

Moral Ideology, the Ideal Child, and the Hidden Adult in Let's Read Children's Stories: A Nodelmanian Reading of *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim*

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Abstract:

This study examines the representation of moral ideology, the construction of the ideal child, and the influence of adult perspectives in two Indonesian children's stories, *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim*. The research applies the theoretical framework proposed by Perry Nodelman, particularly the concepts of ideology, the ideal child, and the hidden adult within the field of Children's Literature Studies. Using a qualitative textual analysis approach, the study analyzes narrative structures, character development, and selected textual excerpts to identify how moral values are constructed and communicated in the stories. The findings reveal that both narratives strongly emphasize moral ideology related to empathy, generosity, and social responsibility. *Mukena Mita* represents moral development through a process of personal reflection in which the protagonist learns to prioritize empathy over personal desire. In contrast, *Sayang Anak Yatim* portrays moral awareness through direct exposure to social realities, encouraging children to express compassion toward vulnerable individuals. The study also demonstrates that both stories construct an image of the ideal child characterized by kindness, humility, and concern for others. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the role of the "hidden adult," in which adult perspectives guide the narrative and validate moral interpretations. Although distributed through the digital platform Let's Read, the stories continue to reflect traditional ideological functions of children's literature by transmitting adult moral expectations to young readers.

Keywords: children's literature, moral ideology, ideal child, hidden adult, digital children's literature.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi ideologi moral, konstruksi anak ideal, dan pengaruh perspektif dewasa dalam dua cerita anak Indonesia, *Mukena Mita* dan *Sayang Anak Yatim*. Penelitian ini menerapkan kerangka teoritis yang diusulkan oleh Perry Nodelman, khususnya konsep ideologi, anak ideal, dan dewasa tersembunyi dalam bidang Studi Sastra Anak. Dengan pendekatan analisis teks kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis struktur naratif, perkembangan karakter, dan kutipan teks terpilih untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana nilai-nilai moral dibangun dan dikomunikasikan dalam cerita-cerita tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kedua narasi secara kuat menekankan ideologi moral terkait empati, kedermawanan, dan tanggung jawab sosial. *Mukena Mita* menggambarkan perkembangan moral melalui proses refleksi pribadi di mana protagonis belajar memprioritaskan empati daripada keinginan pribadi. Di sisi lain, *Sayang Anak Yatim* menggambarkan kesadaran moral melalui paparan langsung terhadap realitas sosial, mendorong anak-anak untuk mengekspresikan belas kasihan terhadap individu yang rentan. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa kedua cerita membangun citra anak ideal yang ditandai dengan kebaikan, kerendahan hati, dan kepedulian terhadap orang lain. Selain itu, analisis menyoroti peran "orang dewasa tersembunyi," di mana perspektif orang dewasa

mengarahkan narasi dan mengonfirmasi interpretasi moral. Meskipun didistribusikan melalui platform digital *Let's Read*, cerita-cerita ini tetap mencerminkan fungsi ideologis tradisional sastra anak-anak dengan menyampaikan harapan moral orang dewasa kepada pembaca muda.

Kata kunci: sastra anak-anak, ideologi moral, anak ideal, orang dewasa tersembunyi, sastra anak-anak digital.

ملخص البحث:

يكتب ملخص البحث بمسافة واحدة باستخدام خط Sakkal Majalla حجم 16 نقطة. يحتوي الملخص على أهداف البحث ومنهجيته والنتائج مناقشاته والخلاصة. وطوله حوالي 100-200 كلمة.

الكلمات الأساسية: الكلمة 1؛ الكلمة 2؛ الكلمة 3 (حتى الكلمة الأساسية 5 المفصلة بفاصلة منقوطة)

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature has long occupied a paradoxical position within literary and cultural studies. On the one hand, it is commonly associated with innocence, simplicity, and entertainment. On the other hand, it functions as a powerful medium through which societies introduce moral values, regulate emotions, and shape children's understanding of acceptable behavior (Jeharus, 2025; Unsha et al., 2023). Stories for children rarely operate as neutral aesthetic objects. They are typically created by adults, circulated by adult institutions, and mediated by adult expectations concerning what children should know, feel, and become. For that reason, children's literature needs to be read not only as narrative art but also as a cultural discourse about childhood, morality, and social formation.

