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Abstract: *This study aims to make a comparative reading of Bina Shah's Slum Child (2010) and Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) through the perspective of the United Nations 1989; Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The text of both novels highlight the experiences of marginalized children in South Asia, depicting how lack of resources, social barriers of caste and class, moreover ethnic biasness force such children toward exclusion and complete denial to rights of respect, education and protection. Slum Child is the story of Laila, a Christian girl born in the slums of Karachi who as a child struggles against the structural neglect and gender oppression. The White Tiger is a narration of the struggles of Balram Halwai who while living in Indian rural setup, faces the bitterness of labor and decides to change his social status. Through illegal enterprise he exploits others thus proving how servitude and exploitation influences childhood detrimentally and standardized injustice. By placing these stories within the theoretical framework of child rights convention, the study argues that literary narratives serve a purpose of a record of what authors feel and write about marginalized childhoods and how their rights can be protected in an unstructured settings. It is an alternate approach to highlight the issues of those who remain neglected in the mainstream social activities. By giving voice to the sufferings and resilience fictional works not only depict systemic violence but also suggest the possibilities of security and dignified upbringing of these children. In the contemporary era, where child protection has become a challenge on global level, South Asian novels offer critical insights into how communities can rethink safeguard and equality for children.*

Introduction

Child rights and protections typically evoke images of policy frameworks, legal instruments and institutional interventions. However, for children living in crisis-situations such as poverty, marginalization, forced labor and minority exclusion the lived realities often remain outside the scope of formal discourse. This paper argues that literary narratives can act as an alternative archive of child-protection, giving voice to the "invisible children" in contexts of structural injustice. Specifically, this study conducts a comparative reading of Slum Child (2010) by Bina Shah and The White Tiger (2008) by

Aravind Adiga, through the lens of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). By reading fiction in South Asia that foregrounds the lived experiences of marginalized children, this study reflects on how the structural denial of rights (to education, safety, dignity) can be represented culturally and how literature gestures toward resilience and dignity for children even in crisis. The texts under study are rich with approaches to reimagine the perspectives regarding child rights and how they may be implemented not only in the process of policymaking in Pakistan but as cultural practices in the wider region. In short, literature serves both mirror and a guiding route, pointing out toward the problem and suggesting the possible solutions.

Literature Review

Child Rights, Crisis & Localization

The UNCRC gives the pattern of basic rights of children under four central categories: survival, development, protection and participation. Nevertheless, in the time of military conflict, internal or external displacement, destitution or minority intolerance the genuine implementation of these rights into communal lives often becomes impossible. In Pakistan, for instance, The report titled *The State of Children in Pakistan 2024* signals the recent surfacing problems such as climate related sensitivities, displaced children and individuals living on the peripheries who are the victims of persistence injustice and inequality (Unicef, 2025). A recent revision of the act regarding child right protection in Pakistan highlights that despite international promises and assurances; still a lot of work has to be done in this regard. Legislation and implementation of these laws are not equally applied across the provinces in Pakistan (Hilal, Salman, 2023). Moreover, in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone there has been a surge (402 incidents) of child-rights violations in the last six months — forced labor, begging, trafficking among them. ([Dawn](#))

The concept of *localizing child protection* means moving from international norms toward culturally-situated, context-sensitive practices: involving communities, recognizing local childhoods, and ensuring that dignity is more than a policy slogan. The literature calls for child-centric policies which heed children's voices and lived experiences, rather than purely institutional or legal models. Notably, youth activism and literary forums in Peshawar have been linked to child-rights advocacy. ([The Nation](#))

Literature, Childhood and Marginalization

Fiction has long been used as a lens to explore childhood in marginalized settings: how often childhoods are shaped invisibly by poverty, caste, class, religion, labor and displacement. In the Pakistani context, Bina Shah's *Slum Child* uses the voice of a Christian girl in the slums of Karachi to reflect structural neglect, stigma, labor and trauma. The novel has been claimed to create space for unheard and oppressed voices. For instance, a paper on "Silence and Resilience in *Slum Child*" argues that the child narrator offers testimony to the structural plight of Christian subaltern children in Pakistan. ([pjsr.com.pk](#)) Another study focuses on socio-religious identity and minority crisis in the novel. ([contemporaryjournal.com](#))

In the Indian context, *The White Tiger* has received scholarly attention for its portrayal of class stratification, labor and exploitation. A recent article argues that the novel exposes the "India of darkness" versus the "India of light" through caste, class and labor. ([the-criterion.com](#)) The novel's epistolary form, cynical tone and representation of the servant/driver's world make it relevant to childhood (and youth) perspectives in marginalized labor settings.

