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NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

Rupture and repair: The consequences of colonial childcare

Hannah Charlton* Freelance writer, UK

ABSTRACT

During the years of colonial rule in India, the white colonial classes delegated their childcare to Ayahs—or nursemaids—despite regarding them as inferior and less civilised. Marjorie, daughter of colonial parents, traces her early attachment to her Ayah despite her family's racist attitudes. As World War 2 ended, Marjorie was abruptly removed from her Ayah and brought back 'home' to England where she was sent to boarding school following the conformist pathways of a colonial family. Her loss of her Ayah and her feelings of abandonment and being unloved cause her to close down emotionally and focus on surviving. Much later, in her fifties, she began to recognise her own state of emotional dysfunction and sought help with therapy. She was fortunate to meet Nick Duffell who had been developing an understanding of what became known as Boarding School Syndrome. With a group of other former boarders, they formed a support group to help those traumatised by boarding school years to process their feelings. Marjorie assisted many boarders and in doing so reduced her sense of isolation and loss. In the meantime, campaigners had fought to acknowledge the Ayahs who were brought to London to care for their charges on the long sea journey and who were then shown the door and abandoned on the streets of London. A care home was established and this effort to give support has finally been recognised.

KEYWORDS: colonialism; childcare; India; racism; Ayah; boarding school

'One kiss on the cheek, one kiss on the nose, one kiss on the other cheek'. This was Marjorie's bedtime ritual in Delhi with her Indian nursemaid, her Ayah (Figure 1), who had been her primary carer since the age of seven months. This loving gesture was in clear defiance of her mother's orders to her as a child: 'You must not kiss Ayah goodnight'. When Marjorie asked why, her mother replied: 'Because she's a servant and an Indian'.

By the age of three Marjorie had navigated her way between the powerful emotional bond she had formed with her Ayah (she was called Byah) and the duty and obedience she owed

*Contact details: hannahrcharlton@gmail.com

to her mother, who seemed to have been anxious about any intimate form of affection and bond developing with Byah.

Figure 1. ***Marjorie with Ayah***

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Marjorie was polarised from her early days between her loyalty to two women: to her birth mother with her rigid hierarchical mindset and her Ayah, who was her emotional anchor and source of love and safety. She found a way to bridge the parallel worlds of her parents' colonial mindset and the cherishing love of her Ayah—her primary carer. She rapidly learned to comply with her parents' chosen status but at the same time to cherish her attachment to Byah who cared for her till she was eight when they were abruptly separated forever.

This is the story of Marjorie's journey from the arms of her Ayah to her highly conformist, institutionalised period in a boarding school on her return to England, followed by her much later-in-life unravelling and processing of her early life distress and resistance to the racism around her.

Marjorie's life story offers a magnifying glass to aspects of the British empire and colonial life and its legacy that are now being extensively re-examined by both colonial and colonised generations. Her very British story offers insights into our understanding of our past.

Decades later her therapist Nick Duffell would address her pain and confusion, establishing that Byah had been a second mother to her during the critical early years development and had made her who she is. As part of this acceptance, and with Duffell's help, a small group of other boarding school survivors, formed an organisation called Boarding Concern (which is now called BSS-S [Boarding School Survivors Support]) to help other boarders deal with a similar privileged pain! During these years of therapy and processing Marjorie also witnessed the documentation and acknowledgement of how the Indian Ayahs had cared for the colonial offspring were sometimes valued, but often treated with brutal contempt.

I learned about Ayahs and their undervalued plight while studying—late in life—aspects of the British Empire and our legacy. As an ex-boarder myself, sent away at 10 from home to a school 300 miles away, when Marjorie talked through her experiences, it resonated strongly with me. I also watched both my brothers endure the life-long effects of being sent away at the age of seven and understand the importance of releasing our suppressed emotions. Meeting Marjorie and interweaving the two strands has been a great help in processing my own involvement and comprehension.

Marjorie's resistance to the status quo and her profound loyalty to her Byah were qualities that she would carry deep within her until much later in life when she would begin to unravel and process her passage from India to boarding school in England—and her subsequent life of reluctant conformity.

Although the loss of Byah would get submerged in the boarding school years, her understanding of the importance of these early years of care and development would emerge later with a greater intensity. This recognition would be reflected in Marjorie's pleasure at the ongoing re-evaluation and close examination of Britain's past as well as the recognition and honouring of the many Ayahs who had been brought to London and then discarded.

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Marjorie was born in southern England, and in 1937, at the age of seven months, she travelled to India where, embarking from the ship on the quayside, her mother handed her over to Byah who had already been looking after her older sister for four years. Byah thanked her mother, who later told Marjorie that Byah had said 'I have been praying for this baby'. So, at this very early age a bond was already in the making.

