

(Re)Visiting Godden's India: Colonial and Female Spaces in *Black Narcissus*

Abstract

The paper examines how the Indian people, landscape and spaces mentioned in the novel Black Narcissus (1939) resist, challenge, and eventually defeat the reforming mission of the English nuns who travel to the Himalayas to set up a Convent school community. The nuns' mission is representative of the imperial agenda to subjugate the Indian land and its people. The paper further explores how Godden subverts traditional colonial narratives about women and colonised peoples through alternative representations of the local people and their landscape, highlighting their resilience to imperial rule. The discussion concludes with highlighting Godden's unique contribution to the Oriental discourse by her writing back about India.

Introduction

The novel *Black Narcissus* (1939), set in early 20th-century British India, is a rare literary work that examines important themes of colonialism, feminism, and the intersection of both in the Indian landscape during the British Raj. India – or more aptly the Indian subcontinent as it was known under British colonial rule – has largely been studied under the broad abstraction of Orientalism. Edward Said viewed Orientalism as a discursive formation, highlighting the enormously systematic discipline of European institutes to produce (mis)representations of the Orient to suit its own purposes. Indeed, the documentation of the Orient has been interpreted as a documentation of the Occidental – in this case, British – vision, views, and methods itself. The British colonies in the Indian subcontinent similarly experienced the reductionist tendencies of their imperial masters who viewed India solely as a colonial enterprise and sought to devise, dissect, divide and consequently dominate the region. This paper aims to look at early 20th-century India as a colonial construct; a geographical, political, and cultural body of imperialist productions. The India in *Black Narcissus* is equally approached as a construct. However, in this case, it is Rumer Godden's construction of India. Godden's India is in some ways a product of the existent colonial narratives of the time, but in many ways it also subverts the mainstream discourses and presents a picture of India rarely seen or heard of – certainly not eight decades ago. From the

myriad of themes ranging from spirituality to sexual obsession, the paper primarily looks at landscape and spaces¹ as the connective to interpret Godden's construct of India.

The plot of *Black Narcissus* is exceedingly simple, yet the subtleties are worth a closer examination. The story follows a small group of English nuns from Darjeeling that travel up north to the fictional land of Mopu, set in a valley in the Himalayas, to open a convent school and a hospital for the local community. For the remainder of the story we witness their efforts to survive the elements, educate and reform the locals, make the abandoned palace inhabitable, build a chapel, tame the wild landscape, and deal with the difficult Mr. Dean – all of which they fail at. With the passage of time and under the influence of the Indian landscape and elements, each of the Sisters begins to unravel, culminating in the tragic death of Sister Ruth, causing their mission to fail and for them to leave Mopu for good. The plot recounts the prevalent imperial practice of sending missions to British colonies to set up convent school communities as part of their *mission civilisatrice*.² Godden further builds on this motif of reform by imperialists, depicting the locals at Mopu as “primitive” and “like children” (Godden 54), where the nuns are responsible for their governance. The outdated derogatory term ‘coolie’³ is also used throughout the novel to address the local workmen, along with stereotypical generalisations about the locals: “they positively stink” (Godden 80).

To what extent Godden personally agreed with some of the large stereotypical assumptions included in *Black Narcissus* propelling the colonial discourses of the time is beyond the purview of this paper. Previous scholarship holds the view that “Godden cannot be extricated from a history of white privilege” and her works ought to be viewed with a certain degree of complicity (Joannou 62). A moderate guess would be that it is a blend of both; Godden seems to unquestioningly build on and propel some problematic colonial themes, but craftily utilises some typical colonial tropes only to subvert them and present a refreshing alternative view. It would be important to remember that her work is not only a piece *on* colonialism, but also a product *of* colonialism. Her “betwixt and between” (Grover 23) life shares the same liminal quality of being able to entertain both world views; the colonised and the colonist's, the Indian and the English. Born in Sussex, England, Godden spent her formative years of early

¹ The term ‘spaces’ in the paper throughout may be referring to one or more of the following: the Palace of Mopu, St. Faith, the House of Women, and other landscape features (the mountain, the vallery etc.)

² The ‘civilizing mission’ was used as a cultural justification for colonisation.

³ A pejorative term used to refer to an unskilled native labourer in Asian countries.

childhood and youth in Narayanganj, India (modern-day Bangladesh), and her later life in Scotland. Most of her works, including *Black Narcissus*, evoke themes of clashing cultural conflicts and disbelonging – something she experienced first hand. As a female Anglo-Indian expatriate author, writing about India in the immediate context of partition and the end of the British empire, Godden has a highly unique position – something that Said calls “strategic location” describing “the author’s position in a text with regard to the Oriental material [s]he writes about” (29). Godden’s position was that of a white woman in India, and an exotic woman in England, yet of the two countries – England and India – one was a birthplace and the other a home: “We never felt that we were foreigners, not India’s own; we felt at home, safely held in her large warm embrace, content as we never were to be content in our country” (Godden and Godden viii). The joint autobiographical work by Rumer Godden and her sister Jon Godden richly details the transitory space Rumer experienced life in and wrote from.

