavioral models through characters, plotlines, and systems of reward and punishment. They reinforce what is acceptable or rejected. They present idealized characters like the obedient child, the virtuous woman, and the brave man—models for the reader to emulate. Endings often reward conformity and punish deviance, reinforcing self-discipline.

For example, the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” conveys the values of caution and obedience, warning against speaking to strangers, and thus serves a moral regulatory function.

2- Stories as Collective Memory Carriers of Tradition: In oral societies, stories serve as primary vehicles for passing on rituals, beliefs, marriage customs, hospitality codes, taboos, and kinship systems. Grandmothers’ tales are cultural archives of collective identity, preserving traditions in the absence of written records.

Through stories, societies shape temporal awareness and symbolic hierarchies—for example, tales like “Lalla Fatma N’Soumer” not only revive national memory but also offer a symbolic portrayal of women as figures of resistance, contributing to collective consciousness.

3- The Anthropological Dimensions of Stories as Tools of Regulation: According to symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz, humans need symbolic sources of orientation to navigate the systems of meaning represented by culture. Thus, stories serve interpretive functions that encode messages about power, gender, and identity.

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In traditional societies, folk tales are interpreted as cultural texts reflective of local values. These stories are often repeated during social gatherings—weddings, seasonal festivals, evening conversations—reaffirming cultural continuity.

4- Stories in Contemporary Contexts: From Tradition to Ideology: Even in modern contexts, stories are used by the state or school systems to transmit desired values such as citizenship, work ethics, hygiene, and tolerance. However, they may also become ideological tools used to shape collective behavior according to political or economic goals.

Some stories in school curricula reproduce authoritarian discourse or traditional gender roles without critique. Although they may seem harmless, they often carry deep meanings and are interpreted differently depending on the context, audience, and characters involved (Christiansen(2021)).

Stories are thus dual-function tools: symbolic behavioral regulators and cultural conveyors of tradition. They are more than narratives—they are semantic structures that reshape and perpetuate social action. Studying them anthropologically reveals the deep interconnection between the symbolic and the structural dimensions of society.

IV. Case Study: Anthropological Analysis of "The Ant and the Grasshopper"

1- Story Overview and Cultural Context: “The Ant and the Grasshopper” is among the most well-known symbolic tales for children, especially in the version by La Fontaine. It provides an ideal case for symbolic discourse analysis within children's literature as a tool for reproducing social values.

From an anthropological perspective, this story is a “cultural text” (Clifford Geertz) that reflects societal views on labor, time, morality, and social inequality.

2- Narrative Summary (Simplified)

- The ant works throughout the summer and stores food.
- The grasshopper sings and dances, carefree.
- Winter arrives, and the grasshopper goes hungry and asks for help.
- The ant refuses to help because he did not work like her.

3- Symbolic Analysis: Character Significance

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The Ant

- Symbolizes hard work and diligence.
- Embodies bourgeois values of calculation and utility.
- Portrayed as virtuous for following social “virtue” (work, foresight, caution).

The Grasshopper

- Represents fragility, irresponsibility, and perhaps an artistic/bohemian spirit.
- Punished for seeking joy and lacking long-term vision.

This symbolism reflects classic cultural dichotomies: work vs. leisure, responsibility vs. pleasure, rationality vs. emotion.

4- Anthropological Reading: The Story as Social Control Tool

- Educational/Regulatory Function:
Used in both schools and families to reinforce values of work and planning, encouraging discipline and frugality.
- Ideological Function:
Despite its simplicity, the story carries a conservative economic ideology that legitimizes a refusal of solidarity, promotes individualism and self-reliance, and excludes artistic or vulnerable expressions from social acceptance.

5- Cultural Dimensions of the Story

- In Western societies: The story aligns with capitalist ethics that link success to individual effort, consistent with Max Weber’s analysis of Protestant work ethics.
- In Arab societies: Although the story is told with similar logic, it may clash with deeply rooted values of hospitality and solidarity, making the ant’s stance less acceptable or even criticized.

6- Alternative Critical Interpretation: Anthropology of Resistance

One could reinterpret the story differently:

- The grasshopper does not represent failure, but resistance to forced labor and excessive productivity.
- The ant becomes a symbol of authoritarian discipline and social conformity.
- The story is thus critiqued as a mechanism for indoctrinating children with market values at the expense of creativity and play.

