

Children of Empire: Peter Pan and the Seeds of Colonial Thinking

Zaid Ibrahim Ismael¹, Asmaa Mehdi Saleh²

¹ Department of English, Al Manara University, Misan, Iraq.

² College of Science for Women, University of Baghdad, Iraq.

Email: asmaams_chem@csw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT

Children's fiction often transcends its superficial framework as mere entertainment by implicitly addressing broader cultural, social, and political issues, which underscores its pedagogical function for young readers. This study examines the imperial ideology embedded in James M. Barrie's Peter and Wendy (the novelistic adaptation of his 1904 play Peter Pan). It aims to show how the novel, through the enchantments of its fantastical world and militarised adventure, aestheticizes and implants colonial beliefs and tendencies in children's imagination, especially Edwardian young readers. Through the conceptual lens of postcolonial theory, the research examines the imaginary setting in Barrie's novel, Neverland, which functions as an imperial nursery. This fictional island invites the implied child reader to absorb colonial thinking, thereby fortifying Britain's colonial project and expansionist ideology. The text's racial perspective and the belligerence of its boy-characters are pivotal aspects nurturing colonial ideology by cultivating ideas of hierarchy and superiority in the empire's youth. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how the author's use of war games, caricatures and mimicry naturalises power structures within the child's worldview, paving the way for imperial thinking. The novel's definition of gender roles is also fundamental to understanding the imperial subtext through Wendy's role as an imperial mother. The research concludes that Peter and Wendy envisions an imaginative habituation realm where the future generations of the British Empire can rehearse imperial practices, asserting their mastery over exotic colonial subjects and territories.

Keywords:

Barrie; colonial; domesticity; empire; imperial; Peter and Wendy; postcolonial.

أبناء الإمبراطورية: بيتر بان والجذور الأولى للفكر الاستعماري

أ.م.د. زيد إبراهيم إسماعيل¹، أ.م.د. أسماء مهدي صالح²

¹جامعة المنارة- ميسان، العراق

²كلية العلوم للبنات- جامعة بغداد، العراق

المخلص

غالبًا ما يتجاوز أدب الأطفال إطاره السطحي بوصفه مجرد لون أدبي ترفيهي يتناوله الضمني لقضايا ثقافية واجتماعية وسياسية أوسع، مما يُبرز دوره التربوي لجمهور القراء الشباب. وتتناول هذه الدراسة الأيديولوجية الإمبريالية المتأصلة في رواية "بيتر ويندي" لجيمس م. باري والمقتبسة من مسرحيته "بيتر بان" والتي عرضت على المسرح البريطاني في 1904. يهدف هذا البحث إلى إظهار الكيفية التي تُضفي بها الرواية، بسحر عالمها الخيالي ونمط المغامرة القتالي الذي يمتاز به النص، وأطار جمالي إلى المعتقدات والنزعات الاستعمارية، لغرسها في مخيلة الأطفال، وخاصة قراء العصر الإبداعي الشباب. ومن نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، يدرس البحث البيئة الخيالية "جزيرة نيفرلاند" في رواية باري، التي تُمثل حاضنة داعمة للمشروع الاستعماري البريطاني وطموحه في التوسع والسيطرة على أراضٍ جديدة. كما يعكس هذا الحيز المكاني رغبة الإمبراطورية في الحفاظ على هيمنتها على رعاياها المستعمرين بغرس مفاهيم التسلسل الهرمي والعرق والسلطة في شباب الإمبراطورية. ويمثل المنظور العنصري للنص والنزعة العسكرية لشخصياته الصبغانية جانبا أساسيا لترسيخ الفكر الاستعماري لدى قرائه البريطانيين الشباب. علاوةً على ذلك، يُبين المقال دلالات النص الاستعمارية من طريق ألعاب الحرب والرسوم الكاريكاتورية والمحاكاة والتي تُضفي طابعًا طبيعيًا على البنية السلطوية في رؤية الطفل للعالم، ممهدةً لهم الطريق لتبني الفكر الإمبريالي في المستقبل. كما أن تجسيد الرواية للأدوار بين الجنسين أساسي لفهم السياق الإمبريالي من طريق دور ويندي كأم إمبراطورية. يخلص البحث إلى أن رواية "بيتر ويندي" تصور عالمًا خياليًا يسهم في تأهيل الأجيال القادمة للإمبراطورية البريطانية للاعتياد على الممارسات الإمبريالية، بالسيطرة الافتراضية على رعايا وأقاليم استعمارية غريبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استعماري؛ إمبراطورية؛ إمبريالية؛ باري؛ بيتر ويندي؛ الحياة المنزلية؛ ما بعد الاستعمار.