Godden’s authorial position reflected in her writings may be best understood under Marianne Hirsche’s concept from memory studies of the “feminist mode of knowledge” to regard the events and experiences of Godden’s childhood places, which are inextricably tied to her work. “To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance,” (Ingold 152) as Godden does in most of her literary oeuvre, including *Black Narcissus*, where “[b]ook after book is written about India” as a nostalgic homage to the years spent there (Godden and Godden viii). It is imperative to analyse Godden’s positionality as a female author writing in a colonial context supplanted with gendered themes. Her questioning and her disruption of the established tropes alone can be read as a feminist mode of knowledge in a literary tradition marred by phallogocentrism – even more so when her writing is positioned synchronously to literary works in her time. Though the paper does not seek to establish any links between the author’s life and *Black Narcissus*, her authorial position, however, must not be neglected, as it allows a better vantage point to understand her construction of India in *Black Narcissus*.

The analysis in the following section will majorly focus on how Godden’s India in *Black Narcissus* contests and/or subverts the typical colonial narratives about India that had existed for centuries as a product of the long British colonial legacy. The paper aims to reverse the stereotypical view of “colonised peoples’ victimage and lack of agency” (Ashcroft 2) and foreground their resilience, which Godden skilfully demonstrates throughout the novel with

her subverted constructions and alternative representations, dispelling colonial myths about India. The following section expands upon the various modes of resistance of local spaces and their people to colonial narratives about landscape and gender. It begins with the exploration of British cartography in India and how manipulating geographies undermined Indian cultural representation. Then the paper examines the gendering of Indian territories in colonial discourses, and how Godden utilises and reverts that trope by giving agency to the feminised Indian land. Followed by the colonial expectation of the changeability of the locals, and how the spaces in *Black Narcissus* contradict that view. Lastly, the role of language in colonisation through foreign labeling of local spaces is examined, and how the locals counter it by either refusing or mastering the master's language.

Subversion of Colonial Tropes in *Black Narcissus*

The Colonial Construct of India

“They’ll eat into the countryside and want to know everything and alter everything.”
(Godden 13)

In 1939, when *Black Narcissus* was published, India was eight years away from its British-led partition into two separate and independent nations: India and Pakistan.⁴ Before analysing Godden's India, it would be imperative to provide a background of India under British colonial rule. Despite centuries of evident differences and growing tensions between Muslims and Hindus and speakers of Urdu and Hindi, the distinct ethnic identities of both groups were neglected by their British colonial masters, for whom they broadly remained 'Indian.' This broad label, used solely to fit the British colonial enterprise, conveyed little of India's multiculturalism.⁵ The colonial 'divide and rule' policy of the British Raj capitalised on the multicultural differences between locals and created divisions amongst various religious groups, castes, and ethnicities as a strategy to control them. The divisions further made it more difficult for individual groups to (re)claim a distinct cultural identity for themselves or fight British rule without allies. On one hand, the British refused to recognise the separate ethnic identities of the locals, but paradoxically when they did, it was only to

⁴ India was partitioned into India and (East and West) Pakistan in 1947. East Pakistan separated from the West in 1971 and formed the independent state of Bangladesh.

⁵ The Indian subcontinent comprises the following modern day countries of India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.

create rifts between the locals. Cartography – a frequent colonial obsession – in particular became a useful tool for the British to strengthen the divisions by drawing boundaries and enclosures between local groups. According to Bill Ashcroft “[t]here has been perhaps no more powerful discursive elaboration of Eurocentrism than that which permanently established the way in which the physical world was to be conceived” allowing the imperial powers to dictate a “fixed, all-seeing viewpoint” (129) from their perspective. Despite the divisions, the locals were stripped of their right to self-identify with their respective land(s) and largely remained ‘Indian’ under the British raj.

In his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Said devotes an entire chapter ‘imaginative geographies’ to highlight this tendency of the West to define the East only in relation to itself: “It is Europe that articulates the Orient” (57); conceptualising the East as a large abstract category, situated faraway in imagined geographies, creating a gulf through the idea of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Hence, to geographically manipulate and to treat the Indian subcontinent as a culturally homogenous and monolithic unit was a classic case of strategic imperial vagueness, allowing imperial powers to freely conceptualise, chart, and control British-ruled India.