The family background was a model British colonial existence. In 1858, British Crown rule was established in India, following a century of control by the East India Company. The British ruled India for about 89 years, from 1858 until India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947—over a period known as the Raj.

Her father had attended Haileybury College, the training establishment founded in 1806 by the East India Company to prepare the administrative class for their colonial roles. After the East India College closed in 1858, Haileybury College was set up four years later, as a

boarding school for boys on the site. Haileybury was a good pathway to the India Army which was his ambition.

He finished his schooling in 1918, and, as Marjorie explained, always suffered from not having served in World War 1, having had the notion of dying for duty instilled in him. During the war, each Monday, the teachers read out the names of former pupils who had been killed in service the previous week. The pupils stood hearing these names and citations of people they had recently watched playing cricket. It was a traumatic period for him and he hardly ever spoke about it later in life.

When he left school, aged 18, he followed his ambition and went to India and joined the Indian army in which, as a white British soldier, he would have been superior in rank and status to any Indian.

Marjorie's mother was born in India and she met her father at a dance when he was 24. Life in India for the family was one of duty and maintaining status as the civilising, superior, white imperial race.

In 1888 a guidebook was published for young white memsahibs (term of deference for colonial wives and women by non-white people) arriving in India. Written by Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, long-term colonial wives, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* gave advice on managing a household as well as servants and is a fascinating—and shocking—insight into the memsahib frame of mind as well as establishing consistency of behaviours and attitudes (Steel & Gardiner, 1888/2011).

In his book *Inglorious Empire*, Shashi Tharoor (2018) points out the need by the colonial wives to demonstrate the Imperial lifestyle:

> The British in India created little islands of Englishness, planting ferns and roses… They lived in bungalows in their own areas, known as cantonments and 'civil lines', separated from the 'Black Towns' where the locals lived; they kept to their clubs, to which Indians were not admitted; their loyalties remained wedded to their faraway homeland; their children were shipped off to the British public-school system and did not mingle with the 'natives'; their clothes and purchases came from Britain, as did their books and ideas. (p. 54)

As Tharoor points out there was rare acknowledgement of the existing skills, discovery, and development history (such as steel production, boat and gun design) and the proven talent of the Indians—the British were there for profit and rule.

'Before the war' Marjorie said, 'Mother was quite busy doing Red Cross work as well as tennis parties. During the war, she did a lot with St. Dunstan's for people who were blinded in the conflict. She knitted for the troops: it wasn't an easy environment.'

Much later in life as she examined her past, Marjorie recognised that her mother had lived with very conformist attitudes: 'My mother was quite racist, referring to "*the touch of the tar brush*" and that sort of stuff'. As did her father who declared that certain Indians could have

a meal with the family but not stay in the house. He totally embraced how the colonial system encouraged a sense of rigid superiority—there was no other way to rule.

Marjorie was aware of this contradiction from very early on: 'In my heart was this nasty stuff I was brought up around, which I loathed from the time I was little. I loathed it. I loved Byah. I was absolutely with her, it was in my blood'. She was forced to live her life constrained by this dividing force between her mother and her Ayah: her relationship with her mother was complicated and even tortuous at times. It wasn't until much later in her life she could unravel her mother's own conflicts and secrets.

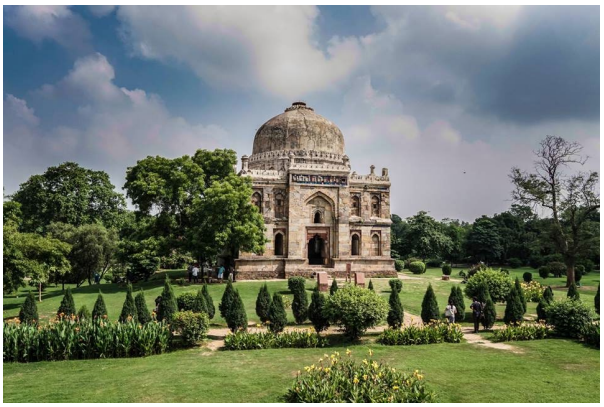
Life with Byah was one of routine and safety in the highly sensory and colourful environment that was India. The two sisters were woken, washed, and dressed by Byah, before going to breakfast. There was a lot of 'prim and proper' behaviour: all with the aim of remaining aloof from the real India and promoting a veneer of civilisation.

At a certain point in the morning, there would be a meeting with her mother to oversee some very traditional educational activities—reading, writing, 'sums', and some history and geography—all reflecting British culture. They did not go to school until they arrived in Britain.

'If my mother was at home, I would have lunch with her. If not, Byah would sit while we had our lunch. She wouldn't eat with us.'

