

## **The Representation of the Anglo-Indian Child in Christine Weston's Short Stories**

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### **I. Introduction**

Many Anglo-Indian household advice manuals and medical guides represent the Anglo-Indian children as prone often to tropical diseases and affected by the erratic Indian climatic conditions. Further, these prescriptive texts depict the contact with native servants as causing physical and moral degeneration of these children. They summarily suggest that children must be sent away to Britain at an early age so that they could be protected from threats posed by India. Britain turned into a site of redemption where these children can be cleansed of all impurities of India. However, published at the end of the British imperial rule in India, Christine Weston's literary representation of these children in her stories seems to be at odds with the popular British social and cultural perceptions of their life in India. The essay investigates her short stories and proposes that the representation of their childhood is contingent upon portraying India as a site of 'growing up'. This 'growing up' of the Anglo-Indian children constitutes escape, adventure, exploration, observation and inter-racial encounters. Locating her stories within the context of the days of the British Raj, the essay seeks to show that there is no monolithic discourse of the Anglo-Indian childhood.

### **II. Background Contexts**

Many writers like Flora Annie Steel, Maud Diver and E.W. Savi wrote stories of the Anglo-Indian life during the period of 'high imperialism' of the British Raj. However, Christine Weston, an Anglo-Indian by birth like Steel and Diver, wrote stories during the 1940s and 1950s for *The New Yorker* magazine dealing primarily with Anglo-Indian and Indian children's life. Before investigating her construction of the Anglo-Indian child, it will be useful here to look at discursive writings that produced the Anglo-Indian childhood for the popular British perceptions. Household and medical guides show imperial anxieties over the physical health and moral constitution of Anglo-Indian children. *Tropical Trials: A Handbook for Women in the Tropics* starts its advice on the health of Anglo-Indian children thus:

Children of European parentage, are difficult to rear in the tropics; their constitutions are unduly taxed by a climate which, at one and the same time, pushes forward their growth, and makes heavy demands upon their physical resources; ... so do these unfortunate little "hot-house nurselings" generally lack the vigour and stamina possessed by children reared under more favourable conditions of climate. (Hunt 379-380)

The above narrative hints at the impact of the hot climatic conditions of India on these children. Anxieties over their childhood life in India find complete expression in advice manuals like E.C.P. Hull's *European in India* too. Besides advising against Anglo-Indian children's contact with natives, Hull's advice manual shows how these children were not allowed enough outdoor activities due to the fear of physical debility and moral contamination:

With regard to the hygienic management of Anglo-Indian children, I need say little here, ...but I may recommend, that they should always be allowed to enjoy as much out-of-door exercise, freedom, and fresh air, as are compatible with guarding against undue exposure. Let them not be kept too much out of the sun-light, but allow them to runabout the garden within the hours permitted to adults, always taking the precaution to give them light broad-brimmed hats, of pith, or some other suitable material. ... (Hull 142)

The above narrative demonstrates that even the suggested outdoor activities were restricted to their 'free' mobility in English gardens under parents' supervision. However, E.M. Collingham notes that besides Anglo-Indian women, it was the 'baba logue' for whom the British did not "clearly demarcate where India ended and Britain began" (93). He has effectively argued how the Anglo-Indian children's life in India opened up the limits of anglicization. Studying the Anglo-Indian life, Elizabeth Buettner has investigated autobiographies of Rudyard Kipling, Rumer Godden, M.M. Kaye, George Roche and others to demonstrate that the imperial nostalgia for the Anglo-Indian childhood is an integral component of these texts.

### **III. India: A Site of Idyllic Atmosphere**

British India turned into a site of exoticism where the Anglo-Indian child can take stock of its position- at once, political- within its milieu and explore the Other in Weston's short stories like "The Atlas Moth", "Infernal Little Beast", "When Bulgaria Fell" and "The Mangoes are Gone". They present an idyllic atmosphere of British India which is rural, timeless and free of at least explicit symbols of industrialization around. While the narrative in "The Mangoes are Gone" narrates how the Anglo-Indian children eat the ripe mangoes, wash 'the flat white seed' and comb 'its white hairs' that stood up 'like the hackles of a wild boar', the narrative in "Infernal Little Beast" captures 'a camping party to the outskirts of a nearby jungle noted for its game, big and small'. Apart from demonstrating how the Indian landscape became a site of pastoral atmosphere where life is closer to nature, it became a setting to construct their subjectivity as well. In "The Atlas Moth", Kumaun Hills of the northern India is represented as a rough terrain which "was impassable for wheels" and the narrators had to walk to get anywhere. It appears that the tentacles of colonial industrialization did not reach the hills of Kumaun yet. It will be useful here to look at the relevant narrative to illustrate the argument here:

