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# “Eating Sugar”: Gastronomical Narratives in Children's Literature

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**Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com****ABSTRACT:**

Food has always been one of the primary indices of life. From the smell of the choicely delights in *Red Riding Hood's* basket that drew in the big bad wolf, to the poisoned apple of revenge in *Snow White* that almost drew in her death, from the magic pumpkin-turned-carriage in *Cinderella* to the inexhaustible porridge-pot in *The Sweet Porridge*, from Alice's tea-party in *Alice in Wonderland* to the cosmos of sugary servings in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, from the cottage of confectionary delights in *Hansel and Gretel* to the shower of snacks in *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, gastronomical experiences have trickled into the very heart of children's literature, weaving a scrumptious labyrinth of food, parallel and pervasive to the universe of children's fiction. A large portion of children's literature (nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and children's novels) from “Hot Cross Buns” and “Pat-a-cake”, to the *Harry Potter* and *Famous Five* series have narratives revolving around food. As sing song and simple as they may be, these gastronomical pieces have origin in societies of feudalism and poverty and have religious and commercial undertones. Here, we seek to follow the breadcrumb trail of culinary narratives in children's literary fiction and trace the meanings they accrue, the impressions they leave and the moral politics they convey, of the socio-cultural realities of their times. Through this paper, we aim to analyze the appetizing tales of our childhood and the effects they had on impressionable minds - with respect to the underlying themes they cater to, and unpack those delightful bites by trying to study them from an adult perspective.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Culinary Narratives, Food and Fiction, Nursery Rhymes, Fairytales

## ***Eating Sugar: Gastronomical Narratives in Children's Fiction***

“Candy doesn't have a point; that's why its candy!”(Burton, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*)

Candy has permeated the crux of culture and civilization of the modernized world right since the beginning of the millennium. The desire for sweetness goes as far back as time and through the years it has only increased. There is no supplement for the sweet, no satisfying alternative for the sugar in your coffee or the middle-of-the-day donut craving, no intellectual surrogate for the sweet-tooth. In the domain of words, however, a close ally to “sweet” would be “sugary”. Indeed the word “sugar” can be used in so many ways: from

popular endearments to dessert frostings, sugar has always been the sweetener of the heart, through food and fiction. Our warmest, happiest thoughts and memories can be observed as leaving behind a saccharine feeling,

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much like the aftertaste of a warm, sugary drink on a cold, winter evening.

The title “*Eating Sugar*” germinates from that thought, since much of the fiction we're about to deal with has secret sugary channels and labyrinths. In keeping with the second half of our title, we're opening the discussion to both the sweet and savoury sensations in children's fiction, working our way through the scrumptious web of desire and excavating their meanings and resonances, like gastronomical detectives or burrowing animals, exploring the terrains of the sweet, the savoury and surfeit. Our objective in this paper would be to take up tales and songs from our childhood and reassess the ideas they hold, going beyond the descriptions of food and launching into the social, psychological and economic contexts.

It is a heavy burden to talk about fairytales. If one is born a real-life Matilda, with a love for limericks, a grit to read and a gargantuan appetite for books, children's literature - being roadmaps to the world of fiction - hold a very special place in their heart, such that, even to think of embarking on a project on it, can be paralysing, out of fears of letting these childhood reservoirs of pure happiness and unadulterated magic - down! When this culminates with a middle-class Bengali's love for food, you get nothing short of a silver-screen depiction of the most brilliant panic-attack!