Godden’s India in *Black Narcissus* starkly challenges this undifferentiated view by highlighting the diverse geographies of India by naming the country of origin for various items; Bhotiya ponies, Tibetan mastiffs, and the imported golf clubs from Darjeeling, etc. Moreover, though the Palace of Mopu (later the Convent of St. Faith) is fictional, its setting is decidedly not. Godden describes the fictional valley that faces the mountain Kanchenjunga in the Himalayan range, and further entrenches it in the realistic geography of then-India with the mention of Darjeeling (a city in modern-day India), Lahore (a city in modern-day Pakistan), Kashmir, Tibet, and Bhutan. Furthermore, the frontier location of the valley defies the trope of boundary as it resists constriction and neat classification under the imperial hegemony of spaces. Given the valley is somewhere in the Himalayan mountain range, it already evades the concept of enclosure as it follows the mountain range which spans across many parts of then-India (multiple modern-day countries) and refuses to neatly fit into one category of space. Extending the rejection of categorisation to people, Godden portrays Hindu and Buddhist locals in the narrative who speak various local dialects, including Hindi, and occasionally use the Arabic greeting of *salaam*⁶. The novel eloquently embeds words

⁶ A shorter version of the Arabic greeting ‘Assalamu Alaikum’ (peace be upon you) used by Muslims.

from Urdu/Hindi⁷ in its English sentences, creating quite a few hybrid new terms⁸ along the way. The author describes the people in these words: “These people were not exactly of the State, nor exactly of India; they were free.” (Godden 23) Thus, in Godden’s India, the local people are “free” and non-subjugated – not only from the colonists but even from the State. The exactness of the location of the valley is never known, which may be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the definitive geographical constructs the British imposed on India. By blurring the British-defined boundaries the valley embodies the “most radical principle of transformative resistance” (Ashcroft 16).

Instead, the valley presents an alternative ‘horizontal’ way of living, which Ashcroft describes as a “way of conceiving home, and with it identity, which escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary” (183). It is a reordering of space to reimagine postcolonial place(s) without imperial boundaries and stricture, allowing extension and possibility. The resistance to boundaries and the vast variety of languages, religions, and geographical associations mentioned in the small fictional valley in *Black Narcissus* give a truer account of the heterogeneity of India compared to the discourse at the time, which still adhered to and propelled the colonial monolithic construct of India. With this in mind, Godden’s acute awareness of and departure from the set discourse is nothing short of a revolutionary literary endeavour, especially considering that her novel was published nearly a decade before partition, when the two-nation theory⁹ was gaining momentum. *Black Narcissus* subtly but surely echoed the clamouring political call of the locals at the time for recognition of their separate identities beyond the unitized label of ‘Indian’ – a term that Godden interestingly does not use once to refer to the locals throughout the novel¹⁰.

Feminisation of the Indian Landscape

Another interesting trope that Godden revises is the perception and treatment of the Eastern landscape as feminine by its Western male colonisers. European travelogues became

⁷ A few Urdu/Hindi terms: *achkan* (tunic), *chapal* (open-toed sandals), *mistri* (carpenter), *dhobi* (launderer), *charpoy* (bed made from woven rope/straw), *bhut* (ghost), *sahib* (sir)

⁸ The term ‘Lady-sahib’ used to address Sister Clodagh; lady being the appropriate address in English and *sahib* (sir) being the local way to address an authority figure (normally used for a man).

⁹ The idea that two separate and independent states were needed for Hindus and Muslims, and the latter had unofficially started to refer to their desired homeland ‘Pakistan’ after the name had first been suggested in a pamphlet *Now or Never* in 1933.

¹⁰ The term ‘Indian’ only appears once but even then it is in connection with the Red Indians, the Indigenous peoples of the United States, and not the local population of India.

notorious for their fetishistic attention to detail in describing Eastern landscapes, which were often purposefully coloured by travellers with exaggerated fantasies and fabrications of their foreign escapades to entertain their male compatriots back home (Kabbani 18). A common motif in their descriptions was the gendering of the Eastern lands as feminine, where the Western male coloniser endeavoured to “penetrate, possess, and cultivate” the fertile territories, “ravishing” their mysterious charms, and “domesticating their wildernesses” (McLeod 42). In these accounts, the feminine land was rendered passive, had no agency, and was at the mercy of its male coloniser who, in contrast, was “active, dominant, heroic, rational, self-controlled, and ascetic” (McLeod 42). A compelling example of this may be observed if a parallel is drawn between the treatment of the feminine landscape by male colonisers and by the local men in *Black Narcissus*. Where the “muscular coloniser” utilised vocabulary of sexual possession and sought to “conquer,” “penetrate,” and “ravish,” the territories, the local men in *Black Narcissus* believed that “no one can conquer that mountain and they never will.” The locals had legends about the strange mountain men, who had “gone mad for love of the mountain” and they “kill[ed] and devour[ed]” if someone went too close to it. Their disinterest in overpowering or conquering the mountain, and their maddening love and murderous defense of it stands out in sharp contrast to the rape imagery of the Western male coloniser.

