

## Poised Between the Real and the Fantastic: E Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet*

Debolina Dey

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ramjas College, Delhi University, Delhi, India

### Abstract

This paper looks at Edith Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet* in the tradition of children's literature and looks at how the storybook straddles the world of the real and the fantastic simultaneously without creating an isolated binary between both these spaces. This paper looks at Nesbit's work in the context of early twentieth century children's writing and how she became an important predecessor to subsequent writers of children's literature like Enid Blyton. The adventure story for children that emerges as a template in the subsequent decades—travelling between intimate domestic spaces and exotic fantastic locales is indebted to Nesbit's writings which provides a new imaginary for children's literature.

**Keywords:** children's literature, Edith Nesbit, Victorian England, fantasy literature, imperialism

### Introduction

Debolina Dey has submitted her PhD thesis on Victorian England titled "Contagion in the Cultural Imagination of Victorian England" and has been teaching as an Assistant professor of English at Ramjas College, Delhi University. She has also been a fellow at Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin.

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days<sup>[1]</sup>.

Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll published in 1865 ends with a backward glance at the notion of childhood itself that needs to be preserved through memory. The fantasy of the wonderland in this context is a nostalgic site of preserving childhood experiences unique to it, demarcating a clear line between the child and adult. Childhood, from being an ideal state of perception for the Romantics idealised in the much examined term called "innocence"<sup>[2]</sup>, becomes a site of discourse in the nineteenth century and locates the child as a subject, reader and object of literature. Fantasy as a genre was crucially indebted to the German Romantic writers like E.T.A Hoffman, Novalis and Ludwig Tieck, emerging in Britain only in the latter half of the Victorian age through the works of George MacDonald, Lewis

Carroll and Charles Kingsley<sup>[3]</sup>. The first half of the nineteenth century saw Evangelical movements trying to educate through the Sunday schools; this was followed by a series of education acts that helped to extend literacy and create a wider reading public, especially among children. As the latter half of the nineteenth century saw publishers competing to produce cheaper reading for an expanding public, the development of publishing materials for children reflected economic and demographic growth, and constituted the child as a subject and consumer. A wider choice of genres were available including adventure stories, fairy tales, folk tales, nonsense, school stories and fantasy - the market of children's literature adapted to these growing needs<sup>[4]</sup>. However, juvenile domestic fiction of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, aimed primarily at girl readers, which differed significantly from the Robin sonade adventure tales of Ballantyne, Marryat and their peers, tales primarily intended for boys<sup>[5]</sup>.

Edith Nesbit stands squarely at the cross-section of the nineteenth and twentieth century and creates a genre of children's literature which marks a shift from the domestic fiction ascribed mainly to a female audience or the adventure story which in turn addressed young male readers. *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) is a hybrid of these two genres where not only is magic an element introduced in the commonplace, but magic itself becomes an element that is to be discovered in the dormant nooks of the domestic<sup>[6]</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Haase, p.329.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt; Butts, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> Kutzer p 47.

By the time the century's most memorable and influential British Robinsonades appeared, Frederick Marryat's *Masterman Ready* (1841-42) and R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), the genre had become an institution of sorts.

Susan Naramore Maher, *Recasting Crusoe: Frederick Marryat, R.M. Ballantyne and the Nineteenth-Century Robinsonade*, *Children's association Quarterly*, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/childrens\\_literature\\_association\\_quarterly/v013/13.4.maher.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/childrens_literature_association_quarterly/v013/13.4.maher.html)

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Prickett in talking of fantasy as a form that developed mainly in the nineteenth century says: "they tried to extend and enrich ways of perceiving "reality" by a variety of nonrealistic techniques that included nonsense, dreams, visions, and the creation of other worlds. Against the mainstream of

<sup>1</sup> Carroll, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in poems like "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", Wordsworth emphasizes on "innocence" as a perspective that is a privilege of childhood. Childhood becomes an ideal state of perception that is untainted yet, by the processes of socialization, and hence is a perception that allows the child to see "into the life of things". William Blake in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* uses the term "innocence" as a perspective and tone for critique of various social practices.

