



Deconstructing the Portrayal of Adults' Superiority towards Children in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*

Nur Inayah[✉], Bambang Purwanto

English Department, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study discusses how the portrayal of adults' superiority towards children in the novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett is deconstructed by the work itself. The adults' superiority is portrayed in the novel, in which the adults are depicted as more superior figure than children. However, the perfect descriptions of the children as portrayed by Sara in the novel show that the hierarchy in child-adult relationship is able to be reversed. This study uses descriptive qualitative method supported by Structuralism's binary opposition and Derrida's Deconstruction reading strategy. The aim of this study is to destabilize the novel, *A Little Princess*, by applying Deconstruction reading strategy. This study shows that the novel deconstructs its portrayal of adults' superiority towards children. So, by destabilizing the binary opposition in the novel, that is an adult opposes a child, the child-adult hierarchy is reversed.

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[✉] E-mail: n.inayah@students.unnes.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the children and the adults is often seen in power inequality which puts the adult as the superior than the child. As Alanen & Mayall (2001:2) explains that,

Adults belong to a different generation from children. Adults, born at a point 20 to 40 years before their children, carry with them knowledge, assumptions and experience acquired during their trajectory through their lives, and influenced by social forces in operation during their life span to date.

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that as the one who occupies the knowledge and life's experiences, the adults are considered to be way more better than the children. While, the children are powerless with their dependence towards the adults caused by their innocency about the life itself: so it makes them considered as the inferior. The issue of child-adult relationship is also raised by Frances Hodgson Burnett in one of her novels, *A Little Princess*.

A Little Princess novel was written by Frances Hodgson Burnett in 1902. This novel tells about a little girl named Sara Crew who has to face the unequal treatments due to the changes of her social status. Her life as an orphan in the age of 11th forced her to be dependent towards the adults around her. Instead of being oppressed by the situation, Sara is described to have a perfect characteristics for a child of her age which makes her called as 'a little princess', and, in further study, questions whether the children are truly the inferior, while adults as the superior one. This condition then seems to deconstruct what is portrayed in the novel regarding to child-adult hierarchy. The characterizations of children turns to be equal compared to adults that in the same way putting the children in the same position with the adults. From this explanation, it can be seen that the construction of child-adult hierarchy has inconsistent assumptions. Therefore, this study is conducted to reveal how Derrida's

Deconstruction theory deconstructs the child-adult hierarchy in the novel *A Little Princess*.

Since this novel seems to deconstruct the child-adult hierarchy that has been established in the novel itself, Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction theory is considered to be the best approach to be used in this study. It is an approach which helps to seek out the binary oppositions operating in a text and reverse them in order to show the unstable assumptions on which most of the readers base their interpretations (Bressler, 1998:130). By using the approach, the unstable hierarchy of the concept of the adults' superiority towards children can be observed and interpreted in detail.

Jacques Derrida was the person who popularized deconstruction approach. He refused any kind of centralism which is based on a system of binary operations or conceptual oppositions. "He [Derrida] suggested that every centralism was not absolute: and it could be substituted or even be replaced." (Rosyidy, 2014.) Besides, deconstruction is a method of destabilizing the priority of things which is considered to be set up as original and natural. "For deconstruction, (1) language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings: (2) existence has no center, no stable meaning, no fixed ground: and (3) human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only "identities" are the ones we invent and choose to believe." (Tyson, 2006:258.)

This explanation shows us that deconstructive reading allows a text to be reinterpreted countless times, since Derrida stated that truth is not absolute' while the wrong might be true (Rosyidy, 2014): and the dynamic of a language may lead one reading becomes different with another reading: and that there is no a single thing which has a stable meaning or identity. Therefore, it can also be said that there is no stable construction on the portrayal of the adults' superiority towards children in Burnett's *A Little Princess*, since the construction can be destabilized.

Based on the explanations above, the problems proposed are how the adults superiority towards children is portrayed in the novel and how the portrayal of the adults' superiority towards children in the novel is deconstructed by the work itself. The aim of this study is to show how the adults' superiority towards children is portrayed in the novel and how the portrayal of the adults' superiority towards children in the novel is deconstructed by the work itself. So, it shows the unstable hierarchy of child-adult relationship in Burnett's *A Little Princess*.