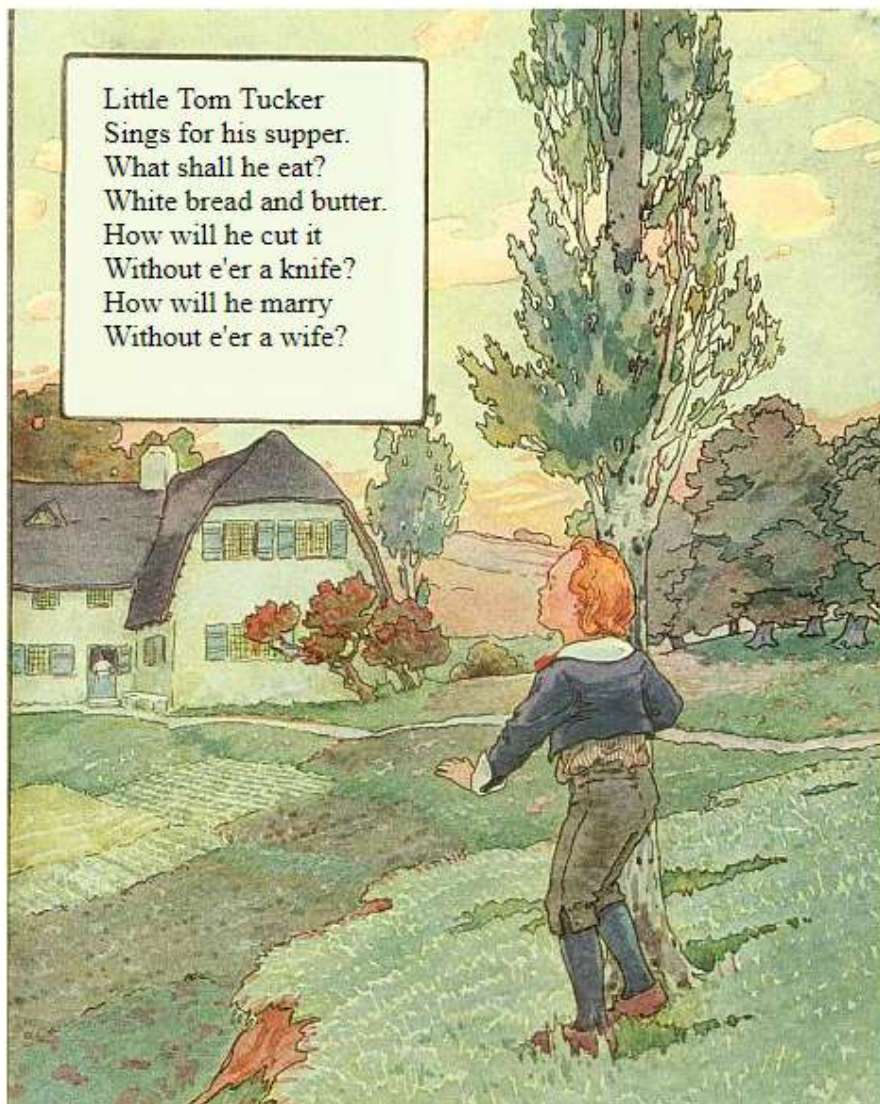
Nursery rhymes, too, form an irreplaceable part of our lives: from Johnny sneakily eating sugar and lying to hide it from his father to windmills making flour in “Blow Winds Blow”, the lessons and morals of these songs have remained with us. These jingles work in multi-faceted ways: parents and caregivers have used catchy sing-song couplets or quatrains, to get a child to eat, or to engage them in cooking together, such as in “Pat-a-cake”.

Out of the books we grew up with, certain things have left an impression on our minds, even after growing up, such as, the descriptions of food and feasts. As an Indian middle-class kid, never having tasted bacon or ham or peanut butter or whipped cream, vivid recollections of the fictional food scenes stayed with us, and influenced our current obsession with food.

There were home-made scones with new honey. There were slices of bread thickly spread with butter, and new made cream-cheese to go with it. There was sticky brown gingerbread, hot from the oven, and a big solid fruit cake that looked almost like a plum pudding when it was cut, it was so black (Blyton 82).

In nursery rhymes, for example, from “Little Miss Muffet” eating her curd and whey to “Pat-a-cake”, there are many lip-licking jingles that immediately come to our mind. Among these, “Little Tommy Tucker” is especially significant as it uncovers the economic inequalities of the time through a seemingly innocent rhyme that becomes especially poignant with the last line.