Introduction

Children's literature has always been dismissed as a genre written only to entertain and instruct young readers. However, this parochial view is no longer prevalent in contemporary times, as critics seek to uncover the coded adult implications in these seemingly apolitical tales, which are intended for children. In his 1992 essay "Ideology and the Children's Book," Peter Hollindale states that children's literature is charged with underlying subtexts for young readers that contribute to shaping their future ideological mindset (Hollindale, 1992, p. 19). In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin note that children's fiction is not devoid of colonial discourse with pedagogical purposes to implant imperial orientation in the implied young addressees (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 43).

Written and published during the Edwardian era—a time when the British Empire was simultaneously enjoying the riches of the Victorian colonies and also withstanding anxieties about imperial decline, *Peter and Wendy* (1911) should not be superficially viewed as a fantasy about children's wistfulness for adventure and exploration. A closer scrutiny reveals how Barrie's novel implicitly propagandises imperialism for the Edwardian child by imaginatively taking them into Neverland—a training ground for colonial ideology.

Literary scholarship is abundant on Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*. In his 1979 contextual examination of Barrie's novel, Andrew Birkin emphasises the social and autobiographical aspects of the text, situating it within the framework of the author's life and Edwardian family life. Furthermore, Jacqueline Rose (1984) interprets Peter Pan's dream of perpetual boyhood as a mirror of adults' anxiety over aging and their nostalgia for childhood and innocence. Similarly, in *The Hidden Adult, Defining Children's Literature* (2008), Perry Nodelman links Peter Pan's fear of adulthood to developmental psychology, discussing themes like autonomy and dependency. He views the characters' adventure as a threshold that marks the transition from childhood and innocence into adulthood and experience. Maria Tatar (2009) investigates the adult-coded issues that lie behind Barrie's children's text, like authority, class distinction and social responsibilities.

2. Aim and Methodology

This article assumes that, in Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, colonial insinuations can be traced in the author's portrayal of racial caricatures, his celebration of the romance of adventure, exploration and war and his idealisation of the traditional image of domesticated femininity. In *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood* (2009), Maria Tatar emphasises the importance of the narrator's perspective in understanding the novel's context and the character's worldview. Thus, Barrie's novelisation of the story of Peter Pan is preferred over the play as a sample for analysis because it is more accessible to the implied child reader. In addition, unlike the theatrical version, the novel

provides elaborate details about the setting, the characters and the implicit colonial ideology, through the narrator's voice.

The present study draws on postcolonial theory to show how Barrie utilises his fiction as a vehicle for transmitting imperial ideology. According to Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), European authors writing during the heyday of Imperialism produced literary texts with unavoidable imperial realities, legitimising racism and colonial hierarchies. Homi Bhabha's postcolonial notion of cultural representation is also essential to understand the binary of the British coloniser and their colonised subjects as depicted in Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*. The current research is based on the assumption that Barrie's novel cultivates ethos regarding colonial authority, race and even gender roles.

3. Children of Empire: Peter Pan and the Seeds of Colonial Thinking

3.1. Neverland and Colonial Cartography

Edward Said contends that "imperialism is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control" (Said, 1993, p. 271). In *Peter and Wendy*, the child readers are given the chance to envision themselves living on an island, Neverland—an imaginative realm, a "map of a child's mind"—with an atmosphere that is identical to that of the distant British colonies at the turn of the nineteenth century (Barrie 1911, p. 7). Neverland is populated by natives who are defined as exotic "Others" from the narrator's imperial perspective. Thus, the child readers experience the adventure of colonial domination in this uncharted appropriable territory, described by Mary Louise Pratt as an imperial "contact zone" (Pratt, 2008, p. 7), where they can enact colonial violence, disguised under their harmless war games. Territorial control is attained by the winners of these semi-military games, not by the indigenous inhabitants, but by the white occupants—either the boys or the pirates who use the island as an anchorage.

