

BRYDA: An empowered of the British Raj

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Abstract

This article attempts to examine a tomboy heroine or an empowered girl of the British Raj period. It analyses in detail the ways in which children's adventure novels about the mutiny explore tensions inherent in the constructions of masculinity. E.M. Field's *Bryda* depicts a little girl who lives through a masculine plot that falls apart at the end with a return to the domestic. The novel employs a girl protagonist who has an opportunity for manly adventure and proves her masculine virtues without ever being in danger of losing her innate female identity. The return to the domestic acts as a final affirmation of the girl heroine's inescapable femaleness. This novel characterizes the threatening domestic scene not only as a danger to masculine virility but also the destruction of all virility. Bryda realizes that she stands between her female self and the masculine status she longs for and finally triumphs as an empowered.

Keywords: British Raj, Empowered, Imperial, Masculinity, Mutiny, Tomboy

1. Introduction

First War of Independence or the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was a turning point in the history of both the India and Britain. Indians and Britons had their own perspectives and the Mutiny can be analysed as a heroic struggle against the British or the conspiracy of the disloyal natives. The Mutiny novels of the 19th and early 20th century England captures the anger, anxiety and anguish of the 1857-58. The Mutiny novels aim to bring back cultural history-since England's cultural history is linked to India's. They are neither merely political texts or literary masterpieces but immediate outcome or reactions to the trauma of the 1857 events. They also offer us in their stereotypes and character portraits how the British saw India and Indians.

India is represented across Anglo-Indian writing as both the child whose growth is to be debated and the jewel in Britain's crown. Britain is depicted as both a modernizing and a paternal power and the violator of Mother India in Indian writing in English. Both these perspectives on the colonial relationship rely upon the idea of the child and of childhood as a recognizable stage or process in order to express their ideals of nationhood. Anglo-Indian writers turned the child as a model of both innocent stasis and timely growth into an imperial ambition. Mutiny adventure novels for children use the imaginative space of juvenile literature to explore cultural fantasies as well as the alternate methods of masculine self-fashioning.

Colonial children's literature examines the notion of empowered childhood from both sides- from the point of view of colonist children as well as colonized children. Such literature celebrates children and their ability to become transformative agents of change. Children seem to demonstrate a greater resilience in surviving culturally fraught occasions. Children are shown to exhibit tremendous agency and transformative power over the politically volatile environment of colonial India. In 19th century British and Anglo-Indian texts, children seem to have a greater influence on their alien environment and they are not only the spokespersons for British colonialism but are central to the

process of consolidating power in India.

The child in colonial narratives signifies all that is noble about England and is designated to carry out the uplifting mission of enlightening the colonized population. The rhetorical relation between the child and the nation places the desire for a real child in parallel with the need to discover a real Orient. In anti-colonial narratives, it involves the re-discovery of a nation whose growth can urgently counter that of the colonizer. In both cases, narratives of development are attached to the concept of the child.

E. M. Field sets children apart as imaginative beings in the tradition of 19th century affective writing. In Field's terms, claiming both to be the child and to have external knowledge of that child means taking responsibility for children as future citizens. The child can be perceived not as colonized, but as a figure that takes part in constructions of the colonized other. Bill Ashcroft perceives that the trope of the child in colonial texts is "a unique tool for managing the profound ambivalence of imperialism".

E.M Field's 1890 children's adventure novel *Bryda: A Story of the Indian Mutiny* gives a "wonderfully complete picture of the Mutiny from the limited stand point of a child" (Gregg, 225). Shailendra Dhari Singh, in a survey of Mutiny fiction, echoes Gregg in commenting that "this simple story of a girl gives a sympathetic touching account of Indian life" (71). *Bryda* places the happiness of the child within a didactic framework that highlights difference. The scene is laid in India about the time of the Mutiny. *Bryda* opens with an English home where young Bryda is growing up, missing her parents and in the loving care of her beloved Uncle Jack. She is set to leave for India and join her parents. The Mutiny breaks out after she arrives in India and it is seen through the eyes of young Bryda who is sympathetic towards the native servants and ayahs. Bryda experiences separation from her family, unfamiliar terrains and practices, unexpected acts of kindness and a multitude of emotions like fear, love and sympathy. The British child's superiority is exemplified in the ability to play which the serious Indian children do not know how to do. While the heroine Bryda is able to see herself and

to imagine a way forward, the dull minds of the Indian children are testimony to their want of imagination which leads to a lack of agency.

As the novel opens, ten year old Bryda Danvers, who has lived until now with her grandparents in England, travels to the Indian village of Dakpur to join her parents, Colonel and Mrs. Danvers. After a short time in Dakpur, Bryda declares that “there could be no country as lovely as India, or so pleasant to live in” (27). The narrator foreshadows the coming mutiny in the novel: “a deep hatred of the English and of their rule in India had been for a long time burning in the hearts of the natives” (28). The sepoys of Dakpur revolt and after a brief siege, Bryda and the other villagers leave for Rungpur, where a garrison of English soldiers protects them. Fleeing Dakpur by boat, the villagers come under attack and a faithful servant, Wazir saves Bryda and her friend Lottie Sykes by swimming them ashore and hiding them in the jungle. Lottie and Bryda embark on different adventures. Lottie becomes the play thing of a rane and Bryda, after a life threatening illness, rescues a child widow from the awful fate of sati. When the girls reunite, more adventures ensue, including an encounter with murderous Thugs and the indispensable tiger hunt. Surviving the mutiny, the novel closes with Bryda back home in England, comfortably surrounded by her family and friends. Mrs. Brooke, the housekeeper observes that Bryda has come home “sadder and wiser” (175), much like the English people after the mutiny.

Bryda offers a handful of models of powerful women and women who take on the roles of men. The first of these is the tale told by a mahout to Bryda. The mahout recounts the story of an elephant belonging to the King of Oude who, in his rage at being eluded by another elephant with whom he fights, turns on his mahout, and “put his heavy foot on the poor man, crushing him to death in a moment” (70). When the wife of the poor mahout comes with her baby in her arms to reproach the elephant, he hangs his head in shame and allows the woman, “by the King’s command, to mount to her poor husband’s place” (71). Thereafter the widow acts as a mahout, a vocation unheard of for a woman. The second example is that of a woman who is a guard in the Rajah of Bundi’s camp, appears in Lottie’s tale of captivity. When Lottie attempts to escape the tent of the Rajah’s women at night, she encounters a strange figure, who wears a sort of military uniform. This strange figure identifies herself as a woman –soldier set to guard the tent of the rane and see that no one comes or goes without the Rajah’s permission of course, importantly in both these cases, the powerful women wield their power of a ruling male’s authority, executing the commands of a true masculine power.

2. Conclusion

English children in the novel seem to find succour in dreams, fantasies and literature. The heroism of the children is therefore a tamer analogy within the literary heroism. *Bryda* depicts the heroism of the children and also generates the theme of heroism both in occidental and oriental literary traditions. Bryda models the masculine qualities but retains her femininity throughout the novel. The empowered girl heroine, through her bravery and mastery of self, is able to articulate British imperialism and Indian resistance. Bryda, the ring leader, is not troubled by any thoughts of grandeur suggested by the ruins. Her body betrays her weakness but her

spirit remains indefatigable. Though Bryda becomes a part and parcel of India and mingles with Indians, she remains the same. There arise an identity crisis in the life of Bryda but we realize that she is able to depict her real self without any fail.

3. References

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