

Chapter Three

JUMP AND OTHER STORIES

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The childhood stories from 'Jump and Other Stories'¹ can be divided broadly into two groups -

- I Those which focus white/black/child/ren
- II Those which include white/black childhood/children as minor phase/characters

The stories from the first group include -

1. 'Once Upon a Time'
2. 'Journey'
3. 'The Ultimate Safari'

The stories which include white/black children as minor characters are -

1. 'Jump'
2. 'Same are Born to Sweet Delight'
3. 'Home'
4. 'Amnesty'
5. 'Comrades'

I Focus on white / black children

1) 'Once Upon a Time'

'Once Upon a Time' is the tragedy of a white family who loses its little son in the attempt to ensure the security of the house against black intruders through installation of increasingly effective devices. As Kate Kellaway remarks, 'Insecurity, personal and political, is the common element in Nadine Gordimer's marvellous new collection of short stories'.² Nadine Gordimer pleads, through it for the need to revise the social codes, on behalf of the white community structured on enmity and hatred for the black community. The story unfolds the ironic truth that the measures apparently planned to destroy the enemy, destroy those who have planned them. Survival in South Africa, according to Gordimer, compels both whites and blacks to substitute the attitude of hatred with the attitude of understanding and mutual trust as human beings.

The two stories from the collection treat child as a major character or childhood as a major phase - 'The Ultimate Safari' and 'A Journey'.³ Yet 'Once Upon a Time' should also be classified as a story with child as a major character for, in the

introductory part of the story, Gordimer expresses her view about children's stories. It is also found that the little boy emerges gradually as a central character. The writer persona does not favour, for instance, the offer of writing for the anthology of stories for children. Her answer is, 'I don't write children's stories'. (p. 23)

Yet the fear of insecurity in the subconscious surfaces in the darkness before sleep in the form of a story which follows. Significantly, child provides a means for the writer, to concretize that fear. Thus her story, and even her stories in general, seek to express the tensions of human relationships in apartheid - ridden South Africa through children as characters although she does not treat children as audience of her stories.

Action in 'Once Upon a Time' advances in five stages towards the tragic climax of the death of the little boy - the only child in the family. The stages are distinctly marked by the white couple's frantic efforts to overcome the constant situation of insecurity by installing more and more effective devices to protect the house from the black intruders. The earlier plaque with the warning 'YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED', is substituted by electronically - controlled gates with the device of a button and a receiver. It is, in turn, replaced by burglar bars and alarm system.

The failure of the system encourages the choice of a heightened wall which, however, is improved further by the installation of the apparently most effective system of 'a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades'. (p.29) The story opens with the description of the happy life of the white couple in a deliberately melodramatic tone, 'a man and his wife who loved each other very much : had a little boy and they loved him very much'. (p.25) The sense of insecurity because of the blacks overshadows the happiness of the family.

The child's world of joy moves on the margin of the adults' world of insecurity and anxiety. The little boy is blissfully unaware of the fear and is secure with its trusted black maid and black gardener. His little world includes his playmates - the cat and the dog of the house. Ironically, the little boy treats the mechanical devices installed by the parents as the toys in the play. The cat and the dog set the alarm system working every now and then, which proves its uselessness. The vital link of love and trust unites the innocent worlds of the little boy, the cat and the dog. They reveal, indirectly, the futility of adult efforts meant to strengthen hatred and distrust.

The little boy is happy in his own world. The child's state of joy, is skillfully off-set against the adults world - when he accompanies his parents for a walk as the writer describes - 'While the little boy and the pet dog raced ahead, the husband and wife found themselves comparing the possible effectiveness of each style against its appearance'. (p. 29)

The death of the little boy reveals the barbarous nature of relationships poisoned by apartheid. The boy is the most unfortunate victim of the devices installed by his parents. The child impersonates the role of a prince as a part of his play; imagines the razor blade coil along the compound wall to be a thicket of thorns from which he desires to rescue a princess. In his romantic adventure of entering the thicket, he gets caught in the razor-bladed trap of death. The inhumanity of this method of punishment stands disclosed to the full when the writer describes the way in which the mass of the child's body is recovered '--- the bleeding mass of the little boy was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire : Cutters; choppers ---'. (p-30) As rightly commented, 'the horrifying ending is haunting, it has a strength which comes from the moment when the political and the personal connect to deliver a blow to the heart'.⁴

The death of the little boy, thus, stresses the need to reassess the relationship of hatred between the whites and the blacks, from the white perspective. The tragedy of the little boy also clarifies the interpretative potential of the child as humanity in its essence, independent of race and colour, for Nadine Gordimer.