Relying on the Victorian imagination of the exotic, and the general discourse surrounding the Oriental other, the Persian carpet in *The Phoenix* and *The Carpet* is symptomatic relying on common tropes of the fantastic-- the flying carpet of Aladdin, from *Thousand and One Nights*, translated by Richard Burton in 1850 or the close resemblance of the plot to F. Antsey's *The Brass Bottle* (1900). The carpet, "is not an ordinary, ignorant, innocent carpet from Kidderminster...it is a carpet with a past- a Persian past" <sup>[7]</sup>. The carpet is a commodity that enters the Victorian domestic space through the imperial market, entering the imaginary of private spaces like the nursery and becoming a vehicle of the magical <sup>[8]</sup>. Domestic not only meant what simply related to the home, it was also something that was defined by what constituted the ideological and spatial co-ordinates of the family as a private space <sup>[9]</sup>. Borrowing heavily from a discourse that was in circulation, Nesbit creates a story that unites the seemingly disparate spaces of the magical and the quotidian.

The adventure in the story, unlike a traditional adventure tale is not an uninterrupted excursion of treasure hunting, but rather periodic digressions undertaken from within the daily. Fantasy, for Nesbit becomes a scope for the imaginative and the magical in the commonplace, localising the remoteness of the fairytale's "Once-upon" and creating a genre that draws upon existing mythologies of Victorian England <sup>[10]</sup>. Yet at the same time Nesbit uses the Phoenix to undercut its popular encyclopedic representation "It's not a flattering likeness...it's most inaccurate" <sup>[11]</sup>. Victorian England witnessed a growing

---

realistic fiction there developed a much stranger undercurrent that included works by Thomas Hood, Charles Dickens, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, Nesbit, and Kipling. In place of limitation and exclusion,

each in his or her own way was in search of a wider vision, seeking the complexity and ambiguity that reflected their own experiences, even at the expense of form." p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Nesbit, p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> The 'bazaar' in the story, is most symptomatic of the Victorian imperial ideology that operates, not only by creating a way of life, it also becomes introduced into the daily, weekly practices of English people. It also operates by creating scope for characters like Mrs. Biddle and Mrs. Peasmarsh, and creates a scope for romance between Mrs. Peasmarsh and the "nice curate". As the children proclaim, among the wonders that the carpet performs, the transformation of the ill-tempered Mrs. Biddle into a kind, sympathetic old lady "is the most wonderful" (Nesbit, p 108). The carpet is not just valued as a commodity, it becomes a vehicle of discretion, acts like the above, that also become moral acts of correction.

<sup>9</sup> In my paper, I have mainly dealt with the domestic, not only because it was a prominent feature of the Victorian novel in early nineteenth century, but also because children in the nineteenth century, as opposed to Blake's "Chimney Sweepers", children became a constitutive element of the "home". They became a part of the domestic space, also as symbolic of the domestic prosperity- the domestic became a natural space for the child to exist in. It was not only a protected space, but private too. In *The Phoenix* and *The Carpet*, one literally sees that the children are almost forced to stay inside as if, almost against their will. When the children are surprised by the encounter of street children in chapter five, they cannot comprehend the "reality" they face in the streets. The domestic as a private space is opposed to this kind of encounter which is the realm of the public, the exposed; the street encounter renders the children's view of "reality" as unfamiliar. The fantasy then is also mediated by books like the *Ingoldsby Legends*, or books (as Anthea remarks) that have street children is almost like a reality that is created by a fictive world of books- as if the reality in books is not a 'reality' at all. Fantasy as a genre then is not only mediated by the popular notions of fantasy and real, but is predicated on a sense of "reality" that is also constructed through books.

<sup>10</sup> The phoenix as a bird becomes significant as a creature that had similar resonances in other cultures as well. Republic. In India, it bears close resemblance to Garuda. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix\\_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenix_(mythology))

<sup>11</sup> Nesbit pp.19-21.

interest about animals and animals/beasts were not only a dominant instrument for the political caricature of the times (they formed a large part of the discourse which was concerned about cruelty to animals), animals also featured in nursery rhymes as Anthea recounts those rhymes for the baby brother nicknamed "lamb", even as the rest of the children are nicknamed after animals <sup>[12]</sup>. The Phoenix seen as an epitome of wisdom and regeneration in classical Greek mythology elsewhere, is characterised in the story by its vanity, self-conceitedness and pomposity. The Phoenix is neither the usual unidimensional beast of the fable nor does it subscribe to the concept of the benign Victorian pet; it resists domestication or taming of any sort, and is rather whimsical- preferring homage and flattery as modes of address.

