



Nankichi Niimi and his contribution to Japanese Children's Literature

Md. Aliul Azim (Ph.D.)

Assistant Professor

Department of Japanese

Bhasha Bhavana

Visva-Bharati

&

Debapriyo Das

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of Japanese

Bhasha Bhavana

Visva Bharati

ABSTRACT:

Japan is enriched with children's literature like all other countries. Authors like Sazanami Iwaya, Mimei Ogawa, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, and Kenji Miyazawa have significantly contributed to increasing the treasure of Japanese Children's Literature. Nankichi Niimi is considered one of the foremost Japanese children's literature authors. The present study primarily focuses on Nankichi's short story "Amedama" and elucidates it through humanity, motherhood, and philanthropy. However, it also presents a brief analysis of children's literature and its characteristics, along with a brief history of Nankichi's life and works.

KEYWORDS: Children Literature, Japanese Children Literature, Nankichi Niimi, Amedama, Humanity, Motherhood, Philanthropy

INTRODUCTION:

The New World Encyclopaedia defines childhood as 'the phase of infancy and adulthood. Childhood is the time during which human being develops physical bodies and mental abilities. Although physical development involves food, shelter, exercise, and protection against harmful objects or events, psychological development is more complex. According to English philosopher John Locke, a child's mind is simple, innocent, and 'like a blank slate. A child tries to imitate the activities he watches from the

environment around him. As he progresses toward early growth, he begins to express those imitations through language. Children usually create their fantasy world during this time by orally listening to fairy tales, myths, legends, and so on from their grandparents. Gradually, the mind of a child gets acquainted with emotions and feelings. Hence, literature performs the role of a teacher who imparts knowledge about various aspects. It further acts as a bridge between the inner and outer world of a human being and not only aids in recognizing one's self at a much deeper level but also helps them to understand the purpose of human existence in this world. The fundamental question that strikes our mind is what defines children's literature. And what are its characteristics?

Before understanding what children's literature is, it is essential to know what literature is and how it is created. Emotions and experiences contribute much to the creative faculty of the human mind, and this creative mind plays an indispensable part in literary creation. Hence, literature can be defined as the arena where human emotions, feelings, imaginations, and experiences are transmitted artistically in written or oral form. Children's literature forms a significant component of the umbrella term 'literature.' Since time immemorial, critics, educationists, and researchers have tried deciphering the word 'children's literature. There are, indeed, a plethora of opinions available regarding the exact definition and meaning of children's literature. However, the most widely acknowledged idea is: that literature that provides entertainment, education, moral values, and positive messages can be regarded as children's literature. Children are the flag-bearers of the nation and our future generations. Therefore, it is essential to impart educational and moral values to them for the country's well-being. In the words of Maxim Gorky:

"To successfully create fiction and educative literature for children, we need to follow: first, writers of talent capable of writing simply, interestingly, and meaningfully; then, editors of culture, with sufficient political and literary training, and finally, the technical facilities to guarantee timely publication and due quality of books for children." (Page No.)

Gorky emphasizes three significant factors in producing books for children. Firstly, the content of a story, such as the language, characters, settings, plot, actions, and themes, must be written in simple terms, i.e., it should be easily understandable, for long, complex sentences and usage of arduous words in it will invariably make it difficult for them to understand. Secondly, the story must attract and create interest among them, for curiosity is one of the basic instincts of the human mind. A simple and linear storyline not only grabs a child's attention but also creates excitement within them to explore it further. A child, therefore, takes great interest in listening to and reading such stories. Thirdly, the story must convey some meaning to them after grabbing the meaning at the superficial level; the child will proceed further with the story. It is worth mentioning here that a child may capture the real essence of the story only after listening to or reading the entire story. Therefore, a storyteller or a writer must be conscious of the three things mentioned above. Additionally, the writer should also keep in mind the 'age-group' factor which plays a significant role in the domain of 'children's literature.