“Little Tom Tucker  
Sings for his supper.  
What shall we give him?  
White bread and butter.  
How shall he cut it  
Without a knife?” [...] (“Little Tommy Tucker,” Opie 416)



**(“Little Tommy Tucker”, illustrated by Frederick Richardson)**

Poverty is evident as Little Tom must labour to earn his supper as singing for one's supper was a well-known proverbial phrase (Opie 417) implying the stark economic dependence in this instant, and the “we” holding the discretionary powers of food provisions. In a poverty stricken feudal society of 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the sing-song nursery rhyme doesn't remain as innocent. The first instances of literature that a child grows up with, far from being hopeful and educative, are tainted by the dark truth of society.

“Hot-cross buns” was another rhyme which was part of our nursery syllabus, and it was not hard to correlate this to the street hawkers we'd see selling their wares. But the buns, with the Christian religious symbol of the cross eaten on Easter, convey superstitious ideas that eating it would bring good luck. Being part of a Catholic school syllabus, it almost seems like a religious propaganda to adults inspecting it. “In 2003, for instance, four local councils decided to ban them for fear of offending non-Christians” (Jack 73).

The utilization of eating practices in fiction for the purpose of propagating or subverting a particular cultural norm is perhaps nowhere more evident as in the riotous tea-party in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*. Set in the Victorian society, the mayhem involved in the Mad Hatter's Tea party with the Dormouse asleep at the table, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare shouting and resting their elbows on him and Alice sitting down uninvited seems to strike at the roots of superficial Victorian sensibilities that were precariously balanced on a tightrope of etiquette and

discipline. Furthermore, the profusion of gastronomical references and their direct consequences on the protagonist depict a world where the act of eating itself was fraught with dangers.



(“Drink-me’ bottle” from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, illustrated by John Tenniel)

Thus, the novel depicts many instances where Alice goes on to taste unknown vials of liquid or food labelled “DRINK ME” or “EAT ME”, to unbelievable effects of growing or shrinking in size. As Keeling puts it, “[...] the moralities attached to eating too much or too little or the right stuff or the wrong stuff, eating, appetite, and digestion [...]” was among the primary concerns and consequent motifs of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature (93). Severe appetite restrictions of children manifested in literary feasts bordering on gluttony and excess: “[...] Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it very nice (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, coffee, and hot buttered toast,)[...]” (Carroll 9).

Even in 21<sup>st</sup> century children's literature such depictions are not uncommon, food being the primary sensory stimulant which can be universally applied, or just as an extension of predecessor practices. Thus, in Harry Potter, we find a feast for every occasion and elaborate descriptions of the sumptuous courses laid out on the giant dining tables by the elves, depicting the one common trait shared by both magic and non-magic children: their unbridled love for food.

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs [...] A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavour you could

think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate eclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding (Rowling 123, 125).

Indeed, the assortment of food in the Harry Potter series is by far one of the most sensational fictional representations of food in children's literature. Set in the world of witchcraft and wizardry, it enmeshes the culinary culture of one world with the fantastical elements of the other. We get spectacular magical delights like Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Hagrid's rock cakes, chocolate frogs, fizzing whizzbees, levitating sherbet balls, cauldron cakes and 'Special Effects' sweets like “Drooble's Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-coloured bubbles that refused to pop for days),” “Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps”(that could make you breathe fire), “Ice Mice”(that would make your teeth chatter and squeak like a mouse), “fragile sugar-spun quills”, “exploding bonbons” and all other sorts of hilarious magical delights (Rowling 197). For non-magic children, never to have stepped into Honeydukes or Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlour or the annual Hogwarts' feasts, is a torture for the taste-buds and leaves them forever wanting.