Godden borrows this all-too-familiar terminology from the prevalent colonial discourses and utilises them in her descriptions of the landscape in *Black Narcissus* to gender it feminine. The valley is described as “mysterious and impenetrable” (Godden 127) with its yellow butterflies, bursting blossoms, dark forests, luscious fields, and snowy peaks. The mountain Kanchenjunga remains a static figure in the background, and the palace of Mopu is vast, open, airy, elated, and built high up on a hill. These descriptions – at least superficially – allow a passive, ornamental, and inviting view of the valley – associations commonly attached to the feminine. However, a closer reading of the seemingly benign and beautiful landscape descriptions may grant the view that Godden only utilises the well-rehearsed colonial trope of feminising the land to be able to subvert it. She attaches meaningful and resilient constructions of femininity to nature and landscape, contrasting the passive and submissive associations attached to landscape in colonial discourses. For instance, where the feminine land is usually ‘possessed’ and ‘occupied’ by its coloniser, we see the landscape in *Black Narcissus* do the exact opposite in a role-reversal of sorts. The immense beauty of the valley, its whooshing winds, and the towering Kanchenjunga gradually come to overwhelm

and occupy the Sisters instead, each of whom feels unsettled and unable to concentrate on her daily tasks:

They all found it hard [to focus]. At recreation they walked on the terrace and sat on the block to watch the views, but that was not enough. Sister Honey would stop with a needle in one hand and the cotton in the other, gaping out of the window, and sometimes Sister Philippa would find that it had taken her an hour to pick the cosmos for the altar vases. She was standing in the flowers, red and clove pink and ivory as high as her breast, and her hands were empty. ‘Even in my thoughts I’m discourteous and ungrateful,’ she sighed. ‘We came here to work for God and here I am already neglecting the smallest things I have to do for Him. . .’ (Godden 46)

Further on in the novel, the possession of their senses by the indomitable nature of the valley is complete when Sister Philippa finds herself saying “it interrupts” – presumably referring to the mountain – as an explanation as to why she had been neglecting her duties. Their initial awe and preoccupation with the natural beauty of the valley turns into a hostile obsession when Sister Philippa, the wisest in the order, eventually requests to leave the mission: “Mopu had run away with me, I was obsessed with it and the mountain and my work in the garden. Yes, I think I was really obsessed. There’s something in this place, I don’t trust myself here. I mean it when I say I daren’t stay.” We witness a similar crisis unfolding in Sister Ruth: “When she [Sister Ruth] was angry nowadays, she could not help what she did or what she said, because she did not know. It felt like something dark and wet, flooding her brain, like blood.” Gradually, all the nuns experience the similar loss of control and feel overpowered by their surroundings, while the landscape grows stronger and bears down on its occupants: “as if the house had swallowed everyone.” Ultimately, the initially inviting landscape wears the nuns down and defeats all their efforts to feel at home in the valley, driving them out before the “rains break”¹¹ – another threatening display of the elemental prowess of the valley.

In a similar vein and following the themes of gendering of landscape and the colonisers attempting to subdue it, Godden utilises the tropes of surveillance and mystery to further contextualise resistance by the landscape. The Sisters had arrived at Mopu to watch over and

¹¹ This refers to the monsoon season of heavy rainfall in the Indian subcontinent which can cause flooding.

guide the local Indians and to redeem their way of life, as exemplified by the case of Kanchi. They had the intention to monitor the activities of the people and reform them. Here Godden presents a quintessential Occidental way of thinking and highlights Said's idea of the assumed superiority of the West over the Orient; the West must watch over and show the right way to the Eastern peoples. Ashcroft explains that the surveilling imperial gaze ensures the "subalternity and powerlessness" of the locals (141). Representing the imperialist coloniser, the Sisters engaged in the duties related to health, education, community-building as well as moral reform. This constant and meticulous surveillance by the Sisters can be likened to Foucault's idea of the Panopticon and the disciplining of the people to bring about the much needed self-regulation. Such an attempt to dictate behaviours to people and to restructure their space and landscape was the Sisters' mission. Godden initially builds on this Orientalism-oriented narrative only to reveal the flaws in this construct about the Indian landscape and people. As the plot proceeds, she reveals that not only was the Indian landscape resistant to reform and restructuring, it was overbearing to the extent of making the Sisters feel watched, leading to them progressively unraveling. The Sisters started to feel as if they were being watched and surveilled all the time, having "the sense of something lurking and hiding behind [their] back and watching [them]" (Godden 197). The effects of this feeling of being under constant surveillance were grim for the Sisters. Godden narrates, "Her eyes were stretched with watching, but she had to watch. Every moment of the day, They needed watching if she was to keep herself safe. She dared not relax for an instant . . . They came upon her while she was asleep" (Godden 117, emphasis in the original text). The author leaves it to our imagination what might inspire such anxiety for Sister Ruth. Perhaps, they were the forces of the Indian landscape – the mountain, the Palace – or the wind, or some unnamed element. The Sisters soon realise the overpowering nature of the formidable Indian elements, especially the mountain, Kanchenjunga: "You have to be very strong to live close to God or a mountain, or you'll turn a little mad" (Godden 153). Kanchenjunga is an integral and crucial part of the story, personified as the Indian element. Godden paints this silent, looming mountain as a "household God" that is found "everywhere". (Godden 122) Its description evokes a sense of omnipresence at various points in the story: "The mountain glittered into the air by night as well as by day" (Godden 147). It was, after all, the highest unclimbed peak in the world at the time that Godden wrote of it in the *Black Narcissus*. Another intriguing feature of the mountain was its mystique. In Godden's words, "Nothing was too strange for the *mysterious and impenetrable* State and the ice mountains and the dark forests and the valley with its easy luscious fields" [emphasis added] (Godden 127). This

