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THE ANTAGONIST AS MYSTICAL FORCE: EVIL, CONTROL AND THE CHILD'S WORLD

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Abstract: This article examines how antagonistic forces function as instruments of psychological and quasi-mystical control in Susan Hill's I'm the King of the Castle and Khudoyberdi Tokhtaboyev's Riding the Yellow Giant (Sariq devni minib.) Focusing on Hooper's calculated cruelty and the symbolic menace of the Yellow Giant, the study argues that both works deploy antagonist figures to shape the child protagonist's sense of power, identity and moral agency, albeit within contrasting cultural frameworks.
Keywords: antagonist, mystical force, children's literature, psychological control, Gothic tradition, folklore, comparative literature.

Introduction:

Children's fiction has long employed figures of threat and opposition not merely as plot devices but as embodiments of forces beyond the child's comprehension or control. When an antagonist's motives remain opaque, when power appears arbitrary and resistance proves futile, the opposing figure acquires a quasi-mystical quality: it seems to belong to an order of things that the protagonist cannot reason with or escape. This dimension of children's narrative has received relatively limited comparative attention, particularly across cultural boundaries.

Susan Hill's I'm the King of the Castle and Khudoyberdi Tokhtaboyev's Riding the Yellow Giant (Sariq devni minib) offer contrasting models. In Hill's Gothic-psychological novel, the antagonist is a child — Hooper — whose persecution of Kingshaw is systematic, relentless and ultimately fatal. In Tokhtaboyev's folkloric-adventure narrative, the antagonist is the mythologised figure of the Yellow Giant, whose menace is external, collective and ultimately conquerable. Comparing them allows the study to trace how English and Uzbek children's fiction differently construct evil, power and the child's capacity for moral response.

The theoretical framework draws on Perry Nodelman's concept of the hidden adult embedded in children's texts,[1] Maria Nikolajeva's analysis of power relationships in children's fiction,[2] and Carl Jung's notion of the Shadow archetype as the projection of disowned aspects of the self.[3] These lenses illuminate the psychological and symbolic dimensions of antagonism in both works.

Hooper as agent of psychological terror

Edmund Hooper's antagonism in Hill's novel operates through language, space and the systematic withdrawal of security. From his first encounter with Kingshaw, Hooper establishes dominance through a note slipped under the door: "I didn't want you to come here".[4] The phrase is not a threat in the conventional sense; it is a declaration of ontological rejection — you do not

[1] Nodelman, P. The hidden adult: Defining children's literature. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. P. 1–20.

[2] Nikolajeva, M. Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers. New York: Routledge, 2010. P. 8–30.
[3] Jung, C. G. The archetypes and the collective unconscious. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959. P. 284–292.
[4] Hill, S. I'm the King of the Castle. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970. P. 17.

belong, your presence is illegitimate. For Kingshaw, already anxious in the unfamiliar house of Warings, these words function as a verdict rather than an opinion.

Hooper's power resides in his knowledge of the environment. He controls Warings as a domain: its rooms, its cellar, the stuffed animals that line the corridors. When he locks Kingshaw in the red room with the glass-eyed crow, the act is calculated rather than impulsive. Hooper does not simply frighten; he engineers fear with a precision that recalls what Nikolajeva describes as the adult's invisible hand in children's fiction — authority that shapes the child's world without fully revealing itself.[5]

Hill reinforces Hooper's quasi-mystical hold through the atmosphere of Warings itself. The house amplifies his power, lending it the quality of inevitability:

"He felt the whole house, dark and silent and waiting, fold itself around him, and he was afraid."[6]

The Gothic setting does not merely reflect Kingshaw's anxiety; it acts as Hooper's silent collaborator. By aligning the antagonist with the spatial uncanny, Hill elevates Hooper's cruelty beyond the personal. His persecution becomes structural — woven into the very environment Kingshaw cannot leave.

What makes Hooper's antagonism most disturbing is its psychological intelligence. He recognises Kingshaw's vulnerabilities — his fear of the house, his need for adult approval, his hope that the two boys might eventually coexist — and exploits each of them in turn. Even after the tragedy, Hooper's words reveal an awareness of his own agency: "It was because of me, I did that, it was because of me."[7] The confession is not remorse; it is a statement of power. Hooper has accomplished what he set out to do.

The Yellow Giant as collective myth and conquerable fear

In Tokhtaboyev's novel, the antagonist is not a person but a figure from collective imagination. The Yellow Giant (Sariq dev) exists at the intersection of folklore, rumour and the child's projection of fear onto the unknown. Unlike Hooper, who targets a specific individual, the Yellow Giant is a communal threat — a force that the village children speak of in hushed tones and that Hoshimjon's companion Zokir fears instinctively.