"There's enough chocolate in there to fill every bathtub in the entire country"

(*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 1995 edition, illustrated by Quentin Blake)

A close resemblance with the delicious wizardry of Rowling's world can be found in the chocolaty cosmos of Roald Dahl's novel *Charlie and the Chocolate factory*. Much like Honeydukes' special-effects confectionaries, and Alice's magical drinks and cakes, “The Inventing Room” in Mr. Wonka's Chocolate Factory, houses gastronomical delights with magical properties that can change and restructure configurations of reality and provide solutions to real life problems. Thus, the most enchanting part of the factory and indeed the part that meant the most to Mr. Wonka, “The Inventing Room”, seemed like a splitting image of “The Room of Requirement” in *The Harry Potter* series. Composite of the solutions to the fundamental problems of humanity, made palatable through various forms of chocolaty mouthfuls, the room boasted of some of the most unique gastronomical gems in the novel such as, the “Everlasting Gobstoppers” that “never get any smaller!...never disappear”, the “Hair Toffee” to combat hair loss and the magic chewing gum that really is a three-course dinner in disguise, thus solving problems of death, decay, loss and lack (Dahl 67).

As marvelous and magical the food appearing out of thin air in Hogwarts or Mr. Wonka's factory might seem to be, agricultural rhymes such as “Oat, Peas, Beans and Barley Grow” and “Blow Winds Blow” actually

illustrate the processes and efforts that go into making the food in real life, serving the purpose of both educating children about the commercial aspects of consumption as well as providing literary enjoyment. Thus, the refrain goes:

Blow wind, blow  
 And go, mill, go  
 That the miller may grind his corn  
 That the baker may take it  
 And into bread make it  
 And bring us a loaf in the morn. (“Blow Winds Blow,” Opie 426)

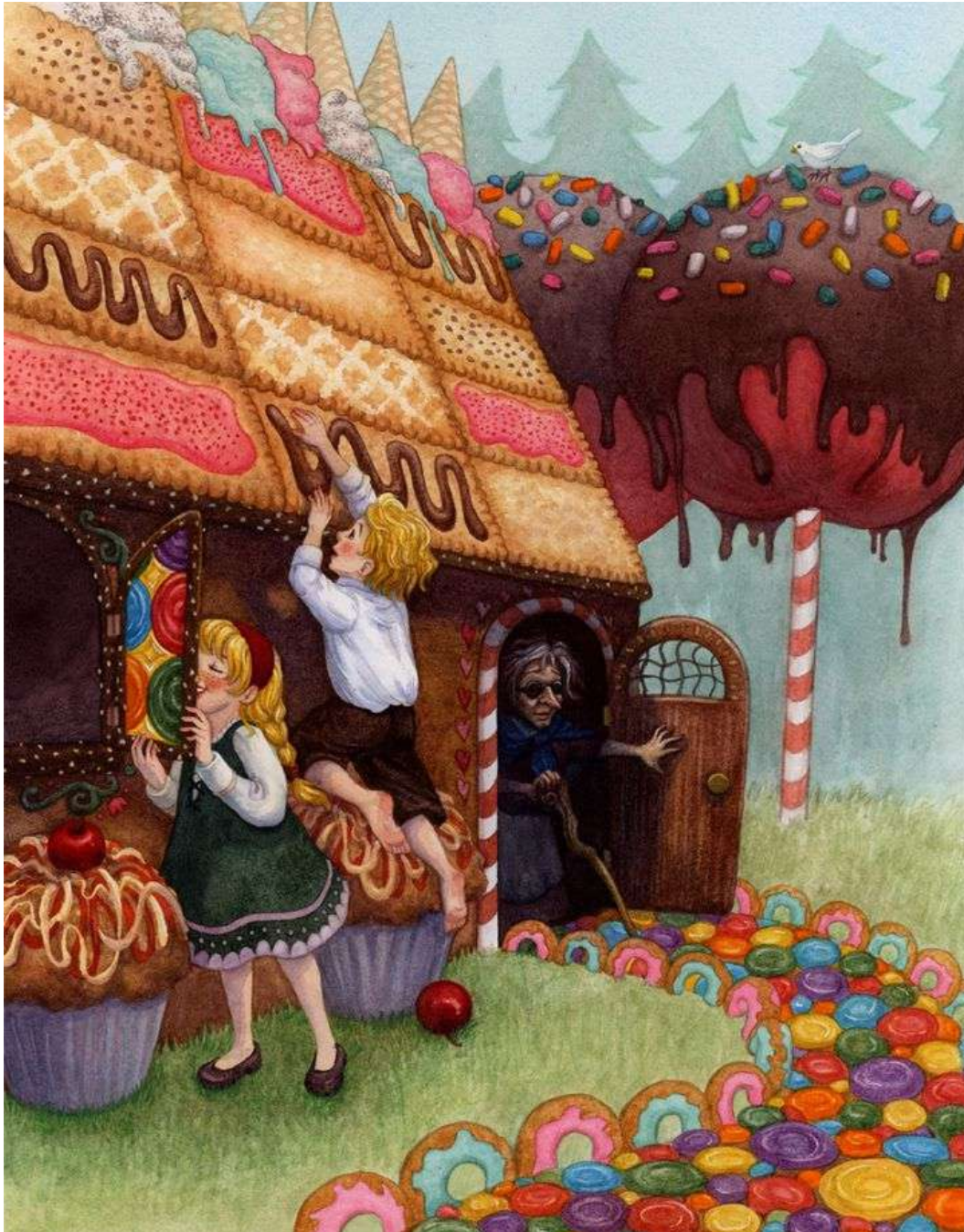
In medieval England, land was managed by feudal lords, and the mill would fall under their jurisdiction, where the peasants were obligated to bring their harvest in to grind, in return for a small ration. An example of medieval feudal social structure, this rhyme is still relevant for today's children and fussy-eaters to raise awareness that the food which so magically appears on their plates, the food their parents coax them to eat, does not spring out of thin air. A little bit of magic needs to be balanced with a little bit of realism.

