

# ***Hanuman Singh* - Questioning Revisionist Readings of a Contemporary British Children's Book**

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## **Abstract**

Traditional British Children's Literature was an Imperial propaganda tool, with didactic aims to instill the Empire's valued norms and behaviors into a young readership. Although contemporary British Children's Literature encompasses complex, subversive narratives that address problematic issues and ideas, an academic intervention becomes important to investigate whether narratives purported to be revisionist are indeed as liberated and reformist. The Scholastic UK children's series titled *My Story*, is a series of historical novels meant to introduce child readers to important moments in British history and features a format of personal narratives of imaginary young protagonists. One of the novels in the series, published in 2002, is titled *Indian Mutiny, Hanuman Singh, 1857-58* written by Prati-ma Mitchell. The child protagonist, Hanuman, plays the role of the observer and documenter, as the main plot revolves around Rani Laxmibai's historical decision to join rebel soldiers. This title in particular has been called "revisionist" by readers, bloggers, and reviewers, where the book is hailed as telling both sides of the story of the 1857 Mutiny. This paper makes an attempt at an academic analysis and demonstrates the shortfalls of the revisionist reading of the text. It will employ narrative analysis, close reading, post-colonial theories, and examine and contrast the school textbooks of India and United Kingdom, to illustrate that a contemporary children's book like *Hanuman Singh* still uses colonial tropes and does not revise the colonizer's understanding of their own colonial past.

**Keywords:** British children's literature; British empire; Historical fiction; Indian history; Narrative theory; Revisionist writing.

*My Story* is a series of historical novels published for children by Scholastic UK. It features a format of personal narratives of imaginary young

protagonists, alive during important moments in British history starting from Roman times till World War II. It is divided into gendered categories of boys and girls, with titles like ‘*Young Nanny, A Victorian Girl’s Diary 1850*’, and ‘*Civil War, Thomas Adamson, England 1644*’.

In 2002, *Indian Mutiny, Hanuman Singh, 1857-58* was published under the series, written by Pratima Mitchell. The book follows a year in the life of young Hanuman, a *Thakur*<sup>1</sup> boy from the village Digna, who finds employment in the personal palace of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, and gets caught up in the court intrigues and espionage, as India’s ‘First War of Independence’ unfolds around him. Hanuman plays the role of the observer and documenter, as the main plot revolves around the Rani’s decision to join rebel soldiers and the consequence of it all.

Apart from a fictionalized history, the book has also been called “revisionist” by readers. In *Contested Representations: Debating Britain’s Imperial Legacy*, an undergraduate blog by the Loyola Marymount University, California, *Hanuman Singh* has been called a book that “rewrites the imperial era narrative...by discussing the plight of the Indians under the harsh British rule – and speaking to the society in which it was created, Britain in the 21st century, which is now a multicultural environment. A retelling of the Indian Mutiny for 21st century British children which obliterates the British narrative of the uprising constructed during the imperial era” (Quintana). Similar sentiments are echoed by reviewers on Amazon.com and Goodreads, where the book is hailed as telling both sides of the story.

Historical Fiction as a genre has always been a critical tool for oppressed, marginalized or peripheral groups to manifest and communicate their narratives that otherwise would have been ignored by traditional historical scholarship. This holds true for children’s literature as well. Watkins asserts,

“The rise of newer forms of literary historicism is connected, in part, with social change and the effort to recover histories... [and] the recuperation of forgotten texts...” (Watkins 31). For Waller Hastings too, the genre of Historical Fiction is the perfect medium to ‘recover histories’ of children. In his article, *Towards a Theory of Historical Fiction for Children*, Hastings argues that historical fiction has a special significance in the discourse surrounding Children’s Literature. He purports Lukács definitions of Historical Fiction which employs “ordinary” heroes – common individuals with basic intelligence and morality but no special standing – to prove that Historical Fiction becomes the most useful genre for bringing forth the lived

experiences of children. For him, “Children, then, who typically have no special standing, seem particularly well suited to demonstrating the effect of social and historical forces on individual members in society” (3). This series obviously intends to ‘recover’ the existence and lived experiences of children from adult-centric depictions of British history by imagining the personal stories of children alive during a particularly significant historical moment.