2) 'A Journey'

'A journey' is a study of the process of growth of a twelve year old white boy from childhood to adolescence or early adulthood triggered off by the peculiar, familiar situation. Many of Nadine Gordimer's fictional plots reveal her preoccupation with the theme of growth of the children in the border zone between childhood and adolescence. She maps, in particular, the ambiguous, delicate yet difficult process of evolution of a child into an adult with extraordinary psychological insight. It is a part of her understanding of human relationships and, ultimately, of human condition.

The story is in itself an interesting technical experiment. The central event of a journey of a mother, her new born baby and her elder son in the aeroplane, and their arrival at a certain airport in Africa is narrated in the first person by three narrators from their different perspectives - the lady passenger travelling by the same

aeroplane, the boy himself, and the father of the baby. Each phase of narration expands the event both spatially and temporally until the story emerges as in-depth study of a twelve year old boy suddenly stepping into adolescence at the age of thirteen while still being a child, in response to the arrival of the baby in the family. It is a technique used by Gordimer even in her story, 'Six Feet of the Country', which facilitates her presentation of 'a surface narrative which --- cracks and ruptures to reveal other narratives sedimented under it'⁵ as pointed out by Graham Huggan.

The boy passes through three phases psychologically. As a child, he has known a life of perfect harmony between his parents and himself. It is beautifully described by the child in the child's language. They used to exchange as he states 'cat language'. (P. 146) However the child is, later, aware of the note of discordance between his father and mother. He finds that 'the cats' have stopped speaking. He is puzzled by the way 'the grown ups' behave. For instance, he is pained to see that 'they would sit there at meals with nothing to talk to each other about, just quiet'. (P. 147) Although the child cannot understand the situation, his mother's 'silence' originates in his father's affair with other woman. The child regrets his inability either to comprehend or to help his parents

because ' a child can't use even a cat voice to ask : what's the matter?' (P. 146)

The pregnancy of the mother is a welcome change for the boy. The sexual act, that leads to it, is unfortunately shameful to both husband and wife 'more like a murder than a conception'. (P. 154) The father's absence from home due to his tours over the countries as Economic Attache creates the environment in which the twelve year - old child gradually grows into a man. He evolves the male sexual awareness about his mother as a female. The child's love for the mother gets transformed into a man's love for the woman. Both the mother and the child live in constant association and share the job of watching the female body, 'changing, the body changing her'. (P. 147) He gets the rare opportunity of seeing his mother's breasts and the way they change slowly. The man-in-child responds to the sight and the touch of the mother's breasts - 'I saw -- - that they were changing, becoming pink and mottled'. (P. 147)

The wonderful yet strange experience of being a man while still being a child is deftly registered by Nadine Gordimer from child's perspective. The child struggles to express it in terms of child's world of experience. For instance, the feel of his mother's breasts against him reminds him of 'plastic bag filled with water '.

(P. 147) The way the breasts change colour is co-related by child's imagination to the similar experience of 'a chameleon slowly blotching from one colour to another when you put it on a flower '.

(P. 147)

The development of sexual awareness reaches next stage when the child - now a thirteen year-old boy - begins to dream about himself and his mother. The child figures himself as the only possessor of the woman against another man - his father. In his dreams, he sees the 'golden body' owned by him and his mother only, which makes him put his 'pyjamas in the wash'. (P. 148) He enjoys, along with his mother, the sight of the new-born babe, deliberately suppressing the awareness that it looked like the father, not like him or his mother. He was himself like his mother 'Too beautiful. Too much like her, her delicate skin round the eyes, her nacreous ears, her lips ...'. (P. 155)

'The Journey' back from Europe to father's place of posting in Africa puts the child in the special position of the only adult male with the responsibility of the female and the baby. He keeps awake in the aeroplane because 'she might need something'. (P. 150) When they arrive at the airport and wait for the luggage, the baby is hungry and needs to be fed. The thirteen year-old boy,

as the male protecting his female, then kneels in front of her so people wouldn't see them when she 'opened her clothes and fed the baby'. (P. 151)