This pedagogical function is particularly visible in stories that center on everyday ethical situations. Rather than presenting morality in abstract philosophical terms, children's stories usually dramatize value through familiar experiences, wanting something, feeling disappointed, encountering someone in need, responding to parents, or learning to share (Indriyani et al., 2025). Such scenes are important because they translate social norms into emotional experience. Readers are not merely told what is right; they are guided toward feeling that some forms of conduct are admirable while others are inadequate. Through this process, the story becomes a site where moral recognition is narratively produced. The child reader is invited not only to follow events but also to internalize a particular ethical orientation toward the world.

Scholars in children's literature studies have repeatedly argued that texts addressed to children are ideologically charged. Among the most influential voices in this field is Perry Nodelman, whose work insists that children's literature cannot be separated from adult assumptions about childhood. For Nodelman(Nodelman, 2003)(Nodelman, 2008), stories for children are shaped by ideas about innocence, obedience, empathy, development, and social responsibility. Even when narratives foreground child protagonists, they frequently encode adult beliefs about what counts as proper feeling and proper behavior. In this sense, children's literature does not simply represent children; it helps construct socially desirable versions of childhood.

Three concepts from Nodelman are especially relevant for the present study(Nodelman, 2003, 2008). The first is ideology, understood as the network of values and assumptions embedded within stories. The second is the ideal child, namely the normative image of childhood implicitly recommended by the narrative. The third is the hidden adult, or the adult presence that structures the text, directs interpretation, and determines what the child reader is expected to learn. Together, these concepts allow scholars to examine not only what a children's story says, but also how it organizes meaning and authority. They make visible the power relations that underlie even apparently simple narratives.

These issues become increasingly important in the context of digital children's literature. The spread of digital reading platforms has changed the circulation, accessibility, and consumption of stories for young readers. Children can now encounter literary texts not only in print but also through smartphones, tablets, and online libraries. Yet technological change does not necessarily dismantle traditional narrative ideology. Digital platforms may broaden access, but the values embedded in stories often remain continuous with older pedagogical functions of children's literature. The digital medium may be new, while the moral logic of the narrative remains recognizably familiar.

One important example is Let's Read, a digital children's library that distributes stories widely and freely across languages and regions. Because of its broad accessibility, Let's Read provides a productive site for examining how contemporary children's stories continue to communicate social values(Sari Pratiwi, 2024). Among the stories available on the platform, *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim* are particularly significant because both foreground ethical themes related to empathy, generosity, and responsibility toward others. In *Mukena Mita*, a child's personal desire for a new mukena is interrupted by a moral lesson about donation and

compassion. In *Sayang Anak Yatim*, child characters encounter babies in an orphanage and respond by offering their own belongings. Although simple in plot, both stories are rich in ideological implication.

Previous discussions of children's literature often focus on identifying explicit moral messages in stories. However, fewer studies ask how such messages are narratively constructed and how adult perspectives shape the child characters' moral development, especially in digital children's literature. This gap is important because it shifts the question from content to structure. The issue is not only whether a story teaches kindness, but also how it teaches kindness, whose perspective authorizes that lesson, and what kind of child subject the story ultimately produces.

