

Kindergarten and the Concept of Regimented Time: An Analysis of *Going to Kindergarten* and *Lucy & Tom: At School*

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Abstract

Childhood is a social construct as much as it is a biological reality. Children are understood primarily in relation to adults and are subjected to processes of socialisation. Such processes, especially those associated with schooling, are largely linked to a *modus operandi* of disciplining. However, there exists a different *modus operandi* that is often overlooked, which acts through everyday activities and introduces the child to the concept of regimented time. This article focuses on instances of the latter mode in literary space through an analysis of the books *Going to Kindergarten* (1974), and *Lucy & Tom: At School* (1973). Though the texts were contemporaneous in origin, they were informed by ideologies that were polar opposites. While *Going to Kindergarten* belonged to the corpus of Soviet children's literature, *Lucy & Tom: At School* belonged to the body of Anglophone children's literature from the capitalist West. But, that said, the child rearing practises that children are subjected to in both texts are essentially the same, despite the differences in socio-cultural milieu that informed their production, and are founded on ideologies of constraint and control.

Keywords: childhood, play, regimented time, school, socialisation

Introduction

Notions regarding childhood have been fiercely contested since antiquity. Children in modernity are largely defined using the metaphor of growth in relation to adults, as sites of lack of want, with childhood seen as a state of transition towards adulthood.¹ This is only one among the many ways in which the child can be understood, for childhood is a social construct – an “account of *adult* views of what children are and how they should be”² – as much as it is a biological reality.³ This fact but often gets overlooked and the received notions of childhood are instead taken as natural and given. Children are thus subjected to processes of socialisation through institutions such as the family and school that aim to integrate them into the adult society by eradicating their perceived differences with adults.⁴ Such socialisation processes, especially those associated with schooling, are largely linked to a *modus operandi* of

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¹ Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 2; Patricia Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 25.

² Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*, p. xi.

³ Jenks, *Childhood*, p. 2, pp. 6-8.

⁴ Jenks, *Childhood*, p. 2, pp. 6-20, p. 33, p. 76.

disciplining founded on a system of reward and punishment: a system which can be discerned in the framework of assessment and credit that informs modern educational systems and determines whether a student progresses from one year to another.⁵ There however exists a different *modus operandi* of disciplining which is more implicit. It operates at a more primary level through everyday activities, and introduces the child to the concept of regimented time, thus laying the groundwork for the system of reward and punishment. This article focuses on instances of this latter mode of disciplining in the literary space, through a close textual analysis of the books *Going to Kindergarten* and *Lucy & Tom: At School*, by analysing them through the lens of sociological theories of childhood.

Going to Kindergarten by Nadezhda Kalinina is a picture book intended for young children. The work, which belongs to the corpus of Soviet children's literature, narrates the tale of two brothers, Alyosha and Sasha, who are beginning kindergarten. The day-to-day activities in the kindergarten form the main narrative, which is complemented by illustrations that lend visual appeal to the text. The illustrations are not central to the development of the narrative and one might say that the book is a "picture book" [with a space in between] as opposed to a "picturebook", the difference between the two being that the visual narrative is not integral to the mediation of meaning in the former, unlike in the latter.⁶ The narrative voice is invariably that of an adult, but it is not patronising or overbearing, either towards the child characters, or towards the implied child reader. The didactic elements in the narrative are portrayed in an implicit manner, and the relationship between the adults and the children is not marked by an asymmetry of power, or by violence, at least not explicitly, like in Antoni Pogorelsky's short story *Karutha Pidakozhi Athava Bhoogarbhha Nivaasikal: Kuttikalkkulla Oru Yakshi-Katha* ["The Black Hen, or the Denizens of the Underground: A Fairy-Tale for Children"]. In Pogorelsky's tale, the protagonist is torn away from his home and friends at a young age, and is sent to a distant boarding school: an action that might have been informed by the contemporary societal discourses pertaining to child rearing in nineteenth century Russia.⁷ That said, it should be taken into account that the two tales are set in different eras, and the children in *Going to Kindergarten* are apparently a lot younger than the protagonist in Pogorelsky's tale. They could possibly meet the same fate as him when they grow older.