However, whether it is meant to counter imperial narratives that were circulated and perhaps remain in the cultural memory of Britain merits further investigation. This paper makes an attempt to create an academic intervention and pose the question of whether *Hanuman Singh* is truly an empowering post-colonial narrative and whether it truly ‘writes back’ to earlier depictions of Indian children. By raising the question, the paper aims to create a critical discourse around the larger context of post-colonial writing for children. Through a textual analysis and close reading, it will attempt to answer the question and illustrate the shortfalls of the revisionist reading.

The story begins with young Hanuman, awaiting his brother’s return. Sewak Singh, a sepoy in the Bengal regiment, is Hanuman’s idol, as he hopes to serve in the army just like his brother does.

However, Sewak’s return is bittersweet as he brings news of the Meerut Mutiny, and a surge in violence across the army. Meanwhile, Hanuman is offered a position as a *khidmutgar*<sup>2</sup> in the Rani of Jhansi’s palace, and is hired to be a companion to the Rani’s young son, Damodar Rao. Sewak Singh also decides to desert his position as sepoy, and join the Rani’s personal guard. The rest of the book deals with various reasons like pressure from local rebels, growing enmity with neighboring kingdoms and the distrust shown by her British allies, that lead the Rani to taking a final stand against the British armies.

Hanuman Singh himself becomes a spy, often carrying important messages and going on reconnaissance missions, in service of the Rani. The book ends with the martyrdom of the Rani and Sewak Singh, along with other characters. Hanuman escapes with Damodar Rao, and returns to his village, disillusioned by the war and bloodshed he witnessed. He resigns to his future as a small time farmer but is happy for the peace it brings.

Certainly, the very fact that the book attempts to represent 1857 from the colonized child’s perspective promises revisionist themes. The book,

*Hanuman Singh*, re-interprets the Mutiny as an account of personal grief, re-imagines the roles and motivations of a celebrated leader in Indian children's textbooks, and it represents the dilemmas of employed, native sepoys.

In his introductory essay titled *Remembering 1857*, Dipesh Chakrabarty outlines three methods by which social events are placed in memory – memorializing, memorizing and the act of remembering/forgetting. While he goes on to show the various ways in which 1857 has been both memorialized by places, documents, and celebrations, and memorized via codification, he presents the question of remembering and forgetting, especially with regards to personal grief and how the pain caused by the Mutiny might manifest or have manifested. He says, “This is the past as personal grief: memory that would have expressed itself at the time in numerous acts of personal grieving in families’ and kin-groups’ sense of loss and bereavement, both on the British side and the Indian...How much do we know about the history of the pain that their relatives would have suffered and about the expression or duration of such pain?” (1692). Hanuman Singh’s story, by giving us a personal account of his involvement and the direct impact of the events on his life tries to, in its own creative way, give child-readers some indication of the grief caused by the 1857 Mutiny.

The ultimate deaths of his brother and hero, Sewak Singh, and his best friend, Saleem, leave Hanuman heartbroken and dispirited, forcing him to abandon his childhood. The book begins with a somber advice “For years, I’d been dreaming of excitement, of new places and new sights; but what I saw and experienced made me old before my time. Listen – stories of war and blood only sound exciting when you hear them in ballads. The reality is closer to hell” (Mitchell 3). When, at the end of the book, he is given news of his brother and best friend’s death, Hanuman says, “For days and nights I grieved for my brother. I pictured all the times I had waited and watched for Sewak Singh and how I had wanted to be like him in every way. I thought about his last words to me over and over again. I forced myself to remember everything we had talked about during our last year together in Jhansi. It was terribly painful, but I didn’t want to forget anything...” (Mitchell 127). Historical fiction and narratives born out of an imaginative rendering like *Hanuman Singh* might not have the authenticity of documents or archival artefacts, but it is one of the ways of ‘not forgetting anything’.