It was a country of orchards and terraced hills, criss-crossed with paths leading to tiny villages...Since the terrain was impassable for wheels, to get anywhere we had to walk, and walk we did, covering miles of the surrounding country; there was little of it my brother and I did n't know by heart. (Weston, "The Atlas Moth" 17)The idyllic India-the Kumaun hills- is represented as a vast expanse of land with immense variety. Yet, like their adult counterparts, the narrators domesticate it by 'covering miles of the surrounding country'. Apart from offering delight, the picturesque landscape presents itself for exploration. Pramod K. Nayar has effectively argued that the natural picturesque, a component of the emotional aesthetic is one of the dominant aesthetics in the early nineteenth century British colonial writings on India. My point is that there is a revisit of this aesthetic of the Indian picturesque in the narratives of nostalgia for the imperial past after the Indian Independence, especially, in Weston's stories of the Raj like "When Bulgaria Fell" where the description of Bhim Tal in the Kumaun district is in the rhetoric of the natural picturesque:

We went on, walking on a fairly level stretch toward the valley where we always hunted pheasants. To our right, high up and about nine miles away, rose the spiny ridge of Sher ka Danda. Behind us, hidden by the pine forest stood the frosty peaks of Tibet. The hills where we walked were threaded by paths which led to or from the tiny villages inhabited by grasscutters or herdsmen, for in India, side by side with birds, bear, and deer. You don't always see the men or the creatures, but even in the wooded hill country you never forget that they are there. (Weston, "When Bulgaria Fell" 24)In the process of domesticating the Himalayan regions through their walk into it and their hunt for pheasants, the Anglo-Indian children encounter not only species of fauna, but also natives belonging to 'the tiny villages'. The narrative reinforces the idea that natives' lives are closer to nature and this idea is an integral component of the Indian picturesque. In "Be Still, She Sleeps", the rhetoric of ruin, a component of the Indian exotic play a significant role in constructing the Anglo-Indian child who finds pleasure in ruins. The first person narrator presents a mythic atmosphere of the tropical India thus:

We stepped into a huge, bare room whose ceiling soared upward like the arch of a cathedral. Light from the tall windows fell across the floor, which was littered with dead bats, dead insects, leaves, and heaven know what- all the weird accumulation which sifts through the crevices of an empty house. The walls were stained and peeling, except for one corner, where, for some reason, the vegetable paint survived in an oblong of startling, ardent blue. (Weston, "Be Still, She Sleeps" 24)

The ruined bungalow had been the house of an English officer who got married to a daughter of an Indian noble. Here, the rhetoric of ruin presents the end of the inter-racial encounter during the days of the East India Company and subsequently, records the changing historical moments of the Raj. The Anglo-Indian childhood is constructed around the natural and civic picturesque of the Indian landscape alongside the rhetoric of ruin.

### **IV. The Adventurous-Exploring Anglo-Indian child**

Weston's short stories like "The Atlas Moth", "When Bulgaria Fell" and "Be Still, She Sleeps" project India as a land of opportunities for exciting adventures and these stories have the early twentieth century British India as its settings. Patrick Brantlinger has pointed out that "late Victorian and Edwardian occultist literature is filled with metaphors of exploration, emigration, conquest, colonization"(249) when landscapes for exploration did not exist anymore at the turn of the twentieth century. In "The Atlas Moth", the narrative says that they were not bored as they shared some of their father's pursuits and a passion for exploration. It appears that the monotony experienced by the Anglo-Indian community was not experienced by their children. They seem to have learnt about the butterfly species, and the technique to capture and preserve them. One day, they were fortunate enough to locate the Oak Leaf butterfly species by chance in the jungle during their return after spending a day on 'sunny hillsides' quiet away from home. The following narrative demonstrates how the Anglo-Indian child is represented as sharing the collecting spree of their adult counterparts in the colonial zone:

A queer sense of dread grew on us as the sound of our shoes on the stones and of water dripping down an invisible fissure sent back a succession of whispering echoes. No one had thought to warn us about the creatures of our own imagination, against which we are defenseless....Since entering we had seen neither bird nor animal, and it seemed as if the place was devoid of life, when suddenly, in the terraqueous light, there appeared a large butterfly fluttering twenty feet ahead of us. We recognized it as an Oak Leaf and, forgetting our fears, promptly gave chase. (Weston, "The Atlas Moth" 18)