Milder, less violent forms of social conditioning can be discerned in *Going to Kindergarten*. These forms of conditioning are but are *no less* important and inculcate into the child socially accepted models of values and behaviours, that lay the groundwork for the planned formal socialisation that is to follow – a socialisation that would strip the child off his perceived differences with the adult through institutions such as the school and family, and mould him in the image of the ideal, submissive, and docile subject. Instances of this conditioning can be discerned in many places in the text, not least in how the children are eased into the routine of school. Alyosha is initially reluctant about the idea of going to kindergarten, but his misgivings are addressed by the adults with the promise of companionship and fun and

⁵ Jenks, *Childhood*, p. 82.

⁶ M. O. Grenby and Kimberley Reynolds, "Glossary," *Children's Literature Studies: A Research Handbook* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 211.

⁷ Antoni Pogorelsky, *Karutha Pidakozhi Athava Bhoogarbhha Nivaasikal: Kuttikalkkulla Oru Yakshi-Katha, Maaya-Lokam: Russian Ezhuthukaarudae Kutti-Kathakal*, translated by Omana and illustrated by Oleg Korovin (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1986), p. 35.

frolic that awaits him there. “You’ll have lots of new *friends* [emphasis added]” at the kindergarten, his mother says.⁸ “You’ll *play* [emphasis added] together and go for walks, and learn many *interesting* [emphasis added] things”.⁹

Alyosha’s helplessness – a helplessness which is shared by Lucy and her friend Jane in *Lucy & Tom: At School* – is compounded by his brother’s enthusiasm which is in stark contrast to his reluctance, and by the consensus that formal schooling is something which is natural and given, and is a rite of passage that everyone has to go through. This is not to question children’s right to education, and rather the argument intends to point out how the notions of education and institutionalised schooling have become synonymous. Home-schooling does exist as an alternative to institutionalised schooling, but the number of parents who opt for it are few, for institutionalised schooling has become the norm where modern day education is concerned: something which is promoted through official policies and statutes, and through literature and media. Formal education has transformed into a multibillion industry that makes vital contributions to the economy, and provides employment to millions and this also serves to consolidate the status of institutionalised schooling as something normal and natural. Even if someone were to take a conscious stand, and opt for home-schooling for their children, they might still be constrained by economic considerations and work place demands, particularly the latter where both parents are working.

The influence exerted by peers acts as a means through which the shared beliefs of the majority enact themselves and gain validation, like how Sasha’s eagerness to go to kindergarten serves to weaken Alyosha’s reluctance, or how the scrutiny of other children makes Sasha and the implied child reader aware of the impropriety of his actions, where he had selfishly hoarded the toys and had refused to share them with others. The visual narrative emphasises the latter point through the depiction of Sasha’s peers’ reaction to his actions.

There are specific places assigned for everything at the kindergarten, from hooks to hang coats, to shelves to place hats, racks to keep boots, and lockers to store one’s belongings. One cannot store one’s boots in the locker, or books in the rack assigned for keeping boots, for it would be contrary to the way the majority does those things. This is implied where Vera Ivanovna tells the children, “That’s the way *all* [emphasis added] the children put away their things,”¹⁰ the implicit message being that conformity is a fundamental requirement for gaining acceptance in society.¹¹ This conformity is to the shared actions and beliefs of the majority.¹² Any action to the contrary is frowned upon, and the individual in question is singled out, marked as a deviant, and ostracised (for example, where Sasha had inadvertently become the centre of attention of the class on account of his inexplicable behaviour when he had refused to share the toys).