Besides remembering the Mutiny, Mitchell, by portraying Hanuman’s life, is also confronting the excess of agenda-driven stereotypes and prej-

udice that were cultivated in British society, as an aftermath of the 1857 uprising. The Victorian values that replaced the Georgian sensibilities were more stringent, wary and rigid of other races. Racist attacks under the guise of Social Darwinism, the civilizing mission, and fear of native violence have had a long lasting impact. Micheal H. Fisher's paper titled *Multiple Meanings of 1857 for Indians in Britain* proves that the propaganda distributed in England was so vicious and hateful, that both political and cultural attitudes towards Indians in England became suspicious and hostile. He concludes "Overall, the sudden and shocking news of the events in 1857 particularly focused and hardened British attitudes against Indian men in more powerful ways than ever before. Lurid rumours and reports flooded London about atrocities by Indian sepoys and servants against British women and children, including mass rapes and murders...and led to a British national hysteria" (Fisher 1707). Even famous icons of British culture celebrated today, had radical reactions.

Dickens, in a letter in 1857 wrote "I wish I were Commander in Chief in India. I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the Earth" (Joshi 49).

The English children's literature that followed too was filled with stereotypes and negative imagery of India. Writers like Rudyard Kipling, Frances Hogsdon Burnett and E. Nesbitt are famously imperialist, upholding the values of the Empire in their children's stories. Supriya Goswami, in her book titled *Colonial India in Children's Literature*, traces what she calls 'The Post-Mutiny Imperial Boy Hero'. Most of the mutiny related children's literature had an Anglo-Indian boy with white parentage, who survives the Munity and is able to "better understand Indians and bridge the cultural gap between the colonizers and the colonized in order to prevent another Mutiny from occurring in India" (Goswami 81). This boy "is not only a location of agency, but also has the ability to consolidate British authority in the colonies" (Goswami 81).

But Mitchell's children, specifically Damodar Rao and Hanuman Singh are foils to the Boy Hero. Sonny, from Sara Jeanette Duncan's *Sonny Sahib*, is a Mutiny orphan raised by loyal natives and once reunited with his father, reaps the benefits of his lineage by supporting the imperial constructs. On the other hand, Damodar Rao, the Indian crown prince is also orphaned by the Mutiny, but instead he loses his lineage, his childhood, and his right to rule and is reduced to a shadow surviving at the mercy of the British. Another Boy Hero, who comes later, is Kipling's Irish Kim.

Although not orphaned by the mutiny, he is an orphan indeed, close to the natives and also a spy. Hanuman Singh is a foil to Kim, both boy spies dedicating their lives to a cause but while Kim is rewarded for his dedication and service to the Empire, Hanuman Singh loses his family and childhood to violence and is a defeated victim. By showing the lives of these children, Mitchell is legitimizing the existence and lives of native children and humanizing their experience of the Mutiny.

Historical fiction can also be revisionist by reimagining the role of historical figures. British imperial narratives vilified the leaders of the Mutiny, while early Indian scholarship glorified them as the first nationalists. Rani Laxmibai was titled the 'Jezebel of India' in British news, while in India she has been considered as one of the most valiant heroines in national history. However, in the book, Rani of Jhansi is a more measured leader. She is neither a nationalist supporter of war nor an allied passive observer. The author has imagined her as a state-head in crises, trying to find the best solution to maintain peace. Historical proof shows that by the time the Mutiny gained momentum, Laxmibai's estate had already been annexed under the Doctrine of Lapse and she was living on a pension of fifty thousand rupees provided by the British<sup>3</sup>. They had allowed her to retain her palaces and residences, and left her as a sort of steward, on their behalf. In the book, too, she is shown to be more of a diplomat, writing letters and making representations for her son's right to rule, rather than waging a war. It is only at the insistence of local rebels, and in the knowledge that the British had lost their faith in her, that she agrees to lead men and women to war. The actual timeline of the original incidents also coincides with this representation, as she joined the Mutiny six months after the first revolt in Meerut. Mitchell's rendering of Rani Laxmibai gives the readers a superior, powerful and proud young Queen, who is a skilled warrior, leading her armies in the battlefield. But, she is also a politician who tries various strategies to secure herself and her people against violence.

