



A JOURNEY TO ANCIENT SUMER: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST IN JENNIFER J. GARRITY'S HISTORICAL CHILDREN'S NOVEL *SECRET OF THE SCRIBE*

ANTİK SÜMER'E YOLCULUK: JENNIFER J. GARRITY'NİN TARİHİ ÇOCUK ROMANI "SECRET OF THE SCRIBE"DE GEÇMİŞİN YENİDEN İNŞASI

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Abstract

This paper argues that Jennifer J. Garrity's historical children's novel *Secret of the Scribe* (2008) with its fictional stereotyping of Ancient Sumer and its polytheistic religion undercuts the possibility of the novel to critically engage its child readers with Sumerian history and culture. By selecting a young female slave as the historical personage of her novel and endowing her with contemporary qualities in tandem with individualism and the ethos of the marketplace, Garrity draws a very modern individual atypical of her time. While, the reader, on one hand, looks back critically on Sumerians' developed sense of collectivist religion, interpreting it as a threat to self-determination and personal autonomy, on the other hand, s/he appreciates the Sumerians for being the first ancient civilization that bears the imprints of a capitalist market society. The use of history enters the text, in so far as it creates a safe zone for fashioning, perpetuating and justifying the norms and values of the present and reassuring the future.

Öz

Bu makale, Jennifer J. Garrity'nin *Secret of The Scribe* (2008) isimli çocuk romanının, Antik Sümer uygarlığını ve çok tanrılı Sümer dinini kurgusal düzlemde klişeleştirerek, çocuk okurların Sümer tarihi ve kültürüne eleştirel bir bakış geliştirebilme ihtimalini yok ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. Garrity'nin, romanın tarihi ana karakteri olarak köle bir genç kadın seçmesi ve ona bireycilik ve piyasa etiği gibi çağdaş nitelikler vermesi, ait olduğu zamana uymayan, oldukça modern bir birey portresi çizmektedir. Okur, bir yandan Sümerlerin gelişmiş kolektif din anlayışına eleştirel gözle bakıp bunu kendi kaderini tayin etme ve kişisel özerkliğine bir tehdit olarak algımlarken, diğer yandan Sümerleri kapitalist pazar toplumunun izlerini taşıyan ilk uygarlık olması nedeniyle takdir eder. Bu şekilde, tarih kullanımı, günümüze ait norm ve değerlerin düzenlenip sürdürülmesi ve meşrulaştırılması ve bu sayede de geleceğin teminat altına alınmasını açısından güvenli bir alan yaratılabildiği müddetçe metne dahil olur.

It is meanings, rather than factual accuracy, that the present looks for when it contemplates the past. Events may be part of a fixed past, but their meanings are part of the changing present. (Baxendale and Pawling 8).

Writing historical fiction involves the selection and interpretation of the elements of a "usable past"¹ to present to the reader an imaginative storyline with an "intelligible" history. The use of history, however, tells us more about the writer's present-day ideologies rather than the so-called truth of past realities. For, the meaning of history, it has been suggested, does not lie in the sequence of mere actions

¹ The term "usable" past was first articulated by Van Wyck Brooks in his 1918 essay "On Creating a Usable Past" to explain the necessity of "invent[ing] a usable past" (166) so that a sense of national unity could be achieved in the historical imagination of the American people.

or events but in its value-laden narrative performance by which those events are selected, arranged and brought to our present attention. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, the meaning of history is not in the events but in its making, in the narrative that “*makes those past events into present historical ‘facts’*” (122). In fact, in the wake of post-structural and postmodern theory, the idea of history has been regarded, basically, as an “imaginary” picture of the past mediated to us through a culturally provided figurative language.² Similar to historians, historical fiction writers are also influenced by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the present and use historical facts to create their own revisionist understanding of history. The historical fiction writer, in trying to make sense of history contextualizes the events from his present viewpoint and registers meanings that reveal, in particular, his/her contemporary sensibilities and concerns, and in general, the “spirit” of his time and era. Consequently, historical fiction, being the by-product of the writer’s research and imagination, problematizes even more the relationship between fact and fiction, past and present, history and narrative. Nevertheless, the appreciation of historical fiction by its readers lies not in its relevancy, but in its universality, or what Fleishman terms as the ‘*hybrid*’ character of the “*historical imagination*” which “*contemplates the universal but does not depart from the rich factuality of history*” (8).³