The premise of play is used throughout the narrative as a means to entice the child characters and the implied child readers to subscribe to the concept of schooling. Alyosha’s mother tries to address his fear of going to kindergarten with the promise of companionship

⁸ Nadezhda Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*, trans. Fainna Solasko and illustrated by Veniamin Losin (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974).

⁹ Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*.

¹⁰ Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*.

¹¹ Jonathan Tudge, ‘Education of Young Children in the Soviet Union: Current Practice in Historical Perspective’, *The Elementary School Journal*, vol. 92, no. 1 (1991), pp. 121-133.

¹² George L. Kline (ed.), *Society Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).

and fun and frolic that awaits him there. Vera Ivanovna too makes a similar promise where she describes the riches that awaits Alyosha in the play-room. Her initial approach towards the two brothers is itself marked by a playfulness, like where she tries to make light of Alyosha's fear: a playfulness that serves to soften any lingering reluctance and endears her to the children. She is described as having a "very *kind* [emphasis added] face" and "*gentle* [emphasis added] voice"¹³ and she literally acts as a mother to the children when they are at the kindergarten. In fact, one can say that this implicit assumption that links the teacher to the mother figure – an assumption that is embedded in popular imagination and has its roots in the discourses related to motherhood and nurture¹⁴ – is the reason that the teachers we come across in the literary space, especially those who are in charge of very young children, are mostly women. The teacher who is in charge of Lucy's class in *Lucy & Tom: At School* is also a woman. She too is described as being kind and "smiling" and the children thinks the world of her.¹⁵ "They thought she was a very nice teacher indeed."¹⁶

There are designated spaces in the kindergarten where play occurs. There are separate play-rooms for each age group, and play, or any other activity for that matter, always occur under the watchful eyes of the adults. Adults are omnipresent in the narrative, either as active participants, or as passive spectators, always ready to intervene. Echoes of what Foucault terms "*disciplinary space*" can be discerned here in how there are designated spaces for everyone and everything.¹⁷ Order is the catchword of the day and "childish spontaneity" is frowned upon and curtailed.¹⁸ The child's right to "undirected play" which was common place in the familial home, as we will see in *Lucy & Tom*, is reined in, "limited to a designated space ... and ... time".¹⁹

The play-rooms are well stocked with toys like "rabbits, dolls, doll furniture and dishes, cars, trucks and fire engines" and there is "even a teddy bear riding a white horse."²⁰ However, such toys, as argued by K. B. Jinan, serve to stunt children's imagination by hindering their interaction with their immediate surroundings, which in turn hinders the natural learning process, and does away with the need for imagining.²¹ The child thus ceases to explore the world, or interact with it through sensory experiences, except through the medium of the commercially manufactured toys, and the discourses they engender: something which might have serious recuperations in the development of the child's mental faculties.²² Here, it should be noted that the term 'commercially manufactured toys' is used in a different sense from the concept of toys as such. Toys, in the most basic sense of the term, could be defined as props that help re-enact experiences, and any object in his immediate environment can become a toy for the child, including his or her own body, like where a child imagines his palm to be a

¹³ Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*.

¹⁴ Jenks, *Childhood*, p. 86.

¹⁵ Shirley Hughes, *Lucy & Tom: At School* (London: Red Fox, 2016).

¹⁶ Hughes, *Lucy & Tom: At School*.

¹⁷ Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*, p. 79.

¹⁸ Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁹ Holland, *Picturing Childhood: The Myth of the Child in Popular Imagery*, p. 80.

²⁰ Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*.

²¹ K. B. Jinan and Existential Knowledge Foundation, 'Unparenting Online 07 07 2022', *YouTube*, 8 July (2022). At: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jG9a4yVYf70.