The story closes on the most dramatic situation projecting a biological conflict between two males over the problem of possession of a female and the little one. The father comes to receive the family of the airport. He is a male anxious re-establish his right over the family. But he senses the presence of another male by the side of his own female and the baby in the form of his thirteen year-old son. He had disliked the child for his being beautiful like a woman and looking the male qualities of courage and love of adventure. But now he sees that 'the boy is looking at him with the face of a man -- as if she is his woman, and the baby his begetting'. (p.158) Here is the young teenager who 'discovers the joy of becoming his mother's surrogate husband ...?'⁶

The baby plays a crucial role as a catalyst both as the unborn and the new born infant. It begins the process of reorganization of mutual relationships between the members of its family. The baby in itself is just a presence with 'abundant black fine hair--- as if the hair had been combed, floating, by the waters of the womb --- eyes very dark --- focusing only now and then --- on

the face of the mother ' (p.143) Gordimer matches the sweet passivity of the infant with the state of excitement it causes within the boy. The baby encourages each to redefine his or her identity in relation to the whole. The writer explores the prismatic diversity within the 'trinity' (p.144) of the mother, the baby and the boy to unfold the colourful pattern of the revised order of relationships within the family caused by the arrival of the baby.

'A Journey' operates on two levels of childhood - the infancy and transitional phase between childhood and adolescence within the framework of a family. Gordimer's novel, My Son's Story, focuses, in particular, on the study of the child during the transitional phase within the politically oppressive environment of South Africa; while her another novel A Sport of Nature, treats the unborn baby as the focus of meaning for the white heroine who struggles to realise her dream of 'rainbow family' - a microcosm of humanity beyond race and colour.

3) 'The Ultimate Safari'

'Child' becomes the exclusive device in terms of which Gordimer studies the crucial problem of refugees in 'The Ultimate Safari'. In 'Once Upon a Time', it is a white little boy while in 'The Ultimate Safari', it is an eleven year-old black girl, who is treated as

the origin of meaning by the writer. 'The Ultimate Safari' represents the tragic sufferings of humanity in various parts of the world compelled to leave their countries and search for a shelter in another so that life is cut off from the past; and does not have any future.

Gordimer exploits the potential of child device to the full in the story. The child is elevated to the status of the narrator. The story is offered as an autobiographical narration of a girl from Mozambique forced to leave the country along with some members of family due to war between the government and the enemy's forces. The writer authenticates the refugee experience from a child's perspective with a double focus. It is a commentary on the nature of sufferings of the refugee groups as well as the narration of her grandmother's struggle to save her grandchildren from death and hunger. The child persona gains three dimensions in the story. The girl is not only the narrator, but a sufferer, and the hope of her grandmother.

The story narrates how the girl's family, including her elder brother - the little brother, the grandmother and the grandfather - is obliged to leave their country under the leadership of the grandmother, and find refuge in the neighbouring country.

The actions spread over the period of about two and a half years and are distributed over three periods. In the first period, the family struggles to survive against the atrocities of bandits looting and burning the houses, and killing people in their village. It is followed by the most difficult period of their journey through Krugar Park while fleeing the country. The concluding part refers to the period of their life in the tent in the refugee camp of the neighboring country.

The girl child narrates the whole series of experiences with child like innocence. The writer uses the child persona as a search light operating on the realities to uncover their essential ugliness and inhumanity. The child's perspective, in being innocent, is objective, unprejudiced and neutral. For instance, on the day her mother goes to buy oil but does not return, the girl waits vainly hoping for her return. The bandits visit the village again. The people scream and run but the three children cannot run because they were 'afraid to run without our mother to tell us where.' (p.34) Herself a child full of fear of the bandits, the girl instinctively becomes a mother to her little brother who 'clung against my stomach with his arms round my neck and his legs round waist like a baby monkey to its mother.' (p.34)

The eleven year-old black girl is grateful to her dear grand-mother whose dedication and sacrifice during the most difficult ordeal of the family have saved the little children from death. The story is, in a sense, a tribute of the granddaughter to the courage of her grandmother. The girl tells, for instance, how the grandmother decides to leave the village when she is convinced that all other alternatives are of no use in sustaining her grandchildren. She sacrifices everything - even her church shoes to buy a big plastic water container. The girl notes how her grandmother is exhausted; her feet bleed, she does not even try to remove the flies from her face, when they walk for days through the Krugar Park.