When compared with adult historical novels, the ideological operations involved in understanding the “use” of history in literature produced for children are even more complex. Since children are seen as potential carriers of a cultural

²The “linguistic” turn in historiographic theory questions the objectivity of history and sees history itself as one big “narrative.” It proposes that there is a very close correlation between history and fiction since they are both “narratives” by which a historical or fictional world is construed. In fact, Barthes sees historical discourse as “*essentially an ideological elaboration, to be more specific, an imaginary elaboration*” (138) in which “*the ‘real’ is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent*” (139). White also takes a similar stance and views history as a narrative by which historical events are “*are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, ... in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play*” (223). Such thinking also displays the reflexive and constructionist implications of historiography in which historical knowledge is regarded as subjective and relational, a product of what Collingwood would describe as “*the constructive imagination*” (242). For a further reading on the epistemologically problematic nature of history writing see Collingwood 231-249; Barthes 127-140; White 221-236; and Mink 211-220.

³Avrom Fleischman in his book *The English Historical Novel* points out that the problem of relativism is also very common in the English historical novel. He states, however, that the difference between a great historical novel and a poorly written one lies largely in the “authorial motive.” While great historical novelists have an aesthetic view of history trying to “*lift the contemplation of the past above both the present and the past, to see in its universal character, freed of the urgency of historical engagement,*” (14) unsuccessful ones write with an instrumentalist view of history, interpreting the past for the sake of the present. For further reading see Fleischman.

heritage -it's moral, social, ethical and emotional values- children fiction writing, as a genre, carries a certain pedagogical value. Feeling responsible for the well-being of children, writers are more careful in the selection and organization of their material. They use history to convey some kind of present-day ethic or esteemed cultural value. As Rosemary Sutcliff, one of the most renown children's historical novelists has remarked, *"I am aware of the responsibility of my job; and I do try to put over to the child reading any book of mine some kind of ethic"* (306).⁴ Moreover, the recreation of historical reality serves to immerse the child into the progressive flow of history, giving the message that child readers can gain a better understanding of who they are by evaluating the past in relation to the present. Gordon S. Wood in his article *"The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History"* points out how knowledge of the past is a key to understanding the present: *"If it is self-identity that we want, then history deepens and complicates that identity by showing us how it has developed through time. It tells us how we got to be the way we are"* (5). By the same token, it is also assumed that the teaching of history will enhance the cognitive and emotional development of the child since the young reader will learn to appreciate a different culture or era besides his own, gaining a broader and diverse perspective from which s/he can develop an understanding of others. Interestingly enough, the "ideal" aim of historical novels written for young people are similar, in effect, to "novels of initiation"⁵ in which the protagonist as well as the child reader is expected to gain maturity and awareness.

However, it is very seldom that historical children's literature will lift their readers from the present to the past so that they can gain access and insight to the universal character of human experience. History enters the text, in so far as it creates a safe zone for fashioning, perpetuating and justifying the norms and values of the present and reassuring the future. Apparently, in the process of imagining a "life Then," the child reader actually internalizes the norms and values of a "life Now" and learns to "evaluate" and in some cases "judge" the past in relation to the present (rather than the other way round). As John Stephens has pointed out, children's historical fiction not only *"inculcat[es] social conservatism"* but also *"implicitly convey[s] the impression or, better, illusion that a reader's present time,*

⁴Sutcliff also emphasizes the importance of providing children with *"a sense of continuity:" ... To know and really understand something of where one came from helps one to understand and cope better with where one is now"* (311).