The Giant's mystical quality derives from its folkloric genealogy. In Uzbek folk tradition, the giant embodies the unpredictable powers of nature and fate that lie beyond ordinary human control.[8] Tokhtaboyev draws on this tradition to give the antagonist a weight that transcends individual psychology. The Giant is not merely frightening; it is cosmologically significant — a remnant of a pre-rational world that the modern child must face and, ultimately, integrate.

Hoshimjon's response to this antagonist reveals the novel's moral logic. Rather than retreating, he actively seeks confrontation:

“Men bugun u bilan jang qilmoqchiman” ("I want to fight him today"), Hoshimjon tells Zokir.[9]

This declaration, delivered with characteristic overconfidence, positions Hoshimjon as a Jungian hero who advances towards the Shadow rather than fleeing it. His courage is not free from

[5] Nikolajeva, M. Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers. P. 45.
[6] Hill, S. I'm the King of the Castle. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970. P. 14.
[7] Hill, S. I'm the King of the Castle. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1970. P. 198.

[8] Jahongirov, G'. O'zbek bolalar folklori. Toshkent: O'qituvchi, 1975. P. 34–40.
[9] To‘xtaboyev, X. Sariq devni minib. Toshkent: G'afur G'ulom nomidagi nashriyot, 1969. B-118.

anxiety — he too feels the weight of the unknown — but he channels that anxiety into action. The Giant thus functions as an externalization of interior fear: by confronting it, Hoshimjon confronts what he does not yet understand about himself and the world.

The contrast with Hooper is instructive. Hooper's power is predicated on Kingshaw's passivity; the more Kingshaw retreats, the more Hooper advances. The Yellow Giant, by contrast, recedes as Hoshimjon advances. This structural difference encodes a moral difference: in Tokhtaboyev's framework, fear is conquerable through courage and community, whereas in Hill's framework, psychological domination is self-reinforcing and ultimately terminal.

Evil, cultural framework and the child's moral agency

The contrasting representations of antagonism in the two novels reflect broader cultural philosophies of childhood and moral development. Hill's Gothic tradition, shaped by post-war English realism and existentialist anxiety, locates evil in social structures and interpersonal relationships that adults fail to supervise.[10] Kingshaw's tragedy is not supernatural; it is sociological. The adults around him — his mother, Mr Hooper — are so absorbed in their own desires that they cannot see the child's suffering. Their blindness gives Hooper's cruelty room to operate. Evil, in Hill's world, flourishes in the gaps of adult attention.

Tokhtaboyev's Uzbek folkloric tradition constructs evil differently. The giant is a known quantity: it belongs to a moral taxonomy that the culture has already named and equipped the child to face. Hoshimjon may be impulsive and overconfident, but he is not without resources. He has friends, community, a tradition of heroic narrative that tells him monsters can be defeated. When he accepts responsibility for a friend's mistake — “Kechirasizlar, bu ishni men qilganman” ("Excuse me, I was the one who did it")[11] — this moral act is the truest form of overcoming the antagonist. The real giant is not external but internal: cowardice, dishonesty, the failure of solidarity.

Maria Nikolajeva observes that power in children's fiction is rarely distributed equally, and that the child's moral growth often depends on recognising where power resides and finding strategies to resist or transform it.[12] Both novels dramatise this process, but with opposite outcomes. Kingshaw never develops a strategy that Hooper cannot anticipate and undermine. Hoshimjon, by contrast, gradually discovers that the most powerful strategy is not individual heroism but collective moral responsibility. The antagonist in Tokhtaboyev's novel is finally overcome not by strength but by character.

Conclusion

The antagonist figures in Hill's I'm the King of the Castle and Tokhtaboyev's Riding the Yellow Giant both acquire a quasi-mystical dimension, but they do so through different cultural and narrative mechanisms. Hooper's cold intelligence, amplified by the Gothic atmosphere of Warings, functions as an inescapable structural force. The Yellow Giant, rooted in Uzbek folkloric tradition, externalises fear in a form that the child protagonist is culturally equipped to confront and ultimately to integrate. Comparing the two reveals how children's literature encodes not only different conceptions of evil but different conceptions of the child's capacity to respond to it. Where Hill traces the child's defeat, Tokhtaboyev traces his moral awakening.

[10] Botting, F. Gothic. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2014. P. 12–18.
[11] To‘xtaboyev, X. Sariq devni minib. Toshkent: G'afur G'ulom nomidagi nashriyot, 1969. B-19

[12] Nikolajeva, M. Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers. P. 67.

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