This study therefore examines *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim* through Perry Nodelman's framework. It asks three questions: how moral ideology is represented in the stories, how the image of the ideal child is constructed, and how the hidden adult shapes the moral meanings of the narratives. By addressing these questions, the paper argues that the stories reproduce a traditional pedagogical model within a digital environment. They promote empathy, generosity, and social awareness, yet they do so through narrative structures clearly governed by adult moral expectations. In that sense, the stories illustrate how digital children's literature may be technologically contemporary while remaining ideologically continuous with earlier forms of children's storytelling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's literature has often been treated as a domain of moral instruction, whether explicitly or implicitly. Nodelman (Nodelman, 2003) argues that children's books frequently serve as cultural vehicles through which societies communicate assumptions about good conduct, proper feeling, and desirable social relations. Ideology in children's literature is not confined to overt lessons or final morals. It is embedded in characterization, narrative conflict, plot resolution, and emotional framing. Stories typically present some responses as appropriate and others as inadequate, thereby guiding readers toward particular ethical interpretations. This ideological function matters because childhood is never represented as purely natural or self-evident. Instead, stories help produce cultural understandings of what childhood should look like. A child who shares, listens, apologizes, and cares for others is represented as admirable, while selfishness, impatience, or insensitivity are narratively corrected. As a result, children's literature participates

in a broader social project: the formation of subjects capable of inhabiting accepted moral norms.

Recent scholarly inquiries into children's literature and digital literacy platforms have approached the subject from diverse pedagogical and critical perspectives. Pratiwi conducted a quantitative evaluation of the "Let's Read" application, demonstrating its significant efficacy in enhancing reading comprehension among junior high school students (Sari Pratiwi, 2024). While Pratiwi focuses on the functional and educational outcomes of the platform, other scholars have delved into the ideological layers of Indonesian children's narratives. For instance, Ahmad et al. applied Perry Nodelman's theory to identify the "hidden adult" in Okky Madasari's works, arguing that complex social criticisms often reveal an adult ideological presence that transcends a child's typical understanding (Ahmad et al., 2022). Furthermore, Jeharus utilized an ecocritical framework to analyze the *Bianglala Anak Nusantara* series, highlighting how picture books serve as vehicles for ecological messages such as nature conservation and environmental exploitation (Jeharus, 2025).

Building upon these foundations, this study offers a distinct contribution by synthesizing the digital medium of "Let's Read" with a rigorous Nodelmanian reading focused on moral and religious discourse. Unlike Pratiwi's pedagogical assessment or Jeharus's ecological focus, this research interrogates the construction of the "ideal child" through the lens of moral ideology within *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim*. The novelty of this work lies in its critical deconstruction of how traditional moral values and religious piety are framed within a modern digital repository. By identifying the "hidden adult" who dictates these moral standards, this study reveals the persistent tension between the adult's didactic intent and the child's literary autonomy, providing a fresh perspective on how digital children's stories in Indonesia continue to function as tools for ideological molding.

Ideology in Children's Literature

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The Ideal Child

Closely related to ideology is the construction of the ideal child. For Nodelman (Nodelman, 2008), children's literature often offers less a description of actual children than a model of childhood imagined by adults. The ideal child is not simply young in age; this figure embodies approved dispositions such as empathy, humility, patience, obedience, and willingness to learn. In many narratives, protagonists initially fail to meet this ideal and must undergo correction or development. In others, they are presented from the outset as moral exemplars. The significance of this concept lies in its normative force. Stories do not merely portray a child doing something kind; they imply that kindness is central to proper childhood itself. Readers are thus encouraged to identify with certain modes of being and to reject others. Children's literature becomes a site where adulthood projects its hopes, anxieties, and expectations onto the figure of the child.

The Hidden Adult

One of Nodelman's most influential contributions is the notion of the hidden adult. Although children's stories often foreground child protagonists, they remain structured by adult authority. The hidden adult may appear through parental characters, explanatory narrators, or plot resolutions that confirm adult wisdom. Even when the child seems central, the terms of understanding are usually adult. The story determines what the child should realize, how conflict should be interpreted, and which values are to be affirmed. The concept is especially useful for reading moral narratives because such stories frequently rely on adult mediation. Adults explain, correct, validate, and frame. This means that the child's moral growth is rarely autonomous. Instead, it occurs within narrative arrangements designed by adult perspectives. The hidden adult therefore reveals the unequal power relation at the heart of children's literature: the text speaks to children, but it does so from within adult cultural authority.