⁵ Danielle Thaler describes historical novels written for young people as *"novel[s] of initiation in which the hero casts off the last traces of his childhood, asserts his autonomy and develops an individual conscience with regard to the world he is passing through"* (4). For further reading see Thaler.

place and subjectivity constitute a normative position against which alterities are to be measured" (205). This paper, by examining *The Secret of the Scribe* (2008), a story written by the American children's historical novelist Jennifer Johnson Garrity, will illustrate how the reconstruction of the first human civilizations, the Sumerians of 2000 B.C., serves as a structural model for the projection and reinforcement of present-day religious and social values, ideals and interests.

Secret of the Scribe, written by Jennifer Johnson Garrity⁶, is a historical novel published by Brimwood Press as one of the four books of the "Historical Novels for Engaging Young Thinkers" series. The series is advocated as being designed, in general, to develop historical literacy in children between ages 10-14 by focusing on the four chronological periods of history - ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern. Among other agendas, Brimwood Press states that the series also anticipates to acquaint its readers with four different worldviews - polytheism, monotheism, naturalism and pantheism.

Secret of the Scribe, being the first novel in the series, is basically an initiation story of a 12-year-old female run-away slave named Tabni, who flees from the palace of the Sumerian King Ishbi-Irra, in 1950 B.C., just before her mother and twenty two other domestic servants are sacrificed to accompany the royal burial of their Sumerian queen. In the palace of king Ishbi-Irra, Tabni chosen to aid the physically and mentally impaired son of the king in his scribal lessons, lives a life of comfort and happiness as one of the few educated scribes who have mastered the Cuneiform script, the ancient writing of the Sumer. Consequently, during her days as a slave girl in Ishbi-Irra's palace, Tabni, rather than being socialized into the role of passivity and servitude, as one might expect, is more privileged and liberated from the others. With her queen's death, however, Tabni's care-free and sheltered childhood ends as she starts a new journey to the unknown. With the help of her mother, she is able to escape from the Sumerian palace and start a new life disguised as a male scribe in the city of Ur, a thriving urban Sumerian trade center. When the city of Ur, which is also the cult center of Nanna, the Sumerian god of Ur, is ravaged and destroyed by the Elamites, Tabni together with a childless couple in the trade business run away to Larsa to begin a new life. Tabni's lonely and

⁶ Jennifer J. Garrity is an American juvenile historical novel writer whose books are widely used in homeschool curriculums throughout the United States. After being commissioned by Brimwood Press to write the first of the four historical novels in their Engaging Young Thinker series, Garrity in a letter to the publisher explains that it was a Sumerian gold headdress displayed in the British museum, belonging to Puabi of Ur, a prominent Sumerian women of 2600 B.C. that had inspired her to write this novel. For further reading see <http://www.brimwoodpress.com/The%20Story%20Behind%20the%20series%20Historical%20Novels%20for%20Engaging%20Thinkers.pdf>

desperate journey down the Euphrates River and her physical struggle for survival end with a symbolic, if not a literal, return home. At the end of the story, Tabni's orphanage and social displacement is replaced by the safety and warmth of family when Amata and Shar-Kali welcome her as part of their family.

However, it is not the symbolic journey of "homecoming," but the "secret" revealed right in the beginning of the novel that provides the framework by which readers are to understand Tabni's rite of passage:

I, Tabni, the secret scribe, ...press the words of my story into soft clay ...When the clay has baked in the fire and hardened, my story will outlive me in this world. Perhaps one day my own children will read it to their children.

No one knows the truth about me. That is, no one but an ensi of Ur, and the moon god, Father Nanna. I have left the priest behind me, but I can never escape from Nanna's pale gaze...(2).

Garrity makes it clear from the outset of her novel that it is from a moral perspective that the sequence of the heroine's journey is to be developed. For the real motivation behind Tabni's storytelling is not to reclaim her female identity or her Sumerian past, but to "unveil" to the reader as well as to herself, her "secret" feelings and thoughts about Sumerian religion and its deities. Using the emancipatory potential of writing to liberate herself from the oppressive divine gaze of religion, Tabni shares with her child reader her daring but equally sincere thoughts about Father Nanna, the anthropomorphic god of Ur: *"I no longer believe Father Nanna wants to bless me. He is furious with me, and to be truthful, I am angry with him. So it is just that his city is no more; I would not want to go there, or visit his holy mountain again. But this, too is a secret"* (3). Tabni is not only angry with Father Nanna, but also happy in seeing his city and holy temple destroyed. In fact, it is these profound yet hidden feelings of defiance and rage that have instigated Tabni to write down her life and confront her Sumerian past. Her need to find the answers for her "wavering faith," a condition that she must also keep as a secret, lies at the heart of her story. This spiritual dilemma, the leitmotif which Tabni's quest for individuation is staged on, will play a pivotal role in Tabni's journey to self-knowledge.