The journey into the Indian wilderness seems to be adventurous offering a visit to the forbidden geographical space where bears' mobility is reported. These children venture into it to reach their home early, however, by chance, they get to catch the Oak Leaf Butterfly which was highly sought after by the collectors of butterfly specimens. My argument here is that the literary representation of these children show that they collaborated with their parents-British imperialists in classifying the species of insects and thereby, try to domesticate the mysterious India. They even encounter a leopard during their 'nocturnal pursuit' thus: "Poised on the edge of the terrace, its mottled tail richly curled, the pale hairs on its face gleaming in the starlight, a leopard appraised us, then noiselessly melted into the darkness, and we turned to ask each other whether we had dreamed" (Weston, "The Atlas Moth" 18). They get a glimpse of a leopard which is at once an integral component of the exotic Indian geographical variety. Similarly, in "When Bulgaria Fell", the children narrators accompany their father for pheasant shooting in the jungle. The following narrative demonstrates how pheasant shooting offers the thrill of adventure in a much unexplored Indian geographical terrain:

A big black, shaggy form was moving slowly along the slope above us, and as we watched it, we saw it change its direction slightly to start down the hill toward our little sheltering tree.

...My father removed the shells from his gun and substituted solid ball. The tiny clock of the closing breech seemed to fill the silence, but the bear ambled unconcernedly, undeviatingly toward us. The wind was in our favor and we ourselves must have been pretty well camouflaged among the flickering shadows of the tree. My father stood motionless and I remember the look on his face and the quiet tenseness of his hands on the shotgun. My heart was making such a noise in my ears that I was sure everyone must hear it. (Weston, "When Bulgaria Fell" 25)

The above narrative is written in the tradition of British imperial adventure/hunting narratives and tries to capture nostalgically the myth of heroic British imperialism. India is played out as a site for their growing up into imperial officials inheriting virtues like perseverance, endurance and courage and holding the British imperial prestige. In "Be Still, She Sleeps", giving a nostalgic account of their visit to a ruined Anglo-Indian bungalow, the narrators express interest for antiquity. They come to Monghyr 'filled with anticipation' and antiquity held for them 'an especial attraction'. During one of their bicycle rides, they come across an Anglo-Indian bungalow left deserted and start their exploration there. During their exploration, they happen to discover many objects that hint at the luxurious British imperial life of the past generation. It will be useful here to look at the narrative to better understand how India turned into a site of exploration for children in their own way:

We walked about cautiously, examining a variety of objects stacked against the walls: massive pieces of furniture, crumbling with age and mildew and the forays of white ants. There were trunks, boxes, bundles which when we touched them, parted softly at their seams and exuded a sort of liquid dust. We found two huge saddles, from which the leather had peeled like wet paper, a bundle of hog spears, and a set of pistols in embossed holsters. Excited and frightened, we ventured into another room, then another, discovering pictures from which the paint had moldered away, more trunks, more books, strange, personal, forgotten accoutrements. (Weston, "Be Still, She Sleeps" 24)

The above narrative demonstrates how the British children share the sense of inquiry, perseverance and excitement. The Anglo-Indian house stood as a testimony to the bygone British imperial era when an English officer was able to marry a daughter of an Indian noble. In this story, these children stand witness to the symbol of miscegenation that had been a common affair even in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Further, the presence of various objects defines their life in colonial India and concomitantly, it becomes a learning experience for these children.

## **V. The Unrestrained/Surveillance-free Anglo-Indian Child**

British India was not only a site of adventures offering pleasure through the experience of danger for these Anglo-Indian children, but it also offers an escape from parents' overwhelming surveillance and concern. In fact, these children often evade even their native servants' supervision and care. Further, the narrators in "The Atlas Moth" express dislike for the cultural redundancy of the Anglo-Indian community constituting 'parties, dances, tennis and the rest of it'. In the story, "The Mangoes are Gone", the narrators complain that they do not have freedom to sleep when they want to. This sense of regret becomes intense when they think that the Indian children enjoy the freedom to do whatever they want. The mango grove turns into an escapade from the constraints and monotony of the Anglo-Indian household. Further, after the arrival of Mahala, the old gardener,

the British children enjoy doing what gave them fun and frolic. The following narrative fittingly captures the sense of freedom which these children celebrate in the grove:

And when we did what was forbidden us, when we climbed the laden branches and ate the unripe fruit and were secretly ill, Mahala said nothing. When we tormented the gardener and threw stones at the well bullocks to make them kick, Mahala's eyes shone with a childish glee. (Weston, "The Mangoes are Gone" 19)

Though in "The Mud Horse", they are shown as wanting to escape from the overwhelming care of native servants, in "The Mangoes are Gone", they enjoy Mahala's company as it offered immense freedom and fun. In fact, 'a queer friendship' developed between them and it was based on the 'inarticulate and unconscious affinity which sometimes exists between youth and old age'. Such an intimate relationship was not possible with the imperial British adults. However, these children show a complete disregard for their Indian servants in "Mud Horse". They get away from home to draw a picture of a train coming "straight at them". It will be useful here to study the following first person child narration:

One of our favourite pastimes was to escape from surveillance and go for long walks or bicycle rides unescorted. It was not much fun when any of our native servants came with us, for they got in our way, and although unable to prevent our doing as we pleased, they were not above carrying tales and getting us into hot water with our parents. (Weston, "The Mud Horse" 301)

It is quite evident that the British children were keen to escape from parents' view and explore the Indian geographical space on their own.

