

## Negotiating Differences: The Fabular Fabric in *Alice in Wonderland*

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The present era, in terms of existence, seems to be operating upon a strange principle of paradoxes, vacillating within the extremes of globalization on one hand, and marginalization, on the other. Just as the technological revolution over the last few decades has transformed the world into a global village, quite so, the rapidly increasing accessibility to a wide range of contrasting and at times, contradictory, forms of life and culture also seems to have taken a toll on the basic human principles of tolerance, inclusion and accommodation.

The complexity associated with the term ‘identity’ in its multiple manifestations across diverse geopolitical areas has sought to be explored, investigated and theorized on one hand, while it has also been the cause of an exponential rise in the processes of Othering, exclusion and dismissal on the other. Wars have been numerous, violence and bloodshed, rampant, so much so, that grieving death has featured far lower on human agenda when compared to the urgency of obliterating differences. It is in the bleakness of the present context that *Alice in Wonderland* invites a new reading, not only as a classic, a landmark in Children’s Literature, but also as an intriguing metaphor which abounds in questions related to logic, culture, identity and inherent differences, and the manner in which they are negotiated.

First published in 1865, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll, emerged as a tale of fantasy written by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson after a boat trip with the three daughters of Henry Lidell, the youngest being Alice. Ever since its publication, the book has been enormously canonized as a classic and the popularity of the tale across age groups has inspired translations of the story into several other languages, as well as multiple television and cinematic adaptations. Against this backdrop of a diverse, multicultural, multilingual readership/ viewership transcending cartographic lines of division, *Alice in Wonderland* now seems to hold within itself not just the fantastic story of a child’s adventures in dream, but also at the allegorical level of interpretation, the seeds of a possible approach towards the largely dominant and volatile clashes of identity and culture in the present context of a global diaspora.

What drives Alice down the rabbit hole is the basic principle of human curiosity as she sees the White Rabbit take a watch out of its waistcoat pocket and hurry down a large rabbit hole under the hedge. The narrator notes, “In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again” (Carroll 07). Mario Livio observes in his book entitled *Why? What Makes Us Curious* (2017), that “several “types” of curiosity – that itch to find out more – exist” and along the lines of Daniel Berlyne, the British Canadian psychologist, divides it along “two main dimensions or axes: one extending between perceptual and epistemic curiosity and the other traversing from specific to diversive curiosity” (Livio ). Of

perceptual curiosity he notes that it “is engendered by extreme outliers, by novel, ambiguous, or puzzling stimuli, and it motivates visual inspection” (ibid).

While acknowledging the complexity of curiosity as a human response to the world around, it may be seen that perceptual curiosity is what leads to exploration of diversity. However, curiosity of this kind has seldom implied conflict or violence. As Alice exclaims “curiouser and curiouser” about the increasing astonishment of her continuously altering identities, the narrator notes in parentheses, “she was so much surprised that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English” (Carroll 13). It is worth attention that despite the essential spatiotemporality inherent in the semiotic structure of languages, Alice’s encounters with the inhabitants of the world down the rabbit hole rests on verbal exchanges in a common language.

Often though, she seems to be coining new words and suffering a loss of memory in being unable to articulate the rhymes and the songs as she had known it before venturing into the rabbit hole, the prime prerequisite of communication, i.e. the basic tenets of encoding and decoding of message through structured signifiers is allowed to remain constant in the text. On one hand, as it may be argued to be an authorial decision in the interest of the text making sense to the readers and thus a requirement of the genre, on the other, this fact of endowing the inhabitants of the Other world with a basic form of expression similar to Alice might as well be interpreted as sharing of a universal language despite the difference in structured articulation conveying familiarity of concepts and meanings.

The question of identity is one of prime importance in the process of negotiating differences. The self becomes the lens through which the world is perceived, and which then draws a response in the form of assimilation or rejection. It is the conviction of being oneself and the rigidity or fluidity associated therewith through the process of acculturation that an individual derives a sense of affiliation or alienation with the surroundings. Amartya Sen observes in *Identity and Violence* that “the sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and the warmth of our relations with others” (Sen 02). In a children’s narrative, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, identity cannot be an abstraction and yet the plurality is beautifully articulated throughout the text.

