

The Little Mem sahib and the Idealized Domestic Empire in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*

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Introduction

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) presents the girl's experience in an age of empire. This text covering the girl's experience is typically classified as domestic fiction aimed at girl readers, and it does not feature the imperialist ventures found commonly in juvenile boys' fiction. Empire is a manifest part of canonical adventure fiction such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which highlights the mythos of the enduring empire on which the sun never sets through the youthful virility of Mother Britannia's sons. Contrary to popular expectations, however, "empire and imperialism are as omnipresent in domestic fiction as they are in adventure fiction and other genres aimed more

specifically at boys" (Kutzer 48). *A Little Princess* focuses on the often neglected daughter's role and how she contributes to British imperial culture in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

The protagonist, Sara Crewe, is the young daughter of an Anglo-Indian officer. She has lived in India all her life until she moves to London at the age of seven to attend a girl's seminary. Sara's subsequent fortune is shaped by her relationship to India, which initially endows her with great wealth, strips it away, and restores it to greater heights by the novel's conclusion. Due to Sara's inextricable connection to the colony, such varied scholars as Roderick McGillis, U.C. Knoepfmacher, and M. Daphne Kutzer have presented postcolonial critiques of *A Little Princess*. While McGillis and Knoepfmacher have shed light on Ram Dass's secondary role, and Kutzer examines the function of domestic empire, not much critical attention has been paid to the figure of the memsahib and how it influences Sara's identity.

When Ram Dass confers on Sara the position of "Missee Sahib," or a little version of the memsahib, he attaches onto the eleven year old girl a complicated position of gendered colonial authority (Burnett 103). The "notorious" image of the memsahib was that of an idle woman in an alien land who "attempted to recreate in British India a replica of 'home'" (Strobel xii). A tension emerges, then, between the historically troubling character of the memsahib and the fantastical character of the fairy-tale-like princess. This paper argues that this tension disappears by the novel's conclusion because Sara as the little memsahib is reshaped into a fantastical and benevolent princess figure to govern the ideal domestic empire. We begin by examining the genre of

children's literature and how the colony serves as a device to construct the more fantastical plot elements. We proceed to consider the crucial role of the servants in making Sara into an authority figure, and finally, we problematize the novel's happy ending, in which the issues of race, class, and empire are foreclosed.

Assimilating Empire into Children's Literature

Scholars such as Jacqueline Rose have argued that "there is no child behind the category of 'children's fiction'": there is only the adult who constructed the child (10). Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) was a revolutionary text precisely because it "shifted the balance of power" within children's texts by "removing the adult's controlling voice" (Hunt xxxiii). Carroll's legacy continues with Burnett in that Sara undeniably occupies the center of *A Little Princess*. Yet, the peculiar dilemma of children's literature caused by the discrepancy between the authors and their target audience remains essentially unresolved. Even though the reader views the world through Sara's eyes, it cannot be forgotten that the child herself is an adult's creation. The child, as a fictional product, thus becomes a vessel that bears particular meanings reflecting the adult's desires. These desires largely stemmed from the values ingrained in the imperial enterprise. Empire dominated and colored every aspect of social and cultural life in nineteenth century Britain, ranging from church hymns to product advertisements. Children's literature, as a genre that

carries a strong didactic impulse, serves an instrumental purpose of “acculturation” that in Britain reflects “the cultural aims of imperial policy” (Stahl 50).

Imperial Britain’s children’s literature seeks to acculturate children to the normalcy of empire as a natural, and accepted part of the world. By the early twentieth century in which Burnett’s novel was published, the stability of Britain’s growing empire was seriously under threat, as evinced by the Indian Rebellion (1857), the Mahdist Revolt (1881-1898), and the Boer Wars (1880-1881 and 1899-1902). Adults are cognizant of the shifting political and social order, but they attempt to impose a stable worldview on their children by presenting empire as an enduring force that is immune to change. As asserted by Perry Nodelman, “children’s literature is inherently conservative” because its aim is to preserve the past (and the illusions of innocence) rather than to move forward (232). The backwards looking tendency of children’s fiction is particularly marked in Burnett’s text. It was originally published as a serial in *St. Nicholas Magazine* as *Sara Crewe; or, What Happened at Miss Minchin’s* in 1887-1888, and later adapted as a 1902 stage play, *The Little Princess*, before finally being expanded and published as a novel, *A Little Princess*, in 1905 (McGillis ix-x). The 1905 novel, despite its chronological period as an early Edwardian novel, strongly preserves Victorian attitudes, especially in its treatment of the colonies as a mysterious source of wealth.