METHODS

This study applies Structuralism's binary opposition and deconstruction reading strategy by Jacques Derrida: and uses descriptive qualitative method since it will involve interpretational qualitative and they will be interpreted and reported descriptively (Creswell, 2014). The material object of this study is Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. While, the formal object of this study is the study about the adults' superiority towards children reflected in the novel called *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The data analysis is taken by some procedures: (1) describing data in binary opposition: (2) data is interpreted through deconstruction reading.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part explains the binary opposition as to describe the portrayal of adults' superiority towards children in Burnett's *A Little Princess*: and deconstruction reading of Burnett's *A Little Princess* related to the portrayal of adults' superiority towards children.

Adults' superiority towards children

Adults become superior to the children as they are considered to know more about life, so that they can fulfill their children's needs. While, the children are inferior because of their dependence towards the adults, in which it drives

them to be passive, voiceless, and let the adults to control them. Hence, the children's dependence towards the adults clearly indicate that the adults are those with independence. The researcher, then, found in Burnett's *A Little Princess* that the adults' characterization of independence also leads to another characterizations which make them considered as the superior to the children. Meanwhile, the children's characterization of dependence in the novel leads them to be considered as the inferior. However, the child-adult hierarchy in the novel can be described through binary opposition found in the novel which consists of some opposing characterizations between the adults and the children.

The binary opposition is taken from opposing characterizations between adults and children in Burnett's *A Little Princess*. The first opposition is 'independent' and 'dependent', which can be seen from the relation between Mr. Crewe (Sara's father) as the adult and Sara as the child in the novel. The adults think that they are more superior than the children, since they – children – are younger former. Especially for having the age differential, children have less experience in life than the adults (Kuhne in Wijayanti and Meyrasyawati, 2015). So that children depend on the adults to support them economically, such as for their daily needs and education: and mentally, such as giving them the attention and love. These explanations about the adults' independence and the children's dependence are described by Burnett in *A Little Princess* as shown in the passage below,

Among other things, she had heard that he was a rich father who was willing to spend a great deal of money on his little daughter. (Burnett, 2017: 12)

From the passage above, it can be seen that Mr. Crewe (Sara's father) is the adult who is economically independent. Therefore he can provide everything his daughter needs and be responsible for his daughter. In this case, Sara as

the child becomes the object or recipient of her father nurturance. So that, it consequently makes Sara always be dependent on her father as the adult. Besides, his position as a single parent for his daughter makes Sara become more dependent on him (Burnett, 2017: 9).

The opposition between 'independent' and 'dependent', then, leads to another opposition, that is 'wise' and 'reckless'. As the adults are considered independent, it means that they are used to managing their own life and it makes them wise. While, children with their dependence, mean that they do not have their own autonomy to do or decide anything in their life, are considered reckless. In Burnett's *A Little Princess*, the opposition between wise and reckless is drawn by two opposing characterization of Lottie as the child and Mr. Carrisford as the adult. Lottie was described as a four-years old kid who had lost her mother (Burnett, 2017:21 & 45). This condition, then, seems to affect her personality as a spoiled child. Besides, the adults around her always treat her as if she needs lot of attention after her mother's death. So this leads to the idea that a child who has lost her mother needs to be taken care of and be given more attention. Yet, this turns her into a spoiled child who wants all her needs to be fulfilled or she would cry out loud (Burnett, 2017: 45). This explanation in the story shows that children are considered reckless, for they often act without any consideration whether it will bring goodness or not. On the other hand, the adults as portrayed by Mr. Carrisford's characterization are categorized as wise. This is when, in the story, Mr. Carrisford is told for keeping her friend's wealth, in which it turns out to be Sara's father who had died in India. Realizing that he had kept the wealth of his beloved friend, Mr. Carrisford decided to give it to his friend's one and only relative, that is his daughter (Sara), instead of running away with it and keeping it for himself. He even felt so burdened for keeping a huge amount of his friend's wealth (Burnett, 2017: 169). So, he decided to find Sara and give back

the fortune to the person who deserved it (Burnett, 2017: 172). These explanations show that adults are wise since they can make a right decision in their own life.