Literature–Rights Interface: Fiction as Archive and Advocacy

There is a growing interest in how narrative fiction can complement rights-based frameworks: by giving voice, humanizing statistics, creating empathy, and anchoring abstract norms in lived experience. In

crisis settings, literature becomes a cultural tool for resilience and a dignified upbringing: addressing violations and possibilities of agency and transformation. While specific research combining South Asian fiction, child rights frameworks and childhood protection remains limited, the existing intersection suggests a fertile terrain for study.

In sum: The literature reveals three key threads relevant to our study — (1) the rights-crisis gap (where children’s rights are formally committed but poorly realized), (2) the narrative of marginalized childhoods (how class, caste, minority, labor shape childhood), and (3) the role of fiction in making visible these marginalized experiences and pathways to resilience. The present study builds on these threads by applying them comparatively to two South Asian novels, situating them within the child-rights framework and examining how they contribute to localization of child protection.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how *Slum Child* and *The White Tiger* represent the lived realities of marginalized children in South Asia, focusing on entrenchment of poverty, class/caste and minority exclusion.
2. To map how these fictional narratives interact with the rights-based framework of the UNCRC (1989), particularly rights to education, safety, dignity, participation and protection from labor.
3. To explore how literature can serve as a path to resilience and dignity for children, i.e., how storytelling opens up possibilities for culturally anchored and locally meaningful child protection
4. To reflect on the implications of these literary representations for the localization of child-protection practices in Pakistan, how they might inform advocacy, policy, community narratives.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do *Slum Child* and *The White Tiger* depict the childhoods of children facing structural exclusion (poverty, caste/class, minority status, labor) in South Asia?
2. How do these depictions align with, diverge from or challenge the rights articulated in the UNCRC framework (particularly protection, participation, development, dignity)?
3. What narratives of resilience, agency and dignity emerge in these novels, and how they might suggest concrete a framework for child-protection in crisis settings?
4. What lessons can be derived from these literary representations for the localization of child-protection in Pakistan — including policy, community strategies, cultural narratives and educational interventions?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary-analysis method, framed within a rights-based lens. Two novels were selected; *Slum Child* (2010) by Bina Shah and *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga on account of their focus on marginalized childhood/young adulthood, labor, class/caste/minority relations in South Asia, and their rich narrative representation of structural injustice.

Using the four core pillars of the UNCRC (survival, development, protection, participation) as sensitizing concepts, the texts are examined for their depiction of denial of rights and fulfillment (or attempted fulfillment), and the cultural narratives of childhood that are embedded within structural crisis.

Each novel is read for thematic patterns around childhood labor, education access, minority identity, class/caste exclusion, and pathways to resilience. Similarly, cross-textual comparison highlights similarities and divergences in representation, cultural context and narrative strategy.

The findings from the textual analysis are contextualized to the Pakistani child-protection environment: rights frameworks in Pakistan, crisis factors (poverty, displacement, minority status), and the localization imperative. Reports and legal reviews drafted in the context of Pakistan’s child rights laws like *The State of Children in Pakistan 2024* serve as the secondary data for the study. The interpretation of the findings

is done not only as a literary critique but it is an attempt of advocating for cultural change. It is an inquiry into how literature may play its role in protection of child rights, the narratives based on communal practices, policy debates and the acts of resilience in such marginalized individuals of the society.

Limitation of the Study

The study is limited to the interpretation of the text of two novels in a qualitative manner. It is interpretive approach rather than empirical; the focus of the study is on representation of the deprived rather than statistics of poverty and lack of resources.

Discussion and Analysis

Depiction of Childhood and Structural Exclusion

Slum Child, by Bina Shah is a story of young Christian girl, Laila living in the slums of Karachi who encounters the prejudice against her religion, faces poverty, works as a domestic servant, and is a victim of neglect and disgrace. The story highlights how childhood finishes for such children and they no more remain children: education and literacy is denied to them, protection compromised and self-respect subverted. Critics are of the view that Shah through the character of Laila, represents not only the subaltern children's deep physical and psychological injury but also resilience.

In *The White Tiger*, although childhood is depicted at the peripheral level as Balram as a youth takes the job of a driver and enters into entrepreneurship in urban setting. Without doubt it is foregrounding of the fact how exclusion on the basis of caste and class snatches away the innocence from children. Furthermore, the obligations of labor place children into the adult worlds. Balram due to economic constraints cannot go to school during his childhood and starts working as a child labor in his village. It is evident in both the texts how the illusion of a normal childhood that embodies education, fun, social protection and healthy growth is deferred in the situations where there is extreme poverty and social rejection.

