



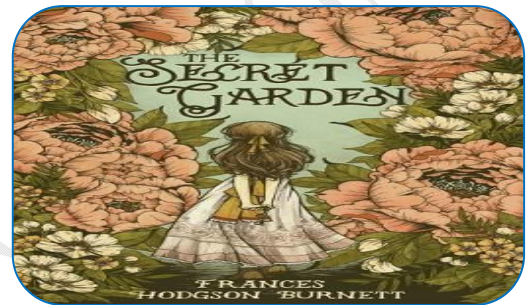
## ADULT'S SECRETS BURIED IN CHILDREN'S GARDEN: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S *THE SECRET GARDEN*

Satyajit Roy

Ph D. Research Scholar , Department of English , Raiganj University.

### ABSTRACT :

Children's books have a long history around the world, and they have absorbed into themselves the elements of folk and fairy tale, and the oral tradition. It perceptively began maturing with the stories of ancient myths or folk-tales with its aim to amuse children as well as to teach them. But the genre of children's literature, in spite of its apparently-fantastical appearance, began to earn its place among serious writings because of its concern with different important issues of society. During 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the events like Economic crisis, rise of Imperialism, development of science and industries, the Wars, the fights for Independence all had left influences in the writings of children too and these wide range of global issues made children's literature more appealing to its readers (adults) and scholars. My paper will re-examine the children's novel *The Secret Garden* in postcolonial perspective to bring out the issues relating to racisms and imperialism, domination, power politics, including Western views of the "Orient" and establish the consequences of reading a children's text that contains imperialistic ideologies like England as a 'better' place than India and many more.



**KEYWORDS :** Folk-tale, Children's literature, Imperialism, Domination, Orient, Postcolonial.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face, and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression. 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." (Burnett 1)

The term 'Children's literature' usually includes a number of varieties which makes the genre an interesting area of study as well as a complicated one. Different critics, scholars and writers have taken this term 'Children's literature' in their own course. As Peter Hunt in *Understanding Children's Literature* defines children's literature as:

"[...] a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience: children. The definition of 'children's literature' therefore is underpinned by purpose: it wants to be something in particular, because this is supposed to connect it with that reading audience— 'children'—with which it declares itself to be overtly and purposefully concerned" (1).

-So in a general way, it can be said that the literary piece which contains the materials to amuse the children may be considered as a part of 'children's literature': this implies that a piece of work, which is

aimed at adult readers, may also be called a work for the children if that work has the potency to make a child interested, laughed and amused.

If the origin of children's writings is traced, this literary genre perceptively began maturing with stories of ancient myths or folk-tales. It is popularly believed, the earliest written versions of folk-tales were *Panchantantra* (c. A.D. 300) originated from India, and *Aesop's Fable*, appeared on papyrus scrolls around A.D. 400 (later published in England in 1848). With the ages, these folktales expanded the tapestry of children's literature. Rather than being seen as miniature adults, children were seen as separate entities with their own needs and limitations. The genre of children's literature, in spite of its apparently-fantastical appearance, began to earn its place among serious writings because of its concern with different important issues of society during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The events like economic crisis, rise of Imperialism, development of science and industries, the wars, the fights for Independence all had left influences in the writings of children too and this wide range of global issues made children's literature more appealing to its readers (adults) and scholars.

So Children's literature began its journey with the aim to amuse, entertain as well as give them moral teaching and with the time it confluences in itself different serious issues of the society. About the importance of Children's literature Paul Hazard also voices in *Books, Children and Men* (1944) that children's literature plays in the construction of a specific cultural or national identity as it (Children's literature) forms the soul of a nation. My paper will re-examine the children's novel *The Secret Garden* in postcolonial perspective to bring out some serious issues relating to racisms and imperialism, domination, power politics, including Western views of the "Orient" and establish the consequences of reading a children's text that contains imperialistic ideologies like England as a 'better' place than India and many more. The text, *The Secret Garden* to some extent is deploying a cynical approach in the children's psyche by placing India as an 'other', a place of 'disease' which can be considered as an effort to put an imperialistic ideology in the reader's psyche.

Postcolonial theory, which has been gaining prominence during the 1<sup>st</sup> half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, raises the question of race within colonialism, and it explains how the optic of race facilitates the colonial powers to represent, to reflect and to make visible the native cultures in 'particular ways'. It investigates what happens when two cultures clash and one of them with accompanying ideology empowers and deems itself superior to other. Edward Said's *Orientalism* which is considered to give rise of postcolonial theory, states about the Western construction of the "imaginary Orient" and representation of them as "Other". Frances Hodgson Burnett being a British novelist and playwright in her text *The Secret Garden* places her views about India like a true 'orientalist' and makes an "ontological and epistemological distinction (made) between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"(Said 2). Here the author of *The Secret Garden* Burnett never visited India and knew nothing about this country but, it is likely the case that she relied on the cultural stereotypes of India.