The apparently innocent narration of the small girl describes the mental condition of the grandmother when the grandfather does not return. It reveals her choice of life instead of death - "Our grandmother looked at us, my first-born brother and my little brother on her lap ... she got up, she swung little brother and her back tied him in her cloth ... she said, 'Come!'" (p. 41) The granddaughter is also grateful to the grandmother for a struggle to give the children the best kind of life even inside the tent.

The paradoxical attitudes of the grandmother and the granddaughter towards 'home' underline the tragic nature of their

existence as refugees. The grandmother tells in her interview that she would not like to go back to her country because 'there is nothing ; no home'. (p.46) On the other hand, the girl is convinced that their past life embedded in safety, stability and love, can be regained in due course. Hence, she hopes to go back to her country where she expects her mother and the grandfather who have returned. There is the nostalgic inner urge within the child narrator to recover the lost childhood, world of joy and happiness 'before war'. (p. 36)

The little girl carries the past world within her in the form of memories of her house and her village. She always interprets the present in terms of the past. For instance, the Warthougs moving away remind her of 'the way a boy in our village used to zigzag on the bicycle his father had brought back from the mines'. (p.38) In her description of Krugar Park, she recreates vividly the fear of the fleeing group while crossing the Park. The girl tells how, in order to survive, they have to more like animals among the animals away from the roads, away from the white peoples' camp. The child narration, thus, becomes in itself an ironic revelation of the truth that wars have reduced human beings

to animals, struggling for existence, while the civilized society offers safety and food for animals.

Gordimer's 'The Ultimate Safari' exposes ironically the Safari of the tourists to which she refers at the beginning of the story. It is, in its essence, a hopeless journey of the victimised humanity from death in search of life, the struggle to survive in the suffocating environment of wars and violence. Thus, the apparently simple narration of the girl - child proves to be a devastating revelation of man's cruelty to man, of man's journey from civilization back to barbarism. Paul Bailey rightly points out, 'Nadine Gordimer's true subject is man ...'⁷

II White/Black Childhood /Children as Minor Phase /Characters

Apart from the three stories which centre on a child, a number of stories from Gordimer's collection of Jump and Other Stories evidence that Gordimer relies on child / childhood as a vital term of reference in the assessment of human condition although it may not play a major role in the narrative. It should also be noted that child, in Gordimer's fiction, is not defined physically in terms of age but, symbolically, in terms of its essential quality of innocence.

Many of her characters are grown-up youths and yet are portrayed psychologically as being childlike in their innocent faith in the goodness of human beings. Her characterization, thus stresses the child-in-man, or- woman which represents the childlike innocence of oppressed humanity.

1. 'Jump'

Jump is the story of a white youth who gets himself involved, unfortunately, in the terrorist activities of the white secret organisation. He is 'an ordinary colonial child of parents who'd come out from Europe to find better life.' (p.7) His parents leave the country after shift in political power to the blacks. During the two years after his school, the boy works as an apprentice draughts man to an architect while carrying on his hobbies of parachute jumping and photography. The humiliating, experience of injustice, in being charged falsely as 'an imperialist spy' (p.8), and detained for five weeks, transforms the adolescent boy into a fierce enemy of the blacks. He joins the secret organisation of whites supposed to work for restoring white rule in the country of his birth.

The organisation uses the boy without his knowledge for a number of terrorist activities in various countries. The horrible reality of massacre, destabilization and destruction through training

of a rebel army is gradually understood by the boy. Ettin argues in his book Betrayals of Body Politic, 'The consequences of hidden knowledge and of betrayals is a motivating force throughout Nadine Gordimer's work'.⁸ (p.100) He, at last, surrenders to the black government to disclose the truth about the white organisation. He is given refuge by the black government. However, after exploiting him as a means to expose the white conspiracy against their government on the international level, they leave the boy to his fate.

