

Black Narcissus: A Post-colonial Empire Film?

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Abstract: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's film *Black Narcissus*, released just weeks before Indian Independence in 1947, dramatizes the doomed attempt of a group of British nuns in northern India to establish a school and hospital. On its release in Britain, the film was generally savaged by critics. This had much to do with the fact that Powell and Pressburger were held to be swimming against the prevailing national style of filmmaking which had, since the advent of the Documentary Movement, privileged realism above melodrama. Despite the early critics' misgivings, the movie won two Academy Awards for its cinematography and art direction, and now, having been critically reappraised in recent years, occupies an iconic niche in the British cinema canon. It is a liminal work: whilst its focus on female characters seems to mark a break with the male-dominated 'empire films' of the 1930s and 40s, the Orientalist construction of 'India' and the dominant male discourse of the film still carry all of the hallmarks of a masculinist, imperial perspective. This paper will examine the colonial and seemingly post-colonial elements of the film and assess its place in the cinematic representation of Empire.

Do you mean that my, my bothers are to do with India?

Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*

1. Introduction

During the 1930s and 1940s there was a well-established tradition of so-called ‘empire films’ made both in Britain and Hollywood that were set in various British colonies and thematised the problem of keeping the unruly Empire together. Two of the best known films of this genre, both British productions directed by the Hungarian-born Anglophile Zoltan Korda (later known as Sir Alexander Korda), were *Sanders of the River* (1935), set in Nigeria, and *The Four Feathers* (1939), set in Egypt. The location and theme of choice for empire films, however, was the “Jewel in the Crown” itself, India. The most prominent examples include the British films *Elephant Boy* (1937) and *The Drum* (1938), both directed by Korda, and the Hollywood-produced *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (dir. Henry Hathaway, 1935), *Wee Willie Winkie* (dir. John Ford, 1937), *Gunga Din* (dir. George Stevens, 1939), and *The Rains Came* (dir. Clarence Brown, 1939). The thrust of these films was the derring-do of their heroic male protagonists in their struggles to protect and assert British colonial values and imperial control over the subcontinent. As Prem Chowdhry writes in *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema*, these films “emphasised the unique imperial status, cultural and racial superiority and patriotic pride not only of the British but of the entire white western world” (Chowdhry 2000: 1). In a sense, they had to. Indians had been struggling for independence since 1916 under the leadership of Mohandas K. Gandhi, and the tide was turning in their favour. Thus it is scarcely surprising to discover that the Empire fights back in *Gunga Din*, for example, by caricaturing the Mahatma’s philosophy of non-violence. Korda’s films, in particular, as Brian McFarlane points out, did not “offer any criticism of the workings of Britain’s far-flung Empire”;

far from it, they were “hymns of praise to the spirit of Empire” (McFarlane 1998: 128).

In contrast, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *Black Narcissus*, released in Britain on 26th May 1947, just weeks before India achieved independence, appeared to be a different kind of empire film. Where the earlier movies, as noted, had centred on the actions and exploits of *male* imperialists, *Black Narcissus*, an ‘empire-in-decline’ narrative, foregrounded the emotionally and sexually unstable experience of empire undergone by its *female* characters. Did this radical gender shift, however, actually signal any substantial change in the way the structure and values of the British Empire were represented in the cinema? In this paper I will examine two issues: first, how ‘India’ was constructed and visualised in this film; and second, how the female experience of empire was presented. My purpose will be to determine whether the film may be considered *post-colonial* (in the sense that it stood apart from and interrogated the imperial project) or, like earlier empire films, *colonial* (in the sense that it actively supported British hegemony in India and elsewhere).

2. Plot outline of *Black Narcissus*

The film, despite some minor divergences, is a faithful adaptation of the identically titled source novel by Rumer Godden. At the Anglo-Catholic convent of the Order of the Servants of Mary in Calcutta, young Sister Clodagh is instructed by her Mother Superior to take charge of the establishment of a new school and hospital at Mopu, a fictional fiefdom north of Darjeeling in the Himalayas. The local Indian General, a benevolent pro-British figure, has offered the Order the use of a deserted ‘palace’, which was briefly home to a monastery, but had been originally built as a harem for his father’s concubines, the so-called ‘House of Women’. Clodagh embarks with a team of four nuns, selected for her by the

Mother Superior: Sister Briony, “for her strength”; Sister ‘Honey’ Blanche, for her popularity; Sister Philippa, for her expertise in gardening; and, lastly, the emotionally unstable Sister Ruth, whose state of health and commitment to the Order are both in question.