alludes to the feminine construction of nature explained by Simone de Beauvoir as the “feminine mystery,” where the dominant male dismisses the individual complexities of a woman as her inherently non-decipherable traits. In Godden, we see a departure from the mysterious construction in the service of the male in favour of a mystery of the feminine nature and the mountain combined with a powerful, omnipresent, even overbearing presence. Thus, this “mysterious and impenetrable” mountain was the one keeping an eye on everyone in its vicinity; while it could see all of them at all times, no one person could hold Kanchenjunga in their full view. In other words, Godden presents India personified by Kanchenjunga as beyond surveillance, and powerful and mysterious in its feminine construction by superimposing colonial discourse on gender discourse.

Resisting Change: “You can’t order these people. They don’t know what an order is” (Godden 53)

The novel further builds on colonial ideas of viewing the locals as primitive, barbaric even, and in a dire need of ‘change’ to the modern and civilised – namely European – ways of life. The nuns’ mission to open a school and a hospital at the Palace of Mopu neatly aligns with this aim. Godden also borrows the polemic that the Orientals were a licentious and lewd race, incapable of governing their “hot-blooded” sexual instincts (Daniel, *Islam, and the West* 270). This is shown through the history of the Palace of Mopu which was formerly known as the House of Women where the concubines of the Indian General lived. By presenting the locals of the valley as ignorant and indulgent, and their spaces as harems, Godden seems to compellingly make the case for a civilising mission as the much-needed intervention that would bring with it order, restraint, and progressive values. This was the ultimate ‘white (wo)man’s burden:’ to govern the locals who could not govern themselves.

But as the story unfolds, this view is overturned with an almost parodic effect, exposing the false precepts of the mission. One of the locals at the beginning of the novel remarks on the nuns’ mission: “They’ll eat into the countryside and want to know everything and alter everything.” (Godden 13) This comment encapsulates the interference and change that was generally expected to come with Christian missions. However, as the story progresses, the way of life at Mopu interferes with the mission instead and resists change:

The house would not conform; look at the way they tried to say St Faith's and always said Mopu. The flimsy walls did not shut out the world but made a sounding box for it; through every crack the smell of the world crept in, the smell of rain and sun and earth and the deodar trees and a wind strangely scented with tea. Here the bell did not command, it sounded doubtful against the gulf; the wind took the notes away and yet it brought the sound of the bells at Goontu very strongly; pagan temple bells. And everywhere in front of them was that far horizon and the eagles in the gulf below the snows. (Godden 61)

Given Godden constructs the landscape as feminine, its resistance to change is once again a stark rebuke of the conventional view of femininity, which according to the discourse at the time, was expected to be pliable, amenable, and easily moulded by men to fit their purpose. In the same vein, the landscape being local may also be read as embodying local resistance to imperial authorities and their civilising mission. Here there was a similar expectation that the locals were "primitive and like children," and they would be easily susceptible to and accepting of the proposed changes without protest. Under this reading, Godden's landscape manages to counteract 'a double colonisation' – a concept first presented by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. "The articulation of sexism . . . went hand in hand with the articulation of racism" (Kabbani 7), with Indian women being treated as a sub-group in patriarchal Indian societies as well as under the British colonial regime. Godden's resistant feminine landscape combats the prevalent discourses of the time and rejects the male colonial treatment of Eastern feminised lands.