Another opposition is between 'powerful' and 'powerless'. Since they are considered to be wise, it makes the adults can be trusted to have the autonomy to run their own life. Their autonomy is also the key to manage the children's life, and that it makes them be powerful over the children. In the novel, the adult as portrayed by Miss Minchin, is powerful since she has the autonomy to run her own Seminary (Burnett, 2017: 264). So, she has the authority to control each child including Sara Crewe. Especially, since Sara lost her father who had left nothing to her, Miss Minchin becomes more powerful that she makes Sara work for her to pay all the costs she has spent during her life in the seminary (Burnett, 2017: 100). In contrast, the children are so reckless that they do not occupy the autonomy to run their own life. So, this situation, then, creates the children as the opposition to be powerless with their dependence on the adults, and that they cannot reject what the adults tell them to do (Burnett, 2017: 257). However, Sara as the child is totally powerless since she can only obey Miss Minchin's command and even believes she deserves to be given any job (Burnett, 2017: 102). These are because Sara realizes that she is now poor and that she has nobody to depend on except Miss Minchin. So, she has to work for her and obey every command given to her in order to pay the hospitality Miss Minchin gives as long as Sara lives in the seminary (Burnett, 2017: 258). Miss Minchin also takes everything that is left for Sara in the seminary, including her dolls since she felt so cheated that Sara's father left nothing to pay her (Burnett, 2017: 101). Her powerfulness is also described in the passage below,

'Don't talk nonsense about people liking you,' said Miss Minchin. 'You will have to do more than teach the little ones. You will run errands and help in the kitchen as well

as in the schoolroom. If you don't please me, you will be sent away. Remember that. Now go.' (Burnett, 2017: 102-103)

From the explanation above, it can be seen that the adults as portrayed by Miss Minchin are ruling since they can control the children's life and set the rule for them. The children are being ruled by the adults since the adults believe they children are reckless that they cannot decide what is best for them (Burnett, 2017: 268). In Burnett *A Little Princess*, Miss Minchin also sets Sara's life as if she is a servant in the seminary as it can be seen in the passage below,

'Don't put on grand airs,' she said. 'The time for that sort of thing is past. you are not a princess any longer. Your carriage and your pony will be sent away—your maid will be dismissed. You will wear your oldest and plainest clothes—your extravagant ones are no longer suited to your station. You are like Becky—you must work for your living.' (Burnett, 2017: 102)

The passage above shows how Miss Minchin uses her authority as the head of the seminary to rule Sara's life after she becomes an orphan and penniless. Yet, the rule even does not uphold justice for Sara since it makes Sara work too hard for a child of her age (Burnett, 2017: 270). Besides, Sara also does not get any appropriate treatment from Miss Minchin even though she has given her best to the seminary (Burnett, 2017: 270). Miss Minchin also forbids Sara to talk to the girls in the seminary (Burnett, 2017: 118). Even after Sara is not under her charge anymore, Miss Minchin still tries to ban Sara to meet her companions in the seminary (Burnett: 2017: 268). It shows that Sara as the child is being ruled by Miss Minchin as the adults. There is nothing she can do but obey anything Miss Minchin tells her to do (Burnett, 2017: 257).

The opposition between 'ruling' and 'ruled' creates the way they live, which are to be 'free' and to be 'controlled'. The adults can control everything since they are powerful and

hold the authority to rule the children. It is different from the adults as portrayed by Miss Minchin, Sara as the children has no authority to dismiss Miss Minchin's orders to do any job in the seminary. Moreover, if Sara does not please Miss Minchin, she will be expelled from the seminary (Burnett, 2017: 103). Sara just powerless as she realizes that there is nothing she can do but to follow Miss Minchin's plans for her life, as seen in the passage below,

It certainly seemed that there was no way in which any change could take place. She knew what Miss Minchin intended that her future should be. So long as she was too young to be used as a regular teacher, she would be used as an errand girl and servant and yet expected to remember what she had learned and in some mysterious way to learn more. The greater number of her evenings she was supposed to spend at study, and at various indefinite intervals she was examined and knew she would have been severely admonished if she had not advanced as was expected of her ... This was what would happen: when she was older she would be expected to drudge in the schoolroom as she drudge now in various parts of the house: they would be obliged to give her more respectable clothes, but they would be sure to be plain and ugly and to make her look somehow like a servant. That was all there seemed to be look forward to, and Sara stood quite still for several minutes and thought it over. (Burnett, 2017: 158)