This neutral lens is also applied to Sewak Singh, who in many ways, is the voice of balance and reason in the book. Memoirs like Charles D'Oyly's *Eight Months' Experience of the Sepoy Revolt in 1857* and Robert Henry Wallace Dunlop's *Service and Adventure with the Khakee Ressalah or Meerut Volunteer Horse during the Mutinies of 1857-1858* tell of the local loyalty to officers and the diversity of reactions within the sepoy community. Sewak too seems to be the true dual voice, arguing both sides. He neither wants to kill his superiors who'd been good and treated the sepoys like "their children", yet he enumerates reasons like low pay, unfair annexation of kingdoms and high taxes that make him want to take some action. When

Hanuman asks him if he was “on the side of the soldiers or the English?”, he says, “There’s a part of me that wants to show the English whom our land belongs to, and another part of me wants to serve in the company and regiment I love. Sometimes loyalty is a very difficult thing to pinpoint” (Mitchell). Sewak becomes a symbol of the doubt and confusion that any war produces.

For a detailed biography of the Rani’s life constructed from various sources, see *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History, and Fable in India* by Harleen Singh, 2014.

Thus, in the ways illustrated above, *Hanuman Singh* does revisit and revise the understanding of 1857. But *Hanuman Singh* also falls short of some important aspects of revisionist writing. The primary aim of revising a narrative is to re-write the narrative perpetuated by the center. Revisionist writing would principally, ‘tell the other side’, would re-interpret traditional historiography to dismantle what is propagated as “truth” (Cattini 31). Here, it would be the colonized writing back to the colonizer. This would include showing the complexities of British rule in India, describing the different ways in which it impacted the local populations and explore Indian sensibilities and reactions. However, the book takes a very limited view of the Mutiny. The rebels do not have a voice or fair representation. Both, Indian child and adult characters seem to come across as inefficient and underserving, and finally, the text does not, in any way, engage or negotiate with Britain’s understanding of the causes that led to the uprising.

Apart from Sewak Singh and Rani Laxmibai, Mitchell’s other Indian characters cannot be called revisionist. In his examination of the construction of Germany’s past in children’s books, Zohar Shavit asserts that when it comes to depicting contentious areas of history, there is an important question of “ “how,” not “how many.” What is the nature of this narrative? What is being told? And how is it told and transmitted to future generations?” (Shavit). In *Hanuman Singh*, most of the native characters are parodies – the native children are spoiled and undeserving, the Mutiny leaders are frivolous and depraved, and the rebels are mindlessly violent with neither their perspectives nor their motivations for the rebellion coming to light.

The prince, Damodar Rao is shown as an entitled, spoiled brat who makes life difficult for all around him. He constantly throws tantrums and makes Hanuman’s life so difficult, even leading him to exclaim “I felt like giving him a good thrashing for a spoiled puppy that he was” (Mitchell 78). It is