Consequently, even though, *Secret of the Scribe*, is written with the aim of introducing the customs and religious worldview of the Sumer, the child reader at the very onset of the novel is advised to regard Sumerian polytheistic worldview and

its “plethora of deities” with great caution. In fact, the reader’s dismay and awe towards Sumerian way of life, especially its religious values and practices intensify when in the opening scene of the novel the reader is pulled into the midst of an irrational and chaotic world beyond belief or comprehension:

Our trouble started When IshibilIrra’s queen complained of pain below her ribs and began to sweat in the night. The king called for the royal ashipu, a sorcerer.... He listened for a long time to the voice of the demon trapped inside her, the one whose desperate attempt to eat his way out of her body was making her sick.

‘Has she sinned?’ the king asked the ashipu with trembling voice.

...‘Worthy king, it is possible. Perhaps to punish her, the hand of the goddess Ninisinna has touched her vital organs.’

King İshbi-Irra’s face drained of color. “Then how can we persuade Ninisinna to heal her?’

The ashipu’s forehead wrinkled. ‘Her sickness is grave. Bring both a lamb and a young goat to stand on either side of her. If it so please Ninisinna, she will cause the demon to flee the queen and enter one animal or the other. When that animal carries the demon, we will slaughter it and lay it on Ninisinna’s altar.’ (5).

Tabni’s reminiscence of the days shortly before her queen’s death plunge the reader into the center of a horrifying world where sinners, gods and sorcerers run rampant. Goats fleeing in panic “*clambering onto the... [queen’s] belly,*” ashipus (sorcerers) who “*chant spells*” with their “*droning voices[s]*” and expel demons with animal sacrifices and “*mixtures[s] of cow’s urine, lime, ash and salt,*” and “*asus*” (medicine men) who try to “*open ...belly [of the queen] with ... surgeon’s knife*” to let out “*demons [who] refuse to go*” are all given as part of historical detail (6-7). Such a caricatured bizarre depiction of the Sumerian universe as world gone haywire amounts to an intuitive recognition of Sumerian civilization as irrational and crazy enhancing the dismay and terror of the child reader towards Sumerian life and its customs.

Moreover, with the queen’s death, the reader confronts another horrifying Sumerian religious practice, i.e. the killing of human slaves as retainer sacrifice. This ancient polytheistic practice, whose historical validity is heavily disputed

among Sumerian scholars,⁷ operates in the background of the novel as the reason behind Tabni's literal as well as symbolic journey to the unknown. (In a way, Garrity makes it apparent that she will play to Western prejudices rather than ground her novel on well-researched historical data and facts.) The depiction of Tabni's removal from home as a consequence of such a merciless and unjust act leads the reader to consider Tabni's rite of passage not only as a personal but also as a moral endeavor. For it facilitates the understanding of evil as stemming from a malevolent and uncaring Sumerian universe whose gods only persecute, punish or oppress. Furthermore, the specific details recounted by Tabni during her escape ordeal, especially about her mother Ku-Aya, once again prompts the child reader to regard Sumerian religion and its deities with great suspicion and awe. Especially, in Ku-Aya's drastic attempt to save the life of her child, the reader realizes not only the anguish and pain of a desperate mother, but also the anger, insolence and determination of a slave questioning the divine justice of gods. Ku-Aya's fervent cry highlights a cruel and unjust Sumerian universe where gods are indifferent and unfeeling and where human life has no significance or value: *"Let them punish me for my disobedience! This is not Tabni's choice, but mine; perhaps they will leave her alone. And what good does it do to be afraid? Our lives are only dice, thrown by the gods' hands. How can I know whether they are in a good mood today? I am only their slave. But when I look at my daughter ... It is worth the risk"* (15). Caught in an erratic world not of her making, Ku-Aya is presented as attaining the wisdom of a tragic hero who comprehends the ultimate value of human life. By choosing to disobey the gods, she not only helps Tabni to escape the fate bestowed upon her, but also gives Tabni the courage to master her own fate. For such an act of defiance will also initiate Tabni's journey to freedom and selfhood, making her the self-seeking individual who questions and initiates events rather than merely responding to them.