²² Jinan, 'Unparenting Online 07 07 2022'.

telephone.²³ Commercially manufactured toys, which are conceptualised and designed by adults based on their notions regarding the child, often serve to kill this creativity.²⁴ In fact, one could draw parallels between the influence of commercially manufactured toys on the child's mental development, and the influence of formal education on his critical thinking. While commercially manufactured toys serve to hinder the child's interaction with his environment and stunt his mental development, formal education serves to stunt his ability for critical thoughts and decisive action, with the child ceasing to think for himself, coming to understand the world instead through the ideas of others:²⁵ ideas which are largely informed by the dominant societal discourses of each epoch. One could thus argue that the children's interaction with toys in the kindergarten harbinger the educational process they would be subjected to in higher classes at school in the succeeding years.²⁶

The nature of the activities that the children engage in at the kindergarten merit scrutiny in this context. The children are often engaged in pretend play. They are encouraged to imitate the adult world in their activities like how they play the game of mothers and daughters with their dolls. It is the adult in their midst, Vera Ivanovna, who *initiates* the game and *keeps* it going.

"See what I have for you," Vera Ivanovna said and took a large box from the cupboard ... Inside it were large and small wooden nesting dolls. "The large dolls are the *mothers* [emphasis added] and the little ones their *children* [emphasis added]," Vera Ivanovna *said* [emphasis added] ... The children each took a doll and sat down to play. The mother dolls said good-bye to their children and went off to *work* [emphasis added]. The little dolls ran off to *play* [emphasis added] ... Vera Ivanovna *began* [emphasis added] to sing and clap in time to the song. The dolls began to dance. After they had been out for a walk and had finished playing it was *time* [emphasis added] for them to come home. There the doll mothers were waiting for them. They sat their children round the table and said, "Here's a nice supper for you. Eat everything up." // The little dolls ate their supper. Now it was *time* [emphasis added] for them to go to bed. Vera Ivanovna gave each of the children a little box. Inside each were a tiny pillow and a blanket. // The big dolls put the little dolls to bed. Then the children put the boxes on the table in a row, *just like their own cots* [emphasis added] in the bedroom at kindergarten. They set the big dolls in a row on the windowsill. // "When we go out for a walk they can watch us through the window," Olya said. // The children tiptoed out to the hall to get their hats and coats. They spoke in whispers so as not to wake the little dolls. They would have their nap while the children went for a walk.²⁷

The game interestingly mirrors the children's own lives at the kindergarten, and serves to reinforce the routine in the both the characters' and the implied readers' minds. The concept of time *regulates* the different phases of the dolls' lives in the game. There is a specific time for

²³ Jinan, 'Unparenting Online 07 07 2022'.

²⁴ Jinan, 'Unparenting Online 07 07 2022'.

²⁵ Jinan, 'Unparenting Online 07 07 2022'.

²⁶ Waltraut Hartmann and Gilles Brougère, 'Toy Culture in Preschool Education and Children's Toy Preferences', in *Toys, Games and Media*, eds Jeffrey Goldstein, David Buckingham and Gilles Brougère (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 37-54.

²⁷ Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*.

everything. The little dolls arrive at school at a specific time [when it is time for their mothers to go to work], and have lunch and dinner at a specific time. They return home at a specific time, and go to bed at a specific time. The routine of the school day serves to drum the concept of regulated time so deep into the children's minds that it becomes natural and given. This is not to say that the concept of time had no bearing on the children's lives before they had come to school. It might indeed have had a bearing and might have decided the time the children had food at home, or the time they had gone to bed, but that said the routine might not have been as pedantic or rigorous as it was now at school for it to be imbibed a self-regulating principle and be seen as natural and given.