The colonies function as a “convenient” plot device “for the beginnings, turning points, and endings of fiction” (Ruskin 17). This is because India is often utilized as a source of intrigue to

launch the story. Sara is the "mysterious stranger" who arrives at Miss Minchin's seminary (Kawabata 285). The girls at the seminary find her special because of her wealth, or more precisely, the exorbitant amount of it. Her wardrobe consists of "velvet dresses trimmed with costly furs" and "hats with great, soft ostrich feathers," which leads the shop attendants to think that she must be a "foreign princess" or the daughter "of an Indian rajah" (Burnett 10-11). Her possessions may have suited her life back in India when she lived like a princess who was "worshipped" by her native servants, but her status as an imperial heiress renders her into a dubious figure in London (Burnett 6). Her wealth becomes a marker of colonial taint that bespeaks a transgressive extravagance associated with the East, and is thereby simultaneously threatening and fascinating.

Sara lived a life of comfortable luxury in India where she resided in a "beautiful bungalow" and "had been used to seeing many servants who made salaams to her" (Burnett 6). Already referred to by her servants as "'Misse Sahib,'" Sara is bound to grow up into a memsahib if she continues to stay in India (Burnett 6). The word "memsahib" is a combination of the Indian pronunciation of "ma'am" as *mem* and "*sahib*" (Arabic word meaning "sir") that was used as an honorific for British housewives in India. Historically, it was a "class restrictive term" that referred to the wives of high-ranking colonial administrators such as civil servants and officers (qtd. in Carter 15). Men who worked in the Indian Civil Service occupied the top echelon in the "Anglo-Indian social hierarchy" and military officers came next in importance (Chaudhuri, "Motherhood" 519). Sara's father, who is

merely described as an “Indian officer,” presumably occupies this second level of rank (Burnett 29). Given that “an unmarried young white girl was generally addressed as *missibaba*,” Ram Dass’s attribution of Sara as a smaller memsahib—a term apparently invented by Burnett—is not only peculiar but also significant (Hore). Ram Dass confers on Sara, an eleven-year-old girl, a gendered position of power and authority that held a specific meaning in late nineteenth-century British culture.

The stereotype portrayed memsahibs rather unflatteringly as “passive, lazy, [and] self-centered social butterflies” (Chaudhuri, “Motherhood” 518). India was constructed as an inhospitable environment that was “no place for a woman” (Sen 32). Many memsahibs suffered from a debilitating ennui because as Flora Annie Steel bluntly assesses, “the majority of European women in India have nothing to do” (122-23). The limited social roles for women coupled with the wide availability of native servants resulted in the prevalence of mental problems from “nervous breakdown, depression, hysteria, and homesickness” (Sen 33). Memsahibs were even freed from the labor of child rearing due to the existence of *ayahs*, or native nannies. In spite of their heavy reliance on them, memsahibs were highly suspicious of these *ayahs*, as many of them felt “that Hindus were superstitious and that British children left in their care would learn superstitious beliefs from these servants” (Chaudhuri, “Servants” 552). Children were consequently more vulnerable to the vices of India and the danger of ‘going native.’ Burnett remarks: “The climate of India was very bad for children, and as soon as possible they were sent away from it—generally to England and to school” (6).

Constructing a Domestic Colony

The fear of 'going native' is foreclosed because *A Little Princess* begins with Sara's departure from India and arrival to London. India, in other words, is already in Sara's past, although it continues to color her present life. It seems that Burnett has rescued her heroine from the objectionable natives and a future life of lethargy, but the irony is that the climate of London proves equally bad. The novel opens with a typical fairy tale opening, "Once on a dark winter's day," only to be followed by a dismal description of the "yellow fog [that] hung so thick and heavy in the streets of London" (5). Sara's "beautiful [Indian] bungalow" is replaced by the "big, dull, brick house" of Miss Minchin's seminary (Burnett 6-7). Already, there emerges a jarring juxtaposition between fantasy and reality in the opening passages of the novel. Sara's fantastical life in India is reconciled with the grim reality of London as she becomes a light that illuminates her bleak surroundings.