⁷ The generally accepted view of retainer sacrifice as a Sumerian ritual practice is an ill-informed misguided cultural appropriation. For according to Black and Green, such extraordinary measures taken to serve the needs of the royalty were not common practices in Ancient Sumer and were *"scarcely if at all hinted at in documentary sources"* (105). The only evidence that attested to such a large-scale human sacrifice was found in the Early Dynastic burials of Queen Pu-abi and the King of Ur excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley. While Woolley's excavation led to the general belief that Ancient polytheistic worldview permits retainer sacrifices, in reality, such *"large-scale sacrifice of the Early Dynastic Period was apparently short-lived and was subsequently abandoned"*(106). For further reading see Black and Green.

After her escape from the palace, Garrity's heroine finds herself in an unbearable situation of uncertainty, loneliness and exile. Consumed by hunger and poverty, she decides to go to Father Nanna's compound in the hope of finding some food and shelter. The mundane and routine life of prayer, worship and supplication⁸ in the holy temple of Nanna is described by the narrator with an unusually high degree of skepticism. Tabni describes the townspeople who visit the Great Ziggurat, the temple of Nanna, as "*throng[s] of worshippers*" baring their souls to the moon god of Ur while priests with "*flopp[ing]*" bellies "*scurr[y] back and forth*" from the alter to the storehouse carrying the offerings for their own future consumption (42-44). Tabni feels herself as a stranger lost in this mystic but bizarre environment. So rather than submitting quietly to her fate, Tabni chooses to act on her will and instincts. For example, unlike other people, Tabni refuses to offer her most precious belonging, her mother's necklace, to Father Nanna and offers instead "*a stale loaf of barley bread*"(37). Instead of lining up with the poor at the temple storehouse for free food and drink or selling her body to entertain an "*endless stream of sailors and traders*" (99) she prefers to cut her hair, dress in a men's caftan and work as a boy scribe selling her talent to survive. When an "ensi" (priest) realizes her true identity and accuses her of tricking the gods and forgetting her humble place, Tabni replies proudly that she is a scribe and that being accustomed to freedom she will never become a slave again:

'You should have sold yourself into slavery...become a servant in a respectable household. Instead, you have forgotten your humble place beneath the hand of the gods, and rise to match wits with them!'

Furious, I clenched my fists. Perhaps I *was* [original italics] a slave of the gods, but never would I be a slave of men...Now that I had grown accustomed to freedom, I had no more wish to become someone's property. (99-100).

By equating Sumerian gods with human slaveholders, Garrity's highly critical approach to Sumerian religion comes to the fore as she silently instructs her child readers to correlate Sumerian polytheistic worship with real slavery. Such a sequencing of narration is important for two reasons. First of all, it undermines the

⁸ According to Black and Green, Sumerian deities "*lived on the sacrifice of sheep, fish, cereals and oil which mankind was obliged to offer them regularly: the same foods as were consumed by man himself. They drank beer and wine (probably date wine as well as grapevine, and in a number of myths gods are depicted as imbibing to excess*" (85).

genuine love and adoration that Sumerian people felt for their deities. In contrary to what Garrity conveys, the relationship between man and god in ancient Sumer was not that of master and slave but that of father and son, husband and wife. As the eminent Sumerian scholar Samuel Noah Kramer points out in his book *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character*, "... the 'love of god for man' resembled the pattern of love between parents and children as well as between husband and wife... there was the doctrine of the personal god –the 'my god' of the worshipper, whom he thought of as his father or mother... In the lamentation literature, the gods again and again manifest their love and affection" (259). Secondly, such juxtaposition reinforces the idea of Sumerian religion as oppressive and tyrannical, an abdication of self-agency and individual choice. However, Kramer as well as Black and Green posit that human destiny for the Sumers was not seen as completely controlled by divine power. ⁹