Even in the magical world of the chocolate factory, realism infiltrates in the form of the brutal socio-economic inequalities of a world comprised of the haves and have-nots. Thus, Dahl writes: “Many times a day, he would see other children taking bars of creamy chocolate out of their pockets and munching them greedily; and that, of course, was pure torture.” (Dahl, 4) Furthermore, it mirrors the impoverished conditions of the urban poor in England in the image of the whole family huddled together around Charlie, as he opens a bar of chocolate, which, irrespective of the fact that it's his annual chocolate bar – the only one his family can afford for him in a year on his birthday, he shares with his entire family. In the middle of this bleak realistic depiction of impoverishment, the candy bar then transforms, from a piece of food to a piece of hope: the only warmth in that cold, cold cottage.

The centrality of food in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* thus forms a commentary on the real economic imbalances in a society where eating becomes a primary indicator of identity as manifested in the characterization of the families belonging to different socio-economic stratas- from the famished Buckets, to the greedy Gloops, to the compulsive consumer Beauregardes. The effects of confectionaries on the consumption culture are thus enunciated through the various impacts it has on these characters. Thus, Augustus Gloop drinks from the forbidden chocolate river and topples into it; Violet Beauregarde over-ambitiously chews an entire bar of blueberry gum meant for a three-course meal, swells up like a blueberry and has to be taken to the juicer room to be shrunk back to size. An excess of technological and hyper-real consumption leads to Mike Teeve's transgression as he teleports himself into the television thereby considerably shrinking in size. Both these instances of blowing up and shrinking down, consequent to consumption closely resemble Alice's adventures down the rabbit hole. The Oompa-Loompas figure as the moral compass of the novel, voicing the consequences of gluttony and illicit consumption following each child's fall from grace.

Ironically, the children's transgressions end up in their being consumed by the object of their desire and being literally and grotesquely enmeshed in what they wished to consume. Thus, Augustus comes out decked in chocolate fudge; Violet becomes physically altered to look like a blueberry as she, true to her name, comes out with a violet skin; Veruca is covered with nut scrapings and filth, a consequence of going through the rubbish chute, and Mike Teeve, stretched back to his size, looks even thinner than before (a possible reference to the flat-screen hyper-real dimension he seems to be most invested in). Only Charlie, through eating and restraint, re-enacts the need for control and moderation, and thereby achieves a sense of gastronomical redemption by acceding to the position of the chosen one – the winner of the test of character and the ultimate inheritor of the chocolate factory.