Every afternoon they went to Lodhi Gardens (Figure 2), the huge park in the middle of Delhi where the children, accompanied by their Ayahs, would play and explore. Byah was always there to encourage, console, and be her pillar of safety and love. 'I can't think of a better word than being at ease with somebody. She was just there and loving and secure. Everything was safe, everything.'

Figure 2. ***Lodhi Gardens, Delhi***



Note. From *Lodhi Garden, Delhi, India* [Photograph]. Tanviechpilani, 2016, Wikimedia (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lodhi_Garden,_Delhi,_India.jpg). CC BY-SA 4.0.

Byah's name was Angeli. She didn't tell Marjorie much about her life. She'd been working with British families for many years. 'She was probably in her fifties: she was going grey because I remember how she used to do her hair.' Occasionally she would go off and see her mother. She would have left her family to work, although apparently, she had a son.

'I remember once when my mother was out, Byah took me to her quarters and I was appalled because she was in the servants' quarters in Delhi and it was a mud floor. And I asked, "Where's your bed?" And she said, "I haven't got a bed". She just had a mat on the floor and that shocked me. She showed me her Christian Bible, which had Indian illustrations in it, and she sat and read it to me.'

Her older sister had accepted and absorbed her parents' attitudes whereas Marjorie had, from an early age, instinctively resisted them: 'She was different and always thought in an upper-class manner. When she wanted fudge and the Cook or Byah said "No, not until 4 pm", she would then change her watch to demand fudge when she wanted it.' Marjorie was aware of her sister's conscious right to manipulate and order someone who is a servant, as opposed to respecting someone who looks after you. She would challenge her sister and explain it was the Cook's rest time.

'It's all difficult stuff… that degree of suppressing the empathy, because you believe that some people somehow are not worth it or not better than us. Or you believe deep down that you have an innate superiority that enables you or allows you to treat somebody exactly with a darker skin as inferior. It was awful to watch. My anti racism has a very emotional base. I've recognised that from refusing not to kiss Bayah. I hated my parents' racism.'

Marjorie's story reflects the significant changes in parenting styles during her lifetime. Her parents would have been brought up with a hangover from the Victorian era—children were to be seen not heard and obedience and punishment were the key drivers, with the cloak of duty wrapped around all activities. Parents saw their offspring as continuing and maintaining this line of duty and, perhaps for this very reason, not regarding their children as equals, friends, or companions; they felt justified in handing over their important early care to the very people they regarded as inferior and less civilised. This contradiction whereby the British colonials handed over their parental duties to native servants they regarded as inferior and uncivilised meant that the children often had a very different, more relaxed experience. Parents would not know or care about the stories, the songs, or the games the children learned.

For this same reason the children were returned to the homeland to go to boarding school. This institutionalised care and education ensured the desired consistency in behaviour, to instil these same disciplines and values into the next generation and avoid any resistance or interrogation of the life they were being given.

Without realising it, Marjorie's powerful attachment to Byah meant that she saw the world through a different lens to the rest of her family. A confused perspective that would challenge her for much of her life, geared as she was to conform to their way of thinking.

The big change and emotional rupture for Marjorie came when her father was posted back to England. The war ended on May 8, 1945. 'I remember exactly where we were in the house: I have flashbacks, exactly like photographs. My father came back from work and said: "We're going home"'.

'My Byah was always very quiet anyway with my parents and I never thought I would hear her stand up to him, but, very upset, she asked, "And what is going to happen to me?" She had already been with the family for 12 years'.

'And my father said, "Ah well, I'll see if I can get you to come back with us", but even then, I understood he never would. It was 1945. We couldn't have brought her with us back then. So he just lied to her. I remember it clearly because she was so upset. So was I: I hadn't ever thought of not having her with me.'

Her father was flown back to England. Her mother and Marjorie and her sister followed suit and sailed less than three weeks after the end of the war in late May.

It took three days on the train to get to the port in Mumbai (Bombay). The family had packed up swiftly in Delhi. Byah travelled on the train with them, but was never allowed to sleep in the compartment with the family. 'That was the last week I had with her because she came with us to the Deolali Camp, where we stayed for a few days. I'm so glad I had that time with her because my mother slept in one room with my sister, while Byah stayed in a room with me. She was sleeping on the floor. It was just very special seeing how she lived, which I hadn't seen before. We were sharing space, intimate space. It wasn't me being nosy. I was just hugging myself with delight. I remember feeling so good. It was just wonderful'. These last days with Byah—though she didn't fully understand it—gave Marjorie experiences of intimacy never previously allowed or tolerated.

The parting was appalling: the night before there were thousands and thousands of people preparing to leave. The ships had been changed into troop ships: people were stacked inside. On the top deck were civilians, and on the lower decks, 5,000 troops were being returned to England.