unclear why Mitchell made the choice to portray Damodar Rao in such a way. It invokes the same colonial imagery employed by Hogsdon-Burnett in her children's book *The Secret Garden*, when she describes Mary as a sickly, spoilt, loveless brat because she was being raised in the hot and humid Indian climate by silly, fearful native servants. A book by Marathi author Y.N Kelkar titled '*Itihasachya Sahali*' contains an incomplete memoir purported to be written by the real Damodar Rao. A translation tells of his life after the defeat of his '*masaheb*'. The trials and tribulations faced are pitiful as he and a handful of loyal followers escape into jungles, living in secrecy and sickness, and gradually penniless, are forced to reach out to erstwhile confidantes who then put in a good word with the British. There is a sorrowful anecdote where he is forced to sell the last of his mother's jewelry in order to raise funds. The British are also shown to break their word, and cheat him out of the seven lakhs secured for him by Rani Laxmibai in a 'trust' (Chavan). But in the book, Hanuman observes the heir apparent of a famous kingdom to be a callous, bratty child instead of a good boy, and a worthy future prince, a lost leader to his people. The lack of sympathy towards him is rather conspicuous. In fact, Sattaduru Sen in the introduction of his illuminating study *Colonial Childhoods: The Juvenile Periphery of India* asserts that native children were depicted not as innocent children but 'small, perverse, adults.' In the book too, Damodar Rao, with his tantrums, entitled behavior, and constant gratification seems more like an unruly tyrant than a child with forgivable shortcomings.

Another example of parodying native characters is the depiction of several other Mutiny leaders.

Rani Laxmibai's father – Moro Pant – is a celebrated figure in the Indian historical pantheon for his unusually progressive views. At a time when women had no access to education, autonomy or public life, he gave his daughter an education, leadership skills, and raised her to be a warrior. However, in the book, Sewak Singh calls him a "senile fool" and he is shown as a double-timing minister, who foils the

Rani's attempts at diplomacy and is responsible for leading her to war. Azimullah is also referred to as a womanizing fool, whereas historical evidence points to the depth of his character, as he "had been embittered by prejudice and injustice...[that he] personally experienced during their own time in Britain. Typically, [for] Azimullah...long experience in Britain raised...awareness of colonialism and sense of patriotism for India." (Fisher 1706) Even Tantia Tope, Nana Sahib and Rao Sahib are implied to be weak, frivolous men, unable to take a stand. Rani Laxmibai is ag-



gravated by her allies for getting drunk at dancing houses. However, the paper's research yielded no traces for such fractures in the Rani's relationship with her comrades. On the other hand, there are suggestions that such establishments were used by rebels for covert meetings. Rana Safvi writes - "In fact, many of the courtesans' *kothas*<sup>5</sup> were meeting points for the rebels. Post 1857, the full might of the British Empire descended on these *kothas*. The courtesans who had been the repositories of old culture and fine arts were relegated to the status of common prostitutes and their vast properties seized" (Safvi). So, in the spirit of revisionist writing, these dancing houses could've been celebrated for their part in the rebellion instead of being written in tandem with the imperial tropes.

As a fictional account, Mitchell can undoubtedly be inventive of the people she portrays. Even if there was a conscious effort not to lionize these figures, as done with Nana Sahib, who does indeed have some murky incidents to his name, what is perplexing is the author's choice of writing them as one dimensional, inane characters instead of creating complex personas who have moral ambiguity. The British characters have more moral range, be it a thought provoking statement from the fugitive officer,

Poole Sahib who denounces in perfect Hindustani "What madness has overtaken us all?" (Mitchell) or the wretched Mrs Mutlow, who is indebted to her "dear *Ayah*" for saving them and begs Laxmibai for mercy. Excluding Sewak Singh and Rani Laxmibai, the Indian characters seem to be more influenced by imperial tropes, and less by revisionist aims.

In effect, the purpose of revisionist writing is to in part offer a balanced stance. Yet, the book fails to do so. Apart from the last war, between two armies, violence in the narrative is always visually perpetrated by Indians. The only major scene of massacre is shown to be out-of-control rebels mercilessly killing what appears to be a very peaceful, Eden-like British cantonment where families reside and children are playing. On the other hand, the violence of British retaliation is mentioned through frenzied rebels screeching for revenge, making them an unreliable narrative source. Hanuman is always sympathetic to the plight of the British soldiers, having thoughts like "I remembered the British who really were prisoners and whose lives were in danger. How much longer could they hold out against the sepoys?" (Mitchell 46) but never extends any sympathy to the rebels killed by British retaliation. When, near the end, Saleem brings credible news from Delhi and mentions the execution of Bhahadur Shah Zafar's sons and the rampage and looting by British soldiers, Hanuman Singh's silence is noticeable, as he does not articulate any reaction,

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mental or verbal.