However, out of all the manifestations of food in children's literature, “Hansel and Gretel” is the one that leaves the most indelible imprints on young minds: a sticky-sweet house! An edible sanctuary in the middle of a tale about every child's worst nightmare, the candy cottage, also known as “the gingerbread house” in some versions of the story was built entirely out of sugar, with creamy, white frostings for the roof, gingerbread walls, studded with candies, chocolate chips, cakes, cookies, gummy bears, popsicles and every sugary treat a child could dream of: “...they saw the cottage was made of bread and cakes, and the window panes were of clear sugar” (Grimm 68).



(“Hansel and Gretel”, illustrated by Isabella Kung)

Set in the time of famine, food (or the lack there-of), motivates the abandoning of the children in the forest. Starvation, the inability to feed four mouths, compels the family to make a compromise (a cold-blooded, merciless one at that!): to reduce the number of shareholders for the seeping sugar, to scapegoat two to save the other two, to sacrifice the children in order to survive! This contextually helps in building a back-story to explain abandonment as

well as to highlight the socio-economic realities of the time. It serves to illustrate the extent to which humans can fall for the sake of hunger alone by depicting this brutal breach of parental and familial trust.

Again, it is hunger itself that saves them on the first night as unable to fall asleep, Hansel and Gretel eavesdrop on their plotting parents and plan their own rescue beforehand, by collecting white pebbles to mark their route in the forest. However, on the second night, it is food again that leads to their doom as the breadcrumb trails littered by Hansel on their journey into the woods, did not last the return journey out: "... the thousands of birds which had been flying about in the woods and fields had picked them all up" (Grimm 67). Thus, it is the breadcrumbs in the end that ensures that they are completely lost in the wilderness!

The delectable delusions manifest in the story leads one to question – did Hansel and Gretel, lost and hungry in the wilderness, get drugged on wild roots and weeds thereby prompting hallucinations of an "edible house" - food and shelter being the primary components of that delusion, and the ones that the children were particularly bereft of in the woods! Or, was it the effect of hunger alone that sufficed in inducing these hallucinations? Thus, the story can also be read as a depiction of the delirium evoked by deprivation that drives these children to start gnawing at roofs and window panes of a house, in a blind frenzy of hunger which imbues these inedible objects with the fantastic sugarcoat of dreams: a cottage made of crumbs and cakes and crystal-clean sugar!

'We will go in there', said Hansel, 'and have a glorious feast.'

'I will eat a piece of the roof and you can eat the window.

Will they not be sweet?' (Grimm 68)

These lines highlight another major aspect of food in fairytales – its role as an object of temptation - the classic food metaphor found in so many other fairytales from *Snow White's* tempting poisoned apple, to Alice's portentous drinks and cake in *Adventures of Alice in wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. It is in fact the temptation of abating their hunger that motivates the children to stray from their path: "...and they got so hungry for they had nothing to eat but the berries which they found upon the bushes" (Grimm 68) Acquiescence to this temptation makes them easy victims of the witch's ploy. The psychological consequence of this ploy is evident: when paralleled with the brutal realities of the breach of trust and parental abandonment in the woods, the house of sugar figures as a source of solace: a bright, colourful, promising presence in the darkness of the woods, that is at once comforting and alluring. However the exterior of the sanctuary is soon revealed to be starkly at odds with its interior, thus unfurling what might be one of the moralistic motives behind this metaphor - the dangers of judging things from how they appear to be on the outside, as appearances, most often, are deceptive. The nomenclature "sticky-sweet house" is thus an apt one as the metaphor unfurls to warn everyone about the consequences of being trapped in temptation.