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7- Possibilities for Contemporary Cultural Adaptation

Given social transformations, this story could be rewritten to reflect values of cooperation and solidarity instead of rigid individualism. The role of art and music (embodied by the grasshopper) could be acknowledged as part of social well-being rather than dismissed as unproductive.

Conclusion of the Case Study: “The Ant and the Grasshopper” represents a dense symbolic structure that encodes cultural values regarding work, responsibility, and solidarity. An anthropological reading reveals how the story functions as a tool for reinforcing the social order, but also serves as a space for cultural negotiation and resistance, especially when reinterpreted or adapted to different cultural contexts.

Table representing: the Symbolic Representations and Cultural Functions in the Fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper

Analytical Dimension	The Ant	The Grasshopper	Anthropological Interpretation
Core Symbolism	Work, saving, discipline, rationality	Singing, leisure, carelessness, emotion	A Symbolic embodiment of dual values: (work vs. pleasure) – (utility vs. art)
Social Value being reinforced	Diligence, planning, rejection of dependency	Warning against laziness and aimless living	The story is used in socialization to reinforce values of work and discipline and strengthen authority structures within the family and school.
Disciplinary Function	Role model (moral ideal)	Rejected model (receives punishment/exclusion)	Behavioral regulation through symbolic reward and punishment.
Economic/Ideological connotation	Promotion of individualism, self-responsibility, cost-benefit logic	Unproductiveness, rejection of market values, momentary enjoyment	Conservative discourse that exalts capitalist ethics and legitimizes social inequality and lack of solidarity.
Function in Cultural Socialization	Teaching children that success results from effort and planning	Warning against recklessness and dependence on others	The story serves as a tool for reproducing the prevailing social order, according to the model of the “productive citizen.”
Potential for Critical/reversed interpretation	Representation of symbolic authority and excessive discipline	Expression of soft resistance and the right to play and art	In a critical reading, the story becomes a space to question-imposed values and their fairness, especially in societies with a participatory ethos.

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Cultural Variability in Reception	May be accepted in the Western societies aligned with capitalist work ethics	Re-evaluated in societies that value hospitality and solidarity	The story shows adaptability to different value systems, making it a rich material for comparative cultural analysis.
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The table presents an anthropological breakdown of the fable of the ant and the grasshopper, treating it as a symbolic narrative used in cultural and social upbringing. The ant represents a moral model of discipline, labor, and saving, while the grasshopper symbolizes joy, singing, and irresponsibility. This value distribution is not neutral; it performs a clear regulatory function in which productive behavior is rewarded and carefree conduct is punished.

The story is used to instill values linked to individual responsibility and utilitarian thinking, reinforcing capitalist ethics and legitimizing social inequality. It thus reflects a conservative ideological discourse that sustains authority structures within the family and educational institutions.

However, critical interpretation allows for an alternative reading: the ant may embody excessive control and submission, while the grasshopper expresses a soft form of resistance and the right to art, play, and spontaneity. The comparative cultural dimension also reveals the story’s flexibility. Its meaning varies across societies, making it a fertile subject for cultural reappropriation and symbolic contestation

V. Functions of Children’s Literature in Shaping Identity and Belonging

Children’s literature is rooted in cultural and educational fields that rely on early reception and symbolic socialization. It serves as an effective tool in reinforcing identity and building belonging through language, narrative, characters, and the values embedded in texts aimed at children. Its analysis can draw upon the anthropology of education and social representation theories—especially Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence and Albert Bandura’s social learning theory, which explains how repeated exposure shapes both personal and collective identity.

1-Core Functions of Children’s Literature in Identity Formation

-Identity-Building Function: Children’s literature enhances cultural identity by incorporating heritage stories, national symbols, and historical figures that reflect

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the group’s uniqueness—fostering a child’s awareness of belonging to a specific symbolic environment. It also helps shape the image of the self and the “other,” allowing children to locate themselves within the social world and understand their place relative to others, whether as characters in the story or members of different cultures.

-Social and Integrative Function: Children’s literature strengthens social belonging by depicting stories of communal life, cooperation, and inclusion within family, neighborhood, or school settings. It nurtures the child’s perception of being part of a greater whole. Literature also conveys ethical and behavioral values (e.g., respect, teamwork, courage), reinforcing moral and normative alignment with one’s group.