## **VI. The Anglo-Indian Child's Struggling Subjectivity**

Weston's stories like "Infernal Little Beast" and "The Mud Horse" capture the struggling subjectivity of these Anglo-Indian children. The political-social space of their community turn into a space of 'unalloyed joy'. Ian Short in "Infernal Little Beast" was indifferent to the features of the exotic Indian landscape whereas the narrator and his brother tell how it thrilled them. It will be useful here to look at their experiences of the camping party:

Camp life had always thrilled us-mornings smelling of wood smoke, the whistling of wild pigeons in the trees, the sound of burned toast being scraped for breakfast, and the thought of the whole marvellous, unfolding of the day. There were elephants and ponies for us to ride, and mornings to be spent with our friends and parents in the sal and bamboo jungles. (Weston, "Infernal Little Beast" 30)

They enjoyed talking with the villagers and their children who came to meet their parents. However, after Ian Short poked fun at their conducive attitude towards the natives, they also started calling their "Indian servants and the half-naked smiling villagers as niggers" (31). Here, the Anglo-Indian child's subjectivity is caught between the world of the Anglo-Indian community demonstrating racial superiority and the exotic Indian landscape including natives. In "The Mud Horse", the Anglo-Indian child seems to have inherited the Anglo-Indian cultural ethos when it says that the native child must be ashamed to talk about a pregnant horse. The native child exhibits its raw creativity whereas such a creative sense is an impossibility for the Anglo-Indian children whose life is harnessed by their adult counterparts. In fact, these children are captivated by Kulloo's "air of concentration, a serene, absolute forgetfulness of the world around him" (302). Further, they are caught between playing the imperial role of subordinating Kulloo and their wonder at his way of understanding the world. Like their adult counterparts, they demonstrate racial superiority and repulsion as well as attraction towards the native world.

## **VII. The Inter-racial encounter and the Anglo-Indian Child**

Native servants are both facilitators and destroyers of their play and freedom for the Anglo-Indian children. While Mahala is accommodative in "The Mangoes are Gone" and Govind collaborates with them in hunting a bear in "When Bulgaria Fell", servants in "The Mud Horse" hinder the children's attempts to explore the Indian geographical space. Their encounter with natives do not stop with servants found in the Anglo-Indian household. For instance, in Weston's "The Mud Horse", the British children encounter the native children during their tour outside their home escaping their parents' surveillance. They head towards the railway track to capture the passing train in their drawing and they meet the gate-tender's son, Kulloo who hold a mud horse in his hand. Though the British children and Kulloo share the same spirit of childhood, the narrative demonstrates that they both belong to the different worlds which cannot meet. In "The Devil Has the Moon", the Anglo-Indian children are drawn into 'the mob of milling, half-naked bodies' that chase the devil though we are instructed by their Eurasian tutor not to believe in superstitions. In the story titled "A Game of Halma", the Anglo-Indian child turns out to be a witness to the strained relationship between the French father and his native friend, Vasi. The child narrator turns into an observer and watches the game of Halma played under the pipal tree. The child wonders why Nawab Sahib was not instructed to remove his shoes and get into his house. Such an observation

shows that these Anglo-Indian children had been the witness of such tense colonial encounters where the native is insulted by the bullying white imperial official. Summarily, these children definitely show a sense of racial superiority and enjoy the privilege of being part of the ruling community. However, as E.M. Collingham puts it, the Anglo-Indian children jeopardize the limits of anglicization by disobeying their parents and establishing cordiality with native servants.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

The essay investigated the literary representation of the Anglo-Indian child in Christine Weston's short stories and argued that this representation is contingent upon portraying India as a site of 'growing up'. This 'growing up' of Anglo-Indian children constitutes escape, adventure, exploration, observation, and inter-racial encounters. Locating her stories within the context of the days of the British Raj, the essay demonstrated that there is no monolithic discourse of the Anglo-Indian childhood. Rather, a detailed analysis of literary representations will definitely reveal the possibility of multiple discourses.

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