

## Ideology and the Children's Literature: A Critical analysis of Frances Burnett's *The Secret Garden*

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### ABSTRACT

Children's literature explicitly throws to the adult readers the ideologies and attitudes which the societies wish to engender in their children. Since these expressions are written, published and bought for children by the adult, the opinions of (believed) important behaviours can be easily posited through the readings. Studies show fiction helps children retain information about distant places and times better than more traditional teaching methods (McGowan 204). British books on colonial India clearly indicate these children how they need to behave and believe about themselves, being members of the dominant race with prospect of the colonized people of the Empire. This literature demonstrates the British as superior to the Indians and teaches children the same. Whether they were aware of it or not, the authors and publishers of such novels were helping to teach the Empire's children how they should regard themselves. The paper examines various, at times surprising, interlinks between the nineteenth century British imperialist ideology and one of the popular children's classic – *The Secret Garden*. Burnett not only depicts, but indirectly endorses imperialism and empires. In the words of Roland Barthes, depoliticize the imperialist project – especially in India which, though not the physical/imaginative setting, constantly hovers in the background of *The Secret Garden*.

**Key words:** Anglo-Indian, Ideology, Imperialism, Orientalism.

'You thought I was a native! You dared! You don't know anything about natives! They are not people - they're servants who must salaam to you. You know nothing about India.'

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (32)

The focus of this paper is to unfold and to explore the ideology apparent in children's literature, with special reference to Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*(1911) vis-a-vis to examine how India had been described for British children during the time India was part of the British Empire. To understand both these issues backdrop on British India and children's literature seems necessary.

The British East India Company entered as a trading company, established in the early 1600s and gradually ended up into monopolizing the trade between England and

India. It received special dispensations from the British government and was the major cause of British presence in India for long years. Some other countries, most remarkably France and the Netherlands, also had their own East India Companies. All of the trading companies competed with each other, militarily and in trade, for influence in and control of India. Robert Clive and later on Lord Clive led the British East India Company to win European control of India against the French East India Company in the mid-1700s. The British East India Company essentially ran India quite easily for England until the Indian Mutiny, an uprising by Indian

troops. After the Mutiny in 1857, the British government made India an official colony of the British Empire, and it remained so until the independence was achieved in 1947.

During those times, when India was facing great political pressures, Britain was also experiencing societal changes, including in education. The expansion of literacy and the increase in British involvement in India occurred at the same time. In response to the increasing demand for books, publishing houses sold many books about the British Empire, including many stories for children. The Empire was an unexpectedly topic of interest for literature, since authors who had never travelled outside of Europe could find information on the colonies written by fellow British citizens and use this information to populate their novels. Colonies were exotic, but since they were under the auspices of the British Crown, children could, if they wished, easily imagine themselves travelling there. Furthermore, colonies provided an excellent story setting for the teaching of imperialist culture to children. Studies show fiction helps children retain information about distant places and times better than more traditional teaching methods (McGowan 204). For Victorian children, India was a distant place, and still an exotic destination even while under control of the Empire. Fiction also teaches and reinforces norms of behaviour and attitudes. Not all fiction, however, equally shows the ideology that it teaches.

*The Secret Garden* is one of the books featuring India written for young British citizens during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These books gave an idea of British life in India, centring on the adventures and exciting experiences children could have, such as riding on elephants, and on the tales that children heard. Looking at *The Secret Garden* in relation to other books in the genre reveals a vivid and clear picture

of the opinions the British held of India and the view they expect their children to have of the colony. These expressions included the rarely questioned idea that Britain should rule over India, that the British were “better” than Indians and that Britain itself was “better” than India.

As a final point, the intertwining - in a popular children's novel - of the British imperial project abroad and the one back home aptly demonstrates how deeply imperialism was (according to Rushdie, *is*) embedded in every aspect of British culture. 'I never saw spring in India because there wasn't any.' (Rushdie, 131-2)

*The Secret Garden* deals greatly with the topic of exoticizing Yorkshire to be for Mary a world not unlike India is for British children in other stories. Parallels between Britain and India are more easily seen and the superiority of Britain is proved by showing Yorkshire as a quite different, rather better world.

The novel, at the very first reading, does not guarantee a long-lasting success. The story, compared with so many adventure novels for boys produced in the same period, is far from breathtaking: Mary Lennox, a ten-year-old English girl, born (and from the beginning of the novel *living*) in India, loses both her parents in an outbreak of cholera. She survives by luck: a few days later, gentle (yet indisputably manly) English soldiers come across her and, after a couple of unpleasant weeks spent with a large family of a poor English clergyman, Mary *returns* (the word everyone is using unwittingly is revealing because, of course, she has never been there) to England, or, as one of the minor characters in the novel says, *home*. Home is in Yorkshire; a gloomy house on the edge of the moors, with hundreds of locked rooms, one locked garden, and quite a few benign secrets waiting to be revealed. The house belongs to

Mary's uncle, Archibald Craven, the man whose unhappiness is equalled only by his wealth - the widower in perpetual mourning for his beautiful wife (dead for ten years), and the father who emotionally abandoned his seemingly invalid son the moment the child was born.

The Secret Garden is set in England, not India, and has as its main character a true Anglo-Indian girl, born and raised in India before moving to England to live in a shut-up manor on the moor. Mary discovers her imperious, crippled cousin Colin, who, as everyone says, will never be able to walk, and the garden that her uncle shuttered when his wife died in childbirth. With the help of Dickon, a local boy who knows the moors and native animals, and the magic Mary knows of from India, Mary and Colin rehabilitate the garden and each other. *The Secret Garden* has a clear story arc and character growth.