Thus throughout the story, the boy remains essentially a little boy in his surface understanding of the exploitative environment. The young man is referred to, significantly, as 'a boy'. He is still a child - innocent, trustful and idealistic - in the sense that he fails to comprehend how both political groups of the whites as well as the blacks exploit him for their selfish political interests. His patriotic comprehension of the country of his birth suffers from the lack of knowledge about the reality of South Africa which is 'far more disturbingly complex and dangerously ambiguous'⁹ - as Richard I. Smyer puts it than the boy thinks. The writer underlines the boy's identity as the innocent little boy through the description of his photograph in the newspaper after he

surrenders to the black government - 'On his big hunched body --- the head of a little boy with round bewildered eyes under brows drawn together and raised'. (p.4)

The title, 'Jump', refers to the boy's jump with the parachute. It also represents his shift from the world of a child to that of a man - 'as an adolescent --- he jumped - the rite of passage into manhood'. (p.7) However 'Jump' gains further significance at the end of the story. The boy cannot jump from the window of the hotel in spite of his desire to jump. He is yet unprepared to grasp the lessons of experience in their totality - hence his response at the end of the story, 'not now, not yet'.

2. 'Some Are Born to Sweet Delight'

'Some Are Born to Sweet Delight' finds Gordimer shifting her area of concern from apartheid - ridden South Africa, to terrorism on the international level. Gordimer inevitably portrays the seventeen year-old heroine in the image of child to explore the brutality of terrorists. Vera is the daughter of the commissioner father from London. She falls passionately in love with a young foreigner lodging in her house. But the terrorist in disguise targets her as the carrier of a bomb to accomplish explosion of an aeroplane.

The writer balances Vera's childlike innocence against the cool crookedness of the so-called terrorist, Rad. At every stage of their love affair, Rad is shown to be an expert psychologist handling the inexperienced romantic girl skillfully for his purpose. He wins her into the trap of his love through his parental conduct. For instance, when the girl vomits in the kitchen, 'he was there beside her, in the disgusting stink of her, and he had wetted a dish-towel and was wiping her face, her dirty mouth, her tears'. (p. 41)

The relationship between Rad and Vera reaches a crucial stage when they enter into sex experience for the first time. Vera is overcome by gratitude for the man after it. But the man treats the weeping girl only as 'an overexcited child'. The writer narrates, 'he wiped her tears, he dressed her with the comforting resignation to her emotion, a mother shows with an over excited child'. (p.79) The use of the unborn child figure has been one of the recurrent strategies of Gordimer to expose man's brutality. Vera's pregnancy produces a sense of guilt in her. But Rad, on the other hand, accepts it coolly, and immediately informs her of his resolution to marry her. The network of relationships woven around the unborn child changes the environment in the positive direction. The parents forgive Vera in spite of their earlier

disapproval of the man because 'there was a baby to be born. poor innocent'. (p. 84) Ironically, the same baby provides an excuse for the conspiring terrorist to advance his plan of sending Vera to meet his parents in another country before marriage.

Rad's choice of Vera with the baby in her womb confirms the ruthless dedication of Rad to his purpose of destruction. As the story ends- 'Vera had taken them all, taken the baby inside her; down, along with her happiness'. (p. 86)

3) 'Home'

'Home' is apparently the story of an otherwise childlike obedient, girl/ wife, Teresa, whose strong bond with the mother and the family accomplishes a metamorphosis in her so that she emerges as an active and self - dependent woman with a strong identity of her own. The theme of childhood operates in it on two levels - Teresa's relationship as a child with her mother, and her identity as a child imposed by the husband.

Teresa's journey towards maturity begins with the news of her mother's arrest along with her brother and sister. During the first stage of her struggle to survive against the trauma, she suffers from the conflict between her sense of hatred for the

mother in the past and her sense of anxiety for her in the present. The mother-daughter relationship appears to have an autobiographical context as it reminds of the strenuous nature of Gordimer's relationship with her own mother during childhood. It illustrates Andrew V. Ettin's view that Gordimer's perception about 'her own life ... and family relationships ... are necessarily linked to her political consciousness.'¹⁰ Teresa, the child, had hated her mother because 'her mother had shifted her with thick clothing, suffocating servility, smothering religion'. (p.123) In re-living the memories of childhood life as a wife married for seven years to an ichthyologist Swedish husband, she is overcome with repentance for the mother - 'all that had disgusted Teresa ... now filled her with anguish'. (p.124) The imprisonment of mother thus liberates her mind from the prison of hatred for that woman. Teresa talks to her husband about her mother and is filled with curiosity and flashes of understanding about her mother, 'the monotony and smallness of her mother's life.' (p.129) In a sense 'Home' may be regarded as a microcosmic illustration of John Cooke's central argument in his book, The Novels of Nadine Gordimer : Private Lives and Public Landscapes,¹¹ about the centrality of mother-daughter relationship in Gordimer's fiction. The process of change in Teresa is visualised