Another example of graphic violence is an Indian mob lynching mercenaries who try to capture rebels on behalf of the British. The scene is employed as a narrative device, in order to convince the Rani that her subjects were in full support of the rebels. But Hanuman's point of view is always highly critical of the rebels and never truly attempts to understand their side. As a witness, he records the rebels as arrogant and bloodthirsty 'murderers', threatening to even kill the Rani if she doesn't support them.

He is the diarist and documenter, and his perceptions are what child readers will be influenced by. Thus, if Hanuman is truly a revisionist voice, he must be more nonaligned in his judgments.

Eventually in the story, Hanuman and Nathu, a fellow spy, have the opportunity to infiltrate a British household. They become washeruppers in one Sir Robert Hamilton's massive bungalow. And while the book makes an attempt to demonstrate what western habits would have looked like to a native – Hanuman is astonished to find crockery and cutlery, is disgusted by bathtubs and finds it amazing that men and women dine together – even here, the British master is not any more sinister than an inebriated caricature with a 'red face' and 'bulging blue eyes' that drunkely yells about the house or a fussy mistress who doesn't trust the cook. Hanuman seems more wary of his own countrymen, showing the Bengali cook as a violent, 'mean, alcoholic boss' and comments that "All these servants of white people thought no end of themselves and had adopted their master's politics and prejudices" (Mitchell 96).

Apart from the one conversation he has with his brother in the beginning of the text, Hanuman never tries to appreciate or even understand why the masses were angry and willing to lay down their lives for the cause.

It appears as though in the narrative's constructed world, Hanuman Singh and his band of friends only seem to act out of a loyalty to the Rani (this sentiment is reiterated constantly), and not particularly due to any personal grievances against the British. The British armies are just potential employers, and distant, alien rulers to Hanuman. The Mutiny came as a complex reaction to the exploitations of the East India Company. Yet, the story does not communicate any of the severity or injustice effectively.

Very often, historical books such as Hanuman Singh are used as pedagogic tools in classroom teaching, prescribed as reading material to further

the interaction of children with history. They can either uphold the textbook's stance, or offer an alternative view. *Hanuman Singh* seems to do the former. The depiction of the Mutiny was analyzed in an Indian textbook and an English textbook. While the Indian text book seems to have a more wholesome overview, the English textbook, does not delve into the multi-faceted reasons for revolt.

The NCERT history textbook for class eight followed by CBSE schools in India has a chapter on the Indian Mutiny titled "*When People Rebel: 1857 and After*". It enumerates the reasons why the Mutiny took place. These are – anger in Nawabs and Rajas, after losing their power through unfair means of annexation by the East India Company; resentment in peasants and zamindars due to the unusually high taxes levied, discontent among sepoys with regard to pay, conditions of service and severe punishments for disobedience; and lastly fear of conversion and violations of religious sentiments. The textbook also contains two historical accounts – one by Vishnubhatt Godse, a traveler who documented the Mutiny and causes for rebellion and second, by Subedar Sitaram Pande who shows not all sepoys were in support of revolt, and remained loyal to their officers. These reasons illustrate that the Mutiny was not a sudden, aggressive uprising to a singular cultural transgression by the Company, but it was a reaction to many other social injustices simmering underneath the surface (NCERT).