Sara is the paragon of the female child who is wise beyond her years. Unlike the conventional "'beautiful-child' cult" of late nineteenth-century British society (Hunt xxxv), which celebrated the child's youth and innocence, Sara is described from the onset as "an odd-looking little girl" (Burnett 5). She herself admits that she is "not beautiful at all," but what marks her as special is "an old look" in a seven-year-old girl (8; 5). Thus, Burnett asks her readers to celebrate the titular princess for her remarkable maturity rather than her physical beauty. The marriage of two seemingly disparate elements—the more fantastical connotations of

the princess with the introspective Sara—is explained by Phyllis Bixler Koppes, who classifies Burnett’s text as a “combination of fairy tale and exemplum” (192). The fairy tale that Burnett draws her inspiration from is the Cinderella story, a tale in which the “primary concern is not character change or development . . . but rather character revelation” (Koppes 193).

Sara’s colonial wealth becomes an obstacle to this process of character revelation. Although Sara is “never ‘grand’” about her riches and remains “a friendly little soul,” her exotic material goods overshadow her naturally strong moral character (Burnett 29). Burnett thereby subjects her heroine to severe trials to test if she is “really a nice child or a horrid one” (28). Sara is drastically demoted from “show pupil” to “pauper” (14; 60) and suffers ordeals at the hands of the malevolent ‘stepmother’ figure of Miss Minchin and ‘stepsisters’ such as Lavinia (Suh and Park 95). She continues to maintain her regal poise though as “the-little-girl-who-is-not-a-beggar” (Burnett 94). The removal of Sara’s wealth unambiguously reveals that Sara’s salutary presence emanates from her alone, and not by what she owns, proving that she is “not only worthy to be a princess but also a princess by nature” (Koppes 193).

Miss Minchin functions as a foil that solidifies Sara’s status as a true princess. The headmistress is the governor who heads the “respectable” looking but “ugly” school (Burnett 7), ruling her “colonized subjects” (i.e., students) with an iron fist (Kutzer 49). Like a “corrupt colonial administrator,” Miss Minchin values Sara only for her material value as a resource that can be exploited (Kutzer 50). One of the key character revelations is that Sara is the

antithesis of Miss Minchin: if Miss Minchin is cold and ummotherly, Sara is warm and motherly. The precocious girl volunteers to be “a good mother” to her doll Emily, and the object of her motherly affection eventually shifts to real subjects in Lottie and Ermengarde, the most marginalized members of Miss Minchin’s school (Burnett 12). Most importantly, Sara’s transformation into a drudge allows her to empathize with the scullery maid Becky. Through Sara’s power of imagination and storytelling, the dingy attic becomes a space of resistance against Miss Minchin’s tyranny. The power of her imagination acts as a defense mechanism to sustain her life in the dilapidated attic. Sara’s stories nourish her and Becky’s hungry souls as she pretends that they are prisoners in the Bastille and even the rat, Melchisedec, and sparrow become her companions.

Sara’s ability to make “*everything* [into] a story” is a unique power that allows her to transcend her dreary existence (89). Her enterprising spirit to cultivate a more pleasant living space amid the urban wilderness leads McGillis to interpret Burnett’s novel as “a reworking of the Crusoe story in terms of the female experience” (8). If the plucky boy is “elected as the vigorously, exuberantly youthful representative” of colonial expansion that moves outwards, the pensive girl remains grounded at home (Randall 42). Sara is an avid reader who “liked books more than anything else,” and reading is a sedentary activity that is best conducted in the comfort of the home (Burnett 7). Her roles as a storyteller, teacher, kitchen drudge, and surrogate mother are also centered in the domestic space. As McGillis observes,

“Sara is something of a Crusoe at home in that she manages to construct for herself a civilized [domestic] living space in a modern urban wasteland represented by Miss Minchin and her single-minded business practices and by the poverty visible in the London streets” (13).

This “civilized living space” becomes a more desirable alternative to Miss Minchin’s ill-governed “domestic imperial colony” (Kutzer 49). Like the memsahibs who created a cult of the home amid an alien land, Sara too creates her own protected sphere.