As Alice reaches wonderland, her initial problem is dealing with her physical size. She is too large to step out into the garden and the next moment, having consumed the magic potion after much deliberation with herself, she becomes too small to reach the key she had left on the table. As she cries and scolds herself, the narrator notes “this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people” (Carroll 12). A little later, Alice wonders “was I the same when I got up this morning?”, and further, “who in the world am I?” (Carroll 14). The narrator adds “she began thinking over all the children she knew that were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them” (ibid). This may be read as an indicator of fluidity of identity, inherent in the very fact of it being a social construct of one’s own perception of oneself and perhaps also as a point where the plurality of human existence intersects to facilitate an overlapping of distinct boundaries of Otherness.

The question of identity is further problematized as Alice meets the hookah smoking caterpillar in the course of her journey through the wonderland, who asks her a simple question

–“who are you?” (Carroll 34). Alice responds saying, “I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (ibid). This articulation, though apparently comic, might be interpreted as the very dilemma of existence in the multicultural context of human lives in the present times. The context of division of the world in terms of insulation of individual identities in to collective representations in terms of race, culture, religion, civilization presupposes a deliberate unidimensional affiliation to a singular aspect, denying the multifaceted nature of identity.

When Alice speaks about her inability to determine who she is, it voices, as an allegory, the existentialist confusion of a human individual to be able to assert a singular choice and categorize oneself into the preexisting mould of channelized identity. The question gets more interesting as the caterpillar asks Alice to repeat the rhyme ‘You are old, Father William’ when she complains of having suffered a loss of memory and refers to the previous rhyme she had tried to recite, “but it all came different” (Carroll 35). It is here that the role of memory in determining one’s identity is brought into focus. Every known rhyme or song that Alice utters in wonderland, comes out as different from what it used to be in her own world. Memory, here, as a constituent component of one’s sense of identity is given an ephemerality which does not stay constant.

Plurality of existence penetrates the being of Alice. Her mixing up of words and phrases in known rhymes and songs implies a component of challenge to the hegemonic mainstream notion of knowledge as inherited from one’s known terrain in the altered contexts of space and time. After her recitation of the rhyme as instructed by the caterpillar, the latter observes “it is wrong from beginning to end”, and leaves Alice to determine her size according to her desire with the aid of the mushroom, one side of which would make her grow taller while the other side would make her shorter (Carroll 38). Alice comes to terms with the complexity of her physical size as per her requirements in the present locale. This might be read as a metaphor of making existentialist choices pertaining to harmonious survival in an unknown territory.

Conflicts based on identity, arise from nowhere, as for instance, the one between the pigeon and Alice as the latter grows large and has a long neck while trying to adjust her size with a bite from the caterpillar’s mushroom. The pigeon mistakes Alice for a serpent and “starts beating her violently with its wings” (Carroll 39). As Alice engages in a conversation with the pigeon who fears serpents eating up her eggs, and desperately tries to introduce herself as a “little girl” but at the same time admits the fact of little girls eating eggs “as much as serpents do”, the pigeon concludes, “then they’re a kind of serpent, that’s all I can say” (Carroll 40). This brief episode quite distinctly brings out the irony of difference inherent in identity as real and identity as perceived, and the desire to categorize individuals into known compartments created through limited knowledge and lack of faith.

The fragmented and playful nature of identity as opposed to the socially prominent act of construing it as a constant is further re-emphasized with the portrayal of the Cheshire cat, introduced to Alice as well as the readers as a large cat “grinning from ear to ear”, which can vanish at will, sometimes completely and sometimes in fragments, “ending with the grin which remained some time after the rest of it had gone (Carroll 50). The Cheshire cat introduces into

the text not just a spectacle, but the larger question of identity as a component of imagination – at times fragmented, and bordering between the thin demarcations of presence and absence.

This fluidity poses a problem to authority when the Queen of Hearts orders the execution of the Cheshire cat and the executioner argues that “you couldn’t cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from” (Carroll 66). It is interesting to note here that the body might as well be read as symbolic of not just physicality but the historicity of an individual existence, both in terms of *pastness* as well as *presentness*. It is the body which is the source and the domain of violence. It could be interpreted as the entire volume of what perpetuates notionalities of convictions, beliefs and perceptions regarding one’s own self and the world.