However, the Hodder Education textbook series, which is contemporarily used by various British school boards, has a chapter titled "*The Indian Mutiny 1857*" which enumerates reasons for the Mutiny – an incident that "*traumatized the British in India and Britain itself*" (Leadbeater 1). Overlooking the omission of trauma to natives, most of the points argue that it was essentially British Modernity or the White Man's Burden - which is described as a "*paternalistic concern to spread the benefits of British Civilisation and Christian Culture*" (Leadbeater 9) - that perpetuated the mutiny. The book argues that social changes like abolishing *Sati* and human sacrificial practices of the *Thuggees*; introducing an education system via the Minute on Education by Macaulay, technological benefits that disturbed the conservative Brahmin classes, and annexation of princely states that lead to "*unemployment*" were the main reasons that caused resentment towards the Company. The hurting of religious sentiments was the last straw that consequently led to the Mutiny. The chapter sets a tone of "*good intentions, bad execution*" passing off the British presence as a well-meaning power that failed to properly execute its vision. A small paragraph does mention the "*corruption*" of the East India Company, however it does not list the various atrocities committed by the Compa-

ny like over-taxation of native farmers causing generational poverty and famine, exploiting peasant classes by forcing only cash crops, and casual violence against natives.

Hanuman Singh too seems to have taken cues from the British narrative built around the causes of mutiny. The focus of the rebellion is more on caste and fear of conversion, making it look like a religious war, instead one with socio-economic implications. Hanuman notes "Some soldiers were very angry that the English sahibs did not care about their feelings on such matter, so they refused to use the bullets...My brother said that there had been a rumour that it was a plot to convert all soldiers to Christianity, by first making them lose caste. What an impossible situation that would have been, to be a stranger and outcaste in your own family and village..." (Mitchell 11) When Jhansi finally takes a stand, the posters that are put up to announce the rebellion mention only one reason - destruction of faith, and Indian traditions. The book reduces the Mutiny to a large scale communal riot, rather than treat it as a symptom of colonization. Even minor reasons mentioned are either superstitious beliefs in prophecies, or that "Those who have mutinied have been promised twelve rupees a month by the rebel leaders." (Mitchell 48). While there are historical records to prove that there was indeed a prophecy proclaimed with regards to the end of British rule, it is outlandish to propose that such mass mobilization was possible due to these lesser motives.

Textbook critic James W. Loewen argues that the tendency of history textbooks to present a uniform, omniscient perspective on areas of real controversy "insulates students from the raw materials of history" and "encourage[s] students to believe that history is facts to be learned" (Hastings 4). For him, historical fiction cannot function as an alternative to history, but is a great resource to help young readers understand and interact with the nuances and paradoxes of historical events, or to borrow from Aiken, 'how the past looked, sounded, felt, and smelt.' However, Mitchell's depiction perpetuates the same simplistic, hegemonic understanding of the event that can be found in British school textbooks.

Apart from the negligent treatment of the causes of the Mutiny, the British presence in the country is also not problematized. It has famously been argued that the economic cost of colonizing India left the country drained and in poverty. In what is called the "deindustrialization of India", the British treated Indian as a resource reserve, exploiting local populations to build a global monopoly in trade. It is pointed out that "The British monopoly of industrial production drove Indians to agriculture beyond

levels the land could sustain...and if weather or drought reduced their agricultural work, there was no back-up source of income from cloth. Rural poverty was a direct result of British actions" (Tharoor 31). Also illustrated are the effects of high taxation, "Taxation by the Company – usually at a minimum of 50% of income – was so onerous that two-thirds of the population ruled by the British in the late eighteenth century fled their lands. Durant writes that '[tax] defaulters were confined in cages, and exposed to the burning sun; fathers sold their children to meet the rising rates'. Unpaid taxes meant being tortured to pay up, and the wretched victim's land being confiscated by the British. The East India Company created, for the first time in Indian history, the landless peasant, deprived of his traditional source of sustenance" (31).