It can be seen from the passage above that Sara as the children is really powerless that she can be controlled by Miss Minchin as the adult. If she wants to stay in the seminary, she has to please Miss Minchin by following her plans she has set for her life in the seminary. She shall perform every command given to her even if it means she will be treated as if she is a servant in the seminary. Moreover, since there is nothing Sara can do, it means that she is being controlled by Miss Minchin as the adult. While, Miss Minchin as the adult has freedom to control her pupils in the seminary including Sara.

Those oppositions reflect how superior the adults to the children and how inferior the children to the adults in *A Little Princess* (Burnett, 2017). Each opposition shows that the adults who take the control over the children are in the upper level, while the children are in the position of being controlled. This shows the differentiation that exists in the relationship of child-adult, especially in Burnett's *A Little Princess*. She, Burnett, tries to show that the adults with all the authority to run their own life can take control over the children. Moreover, the adults become more superior than the children since the children themselves are familiarised with being dependent on the adults as what has reflected on *A Little Princess* (Burnett, 2017).

Deconstructing Adults' Superiority towards Children

In the previous writing about binary opposition in Burnett's *A Little Princess* as related to the adults' superiority towards children, it is already mentioned that adults are superior because of some differentiations between their characterizations and the children's, in which those put the adults in the higher level than the children. But there are also some characterizations of the children in the novel that seem to reject the idea of the adults' superiority itself. The perfect description of the children as portrayed by Sara Crewe seems to built a new meaning of children's characterizations in general and this idea is considered as a deconstruction thinking. Her characterizations described in the novel seem seem to be similar to the adults' characterization as the party which hold the superiority. This idea, then, is the idea of deconstruction.

However Their dependence is caused by some factors, such as how the adults around them treat them. So, there is a big possibility to the children to be independent just if the adults around them or even an unexpected condition forces them to be independent. For example, in Burnett's *A Little Princess*, the children as

portrayed by Sara Crewe is dependent on the adults for they still need the nurturance from the adults (Burnett, 2017: 9). Besides, the children are also economically dependent on the adults around them since they are the ones who earn the money for the family and provide their children with the wealth (Burnett, 2017:12). These kinds of dependence are caused by the way the adults treat them to be dependent. They always provide their children with material wealth so that the children tend to be spoiled. Yet, not all parents choose to treat their children with the fortune they have. Moreover, if the situation suddenly changes and turns the life of a prosperous family into a peniless one: or even when the children lost one or both of their parents, the children can possibly become independent like the adults. Such as one of the children in Burnett's *A Little Princess* named Sara Crewe, she is an independent little girl since she has lost her mother when she was born (Burnett, 2017:8). So, even though her father treats her like a little princess (Burnett, 2017:20), Sara realizes that she is the one who has to take care of her rich father (Burnett, 2017:10). Besides, when other children might be so spoiled that they are usually annoying (Burnett, 2017: 20), Sara chooses to make herself useful and not to give up to the sudden change in her life which turns her into a poor child when she lost her father and the wealth that supports her life (Burnett, 2017: 109). Even when Miss Minchin makes her busy with the works of a servant in the seminary, indeed Sara still independently realizes her necessity to educate herself (Burnett, 2017:110). Since she lives by her own self after the death of her father, she also told herself not to complain while she is doing her jobs that seems so burdening for a child of her age (Burnett, 2017:112).

From their dependence on the adults, the children then become reckless that they are not given any chance to develop themselves by considering what is best for them. But, the perfect description of Sara Crewe in Burnett's *A Little Princess* makes the adults let Sara to

unintentionally develop herself and reject the idea of the children's recklessness as shown in the passage below,

She was such a little girl that one did not expect to see such a look on her small face. It would have been an old look for a child of twelve, and Sara Crewe was only seven. The fact was, however, that she was always dreaming and thinking odd things and could not herself remember any time when she had not been thinking things about grown-up people and the world they belonged to. She felt as if she had lived a long, long time (Burnett, 2017:7-8).