by the writer through the process of change in her husband's attitude to her. 'Home' may not be called a 'tender story of mixed marriage.'¹² Gordimer succeeds in liberating her 'self' from the negative influence of the repressed childhood relationship with the mother. It may be more appropriate to interpret it as a 'painful' journey of the egoistic husband towards self - knowledge. The surface narrative of a loving couple has within it the subtext of the tyranny of an authoritarian husband. It is revealed, for instance, in the pet name chosen by the husband for Teresa, 'min lille loppa' i.e. 'my little flea'. The dark, young passionate Teresa is refused every opportunity to assert her identity by the highly educated, elderly, white husband. For instance, when the girl cries and rages against the police for arresting the members of her family, 'he listened and stroked her hair, sheltered her folded hand between his neck and shoulder'. (p.124) He is crooked enough to make love to her in spite of her emotional break down. But it is posed by him as an act of comfort so that when she sleeps 'now and then she gave the hiccuping sign of a comforted child ...'. (p.129)

Teresa's emergence as an active daughter of the family who sets out to help it in spite of all odds - legal, political and racial - is accepted, at last by the husband with awe. It is metaphorically

explicated by the writer through the husband's dream image of 'the drowned body of the child' . (p.139)

4. 'Amnesty'

Amnesty outlines the story of a black girl who finds her black activist man/husband having returned home after nine years' 'imprisonment, unable to fulfil her hunger for his love because of his inability to spare time for his family due to political responsibilities as a comrade. It is the tragedy of both the wife and husband. His dedication to the nationalist cause of liberation denies him the right to personal life while her personal need of him remains unfulfilled because' — the Movement has reclaimed him'¹³ as Barbara Harlow comments. The writer reveals the girl's dream of happy married life through two child images - there is the little daughter, on the one hand, and there is the girl/wife herself waiting like a child for him.

The six year-old daughter is proud of her father to whom she is introduced through a photograph by her mother. However, when the father comes back, the girl exclaims, 'that's not him'. (p.253) It pinpoints powerfully the child's instinctive realisation that the man would not be a loving 'Daddy ' for her.

Even the young wife finds it difficult to compromise with the man who is always engaged in public activities. The intellectual distance between the two is mapped in the image of the girl listening to her husband, discussing various issues with the members, like one of the children to whom the teacher looks 'to encourage the child to understand'. (p. 255) The second pregnancy of the wife is welcomed by the man for the coming child being one who 'belongs to a new country, he will build the freedom we've fought for.' (p.256)

The writer merges the two images of girl-children, the little daughter, and her young mother waiting for the husband as she did in her childhood. The daughter - persona's sense of loss of the real father highlights her mother's sense of loss of the real husband. The story ends on the image of the wife, still waiting to be married, sitting on a warm stone as 'she used to do when she was a child'. (p.256)

5. 'Comrades'

'Comrades' evidences once again Gordimer's inclination to exploit the potential of childhood as a strategy to clarify the reality of apartheid and its disastrous consequences on South African society. It is the story of a white lady social workers

who gives a lift on her way back from the seminar to a group of black young men who have attended the same. On learning that they have missed the lunch, she takes them to her own house, and offers them food and drink. The writer's dramatic awareness of the consequences of apartheid is vividly registered through the acknowledgement of the tragedy of those black young men. As the writer reveals 'youngsters their age have not been at school for several years, they are the children growing into young men and women, for whom school is a battle - ground--'. (p.95) The political environment has prevented the black children of the privileged white class. Their right to innocence and faith is destroyed because of the career for which they are trained so that they may learn 'to wire explosives to undersides of vehicles ... to dig holes ... to plant mines'. (p.96) Gordimer thus defines the tragedy not only of the South African society but of the mankind as a whole engaged in political conflicts in terms of its destructive influence on children who represent the innocent humanity.

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