Sara’s budding colony is not only inhabited by her but contains subjects that she civilizes. Indrani Sen, in her analysis of memsahibs’ writings, observes that in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, memsahibs showed stronger “evangelist tendencies” that pushed them to interact with native Indians (qtd. in Choudhury 102). Women in British India acted as female missionaries, teachers, nurses, or reformers committed to either converting or uplifting the benighted indigenous women (Strobel xii). In the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny, the Englishwoman was prescribed a more “sheltered role” and encouraged to become the “‘ignorant’ memsahib” who was indifferent to the conditions of India and its indigenous population (Park 77). Abandoning this later image of the passive and superficial memsahibs, Sara adopts the more active role of carrying out empire’s civilizing mission. In this sense, she subscribes to the pre-Mutiny role of English women who served as missionaries proselytizing to the natives in the colonies. The threat of the natives is conveniently removed as Sara’s actions largely transpire within the protected walls of Miss

Minchin's seminary. Becky functions as the figure of the oppressed native whose soul needs to be saved and nurtured. Unlike the actual memsahibs who idled away their days and even neglected their own children, Sara inhabits multiple roles that highlight the domestic virtues of the ideal English woman as she becomes a friend, teacher, and pseudo-mother to Becky. Unlike Miss Minchin who insists that "scullery maids . . . are not little girls," Sara recognizes Becky's humanity: "She is a little girl, too, you know" (Burnett 54).

Indeed, Sara proclaims to Becky that "we are just the same," but her egalitarian statement that she is "only a little girl like you [Becky]" merely indicates that they are both members of the same humanity (41). It does not, in other words, mean that Becky is Sara's equal in terms of class and education. Sara's superiority to Becky is exemplified in her role as the storyteller. Even as Sara asserts that "stories belong to everybody," Burnett makes it clear that everybody cannot be a storyteller, which is why Becky's role is limited to the listener (37). The power to tell a story amounts to the power to construct a world, and this is a privilege afforded to a limited and exclusive number of people. Sara's ability to weave tales is a product of her rich imagination and intelligence, all of which require that a child be of a certain class—that is, a British citizen of the upper middle, or higher class—in order to enjoy a proper education and afford books. Although this fact of her privileged upbringing temporarily escapes Sara when she admits that "there's no difference now" between her and Becky as both are penniless, Becky insists on maintaining their difference (70). In the eyes of the scullery maid, Sara is like the

real princess she once saw “outside Covin’ Garden” (42). Burnett, therefore, rigidly maintains their unequal status, and more importantly, Becky willingly accepts this hierarchy.

If Burnett’s novel is read as a Cinderella tale, then the onus of recognizing Sara’s true nature lies not with her, but on those around her. Sara’s attribution of princess by Becky evinces that “princesses are made by their subjects,” endowing Sara with an air of legitimacy that establishes her as a princess of the people (Reimer 115). The ultimate royal subject is, of course, Ram Dass. The “native Indian man-servant” of Thomas Carrisford immediately recognizes Sara as “Misse Sahib” (Burnett 103). Carrisford dismisses the possibility that “a little dark, forlorn creature” could be Sara Crewe, but the servant sees beyond Sara’s shabby exterior to detect her noble inner worth (168). In Ram Dass’s words, “she has the bearing of a child who is of the blood of kings!” (126). Indeed, Sara’s very name derives from “Sarah,” the Hebrew word meaning princess. This suggests that the little girl is not merely a princess of the people but a princess by birthright; thus, Sara must be reinstated into her proper position as a ruler.

The first encounter between Ram Dass and Sara marks a pivotal point in the narrative that signals the transition of her fortune:

The truth was that the poor fellow felt as if his gods had intervened, and the kind little voice [of Sara] came from heaven itself. At once Sara saw that he had been accustomed to European children. He poured forth a flood

of respectful thanks. He was the servant of Missee Sahib.
(103)

As Ram Dass displays great obeisance toward the young girl, Sara neither objects nor is unsettled by the servility of the adult male before her. This is because just as Ram Dass perceives her as a female master, she only sees him as a native servant: a "Lascar" (102). If Becky gives Sara her superior class identity, Ram Dass confirms Sara's racial superiority. His deference stirs in Sara past memories of her life in India where "her servants and her slaves" "salaamed when she went by" to the point that their "foreheads almost touched the ground" (105). Although Sara laments that "[i]t was like a sort of dream . . . and it could never come back," Burnett redresses Sara's current plight to ensure that the glory days of her past will come back so she can fulfill her royal namesake (105). As pointed out by Knoepfmacher, Ram Dass's perception of Sara's voice coming from heaven "suggests that more than sheer accident has prompted Carrisford" to become Sara's neighbor (xxi). What transpires is "something akin to a providential dispensation" that can be understood as a literary trope of extraordinary coincidences to ensure a blissful fairy-tale ending (Knoepfmacher xxi).