As Maria Tatar notes in her "Introduction to Hansel and Gretel", the abundance of culinary references in the narrative highlight the cultural practices of feasting and repression, cooking and consumption. The parental figure is both the provider of food, succor and hospitality as well as the withholder of these means, thus playing a powerful role in the lives of children. Thus, she writes:

How do we explain the profusion of references to food in this tale of parental abandonment ... ? Does "Hansel and Gretel" perhaps address a child's real anxieties about starvation, abandonment, and being devoured by enacting a drama in which children are perpetually at risk but eventually delivered from want and deprivation? Or is the tale really about the oral greed, denial, and regression of the children, as Bruno Bettelheim insists? Disavowing the manifest content of the tale, Bettelheim suggests that the real problem turns on the children's 'unrestrained giving in to gluttony,' their 'cannibalistic inclinations,' and their 'oral greediness' (181).

This introduces another major motif in the story: cannibalism. As Mr. Wonka comments, in "*Charlie and*



*the Chocolate Factory*”: “Everything here is edible; even I'm edible. But that, dear children, is cannibalism, and is in fact frowned upon in most societies.” Even in Indian regional literature, any Bengali kid who grew up with *Thakumar Jhuli* would be familiar with the cannibal Rakshashis eating the children of the queen. The story of Hansel and Gretel is one of the forerunners of hunger, poverty, gluttony, excess, abandonment and cannibalism as found in children's literature.

The old woman had only pretended to be so friendly. She was really a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children. She had built the little house of bread just to lure them inside. As soon as a child was in her power, she killed it, cooked it, and ate it[...] When Hansel and Gretel got near her, she laughed fiendishly and sneered: "They're mine! This time they won't get away from me! (Tatar 188)

While the stepmother at home was intent on starving them, the witch in the forest presents another side of the consumption-starvation matrix by force feeding them, only in order to fatten them enough to be made into dinner. Cooking in the witch's cauldron thus has major cannibalistic resonances which further culminate with her ending up being roasted to death. Thus, the tables are turned on this culinary catastrophe as the children who were almost about to be made into the witch's dinner end up cooking her instead. Courage, the drive to kill, death and the roasting process get intertwined in this narrative of cannibalistic hunger and horror.

The relationship between the object of consumption and being consumed by it is also a predominant theme in children's rhymes. A popular rendition of this can be found in a rhyme, originally an excerpt of Southey's “What All the World Is Made Of”, that featured in a lot of nursery rhyme textbooks:

What are little girls made of?  
 What are little girls made of?  
 Sugar and spice and all things nice,  
 That's what little girls are made of. (“What Are Little Boys Made Of,” Jack 200)

The portrayal of little girls being made up of ingredients which little kids are seen most to consume brings forth the motif of cannibalism. The unconcerned way of depicting consumption and its effects is a common and problematic motif, like the wolf that gobbled up Little Red Riding Hood's grandma who was apparently rescued alive by cutting out his stomach. Cannibalism and violence, never occur explicitly, yet are implied in a lot of these aforementioned pieces. This “nonsensical jingle” which, according to Albert Jack would have horrified Southey to be so well known in today's age, brings forth the issue of how little compilers of nursery books look into the underlying metaphors and their very possible effects on young minds (200).

Just as the breadcrumbs play the role of unreliable signposts in “Hansel and Gretel”, highlighting the travesties of living in an existential wilderness, these childhood rhymes and stories, seem to tell us that, in a world where there are no reassuring directions, no guidelines, no roadmaps, it is necessary to lose your way before you're ready to find it and that no matter what the odds, the story doesn't end until you're reunited with the ones you love. Thus, the stories that influenced us when we were younger continue to expand in the metaphors and lessons they employ. As children are the harbingers of the future, the impact of these stories that mould young minds cannot be ignored. In a world ravaged by hatred, war and poverty, stories do to minds what food does to famished stomachs. The effects of both, however, trickle down to the chambers of the heart, leaving behind traces of the magic that they are born of. Memories fade away, old friends turn to strangers, but the flavor of the tales and songs of childhood remains – leaving us hungry then – and now!

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