After dropping Sasha and Alyosha at the kindergarten on the very first day, their mother says that she will come to collect them “at five o'clock” in the evening.²⁸ This seemingly innocuous remark could be seen as the first symbolic marker of the boys' initiation into the idea of regulated time, and the beginning of their formal integration into the adult society, which would forever divide their living days into fixed hours and minutes, each allotted to the carrying out of particular tasks and routines.²⁹ The days that used to stretch endlessly before the brothers up till then would now be divided into school hours and after-school hours following their first day at school, and the academic curriculum would punctuate their school hours further, “constituting a relationship between particular activities and time.”³⁰ The children have no choice, but to get used to it. Lucy in *Lucy & Tom: At School* too faces a similar conundrum. Lucy looks forward to going to school, but there are days when she does not feel like going. She too is but left with no choice, than to get “used [emphasis added] to it.”³¹

Lucy & Tom: At School narrates the story of two siblings, Lucy and Tom, as they begin school. Belonging to the genre of the “picturebook,”³² the textual narrative is accompanied by vivid and vibrant watercolour illustrations that complement and add to it. The visual narrative takes the lead here and supersedes its textual counterpart in importance, with the latter acting as a kind of foot note to the illustrations. The narrator is a third person omniscient narrator, ostensibly an adult, as can be presumed from the narrative voice and the manner in which it focalises the child characters and the implied child reader. The narrative voice is not condescending or overbearing. Rather, it is largely neutral in tone, and could even be described as sympathetic at places to the child characters. The relationship between the adults and the children in the narrative is not marked by explicit forms of control or constraint *per se*, but that said, the foundations are laid in place for a more thorough, implicit, systematic, structured form of social conditioning via the institution of *formal* schooling.

The beginning of school marks the end of the sibling's idea of time as they have known it up till then and acquaints them with the idea of the time-table or regimented time that serves as the “central organising principle of any curriculum” and spatializes the “politics of

²⁸ Kalinina, *Going to Kindergarten*.

²⁹ Åsta Birkeland and Hanne Værum Sørensen, ‘Time Regulation as Institutional Condition for Children's Outdoor Play and Cultural Formation in Kindergarten’, in *Outdoor Learning and Play: Pedagogical Practices and Children's Cultural Formation*, eds Liv Torunn Grindheim, Hanne Værum Sørensen, and Angela Rekers (Cham, Switzerland, Springer, 2021), pp. 111-128.

³⁰ Jenks, *Childhood*, p. 78.

³¹ Hughes, *Lucy & Tom: At School*.

³² Grenby and Reynolds, ‘Glossary’, p. 211.

experience.”³³ They used to play at home as and when they pleased, except for the vagaries of the weather, which forced them indoors occasionally, but now their play time is regimented with the beginning of school, where specific time slots are allotted for specific activities, including for play. It is true that Lucy and friends engage in play in class, like when they play pretend shop, or engage in activities such as colouring, and music and movement, and acting. Yet, all these activities are carried out under the *supervision* of adults. A specific time is designated as playtime and only then are the children allowed to play outside in the playground [virtually] unsupervised: something which had been common place at home, before the children had started school.

The new things that Lucy gets before beginning school like the “new grey skirt”, the “pair of brown shoes,” and the “pencil case” and “satchel,” could be seen as baits, or bribes, that distract the child from the reality of her situation;³⁴ a situation not too dissimilar to the one that the character Edward passes through in Kenneth Grahame’s *The Golden Age*, when he is showered with “new clothes,” trunks and play-boxes with his name “painted on ... them,” and money to spend as he pleases, before he begins school.³⁵ Lucy too gets a pencil case with her name printed across it, in addition to a satchel that carries her name, and a peg to hang her clothes is assigned to her at school, under the picture of a teddy bear and an accompanying name plate, with her name emblazoned across.

Lucy’s daily trips to school pique the interest of her brother Tom who is not old enough yet to join school. Now that Lucy is away for the larger part of the day, and is often too tired to play with him when she indeed comes back, Tom feels lonely and is left to play by himself. Their mother thus enrolls him in a playgroup where there are many activities to do, and there are children of similar age whom he can play with. The playgroup is like a precursor to school: a miniature classroom that prepares children for the eventual transition to school. Tom, under adult supervision, paints, sings, and plays with toys and clay, with his new friends in the playgroup. The toys that the children play with, and the games that they play merit scrutiny. We see Lucy and Tom playing pretend school at home in the beginning, with Lucy donning the role of the teacher, and Tom, and their toys, donning the role of the dutiful pupils. Many of the activities and games that the children engage in are characterised by imitation or mimesis of the adult world, like where Lucy and Tom play pretend school at home, or where Lucy and Jane play pretend shop with their classmates. One might say that the toys the children are equipped with encourage pretend play via games that imitate the adult world and its activities.