'The next day Byah left in a rickshaw that faced backwards. My sister and I stood, howling our eyes out, just watching her disappear down a dusty road into the distance. That's an awful memory. Her just sitting, looking backwards. And that was it. There was no sense of being able to stay in touch with her.'

'My mother had been in India for 45 years: she was born there. When we were leaving, she got malaria and she didn't want to tell anybody, which is why we saw an awful lot of Byah because she was taking care of us because my mother was ill. If she told anybody they would

have cancelled her passage and she would have had to wait for months. She went on to the boat with a temperature of about 104 and she waited until we were far enough out to report it to sick bay. After about 12 hours, they wouldn't turn the boat around. My sister, who was 12 and I, who was eight lived in our life jackets. We were on our own, which was also quite a novel experience.'

So, with the world in turmoil, the children, at an early age, were abruptly removed from the life they were used to and cut adrift from their primary caregiver. They were put on a packed troop ship to take them from India and bring them to a cold, northerly Britain and life in the institution of a boarding school. It was 1945. The Britain Marjorie came back to (which she had left at only seven months) was an immediate post-war Britain, struggling to recover from damage, challenged by economic hardship, and with basic necessities in short supply.

Once Marjorie had been torn from Byah—with no real understanding of what lay ahead of her—and brought to England, she had 15 months before being sent to boarding school. 'Until I was eight years old I did not attend school and lived in the love and warmth of India.' The long sea journey to London was followed by a few weeks of living with various relatives in different places, such as Tunbridge Wells: 'We stayed with them as long as they'd have us, and then we'd move on. Eventually we rented a house in Weybridge.'

Marjorie's ongoing relationship with her mother continued to hit unexplained and harsh barriers: 'About three months after we arrived a letter came with Indian stamps on it and I rushed into the hall. I picked up the letter and said to my mother "It's got Indian stamps. Is it from Byah?" And she took the letter out of my hand, and said, "No, Byah is dead", and walked out of the room'.

This shock was clearly something not to be discussed and that needed to be buried in Marjorie's psyche. Much later Marjorie would discover facts that would reveal her mother's own conflicted relationship with India, her identity, and her jealousy of Byah's bond with her daughter. That brusque revelation of Byah's death further terminated Marjorie's hopes of somehow being reunited with her. For her mother it was a complex mix of commodity and ill-will. Byah may not have travelled to London with the family—as did many of the Ayahs—but she was promptly wiped out of existence without any concern for the child's feelings.

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For the most part, childcare by Ayahs has been described from the child's perspective: the popular novel *The Secret Garden*, written in 1911 by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911/2024), outlines how an unwanted child, Mary, is orphaned in India and brought back to England where, along with her upper-class cousin, she learns, through nature, to find love. The Ayahs are portrayed as servants through a distinct colonial mindset. Several film and TV versions of the book reflect these attitudes of arrogance, until the children learn to reflect just how unloved they are.

Very little was documented about the Ayahs and their own feelings—of their close emotional bonds formed with their wards, and the pain of having this bond broken and lost. The voice of the Ayah is virtually silent: despite the key significance for the children they cared for, they were invisible and considered insignificant. Just like the children packed off to boarding school, they were undervalued and rarely considered as individuals except in the memories of the colonial children.

It is only relatively recently that the full story of these caring women has been examined and revealed. In her book *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*, Rozina Visram (2002) reveals how the journeys back to Britain for colonial families required Ayahs to travel with them on the sea voyage of up to four months to look after the children, to be nurses and maids for their white memsahibs. An indication of how undervalued they were was that they were not given their own name on the ship's ticket but were labelled with their employer's name—as in Ayah Smith.

Once in London they were deemed unnecessary and dispensable—often to be replaced by English nannies. They were literally shown the door and had to fend for themselves, in an unknown city, with neither immediate help nor the promised return ticket to take them home. It was expected they would figure out how to survive, abandoned and put on the streets. If Byah had travelled to Britain with the family, there is a high chance that she too would have been discarded.

While the Ayahs were dismissed and sent off to fend for themselves, the next step for the children, abruptly parted from their carers, was to be parcelled off to boarding schools.

In September of 1946, Marjorie, aged nine, was taken to boarding school and left there by her mother. The boarding schools were full to the brim because the post-war world was heavily disrupted with deaths and housing shortages, so she was boarded outside of the school in a private house full of other children. Marjorie's experience of being left there by her mother was very matter of fact: no explanation or reason or support was given, and it was expected that she would accept and adapt with no resistance or unhappiness.