Ram Dass is the catalyst that sparks the change in Sara's fortune. He is "the Magic" that transforms the bleak attic "into a fairyland" basked in a "rosy shade" (Burnett 149-50). If Sara's imagination allows her to spiritually transcend her material poverty, Ram Dass holds the power to physically transform it. He is the "benevolent genie" that resembles the "exotic figure" of

“disguised sultans and caliphs of Eastern fables” (Knoepflmacher xviii). Yet, Ram Dass is no sultan, for he is bound by servitude. Although it was Ram Dass who devised the plan to help Sara, Carrisford usurps his idea as a “romantic plan” that “we invented” (Burnett 168, emphasis added). Carrisford is made into the grand orchestrator while Ram Dass is relegated to the secondary role of ‘the help’ as the “agile, soft-footed Oriental” (169).

His strict containment in the role of the servant functions as a form of wish fulfillment about the loyal native, premised on the historical erasure of the Indian Mutiny. The Mutiny left a traumatic imprint on Britain’s collective psyche during the heyday of British imperialism. According to Ralph Crane and Radhika Mohanram, “the British cultural (and racial) memory of Cawnpore [a major incident during the Mutiny] is that of the white woman under threat of rape and murder at the hands of deceptive Indians” (26). Brijen Gupta lists more than eighty Mutiny novels that “feature the soldier hero defending the threatened white British womanhood as their central narrative trope, rather than the politics that instigated this particular historical event” (qtd. in Crane and Mohanram 22).

A Little Princess carries some of the legacies of the Mutiny novels in that it addresses the potentially threatening aspect of native sexuality. The “specter of predatory native sexuality” is raised in chapter fourteen, “What Melchisedec Heard and Saw” (Reimer 125):

“I can move as if my feet were of velvet,” Ram Dass replied;

"and children sleep soundly—even the unhappy ones. I could have entered this room in the night many times, and without causing her to turn a pillow." (Burnett 128)

The depiction of a dark-skinned adult male who repeatedly creeps into a little girl's room is an alarming one, but the threat is mitigated because Ram Dass is rendered as a wholly tame figure. Ram Dass is the exotic alternative to the "little girl" that Sara hoped would occupy the adjacent attic (102). His appearance is foreshadowed by Sara's desire for a "nice head [to] look out of the attic window" (97), framing Ram Dass as a "desexualized male friend" lacking a proper body (Knoepfmacher 235). His domesticated presence is perhaps unsurprising given that "in India, all servants except the *ayahs* were men" (Chaudhuri, "Servants" 553). Indian male servants were relegated to the domestic sphere associated with women's work, but Ram Dass is further emasculated as he even assumes the *ayah's* role. He is described as being "accustomed to European children," and Mr. Carmichael orders his children to "go and play with Ram Dass" (Burnett 103; 167).

The representation of Ram Dass as Sara's innocent friend leads Knoepfmacher to consider him as Sara's "fellow exile" and "alter ego" (xviii). Knoepfmacher continues that it is, in fact, Ram Dass (and not Carrisford) who acts as her "father substitute" (xviii). Notwithstanding Sara and Ram Dass's mutual loneliness and homesickness, he (like Becky) can never become Sara's equal. This is because their seeming likeness cannot overcome his racial identity and the traditional colonizer master-colonized servant

relationship. His function is to rescue the deracinated girl and place her in the right, upper-class English, world—he can act as a bridge to link her back to this world, but he cannot fully belong to Sara’s world. Forever marginalized as the servant, Ram Dass recedes into the background upon Sara’s discovery of her true benefactor: “It is you [Carrisford] who are my friend!” (Burnett 173). It is the Anglo-Indian gentleman, then, who plays the “prince substitute or a father-surrogate” to Sara-as-Cinderella (Kawabata 290).