However, the colonisers in *Black Narcissus*, namely the nuns, are female. This problematizes the idea of double colonisation, but does not contradict it. Rather, it adds another intersectional component of hierarchical suffering: the role taken on by Western feminism as the emancipator and champion of the rights of local indigenous women. This self-important role of the rescuer shares the same arrogance that the local men from patriarchal societies and Western male colonisers predicate their assumed superiority on. But in this case, the superiority is shrouded and takes on the enlightened form of feminism – of helping, educating, and reforming indigenous women. A classic example of this in *Black Narcissus* is the young local girl Kanchi, whom Sister Clodagh likens to "a basket of fruit . . . there to be eaten." The Sisters are tasked by Mr. Dean to discipline her flirtatious manners and "teach her

a little sense” in the hopes that “cloistered for a few months she’ll be[come] more desirable,” and it would be easier for her uncle to arrange a marriage match for her. Kanchi joins the Lace School and studies English and French under the Sisters, who want to make sure she is educated to be a proper ‘lady,’ so she can marry well. Sister Clodagh’s asceticism and the environment of a Convent make Kanchi’s free-spirited character stand out especially, making her sexuality suspect throughout the novel. Their relationship echoes hierarchical tensions; where the self-possessed Sister Clodagh wants to help the rebellious Kanchi, but also views her as an “unwilling, ripe, breathing *thing*” [emphasis added]. The dehumanising view of Kanchi sours the notion of help Sister Clodagh purports to offer, exposing the hypocrisies of early Western feminism.

As the novel progresses, all the efforts of the nuns to change Mopu and the locals are not only staunchly resisted by the landscape and its people, instead, the stubborn spaces come to have an effect on their foreign occupants. Kanchi, despite all the check and balance, manages to strike up a secret romance with the General’s nephew, the young prince Dilip Rai. She does so within the nunnery – right under the watchful eyes of the Sisters. Despite the supervision and the unfit setting for a romance, their relationship develops naturally without any real obstacles – more characteristic of the former House of Women than a Convent. The house further echoes its former title when Sister Ruth develops romantic feelings for the British agent Mr. Dean. But perhaps the most surprising development is when the calm and collected Sister Clodagh, who is the youngest in the Order to have been made Sister Superior, keeps thinking about her past lover whom she had not thought of since she took religious orders. She finds his likeness in a young groom at the beginning of the novel, then Mr. Dean, and eventually prince Dilip Rai. Of the few male characters mentioned in the book, Sister Clodagh appears to seek and trace reminders of her past lover in nearly all of them. Her longing, coupled with Kanchi’s forbidden trysts and Sister Ruth’s volatile and dangerous confessions of an entirely one-sided infatuation, are reminders of how St. Faith never truly changed from being the House of Women in its essence. It continued being a space intended for female sexual expression where one “could see lights shining there to all hours of the night, and hear the music.” The Palace resisted the foreign civilising mission, and in turn, changed its ascetic female occupants and conformed them to its original intended purpose.

It is worth noting that all three women radically revert the trope of women – especially Eastern women – being actively *sexual* rather than *sexualised* passive beings. From extreme

depictions in paintings such as *The Turkish Bath (Le Bain turc)* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to the incestuous and sadistic accounts of the Mughal emperor Akbar ordering his wife Anarkali¹² to be entombed alive for having a love affair with his son Salim, the sexualised figure of the Oriental woman has no agency within the colonial discourse. Despite the stark exhibitionist tendency of such portrayals – which might seemingly present women as sexually liberated – the Oriental female has no sexual agency of her own; she is merely a canvas and a conduit for (imperialist) male desire and fetishisation. But all three women in *Black Narcissus* – Kanchi, Sister Ruth, and Sister Clodagh – are sexually wilful initiators of their own romantic fate, untethered to a man. In fact, all three men in each case either reject, leave, or refuse to adequately reciprocate the woman's romantic feelings. Dilip flatly tells Kanchi that he cannot marry her as she is a local girl but agrees to keep her as his concubine, Mr. Dean is repelled by Sister Ruth's declarations of love and urges her to return to the nunnery, and Con sets off for America leaving Clodagh behind in Ireland before she joins the Order. Without a man's desire or design, all three women autonomously develop and nurture their own romantic feelings which the novel intricately explores.

Kanchi's eventual fate of becoming Dilip's concubine may reassert the above-mentioned colonial stereotype of East being a site of perverse desire and sexual excess, employing extreme yet ornamental portrayals of female sexuality without any real agency. However, the figure of the Eastern concubine in colonial discourses is a Western construct, heavily influenced by Victorian morality which favoured marriage. Hence, the concubines – or more accurately the *tawaifs*¹³ – of the Indian subcontinent came to be viewed as common prostitutes without any real power by the British colonists. In reality, they were the “custodians of elite art and culture, and enjoyed a relatively autonomous lifestyle with a respected place in public society” (Mehrotra). Though Indian harems were undeniably influenced by certain polygynous aspects of Islamic ideology which were derogatory to women, the harems eventually became more of a cultural practice in the Mughal era with many upper class women freely opting to become a part of it. The *tawaifs* symbolised the role of women in society outside the domestic sphere; they could travel alone, educate themselves, own wealth, conduct their own affairs, and – unlike in a marriage – were not any man's property under law. The *tawaifs* of India were well-connected and due to their

¹² Some accounts state that Anarkali was a courtesan at Akbar's Mughal court, not his wife.