The narrative voice in the *The Phoenix* and the *Carpet* is informed by what U.C Knoepfmacher calls a "Janus-like split" where the two "contrary states" of innocence and experience are like two opposing perspectives that acknowledges "the simultaneous yet opposing demands of growth and arrest." Nesbit's narrator then relies on this double perspective which sees beyond the wish fulfilment of the child, and aligns herself with the subject of the tale, perhaps implying a double readership not only of the child alone but also the governess or the parent. As Knoepfmacher quotes Nesbit, "There is only one way of understanding children; they cannot be understood by imagination, or observation, nor even by love. They can only be understood by memory... I was a child once myself, and by some fortunate chance I remember exactly how I used to feel and think about things." Knoepfmacher observes that, "From the vantage point of experience, an adult imagination recreates an earlier childhood self in order to steer it towards the reality principle. From the vantage point of innocence, however, that childhood agent may resist the imposition of adult values and stubbornly demand that its desire to linger in a realm of magic and wonder be satisfied" <sup>[13]</sup>. Although the narrator often empathises with the children against the unimaginative reality of adult world, the narrator is also careful to show that the realm of fantasy cannot be permanent.

Nesbit is careful to put a note of warning to her young audience by showing that wishes too can have dimensions that are in excess of itself. The dangers of excess are not only stressed through the element of magic, but also through the motif of fire and its various connotations which run throughout the book. The serendipitous discovery of magic that is a consequence of an accident by fire ultimately brings a closure to the narrative of fantasy as the Phoenix, by its extreme frivolousness lights fire to the entire theatre, likening it to a temple of its own <sup>[14]</sup>. Nesbit's narrative does not simply exult under the influence of fantasy it also undercuts fantasy so that the fantastic and the real are not isolated binaries but are in constant dialogue with each other rather.

---

<sup>12</sup> Novels like *Black Beauty* (1877) by Anna Sewell and *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872) by Charles Darwin created an effect that fostered the growth in animal subjectivity through creatures like the talking horse. Morse and Danahay.

<sup>13</sup> Knoepfmacher, pp. 497-530.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps one could detect a strain of humorous irony in the narrator's tone as the overenthusiastic children have to chew their own words, literally their yearning for magic and adventure. Like in *The Five Children and It* where their last wish to wish away this power of wishing, here too by the end of the story, the children seem to have had their fill of this excessive wish-fulfilment.

Fantasy is an element that facilitates and aids the organising principle of adventure through imagination and desire as forms empowerment to children; but, that too is finally undermined by the fact that even these coordinates are not completely in the control of the child. The child-audience through a sense of vicarious pleasure both participates and learns from the follies through the alternate voices of innocence and experience.

Although imagination as a tool of childhood much revered by the Romantics, a tool that Nesbit seems to suggest to her readers, yet the imaginative in this context is not just a perspective, it is a realm that is parallel to the real, Cyril says, "I think we are the sort of people things happen to. I have a sort of feeling things would happen right enough if we could only give them a shove. It just wants something to start it. That's all"<sup>[15]</sup>.

Even when the carpet does not transport the Phoenix and the children to a space beyond the real, the encounters with a fantastic creature like the Phoenix, even in the spatial configurations of the real renders it as a dream-like unreal experience<sup>[16]</sup>. In both the cases- the cook being transferred to the island of savages or the Phoenix's visit to the fire department (thinking it to be its temple) the element of the real cannot contain the fantastic through the altered and disparate coordinates of time and space. In one, the phoenix as a bird of antiquity connotes a sense of time disparate with contemporary and real time and in another, the sense of real space is ruptured by the sudden shift in geography and context<sup>[17]</sup>.