'After being shown the way to school, I walked there on my own for 25 minutes each day, for a year. It was awful. I was then moved into the school's own boarding house. It was even worse. I was on my own when Matron came into the hall to pick up the new girls and take them to their dormitories. The dormitory had seven people. I was the eighth. Everybody was in the dormitory and Matron took me in and said, "This is a new girl who's coming into the dormitory." They stared in silence, and she said to me, "You're in that corner because nobody likes you."'

'I stood up to her and said, "Nobody knows me." And she said, "Oh, we've all heard about you and the place you were at before", which I know wasn't true. Women like this Matron were embittered, single women who didn't have anywhere to live after the war. So they went to work in boarding schools.' It was 1947. Marjorie had to learn to survive under the rule of

teachers and staff who clearly saw these children as privileged offspring who needed to follow rules and obey.

Being sent to boarding school on returning to England was alien to 'normal living'. 'I found the lack of privacy, strict timing, and the loss of quiet thinking spaces all devastatingly awful', remembered Marjorie. She realised the need to fall in, follow the herd, and conform.

While at boarding school, Marjorie learned to repress her emotions—about the complete loss of Byah, about being abandoned at boarding school that gave her the feeling of being unloved—and unlovable. She quickly learned not to cry: it didn't help and crying brought reprimands, mockery, and bullying—with all the children fighting to survive in their own ways. Her innate sense of resistance or divergence was under great pressure to conform to the dominant patterns of behaviour belonging to the school, her family, and their social class.

At boarding school, she would experience the dislocation of her primary feelings, realising there was no anchor to turn to, no one who recognised her confusion and pain. The solution was to clamp down on any real feelings and turn her face towards the dominant mode of behaviour and compliance. 'I decided to cope on my own', she described, 'so I could not get hurt.'

Marjorie's story got more complicated as she contemplated the role of her mother and understood her jealousy of Byah, but there had never been any resolution. She had declared Byah was dead, but later, when Marjorie was around school leaving age she found her mother's address book and saw an address for Byah, next to her house-mistress' address. So her mother had in fact been in touch with Byah but had chosen to terminate the bond and never once told her daughter that her Ayah was still alive. This was yet another blow for Marjorie who had to live with not only her own conflicting drives between the emotional bonds she had for Byah and the duty she owed her parents, but also the harsh and complicated attitude her mother clearly felt towards Byah. Reconciling all these contradictions felt impossible: it was better to bury. Marjorie was to live her next decades constrained by this divisive turmoil.

She then followed a life path predetermined for her by her parents' mindset. Four weeks after school she trained as an orthopaedic nurse. She felt fortunate to find work that she enjoyed. She married a man, had children—and life continued down a model pathway. Except that gradually her inner discord began to surface: 'I was married for 34 years. I thought it was acceptable to marry someone who never once said he loved me.'

Gradually the relationship began to disintegrate, with both of them not fully understanding how the experiences of their highly formative young lives were surfacing in confusion and degrees of depression. Both were numbed and unable to express real emotions. They divorced. This was a pivotal point for Marjorie to begin exploring and unravelling her life.

Drawn strongly to help and work with children, Marjorie always worked with them in several different roles.

She formed a new relationship with someone she had met decades before and who had tracked her down. He recognised the very difficult time she was having and suggested she should seek help.

'When I was 54, I realised I was using work as the left-over survival strategy from school and I took the major step of starting therapy to look at my boarding—and childhood issues. I left all previous work, went to university, and started working as a volunteer at a children's charity. I continued to work there for ten years, moving on to be a member of staff.'

She read a newspaper article in which Nick Duffell had written about boarding school men who were typically 'confident, arrogant, and brittle'. The word brittle really hit her and took her back to her boarding school days, thinking of the shell she had surrounded herself with that could so easily be cracked to reveal a mass of repressed emotion.

Duffell (2000), a therapist, was one of the first to examine the 'privileged' trauma of children sent away to what were very tough environments for children back in the 1930s and later. Marjorie went to see Duffell and realised he could help her because he could understand her blocked emotional and mental state. She then continued to see him for four or five years, working with him to acknowledge and untangle all the conflicting layers of her earlier years.

'All this stuff comes out much, much later in life and I've felt more settled and assured in the last 10–12 years. I'm 86 now. It can take an awfully long time. The key thing we are left with is that we're unlovable. Once you feel you are unlovable, then so much else goes wrong because you think nobody likes you too. It's a very hostile sort of thing. I coined the phrase "inappropriately independent". You've just got to get your shoes on and carry on.'

At the time, Nick Duffell was running workshops for people who were coming unstuck later in life after boarding school. He was beginning to formulate the presence of a state of mind that he recognised in children who had been sent to boarding school and whose emotions were largely suppressed during this time. Very often they only began to explore these hidden feelings much later in life, when precisely this state of mind led to relationship trouble and to feelings of loss and abandonment with resulting confusion and anger. These feelings had never been processed.