Hanuman Singh's first chapter addresses all these concerns – famine, poverty, cash crops, over taxation and yet it seems to lack the gravity or significance. These reasons are relegated to the background as Hanuman and his family are not personally affected by any of them – they have enough lands and their father is clever enough not to grow only cash crops. By making these colonial impositions tangential to Hanuman's life, they become tangential to the Munitry as well, just mildly affecting the narrative. There is no expression of pain, utter destitution or discrimination, thus making them just secondary considerations. Even Saleem, who is forced to convert to Christianity, as his family succumbs to the pressure of over taxation, is not too disturbed by his conversion. While his mother is shown to cry her heart out, he, on the other hand, is described to have adventures in the army, and even mentions later in the book, that once the mutiny is over, would like to be employed back. After the first chapter, such economic exploitations and their effects are not pointed out again throughout the text, and all focus is concentrated on mass hysteria and rumors around losing caste and religion.

Not only is there an underrepresentation of the mistreatment of peasants, but there is no diversity in the British population. The only observable British in the narrative are army officers, women and children. Apart from Mr. Morland the tax collector *sahib*, no East India Company employees, merchants, or other Britons are alluded to. In her study, Kolsky talks about how racial violence was "an intrinsic feature of imperial rule" from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century and ""crimes committed by a mostly forgotten cast of European characters - planters, paupers, soldiers, and seamen [show that] violence was an endemic rather than ephemeral part of British colonial rule in India." (Kolsky 2) She states that "...the frugal, disciplined, honorable, honest, vigorous, restrained, sporting, and superior Englishman was

meant to stand in stark contrast to his inferior Indian other, cast as deceitful, extravagant, sensuous, effeminate, and weak." (5) However, this imperial narrative was disrupted by "white vagrants and planters and soldiers and sailors who drifted about India barefoot, drunk and disorderly, assaulting, burglarizing, and murdering those around them, muddying the lines of racial difference and threatening imperial stability from within." (5) Kolsky calls these quotidian acts of violence the "empire's most closely guarded secrets" and asserts that the "archive is replete with incidents of Britons murdering, maiming, and assaulting Indians and *getting away with it*". (2) A revisionist piece of literature would address the 'most closely guarded secret' by referring to this aspect, since the mainstream narratives do not. However, *Hanuman Singh* fails on this account as well, with no representation of the variety of colonizers and the menacing presence of the East India Company on the Indian subcontinent.

In the epilogue of his book, James Vaughn contends that the Raj was a failure to achieve radical Enlightenment's aspirations for a cosmopolitan civil society under an 'empire of liberty'. When "the most dynamic commercial and manufacturing society of the Western world, Britain and its Atlantic empire, collided with one of the richest and most economically buoyant regions of the Indian Ocean, the Mughal province of Bengal.", (Vaughn 239) the ideal of equality and progress of all was not extended to the colonized. Instead, the 19<sup>th</sup> century British Raj in India was "an extractive, bureaucratic, and military despotism that loomed large over an increasingly agrarian and racially divided society. The imperial state did not rule through colonial society but above it" (239) and the empire "came to embody the West's subjugation of "the rest," the development of an inequitable world economy with an industrialized core and underdeveloped peripheries". (239)

However, by not interacting with the many reasons for the Mutiny, by not depicting potent Indian characters, and most importantly, by not communicating the rebel side effectively, *Hanuman Singh* has failed to revise or rewrite any of the British Raj's subjugation of India.

Although it is a unique text, as a revisionist children's book, *Hanuman Singh* does not fulfill its potential. A truly innovative revisionist piece would ideally be a more creative and emancipatory space, and further a discourse around the above mentioned aspects of imperial rule in India. 2002 was the year it was published in, and children's literature had evolved beyond its formulaic writing and elementary style. Children in Britain were already reading intelligent, complex and subversive chil-

dren's works by writers like Phillip Pullman, Neil Gaiman, J.K. Rowling, Katherine Patterson amongst others. Yet, *Hanuman Singh* remains a simplistic depiction of a very intricate issue and to a first-time reader, 1857 remains an unnecessary, bloody war instead of a popular, empowering revolt that called for justice.

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