



Research Paper

## The Bad Golly and the Wicked Goblins: Was Enid Blyton's 'Noddy Series' Truly Racist and Xenophobic?

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**Abstract:**

Enid Blyton is widely and universally regarded as one of the greatest and most beloved of children's authors of all times. Kids growing up in the 70s, 80s and 90s have fond memories of spending their free time going through her wide plethora of literary output ranging from 'Noddy', through the 'Adventures of Mr. Pink Whistle' to 'Famous Five' and 'The Secret Seven'. However, Blyton, though always beloved, was never a stranger to controversy. Her works were often called out on various problematic and controversial issues by critics.

Of all her works, 'Noddy' remains one which has catapulted her into limelight time and again both during and after her death. An epitome of the imaginative faculties of an author before the 'Harry Potter' and 'Lords of the Rings' era, 'The Adventures of Noddy' has undoubtedly been engraved in the hearts of those who grew up reading the books.

The setting for the stories of Noddy is the imaginary city of Toyland- a place where the citizens are toys. This concept finds a parallel in the Wizarding World projected in the 'Harry Potter' series. As appealing as it may seem to both children as well as adults who wish to give their children some healthy reading material in times where the practice of storybook reading is gradually falling out of vogue, yet there have been instances when the toys have allegedly become instruments for the projection of dark and deep social stigmas which plague adult minds. These stigmas which might have been harboured on a conscious or pre-conscious level by the author, have often allegedly found their way into the seemingly innocent stories. Based on this, should Enid Blyton truly be regarded as racist or xenophobic or was it just an extension of the deep human prejudices that reign in human minds, unintentionally rearing their ugly heads at times?

**Keywords:**

Racism, xenophobia, golliwogs, ghetto, prejudice

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### I. Discussion:

Toyland, from the way in which it has been portrayed, appears to be a miniature of society. So, all is not always hunky and dory in the stories of Noddy. The protagonist of the story, a wooden doll with a nodding head, named Noddy has to go through multiple bitter and sweet experiences in the course of the story. He is stripped and robbed, framed for offences not committed by him and even has his possessions stolen from him, resulting in huge meltdowns on his part in many of the stories.

However, the perpetrators of these crimes are often stereotype people, namely golliwogs, outsiders, vagrants and goblins. In the fourth book of Noddy, titled 'Here Comes Noddy', the protagonist is trapped by a group of goblins who take Noddy to a forest to steal his clothes and his car. In the first version of the story book, the goblins were actually golliwogs. The perpetrators of the 'crime' had to undergo a transformation and turn into fair-skinned goblins in subsequent editions of the book owing to severe backlash from critics.

The Golliwog is a kind of rag doll which came into vogue in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Characterized by its jet-black skin, eyes rimmed in white, exaggerated red lips and frizzy hair, the doll garnered great popularity in the UK and Australia in the 1970s.



*A Golliwog Doll*

While some people regard the doll to be an innocuous toy associated with childhood, it is considered racist<sup>1</sup> by others who regard it as a caricature of black Africans. The golliwog doll has also sparked some controversies in recent years. There was an incident in 2007 when the Greater Manchester Police seized two golliwog dolls from a shop after receiving a complaint regarding the offensiveness of the toys. In 2008, a woman in Stockport was arrested allegedly for keeping a golliwog doll at her window. However, the authenticity of the second incident may be subject to further verification.

There have been a host of incidents in recent times where the golliwog has become a subject of controversy. For years the Noddy books were banned because of their alleged 'racism'. However, some literary critics undertaking closer examination of the Noddy books along the footsteps of Professor David Rudd, claimed to have found disturbing aspects of racism<sup>2</sup> and xenophobia<sup>3</sup> all through the twenty-four books.

In the light of their suggestions, the ghettos<sup>4</sup> seemingly finds their parallel in the Dark Woods in Noddy books as Toyland may well be a miniature projection of society. The Dark Woods is regarded as the residence of the goblins who are looked down upon as sly and cunning by the residents of Toyland, just as the ghettos are often regarded as crime zones. The goblins, as illustrated in the Noddy books are people of colour and are often up to no good as are golliwogs, monkeys and gypsies.

Xenophobia also seemingly finds its expression in the Noddy books. In the fourteenth book of Noddy titled 'Be Brave, Little Noddy!', the protagonist's car is damaged owing to a collision with another car owned by an outsider from Toy Town, named Mr. Honk. The onus for the accident, faulty parking too close to a corner (in direct violation of the highway code) is put on Mr. Honk by the author. Mr. Honk spends no time in becoming the antagonist of the book as he not only damages Noddy's means of earning a livelihood but tries to steal his livelihood too by replacing the latter as the taxi-driver of Toyland. At the end of the story when Noddy's friend Big Ears steals the keys of Mr. Honk's car to force him to leave the town, the act is justified, despite the fact that Mr. Honk probably was doing nothing wrong in working as a taxi-driver in Toyland. The author takes care to equip Mr. Honk with not just with quite a few despicable qualities but also with a Turkish hat, seemingly depicting a xenophobic approach towards the non-British in the latter case. Then she goes on to pour her vials of scorn on the character. Even then, the act of forcing him to leave cannot be justified. But to a childish mind, it may appear that he got what he deserved.