Digital Children's Literature

The emergence of digital reading environments has transformed the distribution of

children's stories, but not necessarily their ideological content. Mackey (2016) notes that reading across media alters the conditions of engagement, yet narrative values may remain continuous across print and digital forms. In digital children's literature, stories can reach wider audiences and circulate more rapidly, but they may still rely on familiar moral frameworks. Thus, the move from page to screen should not be mistaken for a move from pedagogy to neutrality. This makes platforms such as Let's Read particularly important. As a digital library, Let's Read expands access to children's literature and supports literacy across diverse contexts. At the same time, it also extends the reach of narratives that carry assumptions about ideal childhood, empathy, and adult-guided morality. Examining stories on such platforms allows us to see how traditional ideological structures continue to operate within contemporary media environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literary approach using descriptive-analytical textual interpretation. The method was appropriate because the research aimed not to measure reception statistically but to examine how meaning was produced within narrative form. Qualitative literary analysis allowed the study to focus on characterization, plot development, dialogue, narrative voice, and moral resolution as sites where ideological meaning becomes visible.

The primary data consisted of two children's stories distributed through the Let's Read platform: *Mukena Mita* (Rahayu & Faza, n.d.) and *Sayang Anak Yatim* (Vani Diana P. & Studio Air, n.d.). These texts were selected for three reasons. First, both present moral themes centered on empathy, generosity, and concern for others. Second, both depict interactions between children and adults, making them especially relevant to an analysis of the hidden adult. Third, both circulate through a digital reading platform, enabling the study to situate its findings within the context of digital children's literature. This selection is fully consistent with the source paper's stated focus on moral ideology, ideal childhood, hidden adult, and digital Let's Read narratives.

Data were collected through close reading. Each story was read repeatedly in order to identify narrative moments that signaled moral tension, emotional transition, adult guidance, and explicit value reinforcement. Relevant textual segments were noted and grouped into three analytical categories derived from Nodelman: ideology, the ideal child, and the hidden adult (Nodelman, 2008). Attention was given to scenes of desire, disappointment, explanation, apology, giving, approval, and concluding narrative judgment, since these are precisely the

moments where moral meaning becomes narratively condensed.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the stories were examined for situations in which moral ideology emerged through conflict, encounter, or resolution. Second, the child protagonists were analyzed to determine what model of ideal childhood the narratives constructed. Third, adult characters and narrative voice were examined to identify the operation of the hidden adult. Fourth, the findings from both stories were compared in order to identify shared ideological patterns as well as distinct narrative strategies. Interpretive validity was maintained through theoretical consistency: all claims were grounded in recurring textual patterns and read through Nodelman's conceptual framework.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Moral ideology in the stories develops from desire toward empathy.

The first major finding is that both stories strongly represent moral ideology, but they do so through different narrative mechanisms. *Mukena Mita* organizes moral instruction through the regulation of desire, whereas *Sayang Anak Yatim* organizes it through exposure to vulnerability. In both cases, the narratives lead child characters away from self-centeredness and toward empathy.

In *Mukena Mita*, the plot begins with a highly recognizable childhood desire. Mita admires another child's mukena and wants one like it for herself. This opening is important because the story does not begin by condemning desire outright. Instead, it presents desire as ordinary and emotionally understandable. Yet the narrative quickly transforms this everyday longing into moral tension when Mita's mother refuses to buy a new mukena. At this point, the conflict is not simply material; it becomes ethical. Mita's disappointment leads her to sulk and avoid helping her mother. What the story dramatizes here is a temporary misalignment between private feeling and social value.

The turning point occurs when Mita discovers that her mother has been collecting clothes to donate to people in need. This revelation reorganizes the emotional logic of the entire story. What initially seemed like maternal refusal is now reframed as generosity. Mita's earlier frustration becomes morally inadequate in light of a broader ethical horizon. The narrative thus does not merely tell the child to share; it re-educates feeling by showing that empathy should take

precedence over consumption. Mita's apology and change of attitude confirm that moral development consists in moving beyond personal desire toward social awareness.