Fantasy in the story works through this kind of juxtaposition, of unfamiliar temporal and spatial arrangement, so that even when Anthea tries to tell mother about the "truth" of the cook's disappearance, she refuses to believe it. Honesty as a necessary moral is turned on its head as this experience of generating disbelief- portrayed as a dilemma for the children-- this is what primarily isolates the protagonists from the realm of the everyday and translates the experience as unique, separating it from the unremarkable. This inability to suspend disbelief on behalf of the adult reader separates the child from the adult and their respective worldviews as readers of fantasy. As the definition of real became more "scientific",

"disciplined" and objectified by the day in Victorian England, the genre of science-fiction reconstructed those very definitions of the scientific as the inventor of possibilities, for the potential of the fantastic. H.G Wells who was a close counterpart of Nesbit's, and also a member of the Fabian Society, uses the very notion of time-travelling but through a reconstruction of scientific discourse. While Wells uses the notion of invention, Nesbit uses the ideas of serendipitous discovery through the imaginative, and although both genres play upon the notions of fantasy, time-travel changes its genre in Wells by becoming science fiction using the rhetoric of science<sup>[18]</sup>. Both genres work by defamiliarising, and according to Bernard V. Lightman "it invites the kind of...social analysis that the proverbial Martian anthropologist would do upon visiting Earth for the first time. Science fiction either defamiliarizes (or makes strange) the world of quotidian life and encourages a critical awareness (or cognition) of the world's underlying values, beliefs and assumptions. To think about the known and mundane as unfamiliar is to recognize its contingency"<sup>[19]</sup>.

Although fantasy seems to steer away from real, it is never successful as a method of distraction as elements of the everyday seep into the adventure through unconscious and necessary beckonings of the domestic. Even what may seem as naughty mischief in dumping the cook with the savages, Anthea is compelled to reassure her "inward monitor" that it is not an act of violation, and she makes sure the next day that the cook is rather happy as the new sovereign<sup>[20]</sup>. The cook, a self-appointed representative of the middle class domestic norm, attempts to domesticate the savages in British custom: "Tomorrow I am going to start cleaning out my hut...and I shall teach them cooking, they burns everything to a cinder now unless they eats it raw"<sup>[21]</sup>. Nesbit attempts to critique the coloniser by typifying the colonised as the "copper coloured savage" and by appointing the cook as the queen, where her cap becomes the farcical symbol of her crown. The critique becomes ambiguous though, when the cook, who is much disliked by the children, is married to the "pet burglar", who is shown in an affectionate light, and both are left perennially in the realm of fantasy, removed from the real geography of London. If the home is characterised by its close resemblance to the imperial metaphor in Victorian England, one wonders if Nesbit then portrays the colony as the clearance field of unwanted elements from England<sup>[22]</sup>. Domestic ideology is

<sup>15</sup> Nesbit seems to suggest throughout the book that through an imaginative re-visioning of the real can the interesting, the adventurous and the magical be nudged into life. One wonders if it is at all far from the Romantic animism that had the power to "see into the life of things" (and be connected to things around, like "a motion and a spirit, that impels/all thinking things, all objects of all thought,/and rolls through all things") by this very quality of child-like imagination? Nesbit seems to suggest that it is this privileged quality of imagination that is the crucible for fantasy, for being connected into seemingly lifeless things, even if within the domestic. Considering the fact that fantasy as a genre was influenced by German Romanticism, it is not surprising that Nesbit as an English author plays upon key elements of English Romanticism, consciously or otherwise.

Nesbit, p.14.

<sup>16</sup> The firemen believe that the encounter with the Phoenix was a dream, although it happens in the "reality" of the book. By doing so, Nesbit blurs the margins between the real and what is considered as fantasy.

<sup>17</sup> I am not saying that the Phoenix and the Carpet are similar vehicles of fantasy or that they are equated in the book. While both are individuated and personified to an extent, both are also forms of an antiquity and hence the exotic. While the Phoenix as a figure confuses notions of "time" by being in the present, the carpet also plays upon "time" by transporting the children in a jiffy, to exotic places. But while the Phoenix as a figure characterizes a diachronic/vertical notion of time/space, the carpet by simultaneously exploring spaces, plays upon a synchronic/lateral notion of space/time.