While the "ensi," the high priest of Ur, is represented as an evil character that tries to place limits on what Tabni can do, Ku-Aya and her surrogate mother Amata, with their courage and assertive individualism are portrayed as strong positive role models. Tabni's mother provides spiritual guidance by giving her the courage to become the judge of her own conscience, whereas Amata, the Sumerian woman who Tabni meets while wandering in the crowded streets of Ur, becomes her model for success and self-efficacy. Amata who is portrayed as the only Sumerian woman doing business in the local town market of Ur, shows Tabni how to survive in the male-dominated Sumerian world of commerce and trade. Amata, a character that is motherly yet masculine, teaches Tabni the logic of the marketplace and helps her to become the "crafter" of her own life. After her first husband's death, Amata marries Shar-Kali, a weaver, and becomes a successful merchant who runs her own trade business. Moreover, Garrity portrays the relationship between Amata and her husband as one that is based on true gender equality, where husband and wife participate on equal terms in both the public and private sphere of Sumerian culture. Their house is a mess since "*both rather create works of art than keep house*" (177), they are co-partners helping, appreciating and supporting each other's artistry and they do not let the issue of "childlessness" get in the way of their marriage. Unable to bear and raise children, Amata acquaints herself with the

⁹ Kramer highlights "education" and the "ambitious drive for pre-eminence" as "deeply color[ing] the Sumerian outlook on life" (267) while Black and Green assert more a "harmonious" interplay between god, kings and the humans: "*The idea of a god determining the 'destiny' or 'fate' of an individual was more a settling of certain potentialities than an absolute predestination of the future. There were certain 'plans' or 'design' behind the world and it was up to gods, kings and humanity at large to do their part to ensure the harmonious functioning of civilization.*" (69).

art of pottery and jewelry and harbors a strong sense of love and appreciation for her artifacts, treating them like her children. Nevertheless, when opportunity prevails, she does not hesitate to sell and make profit from her craftsmanship. Amata's egalitarian marriage based on mutual love and affection as well as her pragmatic, creative and resourceful nature becomes a manual for Tabni's self-development and plays a prominent role in her maturation.

Tabni's strong instinct to survive in the unfamiliar coastal town of Ur enables Tabni to cast off the fatalism of her polytheistic religion and take control over the rapidly changing circumstances that she is caught in. The further away Tabni distances herself from her gods and their ardent worshippers "*watch[ing] them like one who is far away and unseen*" (102), the more she gets closer to realizing her own potential and self-worth. For each successive stage of Tabni's journey leads her religious faith to falter as she feels "*completely foreign ... hollow, invisible in a world in which [she] did not belong*" (42). Confused and lonely, Garrity's protagonist oscillates between an inner voice that asks her to do what she believes is right, and an outside voice that reminds her to respect the gods and fear their wrath: "*I worked as hard as ever, buying amulets and depositing them daily at Nanna's and Ningal's shrines, in hopes that this would cancel out my bitter thoughts towards all the gods. At least I'm doing what's required of me, I comforted myself, even if I cannot feel devotion*" (84). Reflecting a pragmatic can-do approach to life, Garrity's heroine believes in the gods simply as some sort of duty. "*Expected to play a part in keeping these gods ... happy*" (72), she feels a continuous bitterness, indignation and disgust towards them (71, 79, 88).