Contextually, the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* is symbolic of authority. Represented as a card amidst the pack of cards that she governs, the Queen of Hearts has often been read as a metaphor for blind exercise of power. The space occupied by her in the text is full of commands for execution. Interestingly, of the four variants available in a deck of cards, Carroll opts for “hearts”. Here, the choice may be interpreted as an implication of absolute power indulging in acts of tyranny completely at the command of instinctive narcissism, devoid of logic or rationality. The satirical implication emerges clearly in the trial episode of the knave of Hearts where the Queen supercedes the jury and the witnesses with her famous command “sentence first – verdict afterwards” (Carroll 98).

Interplay of differences abound the realm of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. There are differences of opinions, as well as thoughts. And yet these differences do not lead to violence. Though the Queen of Hearts frequently lets out her famous cry, “Off with their heads!”, the domain of her power is restricted to a pack of cards – devoid of weight, and executions are mostly put off by perpetual confusions amongst the pack (Carroll 62). Alice, despite her state of confusion regarding her identity, is quite certain about her strength as an individual, and when introducing herself to the Queen of Hearts in the Croquet Ground, she tells herself, “Why, they’re only a pack of cards, after all. I needn’t be afraid of them!” (ibid). In this understanding of her difference from the subjects of the Queen, lies her sense of integrity imparting to her a freedom from the fear of the Queen.

Characters do not sympathize or empathize with each other and there is no utopian element of an all-pervading happiness. Differences permeate the fabular social fabric, at the visible as well as verbal and ideological levels. There are even junctures where the characters are offended with each other, for instance, Alice is offended by the curt comments of the caterpillar or the complete mess she lands into at the mad hatter’s tea party. There are contradictions at every step, never quite amicably settled, but there is no violence. The secret perhaps lies not only in the fact that it is a children’s story but also that the place is called ‘wonderland’.

Wonder as a feeling of amazement is integrated to childhood. It is innocence which encounters the unknown mysteries of the world with wonder, as a state prior to cultivation of socially acceptable and construed notions of knowledge and the gradual shaping of the same into concrete prisons of the mind in the process of crystallization of identity. Difference, perhaps, before the process of systematic acculturation breeds wonder, while in the adult

world difference becomes a source of isolation, alienation, insecurity, animosity and hostility, leaving little space for the feeling of wonder anymore.

Stephen Hawking in *A Brief History of Time* begins by relating a public lecture delivered by Bertrand Russell on astronomy and a lady who replied in response to his lecture, “What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise” (Hawking 01). Despite the fact that the world rests upon the principles of relativity of truth and perception, the persistent struggle nonetheless remains to arrive at absolutist conclusions and judgments. Dismissal as an integrated part of Othering leads the world to stand where it stands at the moment.

Interestingly, in the case of Alice too, her adventures in wonderland come to an end and she returns to the real world only when she finally dismisses the people at the trial saying, “Who cares for you? You are nothing but a pack of cards!” (Carroll 100) It is at this point that she realizes she had been dreaming and returns home. Her return is symbolic of her assimilation into the world governed by opinions and values, bereft of acceptance or acknowledgement of differences. It is an indicator of perpetuation of a process where children are trained to believe in truth and reality as absolute concepts ingrained through structured paradigms of knowledge, which confirms concretization of identity.

The readers are, however, left to contemplate upon possibilities. The allegorical worth of *Alice in Wonderland*, perhaps, lies in the manner in which it negotiates the question of difference within the fabular fabric of an imagined society replete with differences. When compared to the present world, it is not a very distant cry as Cheshire cat declares, “We are all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad”, hinting at the coexistence of multiple worlds within the single structure of a geographically recognized world. The idea is not to trivialize the nature and extent of human loss the world has witnessed till date, but rather to seek a renewed understanding of where can this journey culminate without further violence caused by absolutist stances on the natural phenomena of differences.

To question the historicity of conflicting differences, the extent of violence and bloodshed, the intensity of trauma and seek solution in asserting identity through means of imposing oneself on the Other is not the acceptable route for sure. A captive at the Auschwitz concentration camp and a psychiatrist, Victor E Frankl writes in his book entitled *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima we know what is at stake” (Frankl 154). The world of Alice intervenes here and issues a warning to the bleakness of the world we create in the memorable episode where Alice, having cried enough over her plight, slips and falls into salt water upto her chin. She soon realizes it as a pool created by her own tears into which she herself and several others had fallen, and regrets thus “I wish I hadn’t cried so much! I shall be punished for it now, I suppose, by being drowned in my own tears!” (Carroll 17).

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