In the post-modern scenario, the world has become a global village. With scientific advancements, our engagements with electronic gazettes have increased, and knowingly or unknowingly, we have detached ourselves from human beings and nature. Mother Nature which chiefly comprises flora and fauna, is ignored repeatedly. However, literature is continuously working as a social device to strengthen the bonding between living and non-living elements constantly flowing over the decades. For instance, pet animals deeply bond with human beings; a dog is very much faithful to his master. The mutual relationship gets established only when both mingle and share a common space. The complex yet highly significant association between human beings, plants, and animal finds an alternative platform in the name of television and the silver- screen. The growing popularity of recent cartoons, animations, and movies not only revives our age-old relationship between human beings and nature but also leaves an indelible mark on the human mind through its compact presentation. A child's mind can build a psychological connection when profoundly absorbed and driven into the interactions among living and non-living elements of nature, which are reflected on television or silver screen.

Similarly, literary books for children import them to an altogether different world of fantasy and enable a child to share the same space with the elements of nature. Perhaps the real essence of children's literature lies in the fact that it serves the purpose of 'edutainment,' i.e., education and entertainment. Although the primary objective of children's literature is to entertain children, it also imparts knowledge to them through the portrayal of different shades in character: the clash or fight between good and evil, for instance, serves the purpose of educating a child about conflicting ideologies prevalent in human society. It imparts lessons about their culture and ethics and teaches them the moral codes of conduct. Gradually, it engages with the child's thought process and, in turn, enhances their power of judgment. They should learn to accept only those things which are positive and helpful for their growth and discard anything harmful and detrimental.

It is worth mentioning that every country around the globe has its world of children's literature. When we think of European Children's Literature, we see the works of Oscar Wilde, Jonathan Swift, and Rudyard Kipling. However, little is known about Japanese children's literature and its dynamic authors. Japan is enriched with its versatile literary creation for children and juvenile readers. Sazanami Iwaya, Mimei Ogawa, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Kenji Miyazawa, Nankichi Niimi, and others have portrayed the beautiful dreamland of fantasy for the children reader of Japan.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF NANKICHI NIIMI:

Nankichi Niimi is one of Japan's foremost children's literature authors. He was born on 30th July 1913 in Handa, located in Aichi prefecture. His childhood name was Shohachi Niimi. Nankichi lost his mother and became a lonely child at four. Later, his father, Tazo Watanabe, remarried Shin a year after Nankichi's mother's demise. Nankichi's father, Tazo, used to work as a Tatami maker and later became an independent businessman and ran a small Tatami shop. Therefore, he struggled hard to make both ends

meet. Nakamichi has been very much fond of writing since his childhood. His father admitted him to Handa City Elementary School, having a meager income.

Student Nankichi was very much efficient in learning. He had great enthusiasm for literature. He worked as a substitute teacher at an elementary school in Handa at eighteen. Then he devoted himself to teaching in schools like Jinjo Elementary School and Kawawa no.1 Jinjo High School. In 1932, he got admitted to the Tokyo School of Foreign Studies (Currently Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) to learn English Literature. During this time, Nankichi focused on learning European and American literature. After graduating, he worked as an English teacher at Anjo High School. He suddenly felt sick and became very weak in 1934. Despite his sickness, he continued his duty as a teacher wholeheartedly. In 1943, he finally had to resign from his work as a teacher at Anjo High School for severe deterioration of health due to Tuberculosis. On 22nd March of the same year, Nankichi took his last breath at 29.

Nankichi started writing multiple songs for children in the third grade of elementary school. His first children's story, "Gongitsune" (1931), was published at eighteen years of age in *Akai Tori*, a popular magazine during his time. After posting this storybook in Japan, he gained immense popularity, particularly in the children's community. It has been included in elementary school textbooks in Japan since 1956. His work, "Denden Mushi no kanashimi" is most beloved by Empress Michiko. She expressed her fondness for Nankichi Niimi's works, primarily mentioning the story "Denden Mushi no kanashimi" while delivering a speech at the "International Board on Books for Young People" conference in 1998. Nankichi compiled a bunch of poems and songs for children, which were written by his students and published in the newspaper in 1939. He also included several verses in the compilation which he wrote. The most popular among these are "Mugi Fue", "Sumidare no Dozo" and "Hosi Matsuri". In 1941 during the Pacific War, Nankichi's health started deteriorating heavily, and he was found ill due to Tuberculosis. His last fairy tale compilation, "Ojisan no Ranpu" (1942), was published before his death.

