Racialised Boundaries. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"

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Abstract:
The garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel is not a neutral, ahistorical, timeless idyll but culturally defined, and insofar it is deliberately distanced from India and everything that India is intended to denote in the novel, the garden is created as an exclusive space, signifying whiteness. Burnett's narrative unfolds to support the ideology and values of imperialism. The racial aspect of Burnett's garden becomes explicit when juxtaposed against Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", an essay written several decades later and also resonant with the images of women and gardens. Whereas the garden in Burnett has many conventionally British associations of health and healing, nature and bounty, creativity and self-expression, Alice Walker pays tribute to a tradition of black women whose relation to a garden was not given, but rather highly contested and violated. The black creative women missing and muted in Burnett's garden find place in Walker's essay and thus Walker works to broaden the literary tradition Burnett relates to.

1 Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* is an allegorical, pastoral narrative in that it celebrates the life and culture of an English countryside in the early twentieth century. However, a seminal technique that Hodgson uses to evoke a rural, idyllic world that is essentially British is by systematically removing it from India - the descriptions of Yorkshire unfold against the backdrop of all that India is not. Burnett knew neither India nor Yorkshire at first hand (although she did know England), so both locations are, besides being geographical entities, also artistic constructs. However, the specific relationship in which these two spaces and countries are brought together, the naturalness and ease with which the contrasts between the two are developed by the author, and accepted and understood by her readers, puts Burnett's novel in the tradition of orientalism as elucidated by Edward Said.

2 Recognising this strain of orientalism in Hodgson's novels has implications for the geographical symbolism of the novel; the garden is not a neutral, ahistorical, timeless idyll but culturally defined, and insofar it is deliberately distanced from India and everything that India is intended to denote in the novel, the garden is created as an exclusive space, signifying whiteness.

3 The racial aspect of Burnett's garden becomes explicit when juxtaposed against Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", an essay written several decades later and also resonant with the images of women and gardens. Whereas the garden in Burnett has

many conventionally British associations of health and healing, nature and bounty, creativity and self-expression, Alice Walker pays tribute to a tradition of black women whose relation to a garden was not given, but rather highly contested and fraught with violence; Walker refers to a tradition of women who somehow managed to keep their creativity and spirituality alive in the face of brutal oppression, deprivation and slavery. Alice Walker's narrative is a reflection on Burnett's garden and indicates that the black women (the Indian Ayah) do not walk through Burnett's secret garden and are muted here. Seen from the perspective of Alice Walker's essay, the garden represents a racialised space, enclosed within boundaries in terms of both what is let in and what is kept out.

4 That the garden is secret forms a central preoccupation in Burnett's narrative so that it becomes almost imperative to examine why it is significant that the garden should be secret and how it is rendered to be so. The most obvious mechanism for making secret is by sealing off from the usual and everyday affairs of the world. Hodgson therefore sets her garden in a remote country home standing at the edge of the Yorkshire moors, far in the north of England, a part which we are to assume is isolated from the rest of the world. The sense of secrecy is further heightened by the circumstances of the accident that happened in the garden which led to it being shut up and barred to all access for ten years.

5 The process by which Burnett defines her secret garden is revealing. From the outset of the novel, Mary Lennox's arrival at Misselthwaite Manor is set against the circumstances of her leaving India:

> When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. . . . Her hair was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another. Her father had held a position under the English Government and had always been busy and ill himself, and her mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah*, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib* she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. . . . She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything . . . (1)

While the opening establishes the colonial context of the novel, it also moves forward by leaving India behind and thereby displacing it. Mary's progress to finding her own garden and all that it symbolises is deeply connected with her rejection of India and everything it embodies. In this opening passage, as throughout the novel, India acquires specific connotations, and Burnett's allegory of the garden evolves in antithesis to this India.