Neverland is, therefore, an archetype of the glamorous colony—a dreamscape with ethnographic diversity of pirates, a native tribe (the Piccaninny), wild animals and mythical characters like fairies, gnomes and mermaids. It is abundant with all kinds of trappings that ignite the desire for adventure in young readers:

Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there, and coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes... a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it... On these magic shores children at play are forever beaching their coracles. (Barrie, 1911, p. 6)

Moreover, it is only in a place like Neverland that growing up is hindered. The dream of imperial dominance is epitomised in Peter's longing for eternal boyhood: "I don't want to be a man... I just

want always to be a little boy and to have fun” (Barrie, 1911, pp. 124, 174). His refusal to grow up is not only a desire for perpetual youth and freedom, but it is also an underlying expression of the Empire’s aspiration to dominate and control conquered lands and subordinate people. Bradley Deane, in *Imperial Boyhood: Piracy and the Play Ethic*, opines: “Representations of perpetual boyhood came to fascinate the late Victorians, partly because such images could naturalise a new spirit of imperial aggression and new policies of preserving power” (Deane, 2011, p. 689).

More broadly, this dream of maintaining youth and power is emblematic of the British Empire’s ambition to safeguard its status as a global power, especially with the emergence of new international powers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Michelle J. Smith and Clare Bradford, in their evaluation of late Victorian and Edwardian Children’s literature, state: “Children’s texts of the period repeatedly encode the desire for an imperial order that is timeless, innocent and self-renewing, a fantasy of empire that resists decay and decline even as Britain faced mounting international competition” (Smith & Bradford, 2011, p. xx). In *Peter and Wendy*, the children can endlessly rehearse their imperial games of power and mastery on a timeless playground—Neverland, where the fantasy of an unchanging imperial order is sustainable.

In Neverland, the children, especially Peter, suffer from their inability to remember the past. This amnesia may stand for the coloniser’s selective memory and the imperial strategy to obliterate colonial violence and inconvenient historical facts from their imperial archives. Robert Fletcher notes that “I call ‘imperialist amnesia’ the fetishistic disavowal of the legacy of European colonisation ... the disavowal of colonialism functions as ... a ‘public secret’ ... helping to efface the grim realities of the colonial enterprise” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 423).

3.2. Internalising Military Sentiments through War Games

According to Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), “... the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire, and all kinds of preparations are made for it within a culture; then in turn imperialism acquires a presence within the culture” (Said, 1993, p. 11). Thus, pedagogic narratives of adventure seek to circulate such imperial philosophy among the empire’s new generations. Written during the zenith of imperial suzerainty, *Peter and Wendy* implicitly advocates imperial thinking through the war games of the boy soldiers. These warfare simulations aim to instill in Edwardian children—Britain’s future citizens—the disposition to incorporate military sentiments into their future worldview. The boys in Barrie’s text are fascinated with war. They simultaneously view it as a recreational activity and a display of imperial masculinity. “To die,” they irrationally proclaim, “will be an awfully big adventure” (Barrie, 1911, p.103)

In addition to its adventurous allure, Neverland is divided into three main fighting encampments: the pirates, the boys and the Indians. They are involved in several ambushes and skirmishes:

The pirates were out looking for the lost boys, the redskins were out looking for the pirates, and the beasts were out looking for the redskins. They were going round and round the island, but they did not meet because all were going at the same rate. All wanted blood... (Barrie, 1911, pp.55-56)

Imperial warfare is, therefore, transformed into an instructional manual for Edwardian children. In these war games, the boys' bravery is extolled: "The boys... steal by in single file, each with his hand on his dagger" (Barrie, 1911, p.56). Peter functions as the boys' charismatic commander, maintaining discipline and whose orders are unquestioningly followed by the boy soldiers. Their dashing war games are romanticised as thrilling acts of adventure, through Peter's war cries as "he seized his sword... and the lust of battle was in his eye" (Barrie 1911, p. 125). This play-war strategy makes imperial violence plausible as adventure and devoid of any moral responsibility to the implied child reader.

3.3. Domesticity and Imperial Pedagogy

While the novel glamorises the ideals of masculinity through adventure, exploration and conquest, it also inscribes women's roles as mothers and domestic caretakers in the imperial child audience. In Peter and Wendy, Wendy is conscripted into domestic responsibilities as a surrogate mother and storyteller for Peter and the Lost Boys. Wendy's duties as the domestic organiser of the underground home—which stands for the Edwardian household in this "wild" environment—fall within what Anne McClintock (1995) calls the "imperial family romance," a common notion in imperial narratives. According to British imperial logic, men are expected to fight and conquer, while women are responsible for maintaining domestic order. Barrie's text, therefore, naturalises these gender norms for his child reader as it sustains conquest since this "civilised" cosy space makes the colonial games of violence legitimate to Peter and his comrades:

While she sewed they played around her; such a group of happy faces and dancing limbs lit up by that romantic fire. It had become a very familiar scene this in the home under the ground... (Barrie, 1911, p. 112)