By contrast, *Sayang Anak Yatim* begins not with selfish desire but with observation. The child characters encounter babies in an orphanage and learn about their vulnerability. Here the moral lesson arises not from correcting personal frustration but from confronting social inequality. The children do not need to be taught to feel from scratch; rather, the story provides a situation designed to elicit compassion. The explanation given by adults at the orphanage turns visual encounter into ethical understanding. Once the children realize that many of the babies lack parental care and material security, they respond by wanting to donate their old clothes.

This immediate response is crucial. The story presents compassion as the natural and proper reaction to social suffering. It teaches that awareness should lead directly to generosity. In this sense, *Sayang Anak Yatim* is more openly didactic than *Mukena Mita*. The former moves from witnessing vulnerability to sharing, while the latter moves from desire through correction to empathy. Yet both narratives ultimately promote the same ideological values: kindness, generosity, and social responsibility.

From Nodelman's perspective, this is precisely how ideology operates in children's literature. The stories do not simply contain moral messages appended to the plot; rather, the plot itself is arranged so that certain values emerge as emotionally and narratively satisfying. Empathy becomes the proper endpoint. Self-interest is either corrected or displaced. The stories thus function as cultural scripts for how children should interpret the world and their relation to others.

Constructing the Ideal Child

The second major finding concerns the image of the ideal child. Both stories construct a normative model of childhood, though they do so through different trajectories. In *Mukena Mita*, the ideal child emerges through learning and self-correction. In *Sayang Anak Yatim*, the ideal child appears as already predisposed toward compassion.

Mita is initially presented as ordinary rather than exemplary. She wants something beautiful, feels disappointed when denied, and reacts immaturely. This initial imperfection is narratively productive. It allows the story to show that ideal childhood is not simply innate; it may be achieved through realization and transformation. Mita becomes ideal not because she never errs, but because she eventually recognizes her mistake, apologizes, and aligns herself with

generosity. The story therefore constructs the ideal child as reflective, educable, and capable of moral growth.

This is an important nuance because the narrative acknowledges childhood desire without allowing it to remain authoritative. Mita's feelings are understandable, but they must be subordinated to a wider awareness of others. The ideal child in this framework is not emotionless; rather, that child learns to regulate desire ethically. Humility, empathy, and willingness to learn become central markers of proper childhood.

In *Sayang Anak Yatim*, however, Sali and Saliha are much closer to ideality from the beginning. Once they understand the condition of the babies in the orphanage, they immediately want to help. Their generosity is not preceded by conflict, resentment, or moral hesitation. As a result, they function more explicitly as role models than as psychologically developing characters. The story is less interested in transformation than in demonstration. It presents the protagonists as embodiments of the virtues adults wish young readers to imitate.

The final lines of the story reinforce this exemplary role by emphasizing that the children love orphans and do not mock or insult them. Such explicit reinforcement reveals the normative thrust of the narrative. The protagonists are not merely individuals in a story world; they are templates of desirable behavior. The ideal child here is kind, compassionate, respectful, and socially sensitive. Taken together, the two stories produce a coherent moral image of childhood. The ideal child is generous, humble, empathetic, and responsive to others' suffering. Whether this child must learn those virtues through error or already demonstrates them spontaneously, the normative endpoint remains the same. This supports Nodelman's claim that children's literature often encodes adult hopes for the younger generation. What appears as innocent storytelling is also a form of ethical design.

The Hidden Adult and Moral Authority

The third major finding is that both narratives are decisively shaped by the hidden adult. Although the stories center on children, moral authority remains firmly adult. Adults introduce the relevant situations, interpret them, and validate the proper response. The child's experience is therefore never wholly autonomous; it unfolds within narrative frameworks organized by adult values.

