

Alice's Journey to the New Land of Wonder: Analyzing Megha Rao's *Alice: The Netherworld*

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Abstract

Fantasy is an inversion of the world we inhabit. Our childhoods were filled with fantasy stories and would be incomplete without knowing the story of "Alice in Wonderland". Despite the popularity, the genre of fantasy suffers from critical disinterest and is often viewed as a basically conservative genre, both in the sense of its conventions and its moral world view. This paper seeks to explore the significant presence of fantasy in the minds of modern authors. Megha Rao's *Alice: The Netherworld* was a product out of the inspiration brought by *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The researcher was curious to know the depth of this inspiration by using the literary device of intertextuality.

Keywords: Megha Rao's *Alice: The Netherworld*, fantasy genre, social context, intertextuality, escape, good and evil, reality vs. illusion.

Introduction

Fantasy is a very relevant and important genre in the literary market. Especially after the Harry Potter series came into vogue, the particular genre became more accessible to kids and teens. Fantasy is farthest away from reality yet the closest. It is like pulling whatever you know; you've ever believed in and stood for, in a very imaginary setting. Despite its popularity, it is seen as an escapist literature set in an alternative world where good and evil is well-defined and easily recognized. But more than an escape, I would like to see it as a way which helps us to keep our best kept secrets in a very plausible manner.

Our childhood is incomplete without knowing the story of Alice in Wonderland. But now it's time to get over the wonderland and look at the netherworld. The young Indian author Megha Rao's *Alice: The Netherworld* takes her readers to a journey of the Netherworld, the fourth world

where demons live (bookish blog). This book is a result of her inspiration towards *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and provides new dimension to the journey of Alice.

Analysis

Fantasy is a broad trend in literature with roots in the oldest epic work, demonstrating significant presence in modern literature through sub-genres like high fantasy, magic realism, dark fantasy, etc. Megha Rao's *Alice: The Netherworld* describes the adventures of Alice who gets lost in the woods and enters the netherworld which is filled with demons (The Hindu-11 June 2012). Rao was highly inspired and enthusiastic after looking at a poster of the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* written by Lewis Carroll. It triggered a question "why can't she be in another world?" which ultimately led to the creation of this novella.

Intertextuality is a literary device which defines an 'interrelationship between texts.' These text references are made to influence the reader and add layers of depth to a text, based on the readers' prior knowledge, assumptions and understanding. Intertextuality draws upon concept, context or ideology from other writing to be merged in the new work. Writers make use of objects, people or situations explicitly to trigger an emotional response in the viewer. Intertextuality is seen as an effective weapon which allows writers to open new perspectives and possibilities to construct their stories. As I said earlier, the author was very much influenced by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

The story begins in the real world and takes us to the secondary world in a fantasy of escape which is quite similar to *Alice in Wonderland*. Perhaps in the present era of skepticism, the protagonist of fantasy who undertakes a journey has more freedom to return bringing a message of renewal or hope. The plots open a door to readers' mundane concerns of life and help them to escape from it. The young Alice became frustrated with her mother's wrath. She runs into a forest and gets trapped in the Netherworld, the fourth world filled with fantasy. When she is back to the real world, all her anger fades away and sees an aura of assurance and hope in her life. Alice is portrayed as a beautiful, angel-like figure in both the fantasy stories. Additionally, Rao's enthusiasm towards Alice in Wonderland is explicit in many instances; "I looked at her strangely. "The Alice I read about fell inside a hole." And found herself in Wonderland. This is far from Wonderland, I'd say..." (Rao 70).

Rao seems to be influenced by Alice's sweet older sister in *Alice in Wonderland* as she had given prominent role to Alice's elder sister 'Emma' in *Alice: The Netherworld*. Unlike her mother, she is very friendly and plays a very supportive role in the growth of little Alice. Nevertheless, just as how Carroll used her sister effectively as a tool to help Alice to get back from the world of illusion to reality, by waking her from the dream, Rao used Emma as a representative of humans to welcome Alice back to the human world. Moreover, the mischievous

Cheshire cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* specially known for its mysterious grinning has been re-depicted in this new work with the similar distinguishing features. Carroll had given a detailed description of Cheshire cat's appearance as obese, furry and fluffy, purple in colour with pink stripes and yellow eyeballs whereas, Rao's Cheshire cat was entirely orange in colour with soft furs and large eyeballs. Cheshire cat in the Wonderland was famous for taking pleasure in misdirecting Alice and explaining her about the stupidity of Wonderland. Similarly, Cheshire cat appears before Alice in the Netherworld as a helper and tricks and misdirects her to the dangerous zone.

A fantasy can to a certain extent be placed within a social context as no fantasy can be understood in isolation. We can apply this to Harry Potter series. There is a sense of continuity and credibility in all the novels under the series. Harry becomes an Everyman type of figure. Readers are able to identify with Harry because of the element of ordinariness presented in the portrayal. Here Alice represents an ordinary teenager sometimes dreams to be in an illusionary world in order to avoid the frets and tensions of the real world. Even while being in the Netherworld, she gets confused whether it is just a dream or not. Similarly, as one reads this novella, he/she begins to think characters in the Netherworld as living persons and their world appears to be familiar. "God! I don't want her to die...I never meant for that. I wouldn't really care if a human died, Allie, but what if it was because of me? I could never live with that." (48). These words are uttered by Cash, a demon that belongs to the fourth world. In spite of his demonic nature, he still calls 'God' which is completely a human attribute. Moreover, the character shows a moralistic and sympathetic attitude similar to ordinary beings.

In most of the fantasy stories, representations of good and evil are clearly defined. The best example of this is *The Twilight Saga*. Generally, vampires are seen as evil and considered as monsters. But the Cullens are different as they avoid their natural craving for human blood. Even though Edward's unconscious urge to drink Bella's blood disturbs him, he became successful in controlling his monster-like desire as well as to save Bella from many dangers. At the same time, vampires like Aro make innumerable plans to kill Bella. In the same way, Alice had to encounter with merpeople, the deadly krakens and the shapeshifters who were evil in nature. But, Cash and family fight with all their might for Alice's safety and protected her from all the dangers. Moreover, just like the fight between good and evil vampires in the last series of *Twilight (Breaking Dawn)*, the last chapter of the book presents a fight between good and bad demons. It doesn't matter if readers have to travel inside a world of magic realism in order to understand the evil nature. Rather what appears to be normal or what one sees as normal in the real world is frequently challenged by fantasy.

Conclusion

Interpersonal relationships are undergoing cataclysmic changes with tremendous technological advancements. And the thin line between reality and illusion is diminishing speedily. In such a world, our faith in the basic goodness of human nature gets re-affirmed through these imaginative pieces. The novella has helped the readers to get rid of the so called 'wonderland' from their minds and succeeded in taking them to another world of wonder. Furthermore, it emboldens the readers who are most familiar with wonderland to imagine another world of fantasy to explore just like Alice. Along with fantasy, the element of family included in the novel has given more acceptances among the readers despite its western inclination.

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