The Fantasy of Happy Endings

The fairy-tale ending is realized when Sara is reunited with Carrisford and regains her fortune. This conclusion appears to be a return to the novel’s opening because Sara is, after all, still a kind-hearted girl, and she has a father again. Yet, if the seven-year-old Sara “did not know all that being rich meant,” her time as a drudge has awakened her to the poverty plaguing London (Burnett 6). Don Randall writes that “the boy of Victorian imperial fiction” embodies empire’s desire “to be and remain forever young” (42). Burnett overcomes the inevitable problem of growth by claiming that maturity does not signal the “beginning of decay” and decline (Randall 42). The eleven-year-old Sara “acknowledges both the sordid facts of Anne’s [the beggar girl’s] existence and [her] responsibility for her” (Keyser 242). Her responsibility for girls like Anne consists in the Victorian charity of gendered noblesse oblige, whereby Sara gives “buns and bread

to the populace" (Burnett 185). This representation of Sara marks an interesting departure from the more typical "angel in the house" Victorian ideal. Unlike the angel in the house who "exerts influence by virtue of being—being good, being pure, being there," Burnett promotes a model of femininity who actually does good through charity work (Park 57). This regal act of kindness makes Sara not only "a princess inside," but a princess of action, which is a prerogative granted by her enormous wealth (Burnett 105).

Empire operates as the *deus ex machina* that restores Sara to her proper place as a princess. Reimer writes that "the princess is a charged political term in the imperialist culture of late nineteenth century Britain" (114). Sara believes that being a princess "has nothing to do with what you look like, or what you have. It has only to do with what you *think* of, and what you *do*" (45). This is why she is free to pretend being a princess even as a drudge, and Sara consistently maintains her superior moral standing over Miss Minchin despite her material poverty: "it seemed as if the child [Sara] were mentally living a life which held her above the rest of the world" (106). Her victory over Miss Minchin's authoritarianism is a psychological and spiritual one; nonetheless, her royal "airs and graces" alone are insufficient to better the lives of her subjects such as Becky (106). To be a true princess who exercises power that yields tangible changes requires affluence. Thus, in the context of Burnett's novel, a princess appears to be synonymous with both an imperial heiress and colonial mistress.

Sara's vast inheritance is a direct result of the colonial

enterprise. Her fellow pupil, Lavinia, dismisses her father by superciliously declaring that “there is nothing so grand in being an Indian officer” (29). Anglo-Indian officers were, indeed, by the second half of the nineteenth century, civil servants who mainly engaged in monotonous administrative duties. It is hard to conceive in realistic terms how Sara can afford her luxurious lifestyle, so India is repackaged as a kind of treasure trove with undiscovered riches. This is a historical anachronism as by the 1860s it was South Africa, and not India, which became the primary source of diamonds. The “rash, innocent” Captain Crewe is almost portrayed as a booty hunter as he becomes entangled in a diamond scheme that would seemingly generate such wealth to make “one dizzy” (10; 44). The mere mention of diamond mines conjures fantastical images of “the Arabian Nights” in the minds of Sara and her classmates (44). But the riches from this hypnotic colonial venture vanishes as suddenly as it materialized, only to reappear in even larger portions by the novel’s conclusion.

In this respect, Jungkyu Suh and Joohyun Park aptly observe that “the empire is at once omnipresent and absent in *A Little Princess* because the true nature of the colonial relationship between Britain and India is never overtly acknowledged” (96). The exploitative deeds of empire are instead neutralized and romanticized “into the tropes of a fairy story” (McGillis 16). Upon being reunited with Carrisford, Sara becomes a “priceless possession” by the “mere fact of her sufferings and adventures” (182). Her adversity is perversely trivialized as a charming story:

When one was sitting by a warm fire in a big glowing

room, it was quite delightful to hear how cold it could be in the attic. It must be admitted that the attic was rather delighted in, and that its coldness and bareness quite sank into insignificance when Melchisedec was remembered, and one heard about the sparrows and things one could see if one climbed on the table and stuck one's head and shoulders out of the skylight. (182)

Residing in a grand house with a hearth, Sara can afford to wistfully reminisce about her hardship as if she is narrating a fairy tale. This is because it is temporary and belongs to the past, unlike the numerous drudges whose life continues to be a misery. The question of genre is significant here because as McGillis remarks, fairy tales and romances tend to "dress up the world; they are a form of wish fulfillment associated with dreams" (70). What Sara romantically celebrates as "the magic" is, in reality, the product of native labor (Burnett 149). Her massive inheritance from Carrisford's diamond mines, too, is the fruit reaped from native exploitation and not a story from the Arabian nights.