Nankichi had a delicate and rich sensibility and observed nature and human beings with deep introspection. His works also reveal the humor and pathos he bore since his mother's demise. Nankichi penetrated deep into the intricacies of life and its existence. Nankichi was a close observer of human nature. He had an exquisite sense to justify human beings perfectly. Sometimes, he possessed a skeptical perception of humans but had humor and a philanthropic vision towards them. He was very fond of children and affectionate to them, for their innocence and purity of mind attracted him the most. He realized that children should be dealt with with utmost care. His work *Amedama* is a wise representation of humanity, empathy, motherhood, and philanthropy.

AMEDAMA- THE PORTRAYAL OF HUMANITY, MOTHERHOOD & PHILANTHROPY:

In the story 'Amedama,' a woman travels by boat with her two children and other passengers in a warm springtime. A Samurai from the other side of the river bank, waving his hand, stops the boat about to leave. He boards the ship and flumps onto somewhere in the middle of it. Since the weather is delightful, he starts dozing off. The two kids start giggling with each other looking at the dozing Samurai having a strange outlook with a black beard. Their mother stops them from making fun of the Samurai in fear of a bitter consequence for disruption of sleep. The two kids start bugging their mother for candy a short time later.

The mother becomes helpless to meet their demand as only one piece of candy is in the handbag. She tries to handle the stubborn kids by saying she will buy them candy after reaching the river bank. However, the determined kids keep on bugging. Suddenly, the Samurai who is supposed to sleep wakes up and looks toward the badgering kids. The mother becomes terrified, thinking that the Samurai must have been disturbed by the kids. She tries to calm them once again but fails. The Samurai pulls out his sword, approaches them, and asks the mother to hand over the candy to him. Being frightened of getting slayed, she gives the sweet to the Samurai with a trembling hand. The Samurai takes it, places it on the boat's edge, cuts it into two pieces, and distributes it between the two kids. Finally, the Samurai deals with the embarrassing situation with mastery and peace.

The short story provides interest not only to children but also to adult readers. The entire report can be considered a hidden message of Nankichi towards the children. From its moral context, the children could be advised to give value to 'obey your parents' and 'be compassionate and kind to your partner, and not to be 'self-centered'. After simplified reading of the entire story, children can be made aware of the event of the pestering kids for candy and disobeying their mother, which leads to disruption of the Samurai's sleep. Although, in the climax of the story, Nankichi has portrayed the character of the Samurai philanthropically that derives a happy ending, children audience could be advised to value morals by making them think of the bitter consequences that could have taken place at any point in time, i.e., getting slayed down by the sword of the Samurai for their misconduct. Hence, the entire work is undoubtedly a wise representation of moral lessons toward children.

In most cases, Japanese T.V programs, animations, cartoons, movies, and narratives represent Samurai as violent and outrageous. Historical descriptions of their outlook, way of dressing, hair-style, weapon, lifestyle, personality, ideology, and social role depict them as extreme and outrageous. Research has also been conducted on their behaviors and their activities in society.

Constantine N. Vaporis, in the research article "*Samurai, Masculinity, and Violence in Japan* " focusing Tokugawa period (1600-1867), states that Samurai could kill a commoner, especially those who belonged to a lower caste in the society. He also mentioned a term known as 'bureau-uchi', which means disrespect killing, and 'kiritsute gomen', which refers to legal permission to cut down and allow them to

execute a commoner or a person of lower status who was justified as an offender. They had the license to kill concerning the protection of respect and honor encircled by the caste system and social orders. Most of the event of killing a commoner was at the time when a person of lower status used to pass by a Samurai. If the Samurai could feel physical contact or any matter of disrespect from the person, he cut them down with his sword on the spot without thinking twice. Although Vaporis mentioned that this legal right to kill was in effect over male commoners, the event of killing could occur in any social setting. If a samurai did not successfully kill the offended commoner on the spot and decided to kill him later, they had to face brutal punishment from the administration.