After their arrival at the palace, now aptly renamed the House of St Faith, the nuns are greeted by the old hag-like caretaker Angu Ayah and a mixed-race English-speaking child, Joseph Anthony, whose job is to interpret. Before they have even unpacked and settled in, however, they find the school and dispensary swamped by locals. This appears, at first sight, to be a promising affirmation of the need for the nuns’ services; however, soon after they learn that the General has paid the villagers to attend. Following this, Clodagh is visited by the General’s agent, the arrogant, cynical and scantily clad Mr Dean. Dean, an Englishman who has ‘gone native’, is dismissive of the Order’s chances at the palace, and cynically predicts to Angu Ayah that the sisters will not hold out for long.

The climate at Mopu is inhospitable, and the nuns find the going extremely tough. Dean advises Clodagh to be wary of treating any serious medical cases, warning that the villagers will turn against them if a death should occur afterwards. When an almost hysterical Ruth bursts in on their discussion to tell of her success in treating a patient with a burst artery, Clodagh immediately chastises her for failing to summon the medically trained Sister Briony, but Dean, sensing that Ruth is aggrieved, commends her.

Later, Dean returns to the convent with an adolescent village girl, Kanchi. Dean explains that Kanchi is headstrong and has been following him around and causing a nuisance for her family, who are unable to marry her off. Dean, delighting in scandalizing the nuns, does not dissuade them from assuming that he has had sexual relations with the girl. Reluctantly, and driven by a sense of duty, Clodagh agrees to take her in. Similarly, when the young General, the old General’s nephew, presents himself to Clodagh and

asks to be educated in the school, she feels duty bound to accept him as well, but is uneasy about Kanchi remaining in his presence.

As Christmas arrives, Clodagh finds herself increasingly yielding to nostalgic reminiscences of a lost love, a young Irishman by the name of Con. When Dean arrives at the nuns' Christmas chapel service drunk, Clodagh, appalled, demands he not visit again. Later, conscious that Ruth has been watching Dean, Clodagh attempts to talk to her, about her health and about Dean. However, Ruth is defiant, accusing Clodagh of being attracted to Dean herself.

Later, when a gold chain goes missing, Kanchi is blamed and beaten by the caretaker Angu Ayah, until the young General intervenes and, with undisguised longing in his eyes, releases her. This is a climactic scene in which the two young love-struck Indians become romantically involved with each other. More significantly, it marks the point when the young General gives up attending classes at the nunnery in order to prepare for Cambridge and yields to his erotic desire for Kanchi—the point when, to put it simply, he gives up what the British can offer him and turns literally to the embrace of his native culture.

With the arrival of spring, Clodagh discovers to her dismay that Sister Philippa has planted the convent garden entirely with flowers in place of the expected and necessary vegetables. Confronted, Philippa, requests Clodagh to ask the Mother Superior to transfer her. When a sick baby is brought to the dispensary, Sister Briony, knowing she cannot help him, refuses to treat the infant. Without Briony's knowledge, however, Sister Blanche offers the mother medicine. When the baby dies, the nuns find the school and dispensary abandoned by the villagers. The young General and Kanchi have also absconded.

Isolated, and warned by Angu Ayah not to visit the village, the nuns have no option but to ring the bell and trust that Dean will come. That evening, Clodagh, unaware that she is being watched, or rather stalked, by Ruth,

confides in Dean her fear that Mopu is defeating them, and confesses her own tormented memories. Dean advises her to abandon the nunnery. Later, Clodagh, unable to sleep, wanders the corridors of the convent. Seeing a light burning in Ruth's room, she tries the door and finds it barred. When Ruth opens the door, Clodagh is horrified to discover that Ruth, in a change of costume worthy of the *kabuki*, has abandoned her nun's habit in favour of a striking red evening dress. Ruth informs her defiantly that she has left the Order and is leaving the nunnery. Clodagh begs her to wait until morning, and settles down to wait with her. But she falls asleep, and wakes to see Ruth rushing out of the room. Clodagh calls the other sisters, but they are unable to find her.

Ruth makes her way down the mountain and comes upon the empty house of Dean. When Dean returns, she openly professes her love for him, but he rejects her. Seeing that she is sick, he offers to return with her to the nunnery, but she refuses his aid and leaves alone. Ruth makes her way back to the nunnery, where she secretly watches Clodagh in the chapel. As Clodagh goes out to ring the morning bell, Ruth, now ashen-faced and vampiric, rushes from the chapel and attacks her. There is a desperate struggle at the bell tower, during which Ruth slips and hurtles to her death in the precipice below Mopu.