In this "colonial fairy tale," Sara's colony is inhabited by helpful and contented natives such as Ram Dass and Becky who never question her authority and right to rule (Suh and Park 97). Sara's Anglo-Indian education has prepared her well to become a proto-governing mistress. Her colonial experience makes her accustomed to handling numerous servants, and more importantly, she knows how to rule over them. In contrast to most memsahibs who could "barely speak or understand Hindi or any Indian language," Sara's gift for languages makes her fluent

in Hindustani, which allows her to connect more readily with natives such as Ram Dass (Chaudhuri, "Servants" 554). She treats her inferiors with kindness, but remains a respected authority figure. She becomes a new master to Ram Dass and sends him to "command" Becky to come and serve as her "attendant" (Burnett 181). Becky now has a "pink, round face," but her status as a servant remains unchanged from her time at Miss Minchin's seminary (185). Burnett's vision of an ideal domestic empire is ultimately conservative because the colonial hierarchy essentially remains untouched. Sara's benevolence fulfills a strategic purpose as it convinces her subjects that she has their best interests at heart—as a result, the prospect of dissent is suppressed and the status quo is strengthened. Empire's philanthropic mission alleviates the material and moral lives of the natives, but just to the point that they do not challenge their imperial benefactors.

Even though Sara does not overtly abuse her powers, her kindness should not be confused with the relinquishing of her authority. She likens her misery to the imprisoned Marie Antoinette, and her sympathies unambiguously lie with the beheaded queen:

There was Marie Antoinette when she was in prison and her throne was gone and she had only a black gown on, and her hair was white, and they [the people] insulted her and called her Widow Capet Those howling mobs of people did not frighten her. She was stronger than they were, even when they cut her head off. (106)

People like Anne belong in the category of the “howling mobs” (106), and while Sara is conscious of Anne’s plight as a member “of the populace,” she is also highly conscious of the fact that she herself is *not* “one of the populace,” but above it (119). Her gesture of giving “buns and bread to the populace” (185) rather humorously “[rectifies] her favorite queen’s insensitivity when she supposedly proclaimed, ‘Let them eat cake’” (Knoepfmacher 240). Janice Kirkland interprets the final chapter in which Sara and Anne reunite at the bakery as a sign that the former and latter “are not giver and receiver of charity but are equals” (196). Although the two girls share a moment of mutual understanding when “they looked straight into each other’s eyes,” Anne still perceives Sara as her gracious “miss” or benefactor, and complies with Sara’s request that she feed the needy (Burnett 187). Sara may be a more democratic ruler than Marie Antoinette, but she is nevertheless royalty.

The consequences of insubordination toward Princess Sara are strongly implied. The memsahibs exercised almost absolute control within the household and among her servants, and Burnett hints at this darker side of authority when Sara imagines that as a princess she could “wave [her] hand and order [Miss Minchin] to execution” (106). Sara proudly declares that she “could do anything—anything that [she] liked” as a princess, and her preoccupation with decapitations suggests that she is not adverse to cruel forms of punishment, exposing the iron fist that hides behind her velvet glove (108). Hence, Jessie’s comment that “sometimes [she’s] a bit frightened of [Sara]” is telling in its truthfulness (155). Sara’s anger towards Miss Minchin may be

justifiable, but her joyful musings about punishing Miss Minchin are unsettling: "I only spare you because I *am* a princess, and you are a poor, stupid, unkind, vulgar old thing, and don't know any better" (106). Burnett finds Sara's notion of a princess's absolute authority to be unproblematic, instead lauding her for her self-control in restraining her passions.

As her domestic space of benevolent governance expands beyond the parameters of Miss Minchin's seminary, the small domestic colony of the attic is projected to expand and flourish. Sara is the ideal child of empire who will "grow into an ideal woman" to "rule an ideal domestic empire" (Kutzer 52). This preoccupation with the ideal projects a "vision of a childhood that is restorative" as embodied by the model child (McGillis 45). After all, Burnett's heroine transcends the model child in that she is exceptional to the point that it is abnormal. When Miss Amelia informs Sara that her father Captain Crewe has died suddenly, she does not shed a single tear, prompting Miss Amelia to call her "the strangest child [she] ever saw" (65). Her almost clinical understanding of human emotions makes her beyond precocious as she proves herself to be better than all the adults in her environment. Sara firmly maintains her composure despite suffering Miss Minchin's abuse for she understands that "when you will not fly into a passion people know you are stronger than they are" (95).