6 The choice of India as a physical and imaginary contrast to England is neither random nor neutral but perpetuates the imperialist ideology of its times. Danijela Petković provides a comprehensive analysis of the oriental-imperialist discourse embedded in the novel and it is worth recounting the main points of Petković´s argument. She points out that Burnett's engagement with India has little to do with the socio-historical reality of the country. In fact India is dehumanised and denied of complexity and variety:

> It is worth noticing that this word [India] is repeated over and over again – the readers are never given the name of the particular Indian town in which the Lennox family tragedy takes place, or the place to which Mary is taken after it – in an obvious effort to consolidate the whole country into one flat, highly unfavourable image the narrator creates. Nor are the native servants given face or any humanly recognizable characteristic. Even the sentences are uniform: 'In India ...this...In India ...that'. (Conversely when the story shifts to England, the details abound ...). (88)

The point is that in her representations Burnett's resorts to a “carefully constructed, perfectly naturalized discourse concerning India (88) and the author's assertions about the country that she did not know at all are both effortless and confident; they appeal to the shared consciousness of her readers, and the writer takes this for granted, “Burnett does not invent these links, she merely echoes popular views, the views that had been in circulation for almost 200 years (91). Petković draws out the relationship between the central motif of the novel and the imperialistic values sustaining this motif:

> Nineteenth century British imperialism – and by imperialism it is understood both imperialist ideology and practice – is undeniably present in *The Secret Garden* as the source of images, metaphors, and values, as well as the novel's underlying doctrine. The images of and references to the British Empire and its subjecs permeate the novel, . . . furthermore they provide the context in which the story of Mary's refinding her true Self – her national, cultural, and gender – is played out. Not only that, the True English Self is in the course of the novel carefully constructed – made possible, even – through numerous contrasts with/negations of its dark Other, India. Thus, not only are the authority and the validity of the colonizing English Self established, but the essential and permanent 'otherness' of India also. (87-88)

7 In the opening scene India is connected with danger, disease, darkness, death, lovelessness, promiscuity and unnatural or perverted relationships. This first impression of India is reinforced by Mary's encounter with a snake which adds a sense of exoticism as well as eerieness. What is also noticeable is that for a country so populated with people, India is made to look desolate in Mary's loneliness and lack of relationships. This sense of desolation is heightened by the mention of cholera which causes the natives either to flee or die. Although born in India and having lived there for almost ten years, Mary “never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants” (1),

whereas the term “home” (9) is introduced immediately with reference to England. Thus India is efficiently dealt with in the first few pages of the book and by the middle of the second chapter, Mary is on her way to England and it becomes clear that India has been set up to show what Mary is actually getting away from. And from the moment Mary arrives in England, Mary's entire development is delineated in terms of how it was in India, with India always carrying the negative connotations.

8 Mary's physical weakness, her plain and ugly appearance, her hardness and spoilt behaviour are all attributed to her situation in India. Mary's physical, mental and emotional development are stunted in India and she progressively changes for the better in all these aspects as soon as a landscape shifts to Yorkshire in England. In Martha's family, Mary is known as “the little girl who had come from India and who had been waited on all her life by what Martha called “blacks until she didn't know how to put on her own stockings ” (70). The Sowerby children sitting by the hearth in an English cottage, eating hot cakes, on the other hand are a picture of health, happiness and independence (70). In contrast to the English clergyman's untidy bungalow in India, with five disgruntled, squabbling children, Mrs Sowerby living in Yorkshire, although she has more than double the amount of children than the clergyman in India, and is a single parent, conveys an image of rural contentment and bliss. Even to Mary, Martha's mother, who she admires very much, “doesn't seem to be like the mothers in India” (88).

9 Being in Yorkshire incurs all kinds of refinements in Mary, brings out the best in her and integrates her into a social network, and this metamorphosis is attributed simply to the change of scene, and the observations that Yorkshire is so unlike India: “In India skies were hot and blazing; this was of a deep cool blue . . . [with] small clouds of snow-white fleece” (61). But these external, physical differences have abstract and far reaching implications: “In India she had always felt hot and too languid to care much about anything. The fact was that the fresh wind from the moor had begun to blow the cobwebs out of her young brain and to waken her up a little” (p. 48). These passages demonstrate how the comparisons move simultaneously at various levels – physical, mental, emotional and moral, always putting India at a disadvantage. This narrative mode informs the entire text, and accordingly when Colin is in his tyrannical moods he is perjoratively described as a “young Rajah“ (170-71).