Anglo-American novelist and playwright Frances Hodgson Burnett is best known for her three children's novels - *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (published in 1885–1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911). Among them, *The Secret Garden* tells an enchanting story of transformation and compassion and it is popularly considered as one of the most important works of children's literature. The novel *The Secret Garden* was first published as a book in 1911, after a version was published as an American magazine serial beginning in 1910; And it is to be noted that the magazine where the novel was serialised was an adult's magazine but later on in 1911 the novel was published as children's text and marketed both to the young and adult readers. (Clark)

In *The Secret Garden* the readers can have the explicit images of the colonised Indian. The story of a girl, Mary who is initially seen to be positioned as an innocent victim of the British imperialism, brings out the identity of India as a place of diseases and death. The narrative begins during the outbreak of cholera in India and the central character Mary who has lost her parents in this disaster is seen to be moved to Yorkshire, England for her betterment. The opening lines of the novel show the very first strike to link India with illness where disease overshadows people throughout the year. Even the description of Mary- "her hair

was yellow and her face was yellow because she had been born in India" is a flimflam attempt to locate her ugliness with India. This is how, the 'occident' looks at the 'orient', the 'colonisers' look at the 'colonised' people. Edward Said's explanation of 'Orientalism', as a way through which the 'European' considers the 'East' or the 'Orient' as primitive, savage, pagan, undeveloped and criminal, is being accentuated with the words of little Mary,

"You don't know anything about natives! They're not people – they're servants who must salaam to you. You know nothing about India" (Burnett 32)

-and through out of the story we have numbers of such representations of India as an inferior race, dark, dominated and a region of the subalterns.

The child characters from the very beginning have been attracting every child characters throughout the world. Like Peter Pan, Bilbo Baggins (*The Hobbit* by JRR Tolkien), Alice (*Alice's adventures in Wonderland*) or the others, Mary Lennox too has left perennial marks in most of the readers' psyche. But the characteristic of the 'disagreeable' girl Mary is quite different from the other child characters. Readers, especially of the Asian subcontinent do find a reflection of a coloniser's attitude in Mary as she believes,-

"Indian servants were commanded to do things, not asked. It was not the custom to say "please" and "thank you"(ibid 30)

From her father who was a military Mary derives the ethnicity of domination, the unlimited authority over the uncivilised 'black' people. The narrator too is projecting the imperialistic characteristics through Mary as-

"The little girl did not offer to help her, because in India native servants always picked up or carried things and it seemed quite proper that other people should wait on one." (ibid 22)

This authoritative attitude of Mary can be compared with the colonisers' ideology of power politics which teaches this little girl to behave like them ('Occident'). The conception of 'other' is too engraved unconsciously in the psyche of Mary. According to the author, as most of the time in India Mary spent with the servants as her mother remained busy in doing 'party', servants spoiled her genetic 'superiority' and made Mary a completely disobedient girl who call her Indian nurse and ayah, "Pig! Pig! Daughter of Pigs!" (ibid 3) and "even slapped her Ayah in the face when she was angry." (ibid 30) The narrator links the unpleasant and commanding tone of Mary with an 'Indian' and also affirms the gloomy fact about the India, "to call a native a pig is the worst insult of all." (ibid 3)

Imperialistic ideology and practice is inter-fuses with the plot of Mary's life in a dogmatic way with various images, metaphors and values. Mary's shift to England considered as 'home' from India makes Mary from a disagreeable girl to a well-behaved girl and also cures all his disease and restores her physical and mental energy which makes her an English lady-like 'self'. This is the way how Burnett has proved the superiority of Britain by showing Yorkshire as a quite different place. Once again, Mary's association with her friends in England like Martha, Dickon is presented as to be superior because their friendship leads Mary to turns from an unfriendly, tyrannical girl to a caring 'self' who can take over the charge to bring life into the neglected 'secret garden'.

So, like the other literary works, a children's text too have the ethical responsibility as it helps to shape their mindset, opinion and reviews. Beneath their apparently-uncomplicated exteriors children's texts have multiple layers of meaning which leave its marks in everyone's childhood. Actually, Children's literature as Hunt claimed "has its own characteristics, and its own influences and internal logic. It is not inferior to other types of writing, it is different". (Hunt 1994:11) and this characteristic makes it being praised all over the world by the readers of all ages. As here in Burnett's *The Secret Garden* reveals a vivid and clear image of the attitude that the British held of India engraved behind a simple story of a little girl's upbringing. Like in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* the character of Mowgli, Mary in *The Secret Garden* too represents the colonization of India by Western culture and how the Western ideal of orientalism, the Orient, and the 'Other' are created through the power of Western culture and is represented in the writings of the orientalists. And this is worthy to say that, Burnett's *The Secret Garden* is nothing but an attempt to

demonstrate the superiority of England herself, her Britishness by placing all other countries as inferior, uncivilised 'other'.

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**Satyajit Roy**

**Ph D. Research Scholar (Department of English), Raiganj University.**