Tabni's refusal to be shaped and constrained by the many Sumerian gods she is required to appease differentiates her from the other people around her. While religious worship is the lifeblood of the town keeping the lives of the Sumerians intact and moving, for the narrator it is presented as an impediment, hindering and slowing her personal growth. From the eyes of Tabni, Sumerian gods are very demanding, insensitive and unsympathetic. Their never-ending desire to be fed, pleased and worshipped infuriate Garrity's protagonist and evoke feelings of anxiety and compulsion. As the novel progresses, Tabni gradually begins to bemoan the pressure which the act of worship and prayer places upon her: "*... Would I have enough strength and time left over to devote to pleasing the hundreds upon hundreds of gods who ruled this world? Only a priest could keep straight the seven day cycle of*

worship' in which each sky god had his day of honor. And yet I was expected to play a part in keeping these gods- along with all the others – happy!" (72).

Tabni's inner voice that liberates her from the control of Sumerian religious practices is even more intensified in the crowded and busy urban life of Ur. For in this thriving trade center, the reader confronts the liberal vision of a free market economy where there is an extensive trade of individual craftsmanship and where people sell their specialized labor as scribes, weavers, potters, metalsmiths, goldsmiths etc. In fact, the first thing that is foregrounded by the narrator about the daily life of Ur is that it is not unusual to come across "*middle-class scribes [fitting] along the streets at the city gates, selling their writing skills to ordinary man*"(39) and "dubsars," the respected high-class scribes recording royal decrees, transactions and letters in their elegant offices for a costly fee. Among the division of specialized labor, the art of "scribing" is presented as having a high exchange value since it is a profession very hard to learn but a service that is in great demand. Thus, Tabni's scribal skill in this competitive trade center serves as an everlasting source of strength and sustenance. Through hard-work and perseverance, she learns to profit from her skill and achieves both material wealth and self-worth. As she begins to compete against the initially more able scribes, she attracts more customers every day and "stave[s] off the loneliness" (69) inherent in her present life.

One of the key concepts that the novel reinforces is the belief that human growth can only come from the individual him/herself, from listening to one's own conscience and is not pertinent to natural forces beyond one's control. The Sumerian deities being the representative of oppressive external natural forces, is suggested by Garrity as obstacles to individual growth and progress, whereas the marketplace with its competitive and productive division of labor sustains self-mastery and sufficiency. The novel's ends with Tabni being an accomplished scribe with future prospects of owning a decent home and thriving business with her new family in the city of Larsa: "*Both Amata and Shar-Kali plan to tell other craftsmen what a skilled scribe I am. Between the three of us, we will gradually earn enough to rent rooms, and then buy a house*" (114). Along with Tabni, other minor characters in the novel like Divatar, also are represented as individuals who have realized the importance of self-empowerment and are ready to set their lifetime goals on personal achievement and hard work: "*Then he [Divatar] went on to tell me all about the gods bringing bad luck on him and his brothers, but he assured me that they*

were going to start over again in Larsa, and they were going to do well, because they were excellent craftsmen who made the finest copper friezes anywhere in the land between the rivers” (111). The movement away from a life of servitude that would have been Tabni’s lot in Ibni-Sinna’s palace towards the egalitarian and social mobility of Ur and Larsa, provides the closure as well as the fundamental structure of the novel.

By selecting a young female slave as the historical personage of her novel and endowing her with contemporary qualities in tandem with individualism and the ethos of the marketplace, Garrity draws a very modern individual atypical of her time. While, the reader, on one hand, looks back critically on Sumerians’ developed sense of collectivist religion, interpreting it as a threat to self-determination and agency, on the other hand, s/he appreciates the Sumerians for being the first ancient civilization that bears the imprints of a capitalist market society.

The valorization of Sumer as the cradle of civilization and the undervaluation of its religious worldview in *Secret of the Scribe* is contingent with the imperial meta-narrative of modernity whose roots lie in 18th century Enlightenment thought and whose two sources, as Linda Hutcheon underpins, are “*liberal humanism and capitalism*” (120). Tabni and her story of maturation become convincing only when read within the light of these values. For it is very unlikely that an individual living in 2000 B.C. and whose worldview is based on complete servitude can become a self-actualizing moral agent seeking free-will and autonomy:

... in line with their world view, [the Sumerians] had no exaggerated confidence in man and his destiny ... They were firmly convinced that man was fashioned of clay and created for one purpose only: to serve the gods by supplying them with food, drink, and shelter so that they might have full leisure for their divine activities ... One fundamental moral problem, a high favorite with Western philosophers, never troubled the Sumerian thinkers at all, namely, the delicate and rather slippery problem of free will. Convinced beyond all need for argument that man was created by the gods solely for their benefit and leisure, the Sumerians accepted their dependent status just as they accepted the divine decision that death was man’s lot and that only the gods were immortal. (Kramer 123).