Sara stands out as not only "a model of behavior, but she is also a symbol of health and hope" in a decaying society (McGillis 45). The existence of characters such as Becky and Anne indicates that Burnett is not blind to the existence of social outcasts and the

poverty plaguing London. As Britain's economic boom from 1847 to 1873 drew to a close, the country was confronted with a nervous age of crises. Poverty was rampant, and by 1889, as many as thirty percent of Londoners lived below the poverty line (qtd. in Roberts 688). One very special girl with her preternatural powers as a motherly nurturer, however, can begin to ameliorate social ills. Sara is the "something" that "warmed and fed" Becky, her smile is enough to "alter" Ram Dass's "whole expression" to show a smile of "gleaming white teeth," her presence revitalizes the invalid Carrisford into "a new man," and her act of charity transforms Anne from a street urchin into a "decent, well-meanin' girl" (Burnett 43; 103; 183; 187). Sara's benevolence, intelligence, and firm moral character make her the perfect colonial mistress to uplift her suffering subjects. That is, she is reshaped into a fantastical princess that Burnett wishes for, but in actuality never did, or could, exist.

Conclusion

The more fantastical plot elements are undermined as Sara's sudden disenchantment from an imperial heiress to scullery maid underscores the instability of the colonial enterprise. Burnett retracts this acute critique of empire, however, by restoring Sara's wealth to even larger portions. Ariko Kawabata points out that as the British Empire grew weaker at the turn of the century, the literary convention of "Deus ex Empire serves to restore the order of the nation/home under threat of collapse" (292). The Indian

Mutiny violently exposed the precariousness of British rule in India. India became an especially dangerous place for women as the ensuing rape narratives cast the English woman into a helpless victim; consequently, Burnett is forced to remove her heroine from the colony and send her back home. Yet, London turns out to be no haven, so it is the role of a girl like Sara to treat the domestic space as a colony in need of a nurturing mother figure.

Valorized as the romanticized memsahib who is reshaped into a fantastical princess, Sara constructs the ideal domestic empire through her benevolent governance. The concluding chapter in which the street urchin Anne finds a loving home thanks to Sara obscures the symptoms of imperial decline such as London's widespread poverty. What is highlighted, rather, is the possibility of a more egalitarian and utopian future as the story concludes with a happy ending. Just as storytelling becomes Sara's lifeline that conceals her harsh reality, *A Little Princess* is Burnett's wishful, almost absurd, fantasy about an exceptional young girl who is faced with the daunting task of tending to a crumbling empire. Sara's very ambitious role—at once adult, simply a child; at once a moral character, also a product of an Anglo-Indian education bred into a proto-governing mistress—is overwhelming indeed. On the small pre-adolescent shoulders of Sara rides the adult's hope of a new generation of rulers to restore the glory of British Empire.

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**The Little Mem sahib and the Idealized Domestic Empire
in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess***

Abstract

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Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905) focuses on the often neglected daughter's role and how she contributes to British imperial culture in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. While various scholars have presented postcolonial critiques of *A Little Princess*, not much critical attention has been paid to the figure of the mem sahib and how it influences the identity of the protagonist, Sara Crewe. When Ram Dass confers on Sara the position of "Misse Sahib," or a little version of the mem sahib, he attaches to the eleven-year-old girl a complicated position of gendered colonial authority. A tension emerges, then, between the historically troubling character of the mem sahib and the fantastical character of the fairy-tale-like princess. This paper argues that this tension disappears by the novel's conclusion because Sara as the little mem sahib is reshaped into a fantastical and benevolent princess figure to govern the ideal domestic empire. We begin by examining the genre of children's literature and how the colony serves as a device to construct the more fantastical plot elements. We proceed to consider the crucial role of the servants in making Sara into an authority figure, and finally, we problematize the novel's happy ending in which the issues of race, class, and empire are foreclosed.

Key Words: Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*, Victorian Era, Children's Literature, Domestic Empire, Memsahib, Gender

Received: Mar. 21. 2015

Revised: Apr. 18. 2015

Accepted: Apr. 27. 2015