Joy Schaverien (2011), author and analyst, first coined the phrase Boarding School Syndrome when her clients talked about deeply repressed feelings: 'The learned behaviours and discontents that result in Boarding School Syndrome revolve around problems with intimacy. Whilst appearing socially confident the ex-boarder… [may] make deeply dependent relationships and then …emotionally, or actually, abandon the loved person. This cutting off from emotional need may be experienced by the partner as a violent attack or an abrupt

rejection' (p. 140). She outlines key principles of A, B, C, and D—abandonment, bereavement, and captivity, which in turn cause dissociation.

Since 1990, Duffell and Joy Schaverien have worked therapeutically with thousands of 'boarding school survivors'. In an article in *The Guardian* (2024), Duffell outlined the 'normalised neglect as the context in which such abuse regularly occurs and compensated survival is inevitable' (para. 3).

Boarding School Syndrome was difficult to talk about for older ex-boarders. The main reason being that these children led privileged lives through their catered upbringing, wide open opportunities for work, wealth, and also membership of belonging to a club-like environment whose foundations were never questioned. Marriages were informally arranged through social status and parenting patterns repeated.

'Nick raised the level of discussion. He lifted it entirely upwards to talking about intergenerational trauma and this lack of empathy from people in power. The disconnect between your sense of current status and your vulnerability as a child is vast. You're told you're the best. You're the top. You're the cream. We need to understand more about this process of rupture, followed by institutionalisation. For a long time we had Tory people making decisions about us who are in positions of power but who actually don't care about us.'

Duffell explained to Marjorie that there was a real need for follow-through after the workshops, somewhere people could go to share stories and collectively process many of the traumas suppressed from early life, in order to retrieve a sense of balance.

As Marjorie worked with Nick to process her personal history, she combined it with her professional experience of helping people and it became clear that a more public forum was needed, a chance for those who suffered from boarding school years to share their stories and be able to revisit and process some of the pain they experienced. A group of other ex-boarders formed the Boarding School Survivors–Support (BSS-S) in 2003 (https://www.bss-support.org.uk/). They were able to share stories and help—complemented by one-on-one therapy—to untangle a complex range of emotions.

'The support group has now been going for over 20 years. It took time to establish, but the group has newsletters and a conference every year. From being a taboo subject, it's become much more talked about. It helped enormously reduce my sense of isolation. What I took from boarding was that it was an unhappy way to spend my school years and that I was unloveable and "different" because of my childhood.'

The emerging stories of former boarders are important for understanding the lasting and long-term effects of sending children away from home to boarding school where they are taught they are part of a privileged elite, superior to the rest of society. This effect was more pronounced through the 20th century, especially pre-internet, when children were more

isolated—but if we accept that there is damage from these fee-paying divisions, then we should acknowledge how it affects the social fabric and policy decisions made by individuals (including key players in politics and industry) who have not processed their superiority and lack of empathy.

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As Marjorie shared experiences with former boarders, she discovered that—in parallel—there were other steps forward being taken to acknowledge the role and significance of the many Ayahs who had cared for colonial children. This was important for her to resolve her sense of loss about her Ayah and her early years.

Between 1890 and 1940, over 1200 Ayahs, as well, it must be added, the Amahs who had cared for children in the East Asian colonies, entered Britain on international ships as British administrators travelled back and forth to the Indian and South East Asian colonial provinces. Most of the Ayahs were dismissed on arrival and abandoned. This destitution was gradually noted by concerned white British women, who felt that Christian duty should be applied to these abandoned women and decided to create a refuge that would not only give them a roof but also civilise the heathen other.

Mentions of the first hostel for Ayahs appeared in the 1890s after it was founded in 1891 by Mr and Mrs Rogers in Jewry Street, in Aldgate in East London. This was subsequently moved to Hackney (Figure 3) by the London City Mission. This was also because in 1909 the India Office—the British government department created in 1858 to oversee the administration of the colonial provinces in India—finally, after nearly 30 years of failing to support destitute Indians, established a Committee on Distressed Colonial and Indian Subjects (Visram, 2002).

In 1921 the Home was moved again to a larger house in King Edward Road also in Hackney (Figure 4). This Ayahs' Home had 30 rooms and could accommodate over 100 women. The Home not only gave sanctuary to the Ayahs, it also served as an 'employment agency' finding return passages with new families.

Figure 3. ***Ayahs and Amahs in the refuge in Hackney***

Note. From *Ayah's Home, Hackney* [Photograph], Author unknown, 1901, Wikimedia (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ayahs%27_Home,_Hackney.jpg). Image in the public domain.