10 Among the several pleasant things that happen to Mary in Yorkshire, the climax is her discovery of the garden. In India, she had not known the natural life that the garden symbolises. She says to Colin about spring, “I never saw it in India because there wasn't any” (212). The necessity of making the garden secret or hidden from the rest of the world

eventually becomes clear - Burnett's garden can only be established after it is as far removed from India as possibly could be, and is cleansed of Indians and everything India stands for. Unlike India, the garden is a civilised, white space with restorative powers where Mary can find her true identity. As Martha comments of India “there's such a lot o' blacks there instead o' respectable white people. When I heard you was comin' from India I though you was a black too”, to which Mary retorts, “You don't know anything about natives! They are not people – they're servants who must salaam to you” (27-28). The dual relation in which India and Yorkshire are caught up becomes evident in this dialogue – it is that of ruler and their subjects, and the naturalness with which white and respectable are linked together cannot go unnoticed. It is ironic that Martha, who herself occupies a position of servility in the British society, feels superior to Mary because of the fact that Mary lived amongst blacks before coming to England. It is only after Mary is categorically cleansed of every trace of India that she is ready for her initiation into the English way of life.

11 That the garden is simply located in England is not enough; it emerges in opposition to India and signifies the author's impulse to empty the garden of Indian natives that had become so inextricably a part of British history. This is probably also the reason why Burnett seeks the farthest corner of England, Yorkshire, and a country home situated there alludes to an aristocratic, white England. At Misselthwaite Manor, while the contact with India cannot be completely negated, the Indian things are all locked up in one of the rooms. Even the Yorkshire dialect in the novel serves to stress this romanticised idea of Englishness. Hence, it becomes apparent that Burnett develops her allegory of the garden vis-a-vis India in order to invoke a particular form of Englishness which is aristocratic, and hence also solely white.

12 Another explanation for the need to make the garden secret is that the author sets out to create not just a white space but to connect whiteness with the ideal, with perfection. However, though the whiteness or the Englishness of the space is maintained by constantly being posited against India, it becomes problematic to disclose this space as perfect. While Burnett employs a number of techniques to construct her secret garden as a viable alternative to India, she does not succeed in this project; the narrative falls hostage to the imperialist ideology underlying the novel and the empire abroad is endorsed by gender and class hierarchies at home. As Petković comments,

> there are in fact two empires overlapping in the semantic field of the novel; the first one (the Empire) is literally as well as imaginatively-metaphorically erected upon the savage Other(s) in distant lands; the second, in which the first one is mirrored, is the domestic empire, smaller in scale but noteworthy: the Yorkshire household composed of master and servants, of the rich and poor, of husbands-masters and wives (daughters)-angels in the house. Furthermore,

the two empires are not only presented and employed as the physical/imaginative setting of the novel – this alone could never support the claim that the novel is essentially imperialist but the values and principles underlying them are endorsed and promoted. (88)

England and Yorkshire are unquestionably desirable when set against India. However, as soon as the focus from India is removed, the social factors prevalent in English life, especially those of gender and class differences, the upstairs-downstairs hierarchies of country homes – invariably begin to impinge on the text. The realities of British society rankle in the text and prevent England from being posed as viable ideal to India. Burnett strives to resolve these contradictions mostly by facile comments. But one technique the author does employ to get rid of the social aspects of England is by resorting to the world of children and putting them in a secret garden, thus creating a world that it is secluded and cut off from the facts of the world outside.

13 In order to establish some kind of companionship between Mary and Martha, despite the class distinctions between them, Burnett suggests that Misselthwaite runs differently from the usual country houses. Martha explains: "If there was a grand missus at Misselthwaite I should never have been even one of th' under housemaids. I míght have been let to be scullery-maid, but I'd never have been let up-stairs, I'm too common an' talk too much Yorkshire. But this is a funny house for all it's so grand. Seems like there's neither master nor mistress except Mr. Pitcher and Mrs. Medlock" (26). Here too the eternal comparison with India is made to indicate that Martha's servitude is, in some fine way, different from that of the servants in India: "The native servants she had been used to in India were not in the least like this. They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals" (25). Martha is young, untrained and outspoken which makes her servility to Mary different (and by implication more dignified) than that of the Indian servants, and thereby prepares the ground for a constrained interaction between her and Mary.