Rights Framework and Literary Representation

Using the UNCRC framework:

Protection: Both texts show children lacking protection from economic exploitation, labor and neglect. In *Slum Child*, Laila faces dangerous slum conditions, drug addiction around her, and minority prejudice; in *The White Tiger*, Balram's servitude and ultimate moral crisis reflect the lack of structural protection.

Development: The right to education and healthy growth is undermined. In *Slum Child*, schooling is fragile; in *The White Tiger*, Balram drops out of formal schooling and learns through observation and labor. The literature illustrates how development is mediated by class/caste/education access.

Participation: The child's agency, voice, decision-making is compromised. However, both novels gesture toward agency: Laila's narrative voice itself is a site of participation; Balram writes his own story and chooses his path (albeit morally ambiguous).

Dignity and Inclusion: The rights discourse emphasizes dignity of the child, non-discrimination. Both texts expose dignity denied (minority Christian, lower-caste, servant class) and invite reflection on what dignified childhood might mean in those contexts.

Thus, the novels align with the rights vocabulary while also complicating it: they show that rights are more than provisions or statutes—they are lived, cultural, relational. They suggest that simply having rights on paper does not guarantee a safe and nurturing childhood.

Pathways to Resilience and Dignified Childhood

A key argument of this paper is that fiction not only shows violation but also allows for the exploration of possible course of action. In *Slum Child*, Laila's resilience, her endurance, the actions she takes to

secure her existence and integrity in the slum ambience points to her resistance despite unsupportive environment. In *The White Tiger*, though Balram's path is morally fraught, it nonetheless represents an escape from structural entrapment ("The Rooster Coop" metaphor) and asserts that children from exclusionary backgrounds may chart new pathways—albeit at a cost. The novels thus create space to examine prospects for a healthy, safe and dignified childhood: they ask what childhood *could* look like if rights were realized, if structures were undone, if voices were heard

Implications for Localizing Child Protection in Pakistan

Given Pakistan's current child-protection crisis—rising violations, displacement, minority exclusion, weak institutional safeguards (see KP data, national reports) — these literary findings have concrete implications:

Narrative inclusion: Pakistan's child-protection mechanisms can benefit from integrating children's narratives (fiction, testimonies) into policy, advocacy and education — making "invisible children" visible.

Cultural tools for advocacy: Literature (and other cultural forms) can operate as part of child-rights localization: local languages, local settings, children's voices from slums or minority contexts.

Resilience and dignity focus: Protection programs should not only focus on harm-avoidance but also on dignified childhood: safe spaces, education access, participation, identity affirmation. The novels point toward such imaginaries.

Minority and labor-child focus: In Pakistan, Christian, Hindu, Afghan migrant, internally displaced children and child-laborers are high-risk groups. The Pakistani literature (such as *Slum Child*) shows how minority status overlaps with exploitation; similar lenses could inform policy design.

Education and voice: As the UNCRC emphasizes participation; programming in Pakistan might create platforms for children to tell their stories (through literature, arts) thus fostering agency and dignity. Thus the paper suggests that localizing child protection means combining legal norms with cultural imaginaries, children's voices, community narratives and advocacy through literature.

Conclusion

In a time of crisis, whether economic, health, displacement, or social, child protection requires more than institutional frameworks: it needs culture, voice, narrative, and imagination. This study has shown how two South Asian novels *Slum Child* and *The White Tiger*, perform this cultural work: they expose how children from the margins are denied rights, they animate the lived realities of exclusion, and they gesture toward pathways of resilience and dignity.

Analyzed through the lens of United Nations Child Rights Convention, these texts remind us that in order to deal with the issues of child protection, inequality in terms of opportunities and the advocacy for the transformation of established practices, must be seen in relation to the lived experiences of under privileged children.

Generally for South Asia and specifically for Pakistani scholarship, the recognition signify that protecting child rights is not merely about passing acts and laws and conducting programs but about listening to the real voices: the sharing of lived experiences, the observing, the enlightening people about childhoods or else invisible. A picture conveys thousand times more than words. In the same way novel may reveal thousand times more than reports. To make the invisible visible is to make it a part of literature, academia so that community may listen to the voices and accept their dignity. Literature can act as a tool to help the marginalized children find their agency, assure safety against personal transgression, and achieve prosperity.

For Pakistan, and indeed the wider region, this means recognizing that protecting children is not only

about laws and programs but about stories: the telling, the witnessing, the humanizing of childhoods otherwise hidden. “A picture is worth a thousand words” — similarly, a novel may be worth a thousand reports. To localize child rights is to embed them in community narratives, to listen to the children, to affirm their dignity. Literature can act as a mechanism that helps children find their voice, guarantee protection against personal violation, and attain healthy growth.

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