<sup>18</sup> "Wells believed that the discovery of deep geological time and astronomical space set humanity in a cosmic context, reducing the biblical story of Creation and Fall from high historical drama to a quaint and local folktale...This is not to imply that the only relationship science-fiction has to "real science" is one-way and parasitic, that is, that science is always prior and primary, with fiction merely adopting whatever passes for scientific knowledge at the time, science fiction not only reflected contemporary trends but in suggesting new scientific and technological possibilities and applications, it helps create the expectation of change." Lightman p. 258

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 258-9

<sup>20</sup> Nesbit, p. 32

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 83

<sup>22</sup> One wonders if the constant shift of the narrative voice confuses the element of critique, for example, by marrying the cook to the burglar and by keeping them there, does Nesbit not imply that fantasy or colonies are places that are places where unwanted elements of society thrive. This implication is further complicated by the fact that it is children ultimately who decide who is "unwanted" and create an alternate space for people who are unwanted. While the cook is disliked, the "pet" burglar is adored by the children and by marrying both of them and not bringing them back to society, is Nesbit then creating an alternate space for them or is she "getting rid" of

never far away from the fantastic, as parental authority intrudes into it as reminders so that even the adventurous departure is discontinued by the need to return home. These quotidian words of advice or conversation between the parent and the child acquire a new resonance in the world of fantasy, and it is as if that element of the real is wished for, as a source of comfort.

The adventurous task of treasure hunting becomes invariably associated with charity for the children- so that the children are described as “the party of explorers prepared to enter the interior.”-Both varying forms of the imperial ideology that gets transformed into the notion of adventure as well as Christian missionary. Treasure becomes a metaphor of the imperial and treasure hunting becomes a trope that is transformed into the much desired adventure for children’s literature [23]. However, Nesbit does not absolve the children--so that the hint of selfish greed lingers on as they dream of presents to buy with the treasure; but that greed also gives way to middle class Victorian morality [24].

The interaction of the imperial with the domestic is mediated through a process of commodification -commodities like the Persian carpet brings together the Victorian imagination about the exotic, the oriental and transports the audience through that collective imagination to a realm of the fantastic. Nesbit employs the dominant imageries of the Orient that were circulated in Victorian England, so that the children “knew it was Indian at once, by the shape of the domes and roofs; and besides, a man went by on an elephant, and two English soldiers went along the road, talking in Mr. Kipling’s books- so after that no one could have any doubt as to where they were” [25]. The sight of “poor people” in India at once tugs at the “inward monitor” of the children who insist on a charitable display of renunciation of surplus commodity, for the colonised: “Cyril bowed several times, and then cleared his throat and said- “thank her very, very much; but I would much rather she gave me some of the cheap things in the bazaar. Tell her I want them to sell again, and give the money to buy clothes for poor people who haven’t any” [26]. The intrusion of the Orient in the imagination of the children becomes evident even through the “language that grew insensibly more and more Arabian Nightsy” [27]. However the carpet is not just a commodity, it becomes a subject in itself as a partaker of the adventure characterised by “sense”, “thoughtfulness” and discretion of its own [28].

Nesbit for whom history was “a source of romantic adventure” reconstructs the genre of fantasy symbolised by the carpet and the Phoenix, these let her explore history not only through a diachronic review but also through a synchronic traversing of

---

these figures from society? Perhaps through the marriage, she creates a scope of the domestic fantasy through the cook and the reality of London streets through the burglar to encounter- something not possible in the real geography of London but “elsewhere” in a colony-like island, yet not marked by notions of “civilization”.

<sup>23</sup> Nesbit, p 70

<sup>24</sup> Charity becomes a way of “using the magical” to “do good”, almost as a justification of a gift the children receive. One is reminded of the biblical parable of talents, so that the children literally dig up buried “treasure”/talent and redistribute it to their very owners. Treasure becomes a metaphorical symbol of that talent-like parable, something that must be used to “generate” something, or even if to re-invent it for the sake of charity.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid p 91

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p 93

<sup>27</sup> Ibid p 93.