-Political and Cultural Function: In multicultural or postcolonial contexts, children’s literature becomes a tool for resisting marginalization and cultural erasure by defending native languages and local narratives. Collectively themed stories help construct shared narratives that reinforce collective memory and national or communal identity.

-Psychological–Symbolic Function: By identifying with story characters, children model themselves on desirable traits, thus building their personality and self-awareness—particularly during critical identity development stages. Some stories explore feelings of alienation or themes of dual identity (e.g., diaspora children), helping children reconcile overlapping cultural affiliations.

-Overlapping and Limiting Functions: It is crucial to recognize that children’s literature may also perpetuate stereotypes or exclusionary depictions of the “other,” which can distort identity and belonging. For example, portraying racial or cultural “others” negatively can reinforce discriminatory or hierarchical identity notions. Therefore, a critical and cultural assessment of children’s literature content is necessary to eliminate implicit biases and foster inclusive representations.

-Results :

- Children’s literature acts as a mechanism for reproducing a society’s symbolic order: The studied story, “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” reveals a symbolic system that reinforces values like labor, saving, and obedience while condemning leisure, laziness, and nonconformity. The ant represents conservative collective values and the idealized child model, proving that children’s stories are not mere entertainment

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but powerful tools for transmitting ideology and reinforcing existing cultural and social structures.

- Childhood in Arab cultural contexts is depicted as a phase of moral and social preparation: Most stories present childhood as a stage requiring discipline and correction rather than a space for imagination and experimentation. This reflects a cultural perception of the child as a subject under construction, rather than an independent agent—a view aligned with Bourdieu’s observations on socialization as the inculcation of symbolic capital and predetermined lifestyles.
- Narrative structures in children's stories often favor moral indoctrination over critical thinking: Stories are typically built on sharp moral binaries (e.g., virtuous ant / negligent grasshopper), producing closed narratives that end in a didactic moral rather than inviting reflection or interpretation. This sustains a vertical/authoritarian model of socialization where adults deliver messages to children without dialogue or participation—contrary to modern theories advocating for an active child reader.
- The underlying messages often reflect gender representations: The ant is often depicted as an ideal female figure—hardworking, organized, and devoted—while the grasshopper is usually male, carefree, and chaotic. This reinforces gendered value distribution: female/discipline vs. male/play, subtly embedding patriarchal norms. Semiotic analysis reveals that children’s literature can inadvertently perpetuate gender hierarchies.

These findings confirm that children’s literature in traditional Arab contexts serves as an effective tool for cultural control and the reproduction of social structures—especially regarding gender roles, moral codes, and childhood perceptions. However, this also raises the need for a more emancipatory, interactive, and pluralistic approach to children’s literature.

-Conclusion :

The intersection of childhood anthropology and children’s literature reveals deeply symbolic dimensions that surpass entertainment, positioning stories as core mediums for transmitting values and shaping cultural and social representations among young audiences. Through their plots, characters, and scenarios, stories perform a ritualistic and symbolic role in reinforcing collective norms and ideologies in subtle but powerful ways.

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By analyzing story patterns across different cultural environments, it becomes clear that each society reshapes its collective identity through the stories it tells its children—whether through oral traditions or modern texts. These narratives serve as “cultural mirrors,” revealing dominant values (e.g., respect, bravery, obedience, solidarity) and exposing symbolic power structures between generations.

In the age of digital transformation and cultural globalization, it is increasingly important to question the content of children’s stories: Do they still serve as faithful conveyors of heritage and values? Or do they now reflect identity tensions and the risks of disconnection from local contexts?

These questions demand that anthropologists delve deeper into childhood storytelling as a space for understanding social dynamics and transformation from a child-centered perspective.

Re-centering children’s literature in anthropological studies not only enriches our understanding of childhood as a culture in its own right but also reveals the story as a form of cultural resistance and an informal record of society recreated through the eyes of its youngest members.

Practical Suggestions :

1. Encourage the creation of stories that reflect local cultural specificities and educational values.
2. Use storytelling as a tool to understand local culture from the child’s perspective.
3. Integrate children’s literature into teacher and educator training programs.

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