The activities inside the class room are marked by relative calm and order, while the activities that take place outdoors, like in the playground, are marked by energy and chaos. It is instructive that while the former happens under adult supervision, the latter pans out largely unsupervised. Also, while the walls of the class room are decorated with paintings, posters, and charts, the walls adjoining the playground are covered by graffiti and inscriptions, in line with the bustle that unfolds at their precincts. The playground has in fact become one of the last bastions of the child in the institutionalised spaces of modernity, where his wilful exuberance and spontaneity enjoys a degree of free reign and freedom of expression.

³³ Jenks, *Childhood*, p. 77.

³⁴ Hughes, *Lucy & Tom: At School*.

³⁵ Kenneth Grahame, *The Golden Age* (London: The Bodley Head, 1900), pp. 245-249.

To sum up, the dichotomy between the adult and the child is nowhere more apparent than in the literature that is produced by adults for children.³⁶ This is true in the case of the texts discussed in this article, *Going to Kindergarten* and *Lucy & Tom: At School*. Though the texts were contemporaneous in origin, they were informed by ideologies that were polar opposites. While *Going to Kindergarten* belonged to the corpus of Soviet children's literature, *Lucy & Tom: At School* belonged to the body of Anglophone children's literature from the capitalist West. But, that said, the child rearing practises that children are subjected to in both texts are essentially the same, despite the differences in socio-cultural milieu that informed their production, and are founded on ideologies of constraint and control. Though the Soviet government had tried to effect an ideological break with the West through its innovative policies, particularly in legislature concerning children, and in children's literature and pedagogy,³⁷ the discourses regarding childhood that were in circulation in the Soviet Union were not much different from the dominant discourses of childhood in the capitalist West, when it came to child rearing practises and the nature of the relationship between the adult and the child.³⁸

Conclusion

The narratives in both texts serve to promote and normalise childrearing practises that are founded on ideologies of constraint and control. The regiment that the children are introduced to at the lower classes would eventually extend to home as they progress up the years. Activities such as colouring and playing with dolls get replaced by lectures pertaining to diverse disciplines, which would naturally entail study and preparation during after-school hours, requirements which are further enforced by the system of assessment and credit, and the corresponding framework of reward and punishment. The child's life is thus shoehorned over time into a regimented time-table, sequestered into a pattern of hours and minutes, each allotted to a specific task, including play and leisure, which are now posited as mere foot notes, or rewards, in return for successful completion of tasks or assignments that are valued by the adult society. The everyday activities marked by fun and frolic that characterises the early years of schooling thus lay foundations for a form of internalised control that works through the regulation of time and space, both at the literal and metaphorical planes, and moulds children into passive and docile subjects with specific worldviews that are deemed conducive by the adult society, and serve to propagate the status-quo of social order and power.

³⁶ Maria Nikolajeva, 'Theory, Post-Theory, and Aetonormative Theory', *Neohelicon*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2009), p. 16; M. N. Parasuraman, 'Distilled Books': *The Mediation of Social Values in the Abridgement of Some Classic Novels in English*, PhD. Dissertation (University of Hyderabad, 2006), p. 52.

³⁷ Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 25-154.

³⁸ Arun Abraham Varghese and P. Boopathi, 'Exploring the Relationship Between the Adult and the Child: A Heterological Analysis of *Maaya-Lokam: Russian Ezhuthukarudae Kutti-Kathakal*', *Lion and the Unicorn* (Forthcoming).