The beginning of the novel is illustrative enough: "When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen." The first sentence states two facts, first, that Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite, Yorkshire to live with her uncle – so the beginning of the novel (the beginning of Mary's life *proper*) literally starts with what everyone calls her *return* to England (and the implied departure from India) – and, second, that she was reported to be 'the most disagreeable-looking child'. Only two sentences later, our trustworthy narrator informs the readers, that 'Her hair was yellow, and *her face was yellow because she had been born in India* and had always been ill in one way or another.' The origin of her ugliness is thus categorically (remarkably early, also) located: Mary's face is yellow because she has been ill a lot, and she has been ill because she was born in

India. The first time India is mentioned, it is immediately linked with illness; this association is ingeniously strengthened by the fact that Mary's parents, Captain Lennox and his wife, die in an outbreak of cholera. India, dark, primitive, unhygienic other to England, makes one ill; moreover, if one is not watchful enough, it literally kills, in its sly, creeping, profoundly un-English, unmanly and dishonorable Oriental way - by disease. This, if anything, is the textbook example of 'the motif of Orient as something denoting danger' that Edward Said identified in a variety of Western discourses. Mary is, first and above all, extremely spoiled and disobedient – for instance, whenever she is angry she slaps her Indian nurse, her ayah and calls her 'pig' and 'daughter of pigs' ("because", the narrator tells her young readers, in an undisturbed, you-might-need-it-some-day way, "to call a native a pig is the worst insult of all."). She is physically *stiff*, thin, and weak. Plus, she is extremely unfriendly. But why should these rather unpleasant traits – over and over again attributed to Mary's being born and raised in/by India - be suggestive of moral corruption? And why should this view be imperialist in origin?

Mary, though English and thus, the novel subtly affirms, genetically superior, was born in India, and has been brought up entirely by Indian servants, who humour her in all possible ways, who dress her up, who bow before her, whom she can slap and verbally abuse. Mary has to come to England to hear the truth about herself for the first time, because in India people are too servile, and they lie. As a result of all this, she is, at the mature age of ten, totally unpromising material for an angel in the house – too tyrannical, too disobedient, too ugly. In other words, she too seems to have gone native.

Burnett makes clear that, as M. Daphne Kutzer puts it, 'India has brought out the worst in both Mary and her mother.' (In keeping with this view, Colin is, in his most horrible tyrannical moods, consistently described as 'young rajah' over and over again – the implication is clear: his unnaturally bad behaviour is so un-English that no English terms can be used to denote it.

Despotism, tyranny, even such small-scale tyranny as Colin exhibits, are, the novel asserts, *somehow* Indian, not British. Even Mary's unpleasant, commanding tone, which she uses when angry, is qualified as 'Indian'.) But a girl's waywardness and insubordination, spelled all over her yellow face, tolerated (or even encouraged) in India, are morally wrong in the context of England: Mary is no longer a 'Misse Sahib', whose very ethnicity (combined with the military power personified in her father) grants her unlimited authority over 'the blacks'; in Yorkshire she is a young lady who must learn some important lessons in self-denial, obedience and respect. And here already we draw the parallel between the two empires: both are patriarchal and phallogocentric, both are built on subordination – but whereas the Empire subordinates the natives (imaginatively, economically, socially, and culturally). A domestic empire is built upon the subordination of the lower social classes, plus all 'the female[s] of the species'. The perfect system must never be threatened by disobedient angels in or out of the house.

Yet despotism, moral corruption, illness and death are not the only signifiers for demonic India in *The Secret Garden*. India, with its oppressive, blazing sun, its hot and humid climate and its lying people, is a fairy-tale-like evil foster mother: it affects (better to say, arrests) physical and mental development of English children, of young girls in particular –

thus poisoning the very future of the Empire. (The point is succinctly brought home by Mary's self-explanatory comment regarding Martha's mother, "She doesn't seem to be like the mothers in India." (89) If one bears in mind that Susana Sowerby is kind, gentle, clean, pure, loving and wise, Mary's first-hand criticism of Indian mothers – of *India as a mother* – is striking.) There are countless references to Mary always being too hot, weak and sleepy to do anything in India – all leading to the conclusion that Empire's children, if removed for too long from the beneficial influences of their mother country – its bracing climate, clean air, its birds (which are 'not like Indian birds') real gardens, its spring and truth-speaking people – might end up as mentally, as well as socially and emotionally, retarded. That is the undercurrent of Ben Weatherstaff's telling Mary "Tha' shapes well enough at it for a young 'un that's lived with heathen." [You're developing quite well considering the fact you lived among the heathens.] (76).

Treacherous India, Burnett insists over and over again, has seriously harmed a helpless child; due to the shared failure of her parents, unprotected Mary has been turned by India into an ugly, sour, yellow-faced, thin girl who doesn't like anyone or anything much and who is prone to tantrums and physical violence. Fortunately for Mary, there is Yorkshire to mend her ways, to bring her back to her original, English, ladylike self.

To have an ending remarks, its noteworthy that, children's fiction is the first literature to which children are exposed, and so shapes their experiences with fiction and reading. The importance of this influence calls for additional attention as it's at the crux of shaping their mindset, opinions, reviews and outlook. It can be seen that 19th century British imperialism in *The Secret Garden* is naturalized, domesticated, replicated,

explained, mystified, narrated, given 'human form divine', made familiar, acceptable, desirable; it is decidedly not questioned, analyzed or criticized – with the exception of potential imperial flaws.

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**Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.**

**~ Japanese Proverb**