Figure 4. ***Ayahs' Home 4 King Edward Road, Hackney, circa. 1921***

Note. From *Ayah's Home 4 King Edward Road, Hackney* [Photograph], Author unknown, c. 1921, Wikimedia (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ayahs%27_Home_4_King_Edward_Road,_Hackney.jpg). Image in the public domain.

One recent move to acknowledge the Indian Ayahs was the campaign to install a Blue Plaque on the building that had housed the Ayah's Home in Hackney. Art historian Farhana Bello (née Mamoojee) came across certain historical family portraits in which an Ayah would be present, next to children, part of the family but never credited. She found out about the Ayah's Home and, with extraordinary tenacity, set about campaigning to have the building (now a block of flats) designated with a Blue Plaque.

In June, 2022, after a lengthy campaign, a Blue Plaque (Figure 5) was unveiled on the building known as the Ayahs' Home in Hackney (English Heritage, 2022). English Heritage, who administer the choice of plaques, has been working hard to break with the long convention of lauding 'notable' and 'prominent' individuals and to aim for a broader representation of social achievement. The plaque for the Ayahs represents a significant shift in our public memorialisation of the past: not only were they women of colour (in 2022 only 14% of English Heritage plaques represented women and 4% of people of colour; Visit Heritage, n.d.a, n.d.b) but they were also stripped of their identity: until 1922, the ship's documents registered most of the Ayahs as Ayah X—the name of their employer. So this Blue Plaque is a memorial to a number of largely anonymous and offensively undervalued women, playing a key role in the early development of colonial children, who were then abandoned in the 'Home' country.

Figure 5. ***English Heritage Blue plaque for the Ayahs' Home***

Note. From *The Ayahs' Home for nannies and nursemaids from Asis was based here 1900–1921* [Photograph]. Spudgun67, 2022, Wikimedia (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_AYAHS%E2%80%99_HOME_for_nannies_and_nursemaids_from_Asia_was_based_here_1900%E2%80%931921.jpg). CC BY-SA 4.0.

While campaigning for the Blue Plaque, Farhana (Mamoojee) Bello also set up an Instagram account (@ayahshome) documenting her research. She also gave talks and curated an exhibition in Hackney Town Hall delving deeper into the history and interviewing men and women who still clung to their memories of their Ayahs. These memoirs from British children reveal the deep attachments with their Ayahs: just as it was a rupture for the child to lose the constant care of the Ayah, so the Ayah—often a single woman with no children—was cut off from the child with whom she had formed a deep attachment and could no longer contact. The pain was mutual and lasting.

In his book *The Intimate Enemy*, the Indian political psychologist Ashis Nandy (1983) wrote of the loss and recovery of self under colonialism: reversing a trend to focus on the colonised, he talks of both the coloniser as well as the colonised. He looked at the psychological problems engendered by the colonial process and this becomes relevant when we understand more about the conflicting nature of white, British children cared for by Ayahs. The Blue Plaque honours the carers: we need also to understand the impact on the children.

As women also began to acknowledge the role of the Ayahs, several writers explored this aspect of colonial childcare in novels and plays: Sita Bramachari's (2022) teen novel *When Secrets Set Sail* centres on two south Asian teenage girls—one adopted, one whose

grandmother has just died. Together they discover that the house they live in was once the refuge for the abandoned Ayahs. The girls begin to decipher secrets from the past in the house and, guided by helpful ghostly spirits, they gradually discover the real stories of the people who had lived in their house. They follow a detective trail that has them uncovering the injustice towards one Ayah and her story of being reunited, when very ill, with her beloved charge who had become one of the first Asian women doctors at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital for women. The contemporary perspective interweaves past and present truths of immigrants coming to Britain and their struggles to find respect and peace instead of offence and wrongdoing.

Tanika Gupta's (2013) play *The Empress* entwines the story of a young discarded Ayah and a lascar (Asian seaman employed on European ships) with that of Queen Victoria and her chosen Indian servant, later tutor, Abdul Karim. This stage drama centres on the struggle for Victorian Indians to survive in a hostile and exploitative Britain. In *An Ayah's Choice*, Shahida Rahman (2022) outlines the turbulent tale of a young Indian woman, full of ambition, who, as an Ayah, embarks on a relationship with a white colonial employer and arrives in London to witness the rise of the Suffragettes and make difficult choices.

The value and the perspective of the Ayahs has now been acknowledged in ways that could only have happened as Britain confronts our Imperial past and recognises how our history has shaped our superior white attitudes. As the American futurologist Alvin Toffler predicted in his 1970 book *Future Shock*: 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn' (Ratcliffe, 2016, para. 2).