14 Similarly, there is a tendency to extricate Dickon from the social structures surrounding him. He is some kind of nature's child, who enjoys being outdoors, knows a great deal about plants and vegetables, is utterly at ease with various animals and can communicate with them – complete with pipe playing. Yet, for all his symbolic qualities, Dickon is enlisted in the service of Mary and Colin; he functions to help Mary with her gardening enterprise and pushes Colin's wheelchair in the garden and teaches him some physical exercises, besides supplying the two regularly with refreshments and diversion. Social reality intrudes even within the secluded boundaries of the secret garden. After

spending their first exciting morning together in the garden, Mary is called to lunch. As she hurries off to a rich, wholesome meal in the house Dickon, "picked up his coat from the grass and brought out of a pocket a lumpy little bundle tied up in a quite clean, coarse, blue and white handkerchief. It held two thick pieces of bread with a slice of something laid between them. 'It's oftenest naught but bread,' he said, 'but I've got a fine slice o' fat bacon with it to-day' (112). This produces a discordant tone in the idealised world of innocent children in the garden, and Burnett understandably brushes the incident aside with the comment, "Mary thought it looked a queer dinner, but he seemed ready to enjoy it" (112).

15 The author tries again to minimize the existence of hierarchical relationship, this time in Ben Weatherstaff's servility to Colin. The usually unsociable and crabby old man, Weatherstaff is quickly put in his place by Colin who tells him, "I'm your master . . . when my father is away. And you are to obey me" (228). Burnett shows Weatherstaff overcome with emotion as he sees Colin standing straight, but one outcome of this encounter is that Ben Weatherstaff acknowledges Colin as his master, "'Eh! Lad,' he almost whispered. 'Eh! My lad!' And then remembering himself he suddenly touched his hat gardner fashion and said, 'Yes, sir! Yes, sir!' And obediently disappeared as he descended the ladder" (229). There are several such ruptures in the narrative when glimpses into social life reveal the precariousness of the contrived harmony of the English countryside. Even Mary Lennox, who is simply Mary in the Indian environment, becomes Mistress Mary as she arrives in England. But all social factors are swept aside in favour of producing an idyllic image of life in England.

16 Another strategy that Burnett employs in order to avoid confronting the aspect of social conflict in the English society is to induce the notion of 'Magic'; all the positive transformations in the novel – Colin's rapid gains in strength, the changes in his and Mary's character, the conversion of a piece of land that has remained neglected for ten years into a pleasant, blooming garden - are eventually presented in terms of magic as other explanations are not available. In fact the entire chapter 23 of the novel is devoted to the exposition of the concept of magic in the book. The end effect of introducing magic into the book is that is deflects attention from awkward realities such as the fact that to turn a wild overgrown area into any version of a garden involves dirty and back-breaking work as may be seen in the figure of Ben Weatherstaff and is not child's play as it is made out to be for Mary, Dickon and Colin. Another such conundrum is the issue of food (fresh milk and buns and eggs) supplied by Mrs Sowerby to the children during their time in the secret garden. While fresh food, prepared by a mother, is integral to Burnett's vision of rural bliss, the details of how Mrs Sowerby so generously manages to fit in the task of baking and providing for three

additional children beyond her own twelve, and how Dickon (who is only twelve) carries a pail of milk and a pail of buns across the countryside, are overlooked. This reluctance to deal with the social aspects of English life is evident everywhere in the text. It is notable that Mary's much cherished wish to visit Martha's family in their cottage never does take place; the sentimental form of the narrative does not have the prerequisites for rendering such a meeting – it remains just a fancy.

17 Burnett's vision reaches a climax in the end of the novel, in the second last chapter when the three thriving English children stand in the middle of a blooming garden and sing the Doxology aloud, joined by the awe-struck and respectful Ben Weatherstaff, with tears gushing down his cheeks. It is also the moment when Mrs Sowerby enters the garden. The scene is extremely conventional in its symbolism and leads to a doubtless assertion of the British feudalistic values, including Protestanism. Towards the end of the novel it emerges that the narrative has primarily been directed towards the restoration of Colin. The justification for making the illness and healing of Colin as a central concern of the novel might lie in Burnett's personal circumstances; perhaps it is her way of resurrecting her younger son who had been sickly and had died. But apart from her personal tragedy, what is quite apparent is that the values with which she invests Colin are feudal and imperialistic. Whereas Mary and Dickon work in the garden, Colin approaches it with unquestioned authority and launches into great speeches and lectures. Although sickly, Colin as a young Englishman of social stature, declares his natural destiny to be a scientist and explorer, and this is said without a hint of irony: '"I shall live for ever and ever and ever!" he cried grandly. "I shall find out thousands and thousands of things. I shall find out about people and creatures and everything that grows . . . "' (278-279). Colin's resemblance to the little lord Fauntleroy is unmistakable.