The surviving nuns prepare to abandon the nunnery. As they are making their way down, they encounter Dean on the path. He and Clodagh take their leave of each other. As Dean moves away, the rains suddenly begin to fall, thus fulfilling his prophecy that the nuns would stay only until the onset of the monsoon. As Clodagh looks back over her shoulder for the last time, Mopu, now a tantalizing illusion, disappears behind a veil of cloud.

3. Powell's construction of 'India'

In his review in *Sight and Sound* in 1947, the film critic Arthur Vesselo was

dismissive of *Black Narcissus*, damning it as an adaptation that “misses the mark,” being “largely a matter of atmosphere, of shadowy values which the film, in its excessive concreteness, fails to make real.” It was the panoramic photography of the Himalayan locations alone that earned his admiration. “The film’s biggest achievement,” he writes, “is in its exterior colour-work, which has moments of splendour so impressive that they almost make the whole film worth while.” Yet ironically, unlike Jean Renoir’s 1951 adaptation of a different Rumer Godden novel, *The River*, which was filmed entirely in India, not a single scene of *Black Narcissus* was shot on authentic location; rather, the film was made mainly at Pinewood Studios, with some scenes being shot among the ‘Himalayan’ azaleas and rhododendrons of Leonardslee Gardens in Sussex, the home of Sir Edmund Loder, an Indian army retiree. Powell’s decision not to shoot in India/Nepal had the result that “the ‘East’ that was compelling, beguiling and seductive [in the film] was in fact the creation of a Western imagination” (Street 2005: 34). Indeed, the ‘India’ constructed by his artistic team was so beguiling that, as Powell recounts wryly in his memoirs, “when it was done, it was so convincing that people who knew the Himalayas have told me where the picture was shot” (Powell 2000: 159). Yet what kind of ‘India’ did Powell and his team construct?

Powell was well served by the two primary members of his artistic team who could realise the director’s grand pictorial concept for *Black Narcissus*: Alfred Junge, whose work on the film won him the Academy Award for Best Art Direction, and the veteran cameraman Jack Cardiff, who garnered the film’s other Academy Award for Best Cinematography. Both the stunning vistas of Himalayan peaks as well as the exotic interiors at Mopu were conceived by Junge, who made extensive use of matte paintings and large-scale landscape paintings to suggest the mountainous environment, as well as some scale models for motion shots of the convent. Famously, the fateful bell tower at Mopu appears in the film to perch at the top of the

precipice into which Ruth plunges after the climactic life-and-death struggle with Clodagh; in reality, the tower stood a mere three feet off the floor of the Pinewood sound stage. Junge's visions of the rocky chasm below and the towering peaks in the distance were realised by the matte painter Walter Percy Day, whom Powell describes in his memoirs as "the greatest trick-man and film wizard that I've ever known" (Powell 2000: 311). As for the cinematographer Jack Cardiff, he was deservedly praised for his Vermeer-inspired " 'painterly' use of Technicolor" (Street 2005: 61). It was his use of saturated pigments and chiaroscuro lighting that heightened the exotic appeal of the external panoramas, the interior shots at Mopu, and the stunning costumes (Bowyer 2004). Between them, Junge and Cardiff created a visually arresting Technicolor 'India' that, along with such Orientalist films as *The Drum*, *The Four Feathers*, *Sixty Glorious Years*, *The Mikado* and *The Thief of Baghdad*, was part of the cinematic sensibility at that time that demonstrated an "imperialist interest in the exotic" (Petrie 2000: 228).

Two other key members of Powell's artistic team, associate art director Hein Heckroth and musical director Brian Easdale, added further important textures to this setting with their creation of what might collectively be termed 'ethnic local colour'. Heckroth was responsible for the creation of the exotic and sometimes dazzling costumes worn by the 'natives'. Although he had conducted extensive research on authentic Himalayan clothing, Heckroth nevertheless decided, in keeping with Powell's overall Orientalist vision of India for this production, to make the costumes deliberately stylized and exotic. Thus, according to one contemporary commentator, "The local Indian ruler and his son [*sic*] appear in lavishly bejeweled costumes of gold brocade and sequins—creating a private blaze of color wherever they go" (Lightman 1947: 457). Yet Rumer Godden herself, who had grown up and spent most of her life living in India, considered the costumes to be over-elaborate and like "pantomime clothes"

(Godden 1989: 52). Her judgement may be considered particularly apt given that the performer hamming the old General was the ‘blacked-up’ British stage-trained character actor Esmond Knight.