Marjorie entered this arena of understanding with enthusiasm and a sense of both grief and gratitude for the accelerated re-evaluation of Britain's colonial past. As Salman Rushdie so cleverly put it—lifting and redirecting a phrase from 'Star Wars'—the Empire was writing back!

Another factor was to emerge during the years of therapy that would help Marjorie understand her mother's tricky and conflicted relationship with both Byah and India. This was an added complexity to Marjorie's story but one which has helped bring a degree of closure. Marjorie chose to do a DNA test for interest, when they became easily available, and the results showed she had Indian blood. 'I'm 6% Indian. It turns out my mother was 12.5% Indian and my grandfather 25%.' She was very happy to learn this.

This discovery after her mother's death made it easier for Marjorie to look back at her life and feel a deep sense of reconciliation with her divided loyalties.

Marjorie, in her new stage of understanding and processing could now decipher her mother's conflicted attitudes: the pressure of white social superiority and guarding a secret she could never reveal forced her to become rigorously formal in her relationships with Indians. She assumed and protected her identity of a white British colonial wife and mother by staying aloof to real Indian life and people and not relaxing on the rules.

For Marjorie this discovery was also a highly significant way of viewing her mother's racism as well as her conflicted relationship with Byah. She realised how resentful her mother had been of Byah's intimacy and emotional closeness with her daughter. It also meant that Marjorie could, in her mind, renew her attachment with Byah and grieve in a different fashion knowing she had this deeper link and was also able to feel this was a reason she had resisted her family's racism.

'I am sure my beliefs about how to care for and about people comes directly from Byah. I have also finally worked out that what I put up with when I was nine to 17—a mixture of neglect and boarding school trauma—did not become my ruling influence and pattern for adulthood. During my most formative years, from seven months until I was eight years old I had the most stable and perfect example of love and the "right" way to think about others and behave. Byah's teaching was firm and strong enough for me to hold onto for life. If any credit is due, it belongs to her!'

In 2009, Marjorie went back to India with her daughter. When she entered Delhi Airport she found tears streaming down her face: 'It sounded like music to me. It was extraordinary. I got out with all this language around me and it converted into a beautiful, beautiful sound.' There had been enormous change, but still the same rich sensory environment in which her childhood and memories were rooted.

Her daughter wanted to see the house where she had lived in the '1930s Lutyens-style bungalow zone' and found it along with the tree she used to kiss goodbye to.

When they went to the hotel close to where she had lived, there was a doorman at the front in a military uniform who said, 'Welcome to the hotel, Madam' and Marjorie looked up at him and responded, 'But I'm coming home!' He took her hand and when he asked when she had last been here, she told him '64 years ago!'

The next day she asked him how to get to the Lodhi Gardens and he showed them on a map how to walk down the central roads towards the park's principal entrance. However, as memories of her childhood routine surfaced, she turned away from the main streets, followed by her daughter, and worked her way down a busy lane, then another, till she was in front of a doorway. She reached out and turned the handle and opened the door into the back of the familiar, unchanged Lodhi Gardens. Using her memory of the shortcut, she was back in her place of play and safety. Time stood still: she could bring all she had surfaced, shared, relearned, and processed to a place in her mind of love and care. With Byah at her side.

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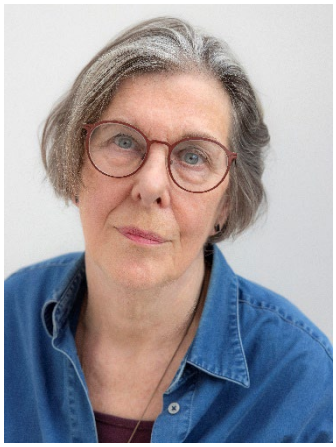

Hannah Charlton: After an early start in languages, post-graduate linguistics, and teaching in Greece, Hannah has had a long career in journalism, writing books, communications, creating content, and brand development. She worked as a journalist and editor at the *Sunday Times Magazine* in the 1980s and then moved over into early digital development in 1990, creating award-winning CDRoms for News International. In the mid-1990s she immersed herself in brand development and digital strategy, followed by 15 years helping large brands make the transition from analogue into our multi-channel reality and helped new brands find their voice and identity.

In 2018, using her decades of experience across different industries, she took time to step back and look at the bigger picture.

In 2020 she made a significant personal visit to Montgomery, Alabama to visit Bryan Stevenson's National Memorial for Peace and Justice. This triggered a strong desire to explore Britain's Imperial legacy, and she embarked on an MA at Birkbeck in Culture, Diaspora and Ethnicity, as well as engaging in anti-racist training and working on projects relating to our contemporary uncertainty, divisiveness, and confusion. She has written several articles on this subject for Byline Times: https://bylinetimes.com/author/hannahcharlton/ (Image credit: Barry Lewis.)