Wendy's role transcends the confines of domestic femininity when she becomes supportive of the Empire's colonial mission. This is manifest when she and the Lost Boys are captured by the pirates and are sentenced to death. She utilises sentimental national discourse to encourage the boys to tolerate their fate as noble sons of the Empire: "These are my last words, dear boys," she said firmly. 'I feel that I have a message to you from your real mothers, and it is this: "We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen"' (Barrie, 1911, p. 149). Her fervent speech lifts their spirits and makes them fearless in the face of this fatal situation: "So great indeed was their faith in a mother's love that they felt they could afford to be callous for a bit longer" (Barrie, 1911, p. 120). Homi Bhabha opines: "Colonial discourse... is uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them"

(Bhabha, 1994, p. 130). Thus, Barrie's children-characters implicitly deliver these nationalistic and imperial sentiments to the Edwardian child reader.

3.4. Racial Stereotypes

A notable colonial subtext in Peter and Wendy is Barrie's portrayal of Neverland's tribal inhabitants as a racialised 'Other'— labeling them as "savages" and "Redskins" (Barrie, 1911, p. 5)— a common taxonomy in narratives that celebrates colonial supremacy of the British. This derogatory representation reinforces racial difference and internalises in the English child an imperial sense of superiority. Colonial violence is justified as self-defense against the "savage" acts of these Indians: "By all the unwritten laws of savage warfare it is always the redskin who attacks, and with the wiliness of his race he does it just before the dawn, at which time he knows the courage of the whites to be at its lowest ebb" (Barrie, 1911, p.126). The narrator's dehumanising description of the tribe and their lack of individualisation are symptomatic features of the text's racist nature. Edward Said believes that:

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported—and perhaps impelled—by impressive ideological formations... the vocabulary of imperial culture is plentiful with 'inferior,' 'subject races,' 'dependency,' 'expansion,' and 'authority'. (Said, 1993, p. 8)

Though he admires the femininity of the tribal figure of Tiger Lily as a beautiful princess, the narrator's reference to her "dark" skin falls within the colonial subordinating categorisation of native figures as "noble savage[s]": "It is written that the noble savage must never express surprise in the presence of the white" (Barrie, 1911, p. 111). He also commends the tribe's courage, but his eulogy is not without racial innuendo: "They were a courageous race; they bore themselves proudly and professed the lofty honor of savages" (Barrie, 1911, p. 112). Besides, the indigenous characters are not given the interiority or depth that the other white figures are granted.

The text's imperial superiority is also evident in the stereotypical images of the subaltern tribal figures, like Tiger Lily, who is incommunicative and is spoken for by the narrator. Such a narrative element is common in colonial texts, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, in which the colonised natives are often marginalised and "spoken for" (Spivak, 1994, p. 294).

The tribe allies with the boy soldiers against the pirates, with Peter as their military chief, an assurance of hierarchy in colonial discourse—the submission of the colonised subjects to the coloniser's leadership:

They called Peter the Great White Father, prostrating themselves before him; and he liked this tremendously... 'The great white father,' he would say to them in a very lordly manner, as they grovelled at his feet.... Always when he said, 'Peter Pan has spoken,' it meant that they must now shut up, and they accepted it humbly in that spirit. (Barrie, 1911, p. 109)

These habituation devices, Clare Bradford (2007) remarks, naturalise colonial acts and relations through the pleasures of fantasy and contribute to shaping children's epistemologies of domination in imperial-era adventure fiction, specifically hegemonic notions about national identity, race and sovereignty.

4. Conclusion

While former scholarship on Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* shed light on the text's psychological implications and its appeal to the child reader as an adventure fantasy, it underestimated its latent imperial subtext. The novelist implicitly endeavours to disseminate imperial values through children's war games, colonial hierarchies and racial representations of indigenous figures. Moreover, the rigid patriarchal distribution of labour, in *Peter and Wendy*, represents Britain's tableaux of males' militarism and females' roles as nurturers within the imperial household.

Peter and Wendy also emphasises the supremacy of the white English child and his mastery over Neverland's native inhabitants. The text's colonial fantasy is also evident in the British boys' war games with pirates, aestheticising violence and conquest and imaginatively encouraging the child-reader's complicity in this imperial adventure. Even Peter's longing for eternal boyhood in timeless Neverland is utilised as an imperial metaphor signifying the British Empire's dream of everlasting global power and the anxiety over decolonisation and losing imperial authority in the future.

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