Hence, it is pretty predictable that the Samurai of the society was made of a brutal and violent mindset. Terrible consequences might occur at any moment because of the loss of temper of a Samurai over trivialities. However, the story's plot is centered on three characters, i.e., the mother, her two kids, and the Samurai. Considering the embarrassing situation, the Samurai might have used his weapon on the mother or her stubborn kids with rashness.

However, Aji Setyanto, in the research article *"The Root of Samurai Culture and its Core Values for Management Purposes,"* discusses Inazo Nitobe's exploration of Samurai ideologies. Nitobe states that the value of Bushido, the way of Samurai, is based on seven values. These are as follows:

- ① Gi(義) / Rectitude or Justice, ② Yuuki(勇氣) / Courage, ③ Jin(仁) / Benevolence or Mercy, ④ Reigi(礼儀) / Politeness, ⑤ Makoto(真) / Honesty & Sincerity ⑥ Meiyo(名誉) / Honour ⑦ Chūgo(忠義) / Loyalty

The above values signify deeds according to reason and justice. It symbolizes a composition of Confucius and Buddhist ethics, which control both the physical and mental states of a Samurai. The ethics drive them on the way "to die when to die is right, to strike when to strike is right". (Nitobe 23)

Therefore, although readers might fear the possibility of killing the mother and her children by the Samurai for a particular moment, the story's ending elicits a feeling of happiness. According to the situation, the Samurai's acts not only show respect for women and a mother but also give the readers a sense of humanity and interpret the nature of a Samurai consisting of actual value. The writer sympathizes with the mother, who is helpless to fulfill her children's demands and becomes concerned about their life in fear of the Samurai. He used his sword in a peaceful way that also rendered a harmless resolution to the helpless mother and her children. Therefore, because of the above Busido codes, Nankichi has wisely portrayed a Samurai who values the ethics of Gi(義), Jin(仁), Reigi(礼儀), and Makoto(真) throughout the story.

CONCLUSION:

Nankichi penned his entire literary works during the brief span of his life. He lost his mother when he was just four years old. Therefore, loneliness remained his only companion since childhood. He was very aware of the essence of motherly love and care, which is very important in a child's life. Hence, he spent the rest of his life depicting his unfulfilled emotions, darkened with solidarity, followed by his mother's demise throughout his writings. He has created his literary world of fantasy. Through his writings, he takes credit for the personified portrayal of humanity, motherhood, empathy, and love, along with elements of nature such as-- animals, trees, flowers, and non-living objects. His works have left a clear footprint in enriching the genre of Japanese children's literature.

REFERENCES:

1. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Childhood>
2. Locke, J. “*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*”, edited by Winkler, P., K. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1690.
3. Vaporis, Constantine N. “Samurai, Masculinity and Violence in Japan.” *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, edited by Robert Antony et al., vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, pp. 236–254. *The Cambridge World History of Violence*.
4. Setyanto, Aji & Wiyono, Bambang & Burhanuddin, Burhanuddin & Mustiningsih, Mustiningsih, “*The Root of Samurai Culture and its Core Values for Educational Management Purposes*”, 2020, pp. 183-220.
5. Gorky. Maxim, “*On Themes. On Literature*”, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1933, pp. 219-220
6. 吉田 弘. 『新美南吉の生涯』. 1st ed., Yoshida Hiroshi, 2012., pp. 429
7. 新美南吉、『新美南吉全集・116作品⇒1冊』、出版委員会、ASIN : BOOPXB7S7Y、2014.