¹³ A *tawaif* (courtesan) was a highly successful entertainer who catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the reign of the Mughals.

networks in high-ranking political circles, they “played a pivotal role in weakening the imperial power” (Kumar 3). Though Dilip’s refusal to marry and give Kanchi the socially respectable status of being his wife is dubious at best, Kanchi’s ready agreement to this arrangement, however, should not simply be dismissed as naivety on her part or coercion on his part. As a sexually aware and autonomous character, Kanchi’s role as the prince’s concubine may be read as a far freer alternative to being his wife, given the cultural context of British India, where the “more ‘respectable’ *pardah*-bound¹⁴ women of the time . . . had to their name neither property nor literacy” (Mehrotra) and certainly not all the other freedoms accessible to a tawaif. Kanchi’s character is constantly viewed through the lens of colonial morality in the novel, but a deeper analysis of her character contradicts the conventional understanding of Indian courtesans in the Western imagination. She highlights alternative social identities outside of the domestic sphere for women in India. Additionally, the well-established link between the Indian tawaifs and their political role in helping the fight against British colonial rule may be metaphorized in how Kanchi resists and defies all that the Sisters try to teach her, and eventually leaves the nunnery and finds herself a situation on her own terms (and not her uncle’s, Mr. Dean’s, or the Sisters’).

‘You taught me *your* language’

The legacy of British imperialism in the Indian subcontinent perhaps becomes most prominent in the widespread use of English to date¹⁵. During the British Raj, English became the dominant language in the critical spheres of politics, education, and the culture of India. Through these discourses the British were able to advance colonial ideologies and gradually erode and replace the Indian way(s) of life, with the English language having a crucial part to play in the history of British imperialism in India. Ashcroft poses the pertinent question: “Can one use the language of imperialism without being inescapably contaminated by an imperial world view?” (56) The Sunnias in *Black Narcissus* doesn’t seem to think so. He sits at the top of a hill on a deerskin mat and never speaks the coloniser’s language – or any language for that matter. Throughout the novel we have the locals and the Sisters wonder about him, but we never get to hear his point of view. However, the Sunnias’s silence can not be interpreted as a lack of language, as he once spoke several European languages,

¹⁴ The practice in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of screening women from men, especially by means of a curtain.

¹⁵ English has been the official language of Pakistan and India ever since the British Raj.

traveled and had connections in the world, was invited to attend Queen Victoria's jubilee, and had been decorated by four foreign governments. In fact, Mopu had been leased on the money he lent his nephew. The once wealthy, educated, and worldly Grand General Kundra Rai then one day gave it all up and no one knew why.

The Sunnyasi's alternative modes of communication with the land may be interpreted as his resistance to imperial rule. He sits at the highest spot in the valley facing the mountain Kanchenjunga as the true embodiment of the concept of the "ecological Indian" (Tiffin 11) – exemplifying man's harmonious coexistence with nature. The locals consider him to be the strongest man who ever lived as "he makes himself strong inside himself and he can look at the mountain all day" (Godden 153). Despite all his famed strength, the Sunnyassi expresses no desire to 'conquer' the mountain. This stands out when compared to the common colonial discourses in vogue at the time, which heavily relied on the language of possession when speaking about colonised landscapes (McLeod 42). The nuns vehicle similar colonial ideologies as they fail to understand the Sunnyasi and his local ways without a language medium. Compared to their hurried efforts to "eat into the countryside" and "alter everything" (Godden 13), the Sunnyasi's relationship with the land is entirely incomprehensible to the nuns. They think the Sunnyasi is quite "inhuman" and reject Mr. Dean's notion that his way of life is only a "*different* kind of holiness" [emphasis added] (Godden 75). Later in the novel Sister Clodagh demands that the "dirty, ragged old man [the Sunnyasi]" be turned out of grounds, to which Mr. Dean responds, "He [the Sunnyasi] was here first" (Godden 66). Despite him having been there in the valley first, the nuns want the Sunnyasi removed from his own land, where he cannot even make the case for himself without a language. In some ways, this echoes what would have been the plight of an average local person under British colonialism, helpless to communicate without first learning the language of their coloniser.