In *Mukena Mita*, the mother is the clearest embodiment of the hidden adult. Her initial refusal to buy a new mukena creates the conflict, but the narrative withholds full explanation until

later. This structure is significant because it places the child in a position of partial misunderstanding while reserving fuller moral knowledge for the adult. Once the truth is revealed that the mother has been preparing clothes for donation the story confirms the wisdom of adult judgment. The child's emotional reaction is exposed as limited; the adult perspective is vindicated. This dynamic is central to the operation of the hidden adult. The story seems to follow Mita's feelings, but it ultimately teaches that those feelings must be corrected by adult ethical vision. Mita's apology restores not only family harmony but also the hierarchy of moral interpretation. She learns compassion, but she also learns that adult authority defines the meaning of the situation.

In *Sayang Anak Yatim*, the hidden adult operates through explanation and validation rather than correction. The child characters encounter babies in an orphanage, yet it is adults who interpret that scene for them. The caregiver explains the condition of the children, and the mother affirms the protagonists' desire to donate. Without these adult interventions, the emotional and moral significance of the encounter would remain less defined. Adults mediate reality, and through that mediation the children learn how to respond.

The narrative voice itself also participates in the hidden adult. Especially in *Sayang Anak Yatim*, the story ends with direct moral statements about the children's kindness and respect. The narrator does not leave the meaning of the events open-ended. Instead, the narrative actively guides the reader toward approval. The same is true, though more subtly, in *Mukena Mita*, where the sequence of desire, refusal, revelation, apology, and giving is arranged to produce unmistakable moral clarity. In both stories, then, the hidden adult is not only a character but also a narrative logic. This finding confirms Nodelman's argument that children's literature is shaped by adult perspectives even when it appears to celebrate child experience. The child protagonist may be central, but the interpretive framework is adult. What counts as error, what counts as virtue, and what lesson is ultimately drawn are all governed by adult narrative authority.

Digital Platform, Traditional Pedagogy

A final finding concerns the relation between medium and ideology. Both stories circulate through Let's Read, a digital platform designed to expand access to children's books. Yet their moral architecture remains deeply traditional. The shift from print to digital changes circulation, not the basic narrative logic. Empathy is still privileged, sharing is still praised, and adult guidance remains central.

This continuity is analytically important. It suggests that digital children's literature should not be assumed to be less didactic simply because it is technologically new. On the contrary, digital platforms may amplify the reach of conventional moral narratives by making them more accessible. Let's Read, in this sense, does not merely host stories; it also participates in the reproduction of normative ideas about proper childhood. The stories examined here demonstrate that contemporary digital environments can serve as effective carriers of longstanding pedagogical forms. This is where the results of the analysis were made in an IMRAD-based paper. The result should be based on the chosen research method presented and discussed. The discussion also covers.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim* are not merely simple stories about kindness but ideologically structured narratives that construct childhood in normative ways. Through Perry Nodelman's concepts of ideology, the ideal child, and the hidden adult, three main conclusions can be drawn.

First, both stories represent moral ideology through narrative designs that privilege empathy, generosity, and social responsibility. *Mukena Mita* does so by transforming personal desire into moral self-recognition, while *Sayang Anak Yatim* does so by turning social encounter into immediate compassion. Despite their different structures, both direct readers toward the same ethical horizon. Second, both stories construct the figure of the ideal child. In one story, the ideal child learns through reflection and apology; in the other, the ideal child appears as already compassionate and generous. Together, they define proper childhood as humble, empathetic, respectful, and willing to share with others. Third, adult authority remains central in both narratives. The hidden adult operates through parental guidance, explanatory figures, narrative voice, and morally decisive resolutions. Even when the stories foreground child protagonists, adult perspectives determine how events should be interpreted and what lessons should be learned.

Finally, the digital circulation of these stories through Let's Read does not weaken their pedagogical force. Instead, it shows how traditional moral frameworks continue to operate within contemporary reading environments. The platform modernizes access, but the stories retain familiar ideological assumptions about childhood and adult-guided ethical development. In that

sense, *Mukena Mita* and *Sayang Anak Yatim* reveal that digital children's literature may be new in medium while remaining deeply continuous in moral form.

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