18 It is therefore unsurprising that the characters who come out of the garden in the final scene of the book are the triumphant Colin and his father. Mary falls into the background and, "Across the lawn came the Master of Misselthwaite, and he looked as many of them had never seen him. And by his side, with his head up in the air and his eyes full of laughter, walked as strongly and steadily as any boy in Yorkshire – Master Colin" (306). So in this novel, in the allegory of the secret garden, Burnett nostalgically recreates the bygone world of English aristocracy; the narrative articulates an imperialist ideology that is exclusively white and Protestant and predominantly male.

19 The elisions that Burnett so painstakingly manages in her novel eventually find an expression in Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Garden". Walker uses the

allegory of the garden to refer to the lost traditions of African American women writers and artists, whose creative spirit was violently destroyed by slavery and imperialism – the very same values which are upheld in *The Secret Garden*. In recounting the names of black women writers, Walker seeks to restore them to the literary tradition from which they have been erased and exiled. Hence it is perfectly logical that Walker's concept of the garden should be totally unlike that presented by Burnett, albeit a direct analogy was never intended. Walker has no use for the image of a civilised and privately owned English garden of Bunett's novel, and she moves away from the white, imperialist locations to include open fields and yards; Walker's garden is boundless, both spatially and metaphorically. Alice Walker's essay provides a comment on why Burnett's garden cannot be a symbol of harmony that she sets out to achieve, and she breaks the racialised boundaries of *The Secret Garden* in more than one way.

20 "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" pays tribute to the creative spirit of ordinary, anoynmous and lesser-known black women, a creative spirit that was most often warped and found no outlet at all due to the harsh circumstances of slavery and patriarchal oppression. Walker relates to a tradition of creativity in women that remained only a potential, that was eliminated or never even allowed to exist, and in taking account of the unfulfilled and damaged efforts of African American women, Walker proposes a far reaching and inclusive tradition of creative, artistic work.

21 At one level, Walker redresses the narrow, restrictive, privileged, and subsequently also white American tradition of art and literature by incorporating oral narratives, slave songs, and interrupted stories that black mothers told their children. And creativity cannot be confined to particular forms, and is to be seen as much in Walker's mother's talent to grow the most magnificent flowers wherever she lived, as in a quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian Institution:

> In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by 'an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.' (239)

22 Walker cites Virgina Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and while she finds allegiance with Woolf, she quotes Woof's to insert the experience of black people in the text:

Yet genius of some sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working class. [Change this to 'slaves' and 'the wives and daughters of sharecroppers.'] Now

and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns [Change to a ‘Zora Hurston or a Richard Wright’] blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils [or ‘Sainthood’], of a wise woman selling herbs [our root workers], or even a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen. (239-240)

23 Another technique that Walker applies to widen the sense of literary tradition is to give a black woman's voice-over to an extract from Okot p'Bitek’s poem *Song of Lawino.* Whereas p'Bitek presents the motif of an African rural woman lamenting her betrayal by her husband who takes another woman who is westernized, from a typically male perspective, Walker does not see this as a single occasion but rather indicative of the a history of betrayal shared by all black women and forming a common bond between them. P'Bitek lines are as follows:

> O, my clansmen,
> Let us all cry together!
> Come,
> Let us mourn the death of my husband,
> The death of a Prince
> The Ash that was produced
> By a great Fire!
> O, this homestead is utterly dead,
> Close the gates
> With lacari thorns,
> For the Prince
> The Heir to the Stool is lost!
> And all the young men
> Have perished in the wilderness!

Alice Walker rewites it thus:

> O, my clanswomen,
> Let us all cry together!
> Come,
> Let us mourn the death of our mother,
> The death of a Queen
> The Ash that was produced
> By a great fire!
> O, this homestead is utterly dead,
> Close the gates
> With lacari thorns,
> For our mother
> The creator of the Stool is lost!
> And all the young women
> Have perished in the wilderness! (Fike 148)

24 Walker demonstrates how the substitution of just a few words makes a world of a difference in recovering the missing and the silent. It is important to state here that Walker's attempts are not to antithetically oppose or displace one tradition with the other, but rather to argue for a holistic approach. As Matthew A. Fike comments, Walker's project is not that of competing rejection of the literary ancestors, including white authors, but that of making connections and showing infinite intertextuality. It would therefore not be appropriate to read Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" as antithetical to Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, but rather as completing it in that it hints at the several gardens that lie beyond and outside Burnett's vision.

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