

‘I Will Do What My Ayah Used to Do’: The Ayah as a Site of Imperial Resistance in *The Secret Garden*

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Abstract:

British occupation in nineteenth-century India vexed the empire even as it enabled its colonial power. As Ann Laura Stoler explains, European children, reared in India by ayahs (native nursemaids), troubled European critics because, despite their indispensability, ayahs allegedly corrupted the children’s moral character—their Europeanness. While being racialized as threats, Indian native women servants were specifically maligned as infected and infectious. Which evokes Robert McRuer’s claim that compulsory able-bodiedness is a default identity that necessitates normative bodily functions, disabling and marginalizing bodies that function differently. Applying compulsory able-bodiedness to race, British imperialism’s compulsory white able-bodiedness engenders Indianness as a disability. But can the Anglo-Indian child raised by ayahs be anglicized upon entering European land, or does the child bring the colonized land and culture with them, at once remaining unaltered and altering Europe? To answer these questions, I apply Stoler’s and McRuer’s frameworks to Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, wherein Mary Lennox, losing her parents and ayah to cholera, leaves India for England. Notably, the novel has not produced much critical scholarship on its depiction of ayahs. I aim to fill this gap by yoking Stoler’s and McCruer’s scholarship to examine how the ayah in Hodgson’s novel, first embodied as an Indian servant and eventually as Mary herself, is read through the language of (dis)ability as debilitating and later fortifying the white bourgeois family. I consider the crucial role gendered native servitude and care, an overlooked aspect of colonialism in *The Secret Garden*, played in race- and nation-building.

Keywords: caregivers, colonialism, ableism, racialization, South Asia