If we are to accept Tabni as a modern Sumerian girl who is at odds with her “pre-modern set of beliefs” that restrain her free will but in unity with the values of the marketplace that encourage her self-autonomy and self-interests, then we can

read Tabni's journey as the formation of the "modern subject" and her narrative as a break from "pre-modern *Gemeinschaft*"¹⁰ and an entry into modern capitalism. Tabni with her free-will, independence, self-sufficiency, reason, courage and responsibility is very similar to what Iris Murdoch has described as "*the ideal citizen of the liberal state, a warning held up to tyrants*" (78). In *Secret of the Scribe*, however, the tyrants are not the oppressive feudal societies or monarchies but the anthropomorphic gods and goddesses who deny the self the promise to fulfill its potential. Mark Carnes argues in *Novel History* that the usages and modifications of historical facts by novelists is regarded as somewhat a moral obligation since they view "*their art as cast[ing] light on the human condition rather than any historical episode*" (21). But one must ask: Is liberal individualism or modernity really a transhistorical human condition that needs to be conveyed to children as a universal value that transcends time and place? Or to rephrase it differently, do historical novelists have a moral obligation to view modernity as the yardstick against which all other cultures should be measured?

At first glance, it seems natural that a literature produced by an American author for American children will advocate the need for self-empowerment, agency and free-will and uphold secular virtues as egalitarianism, freedom and resourcefulness but when this is done at the expense of a past culture and people, then one must consider the stakes involved. As Ann Nolan Clark, an award-winning author of children books, remarks, "*Children need to know of other nationalities and races so that, inheriting an adult world, they find a free and joyous interchange of acceptance of these differences ... There is a need for awareness that each group of people has its own special traditions and customs*" (qtd. in Cooper, Collins and Saxby 17). It is only by creating an interchange for awareness and acknowledging such a need for the "acceptance of difference" can historical fiction writers pass onto their readers what Gordon S. Wood describes as the "historical sense:"

To possess a historical sense does not mean simply to possess information about the past. It means to have a different consciousness, a historic consciousness, to have incorporated to our minds a mode of understanding that profoundly influences the way

¹⁰Ferdinand Tönnies in his famous work *Community and Society*, saw *Gemeinschaft* as a model of human social organization that prevailed mostly before the industrial revolution and which he described as an organic close-knit community grounded on custom, kinship, fate and religion. For further reading on the transformation of modern societies from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (market society) see Tönnies.

we look at the world. History adds another dimension to our view of the world and enriches our experience. Someone with a historical sense sees reality differently in four dimensions. (5).

To debase or valorize elements of history for the sake of sustaining the norms and values of the present is identical with what Dwight MacDonald refers to as a “lack [of] respect for tradition that remote ages instinctively felt ... that historical sense ... that feeling for the special quality of each moment of historical time which, from Vico to Spengler, has enabled us to appreciate the past on its own terms” (22).¹¹ Child readers are moved neither towards new modes of self-definition nor possible ways of attending to the world. In the name of portraying the distinctive cultural and religious practices of the ancient Sumer, *Secret of the Scribe*, renders to the reader a “fatalistic” worldview that consists only of human sacrifice, deity offerings and prayer. In so doing, the novel places the child reader in an adverse position from where s/he can turn critical against and judgmental towards Sumerian society and culture. Rather than fostering a sense of wholeness between different peoples and cultures and endorsing empathy and understanding to different “life-worlds,” the *Secret of the Scribe* merely tries to secure, with what can be called as a literal naiveté of imagination, a continuity with the first ancient Sumer civilization and America’s present-day liberal democratic image.

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¹¹Quoted in Chris Lehmann.

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