<sup>28</sup> Nesbit, p. 74

simultaneous spaces that existed as discourses in the Victorian imagination. However, the old world perspective of the past, its disparateness, brought about by the fantasy, is often a source of critique for the present state of affairs as the streets of London are critiqued sharply when re-presented to the Phoenix during the tour of the city. Not only are the children surprised by the reality of the streets, Nesbit through this dissociation also critiques the bourgeois complacency that is critical of its colonies but blind to the realities of its locality. Hence, while India and its “streets were narrow and strange, and the clothes of people in the streets were strange, and the talk of the people was strangest of all”, in an ironic similarity London’s “streets there were small and stuffy and ugly, and crowded with printer’s boys and blinder’s girls coming out from work, and these stared so hard at the pretty red coats and the caps of the sisters that they wished they had gone some other way...Anthea drew a long breath. ‘How awful!’ she said, ‘I didn’t know there were such people except in books” [29]. Although the dialogue between the real and the fantastic happens in close proximity, the fantasy it repeatedly disrupted by a yearning to return to the domestic- “They were in their own dingy breakfast-room at home, and oh, how light and bright and safe and pleasant and altogether delightful it seemed after that dark underground tunnel” [30]. The juxtaposition of the real and the fantastic although a possibility at the beginning, wears itself out by the end when the carpet is shown in its very materiality as a thing that is depleted by overuse, and the Phoenix becomes an object of unwanted folly. That the scope of the fantastic lies in the possibilities of the real is undercut, when the tools of the fantastic are undone by their very existence in the tangible- the carpet is after all made of materials that wear and the Phoenix’s old world pomposity is at odds with Victorian pragmatism. The hopefulness of an adventure at the beginning of the tale is exhausted by the end when the children feel that the adventure must end, as the narrative voice both partakes in the sense of excitement and keeps a careful distance from that excitement, perhaps reminding the reader that material reality is inescapable. As Rosemary Jackson says “Victorian fantasy was heavily influenced by a tradition of Christian Platonism, which read the ‘real’ as place where transcendental truths were reflected. Lapses into a non-signifying world were accordingly restrained” [31]. Jane in the story admits after an overdose of fantasy:

I don’t want any more things to happen just now. I feel like you do when you have been to three parties in a week...I want everything to be just real, and no fancy things happening at all [32].

Later again when Anthea confesses “I wish we’d never had a carpet” [33], fantasy disrupts the real through the disaster of the Persian cats in very material ways, even as the children wonder at this lack of discernment from the carpet as uncharacteristic: “What a mistake for a well-informed carpet to make” [34].

Nesbit’s *The Phoenix and the Carpet* works as a self-conscious text that reflects on its constructiveness through a web of

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p. 91; p. 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p 53

<sup>31</sup> Jackson p. 145

<sup>32</sup> Nesbit p 137

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 178

<sup>34</sup> Ibid p 180

inter-textuality, as Nesbit refers to well known authors like Kinglsey's *Water Babies*, Kipling, Ingoldsby Legends, Haggard or lesser known works like *The Golden Age* <sup>[35]</sup> by Kenneth Grahame, or *The Eyes of Light* by Arthur Moore; these in turn highlights a tradition of the genre that Nesbit sets to hybridise. Nesbit's works influenced authors like C.S.Lewis, Arthur Ransome, Noël Streatfield, and other twentieth-century writers for children like Enid Blyton who separated the element of fantasy from the domestic but structured her popular series of the "Famous Five" stories around a cluster of children similar to Nesbit's. As Knoepfmacher notes about the element of autobiographical filtered in her narratives- it is no coincidence that the child-voyagers in that book (and in its immediate two predecessors, *Five Children and It* and *The Phoenix and the Carpet* [1904]), should form a group of four, composed of two boys and two girls, rather than the singular child or complementary girl/boy pair who embark on strange voyages in other Victorian books of fantasy. Nesbit always sought her identity in groups, whether in units formed by children, parents-and-children, or Fabian Socialists. As a six-year-old, the youngest of the four surviving Nesbit children, she joined her two older brothers in an abortive attempt to run away from their mother's home after the death of their educator-father. Thereafter, even when she rebelled, she needed to feel part of a family, though it was one made up of her philandering husband's illegitimate children <sup>[36]</sup> As Nesbit cleverly uses the tools of the domestic quotidian, a thing as commonplace as the carpet to show spaces alongside the mundane, possibilities that may exist with the real- vistas that lie dormant, but come to life with a touch of imagination and probing, fantasy becomes a form that continually aspires to something more than the real but it also a space that is obliged by it even as it becomes a vantage point to critique elements of the real.