In the book 'Noddy and the Tootles', Noddy's car is stolen once again by a gypsy named Mr. Tootle who leaves the horse pulling his caravan in its place. Mr. Tootle slyly tries to justify the act as an exchange, much to the consternation of Big Ears and Noddy. In another Noddy book, Noddy is almost framed for an act of theft by a goblin named Sly and his money is stolen by a goblin in another. The common feature among all the antagonists in the Noddy series is that they either resemble people of colour or are foreigners to Toyland.

Needless to say, Blyton's legacy continues to have a towering stature even today. Perhaps having stalwarts of children's literature echo sentiments of vitriol and prejudice seems to be a kind of literary betrayal. However, it is to be remembered that writers, like all other individuals, are shaped by contemporary society. In case of Blyton, her sentiments were perhaps those which were held by the society at large in which she was brought up. But even so, can her portrayal of Golliwogs really hint at a kind of covert racism?

The Jim Crow Museum at the Ferris State University has traced the history of Golliwogs to arrive at the conclusion that during the first part of the twentieth century, the much-maligned doll became a favourite children's soft toy in Europe, only surpassed by the Teddy Bear in popularity. It eventually became a very popular character in England and Australia with the image appearing on everything ranging from postcards to biscuits. According to Dr David Pilgrim, Professor of Sociology at the Ferris State University, public criticism of the Golliwog, which began in the 1960s, was a result of the civil rights movement in the United States and the growing racial antagonism between black and white populations in the UK. While there has been much criticism about their sale in recent times, commentator Luke Pearson, NITV's digital engagement and editorial specialist

and the founding director of IndigenousX, said that it was not a case meriting generalization. By his interactions with the older population, he felt that many had played with golliwogs as kids without any knowledge about the context of racism which has now come to be associated with them. Mr Pearson is of the opinion that just because the dolls are now sold in a different era, it does not take away their historical meaning.

Sometimes, children are in the habit of assigning characteristic traits to their toys- a concept which was marketed successfully by Hasbro while marketing the G.I. Joe<sup>5</sup> action figures which were classified into heroes and villains. This is no different in the Noddy series, where various characters of Toyland, who are toys, are assigned with specific characteristics. Sometimes, critics have failed to note that Golliwogs have not always been portrayed in a bad light. For example, the owner of Toyland's garage was initially Mr Golly, who was a Golliwog. He was replaced in later editions by a fair-skinned doll, Mr Sparks. Mr Golly has been portrayed as being kind and cordial always. Similarly, there too was the generous golliwog in the third book of the Noddy series, who rewards Noddy with a couple of sixpences for retrieving his lost hat.

Fear of strangers has long been engraved in human consciousness. Even in commonly termed 'third world countries' which have oft been at the receiving end of racism, children are advised not to get too close to vagabonds and strangers. These instances can hardly be termed as xenophobia but rather a word of caution in the dark world where instances of kidnapping and child molestation are no stranger events or by extension, the inherent mistrust that people have for the unknown. The ghetto culture too finds its parallel in the slums of the third-world countries where people, who hail from the lower economic rungs of the society, reside. Ironically, these people too are often regarded as suspicious by those from the middle or upper classes of society and looked down upon as thieves, robbers and swindlers in a common vein. The 'other' is always regarded as something less than favourable by the human consciousness which is biased in favour of homogeneity and inertia as opposed to change. In this light, Blyton's portrayals may not be, in essence, racist or xenophobic, but merely an expression of human conditioning that everyone is subject to since childhood. The acts of mischief committed by goblins residing in the Dark Woods beyond the borders of Toyland, might very well have been a significantly watered-down rendition of the more horrific crimes which take place in the dark underbelly of cities.

## **II. Conclusion:**

It is oft said that writers build their castles in the air, in which, readers reside. Enid Blyton's books have been well-loved by generations of children and have inculcated the reading habit in them. The stories have appealed to the imagination of countless children and have also helped engage and build up their imaginative faculties in a world where this is increasingly receding. Trying to read themes like racism and xenophobia may prove to be a futile literary exercise in her books as they might point back to the inherent traits of human beings which we are unable to admit to. The much-maligned golliwog was never meant to be a symbol of political incorrectness or racism and had been a much-loved children's toy long before it was subjected to controversy. Similarly, the roots of xenophobia lie in the inherent nature of human beings—the fear of the 'other' or 'different'. T.S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry states that the poet, the man, and the poet, the artist are two different entities. According to this theory, the poet is supposed to detach his own personality, inclusive of his/her personal views, from his literary output. In other words, the more perfect the poet, the more completely separate in him will be the man who experiences and creates. Maybe this is easier said than done. Literary outputs are, in essence, often the mouthpieces of the author's experiences which cannot be devoid of the ingredients which have contributed to building up the schema of that individual. Perhaps, only in an ideal situation can detachment be practiced on a level where traces of it can no longer be found in the creative output of an individual.

### **Footnotes:**

1. Racist- Prejudiced against or antagonistic towards a person or people based on their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group.
2. Racism- Prejudice, discrimination or antagonism by an individual, community or institution towards a person or people based on their membership or belonging to a particular racial or ethnic group.
3. Xenophobia- Mistrust or prejudice against foreigners
4. Ghetto- An underbelly of a city where less privileged citizens reside.
5. G.I. Joe- A line of military-themed dolls and action figures created in 1964 by Hasbro, a Rhode Island-based company.

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