Ashcroft talks about this lack of imperialist language disadvantaging the locals and how "the colonised peoples first took hold of the colonists' language to represent themselves" (4). This is evident in the accented English and the English-Hindi hybrid-words of the locals, conveying their attempts to conform to English, reflecting their morphing cultural and linguistic identities in the process. Their representation of self to others – but even more importantly to themselves – is constructed in the language of the coloniser, carrying traces of imperial thinking. Language here becomes a self-perpetuating colonial tool to dictate thinking

to the colonised subject, who like Caliban, is ever restricted to the imperial modes of expression. The novel similarly makes a clear distinction between how the locals speak English, by punctuating syllable breaks to mark traces of the “sing-song” (Godden 42) local dialect in their English speech. Like Shakespeare’s Caliban, the locals in *Black Narcissus* were of the view “you taught me language” but not “you taught me *your* language” when it came to their interaction with the nuns. Joseph, Dilip, Kanchi, and the other local children graciously attend the school set up by the Sisters for their moral and intellectual improvement. Sunnyasi is the only local in the story to contest this view of the Sisters’ civilising mission; Godden does not give him any words of English at all. The Sunnyasi’s refusal to speak English – even its localized version – foregrounds his rejection of foreign influences. Ashcroft stresses how the colonial identity emerges “through the act of speaking [the coloniser’s language] itself” (57). This potentially explains the Sunnyasi’s silence; his use of English would come with the assumption of a colonial identity, which he rejects.

The significance of labels and names is noteworthy in *Black Narcissus* as “naming becomes a primary colonizing process because it appropriates, defines, [and] captures” (Ashcroft 134) the thing in language. The Palace at Mopu had previously been the House of Women before it became the Palace of Mopu, then it became St. Saviour’s School when the Brotherhood came for five months, and then eventually it was St. Faith once the Sisters came. However, “the natives had never called it anything else [except Mopu]” (Godden 12). The novel highlights the resistance of the locals to call their spaces by foreign labels. Furthermore, the deep connection of the locals with the landscape of the valley is evidenced in their names which are after various mountains of the Himalayan range: “Lashar, Kabru, Kabur, Maku and Kanchenjunga” (Godden 24). Interestingly, the locals’ names are seen as descriptive labels of their overall temperament which they share with their landscape; they are described as “solitary”, “silent” and “ungovernable,” quite like the mountains they are named after (Godden 24). The local language of the people in the valley is inextricably linked with their landscape and identity, further highlighting how the Sisters’ well-meaning yet thoroughly imperialist agenda could be trebly damaging to their land, language, and identity.

Interestingly, the precept of linguistic imperialism also holds the key to countering it. The appropriation of the master’s language by a local person may give her/him the very same cultural capital that her/his subjugation by the master was predicated on. “Mastering the master’s language has been a key strategy of self-empowerment in all post-colonial societies”

(Ashcroft 58), which can be witnessed in the prince Dilip Rai who takes up the study of English and French so he can attend Cambridge university one day. The Sisters' inability to understand the Sunyassi stems from their reliance on language to communicate, which may be viewed as an empirical Western construct, as the Sunsyassi does not seem to need any language to live at all. Dilip Rai, on the other hand, the Sisters come to understand and admire, thanks to his proficiency in English language. Where the Sunnyasi refuses to use the language of the coloniser, prince Dilip Rai decides to perfect his use of the coloniser's language to excel in life. Both may be viewed as valid modes of resistance in postcolonial societies to counter imperialist ideologies.

Conclusion

The paper concludes by drawing attention to the consistent theme of resistance that emerges in Godden's subversion of colonial tropes. Revisiting Godden's India revises old colonial constructs, and presents an alternative view of postcolonial societies. In Godden, we find an exposition of the nuanced complexity of the interaction of British colonising forces with India that had been a colonial subject for centuries yet was on the verge of thwarting the British Raj. The resistance staged by India – its people, its land, its spaces – that Godden draws our attention to takes many different forms. The people refused to forgo their way of life, the land could not be demarcated, and the spaces disallowed the intrusions by the foreigners. Further extending this theme of resistance, Godden portrayed resistance not merely as a reaction, but as an active defiance and will to stand the ground. Not only did Indian elements render the interjections of the colonial masters ineffective, they struck their own blow. In other words, Godden did not only focus on the glorification and undefeatedness of Indian elements, she narrated the effects of India on the colonising forces – the Sisters unravelling and ultimately leaving. Hence, she gave an active agency to India and provided an alternative, and perhaps a more holistic, view of the Indian-British interaction which positioned India beyond its view of subalternity.

While Rumer Godden was not an Indian indigenous person, India was home to her. Godden spent almost her entire youth in India, was well-versed in the Indian cultures, raised a family in India, had a front row seat to the struggles for partition of India, and experienced the pangs of nostalgia and homesickness for India after leaving it. Being *betwixt and between*, being an English woman who had spent most of her life in India (by the time she wrote *Black*

Narcissus), she had a unique insight into the relationship between colonial Britain and India. She could view India from the outside, from the Occidental imperial viewpoint as well from the inside as a woman with the lived experience of India – an advantage that was not available to other authors contributing to the Orientalist discourse. She could understand the colonising forces well. She could also grasp the measure of the reactions and actions of the Indian elements within the colonial context, attending to their many complexities. Ergo, it would not be too far a leap to credit Godden with *writing back* about *her* India, and making a significantly unique contribution in Oriental studies.

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