Panel 2: Girlhood and National Identity

Anna Greek and Hans Hägerdal, *Frida på Sumatra: A Nordic Colonial Girlhood*

The paper applies postcolonial perspectives in the intersection between literature and history, focusing on imaginations of the exotic and colonial in a young girls’ novel written in the heyday of Western colonialism. *Frida på Sumatra* (1921) is an adventure story written by the Danish author Helene Hörlyck and tells the story of Frida, a teenage girl who lives with her uncle Thomas on his estate on Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies. Frida is represented as independent, intelligent and full of initiative, resisting attempts to make her into a proper European young lady – a circumstance which is shocking to her various Anglo-Indian and Dutch suitors, while tolerated by her Danish guardian. Frida also has a close relationship with a number of Batak people, who are linked to her uncle’s estate in various ways and she speaks their language well, having been a captive of “wild savages” for a time before being saved and brought to her uncle’s estate.

This paper has a threefold purpose: First, the novel is placed within the genre of stories of adventurous young women directed at young women readers in the first decades of the Twentieth Century. Secondly, Hans Hägerdal situates imaginations of the savage permeating the novel within the 19th and early 20th century processes of Northern European colonialism in Southeast Asia. Finally, Anna Greek investigates the novel’s representations of race, gender and power concentrating on comparing and contrasting the portrayal of the Danish girl Frida and the Batak girl Lola.

Anna Greek is an Associate Professor in English Literature at Linnaeus University. Among her research interests are intercultural pedagogy and modern African Anglophone literature.

Hans Hägerdal is a Professor in History at Linnaeus University. He has conducted research in colonial and cultural encounters in Southeast Asia, and the professionalization of Chinese historical studies.

Jessica Medhurst, Transcending and Challenging National Identity: Anglophone Constructions of Chinese Girlhood in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century

Childhood in nineteenth and early twentieth century Anglophone accounts of China is a marginalised topic, girlhood even more so. Through close analysis, this paper scrutinises fictional, and one purportedly non-fictional, accounts to discuss the ways in which girlhood is unsurprisingly constructed as an aside to the norm of boyhood and in terms of the tropes of female infanticide and foot binding. It then compares these with constructions of the girls to whom these ideas are addressed, concluding that girlhood in these texts is presented as a universal condition that transcends nationality, society and culture.

It will discuss Nell Parsons’s fictional *Little Chinese Girl* (1909) and Mrs Bryson’s apparently non-fictional *Child Life in China* (1901), drawing out the similarities of the fictional conventions they employ (White, 1978). This will be undertaken alongside a discussion of the
apparent absence of girls in the imaginative trip to China in Louisa May Alcott’s *Eight Cousins* (1875) and the role of girls in Adele M. Fielde’s *Chinese Fairy Tales*. In addition to analysing the physical of appearances of girls, both Chinese and Western, it will compare the values ascribed to them and discuss the ways in which this both conforms with and challenges prevailing notions of the cultural binaries between China and the Anglophone West in the period.

Although it may be no surprise that girlhood in these texts is largely petite, obedient, faithful and bound, a close analysis of the ways in which the texts negotiate this against a backdrop of colonialism, occupation and religious conversion threatens the dichotomous paternalism of the Western saviour trope.

**Dr Jessica Medhurst** completed her PhD (*Constructions of Childhood in Lewis Carroll’s Photographs*) at the University of Reading (2014) and undertook a Knowledge Transfer Partnership postdoctoral project at Newcastle University and Seven Stories, The UK’s National Centre for Children’s Books. She now teaches and researches English Literature at Beijing Normal University (China). Her publications cover constructions of childhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both literature and photography.

**Khanthaporn Changprasert**, *Brave New Girl: Making Sense of Girlhood through Space and Place in Jane Vejjajiva’s The Happiness of Kati*

This study argues that space and place is brought into play as a crucial setting to construct a brave new girl, Kati, the protagonist in Jane Vejjajiva’s *The Happiness of Kati* (2006). This poetic novel portrays a simple and happy life of a nine-year-old Kati, a Thai girl whose positive attitude and character traits are embodied throughout the story of significant setting, yet she has to come to terms with the fact that her mother is dying from an incurable disease. In terms of spatiality studies, this study explicates sociocultural background of Thailand, the conceptual framework of literary geography is also employed to analyze how Kati embraces the surrounding nature, people, and the community where she belongs, thus, empowers her to cope with the sense of loss and then regain courage and confidence to move on with her future life.

It is found that, despite the poignant and moving event, Kati gradually weaves the canvas of girlhood and her strengths dealing with her family situation, including the loss of her mother. The three different settings of home in contemporary Thailand, as well as other exotic geographical features portrayed in the novel convey the sense of the locales, root, and identity of Kati. Having been nurtured by the place of her root, she bravely and securely makes the decision at the end of the story to live her life without her biological parents. This “girl’s book” marks as the idea of being a girl in contemporary children’s literature as well as exposes girls how they define and make sense of this world.

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and Poetry and so forth. Her research interests include narrative empathy in children’s literature, cognitive literary studies, feminist memory studies as well as other interdisciplinary studies.