The passage above indicates how Sara is different from other children. The way she thinks is more like the adults, and it affects in the way she acts in solving her problems. Besides, her condition as a child who has lost her mother turns her into a wise person as she is trusted to help the adults to take care of other children in the seminary (Burnett, 2017:46). She knows how to make a spoiled child to be quiet when the adults choose to give up (Burnett, 2017:47). Moreover, she also knows the best way to use her fortune (Burnett, 2017: 280).

As the children are considered being reckless, they cannot get the authority to run their own life and they will not be trusted to make a decision in their own life. These make the children become so powerless that they only wait for the adults to choose what is best to do and to decide anything in their life. Yet, in Burnett's *A Little Princess*, Sara Crewe with her cleverness can reject the powerlessness the children occupy as she is considered being wise. It is through the adults that Sara powerfulness is admitted. They let Sara make a decision on her own life since they believe she will make the best one by her own self (Burnett, 2017:267). Even Miss Minchin as the adult cannot do anything to reject Sara's decision (Burnett, 2017:267). Besides, since the adults know how special Sara is than other children, they allow her to use her autonomy to do anything she likes to do. So, since they call Sara

a princess, it also means everyone, including the adults, should obey her command (Burnett, 2017:280). However, these explanations clearly indicate how powerful Sara as the children towards the adults is.

Children are also considered as being ruled by the adults. This is because the children are powerless with their dependence on the adults and cannot decide what is best for them (Burnett, 2017: 268). Yet, Sara's perfect description, which makes her regarded as the most accomplished pupil in the seminary (Burnett, 2017:84), rejects the idea that children are the ones who are being ruled by the adults. The children as portrayed by Sara Crewe in Burnett's *A Little Princess* have the power to rule the adults since she realizes her rights to be served, and she also knows that her father has paid for it (Burnett, 2017: 82). So, in this case, Miss Minchin as the adults has no authority to dismiss Sara's order and follows Sara's command (Burnett, 2017: 82).

As shown in figure 4.1, the children are controlled by the adults. This is for they are so powerless that they have no authority to refuse what the adults told them to do (Burnett, 2017: 158). Yet, the description of Sara's characterizations in Burnett's *A Little Princess* also rejects the idea that she, as the children, is being controlled by the adults. In this case, children who are given their authority to decide what is best for themselves have less possibility to be controlled by anyone, especially by the adults (Burnett, 2017: 268). They are free from any command the adults ask them to do (Burnett, 2017:267).

From all oppositions that have been dismantled above, we can see the deconstructed aspects in Burnett's *A Little Princess* (Burnett, 2017). From the discussion above, it can be seen that the adults' superiority can be put in reverse and so it can be seen that there is no stable construction of child-adult hierarchy since the construction can be destabilized. The adults' superiority over children happens just if the children are treated as if they are dependent and

powerless compared to the adults. Besides, if the situation does not seem to challenge the children to think what is good for themselves, the children could possibly be in the lower level than the adults and become passive all the time. The deconstruction also means as fighting back the dominance of the adults over children which may cause the adults to intimidate the children. So, the only way for the children to reject the idea of their inferiority is by occupying the authority to develop themselves to be independent and allowing the unexpected situation to challenge them to be wise and free.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion on the research findings in the previous chapter, the novel *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett illustrates the relation between adults and children from various opposing characterizations which are conceptualized in the form of binary opposition. It shows that adults are superior than the children because they occupy the autonomy to run their own lives, which can be reached by gaining various characterizations such as being independent, wise, powerful, ruling, and free. Therefore, the adults can control the children as what adults, or in this case, Miss Minchin, do towards Sara, the main character of the novel. However, in this novel, Sara takes control over the adult by being a 'little princess' in the seminary.

The story of the novel *A Little Princess* is expected to tell about a child's life experiences since the main character of the novel is Sara Crewe, an eleven year old girl. However, instead of presenting the character of children, the story betrays its own notion by showing the perfect descriptions of a child which put the children in the same level with the adults. Besides, the new characteristics of children that are portrayed by Sara as the main character in the novel show the deconstruction of the portrayal of adults' superiority over children. So, by destabilizing the

binary opposition in the novel, that is a child opposes an adult, the child-adult hierarchy is reversed.

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