When one traces the development of the fantastic adventure in *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, by the end of it fantasy is a scope of possibilities that is disillusioned by this very possibility, as the children find themselves in conditions that are triggered by the unforeseen quality of magic. The "incongruities which make for humour" like the hole in the carpet that separates the children, even as Robert and Jane fall on an unknown rooftop can become a real source of danger, otherwise rendered harmless by the form of fantasy itself. Although humour, partially generated by the Phoenix's prolixity, renders these accidents as harmless, the potential for harm is nonetheless highlighted by Nesbit, although in a tone of the "colloquial, flexible and revealing prose which was her unique contribution to the children's novel" <sup>[37]</sup>. "It might have been worse", said the Phoenix, "What would have been the sentiments of the survivors if that darn had given way when

we were crossing the river?" <sup>[38]</sup>.

The effects generated by the fantastic within the latitudes of the real renders the real as strange as the fantastic because Nesbit does not separate the real from the fantastic; rather keeps them at close proximity as available options of a dialogic relationship. This reworking of temporality is allowed by the scope of fantasy that permits Nesbit to show simultaneity of spaces "Time", said the Phoenix "is, as you are probably aware, merely a convenient fiction, there is no such thing as time." In *The Story of the Amulet*, the Psummead reiterates that "Time and space are only forms of thought" <sup>[39]</sup>. However, the spatial and temporal exploration although temporary is an alternative mode of discoursing about geographies simultaneously, juxtaposing views other than the euro-centric as a self reflexive critique of its own times; the Phoenix provides an alternative distanced perspective to contemporary England because of its moorings in an old world perspective. The double scope, of the fantastic and the daily, the imperial and the local, then creates a genre that brings about a certain familiarity and longing, distance and recognition and moralises through layers of this double scope. Although fantasy is a possibility of stretching the imaginative in the domestic, the question remains- whether the fantastic is privileged over the real as a space of escape, or whether the real is doubly affirmed by a return to it?

## References

1. Carroll Lewis. *Alice's adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, Spark Educational Publishing, 2003.
2. Nesbit Edith. *The Phoenix and The Carpet* Penguin, 1994.
3. Nesbit Edith. *The Story of the Amulet*. Bibliobazaar, 2008.
4. Haase Donald. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008.
5. Hunt Peter, Butts Dennis. *Children's Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1995
6. Prickett, Stephen *Victorian Fantasy*. Baylor University Press, 2005.
7. Kutzer Daphne. *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books*. Routledge, 2000.
8. Morse Deborah Denenholz, Danahay Martin A. *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ashgate Publishing, 2007.
9. Knoepfmacher UC. *The Balancing of Child and Adult: An Approach to Victorian Fantasies for Children Author(s)*, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, University of California Press, 1983; 37(4).
10. Knoepfmacher UC, Nina Auerbach. (eds.) *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.
11. Lightman Bernard V. *Victorian Science in Context*. New York: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
12. Jackson Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen, 1981.
13. Crouch Marcus. *The Nesbit Tradition: The Children's Novel*, Rowen & Littlefield, 1972, 1945-1970.

<sup>35</sup> Typical of his culture and his era, Grahame casts his reminiscences in imagery and metaphor rooted in the culture of Ancient Greece; to the children whose impressions are recorded in the book, the adults in their lives are "Olympians," while the chapter titled "The Argonauts" refers to Perseus, Apollo, Psyche, and similar figures of Greek mythology. Grahame's reminiscences, in *The Golden Age* and in the later *Dream Days* (1898), were notable for their conception "of a world where children are locked in perpetual warfare with the adult 'Olympians' who have wholly forgotten how it feels to be young" — a theme later explored by J. M. Barrie and other authors.

<sup>36</sup> See Knoepfmacher and Auerbach, pp. 177-205

<sup>37</sup> Crouch p 236-238

<sup>38</sup> Nesbit, p 230

<sup>39</sup> Nesbit (2008) P. 44