As for the sound track, Brian Easdale not only created an original ‘operatic’ score for the film but also added diegetic ‘ethnic’ sound effects (McFarland 2006). The strident fanfare played on Tibetan trumpets at the very beginning of the film, for example, announces that the story will unfold in an exotic Shangri-La-type setting. Then, as the camera takes us on our first tour of Mopu, an eerie, wind-like, female chorus—the spirits of the concubines depicted in the tantric wall paintings of the Blue Room—sings a weird and erotic counterpoint to Dean’s dry narration. Later, the stentorian trumpet blasts are employed again to announce the arrival at Mopu of the old General and his retinue. But even more exotic and ‘primitive’ are the tribal drums that are beaten incessantly during the scenes in which the emotional stability of the nuns is most under threat from the ‘barbarism’ beyond the convent’s walls. This is particularly so when Ruth yields to her hysterical longings and, dressed like a vamp in her red dress and lipstick, abandons the convent in search of Dean. Thus we can see how exotic costumes and exotic sounds were used in *Black Narcissus* as elements in Powell’s construction of an Orientalist vision of India as ‘Other’.

Who are the ‘Indians’ who populate this Himalayan film set? Among the principal Indian characters in *Black Narcissus* only the roles of the young General (played by the Indian actor Sabu) and the mixed-race boy Joseph Anthony (played by Eddie Whaley Jr)—both infantile characters—are performed by non-white actors. In contrast, the other principal Indian roles were performed by ‘blacked-up’ British actors and actresses: Kanchi by Jean Simmons; the old General, as already mentioned, by Esmond Knight; and Angu Ayah by May Hallatt. Moreover, it is significant that the two characters that most represent Orientalist ‘Indian’ stereotypes, namely Kanchi (the ‘Seductress’) and the Holy Man (the ‘Guru’), do not utter a

single word throughout the film. As for the other 'natives' that appear in the film, they form an anonymous mass, as described by Dean in his narrated letter at the beginning of the film:

The people are like mountain peasants everywhere, simple, independent. They work because they must. They smile when they feel like it . . . The men are men. No better and no worse than anywhere else. The women are women. The children, children.

In other words, as characters they are characterless. And that appears to be the way in which Powell viewed the extras he employed to fill these roles. As he recalls in his memoirs,

In those days, when the war was just over, there was an immense floating population of Asians around London Docks, and we had no difficulty in building up a list of extras for the crowd scenes: Malays, Indians, Gurkhas, Nepalese, Hindus, Pakistanis, hundreds of them. We formed groups of different castes and races, and each group had a leader.

(Powell 2000: 581)

Thus Powell had at his disposal a mini-Empire of dark-skinned bodies that could be deployed as he wished. From all of this it can be seen that the Indians in *Black Narcissus* are relegated to roles that are hammed-up, often embarrassingly so, by British stage actors in black-face (the Old General, Angu Ayah), or that are immature (the young General, Joseph Anthony), speechless (Kanchi, Holy Man), or characterless (the natives). By contrast, it is the speech, actions and emotional lives of the westerners in this westerner-conceived 'India' (Dean, Clodagh, Ruth) that constitute and dominate the discourse of this drama.

4. A female experience of India?

Having considered the Orientalist constructedness of the setting in *Black Narcissus*, I turn now to an examination of what the gender shift from male to female protagonists may tell us about the discursive thrust of this film. In the context of ‘end-of-empire’ fictions, cultural theorist Richard Dyer, has argued that

When a text is one of celebration, it is manly white qualities of expansiveness, enterprise, courage and control (of self and others) that are in the foreground; but when doubt and uncertainty creep in, women begin to take centre stage. The white male spirit achieves and maintains empire; the white female soul is associated with its demise.

(Dyer 1997: 184)

On the basis of this dichotomy, we may agree with the commentators who see the foregrounding of the experience of emotionally unstable female characters in *Black Narcissus* as constituting a “dramatisation of failing colonial confidence” (Davidson/Hill 2005: 6), particularly in view of the timing of the film’s release just weeks prior to Independence. Yet in this section I wish to question the generally held view that *Black Narcissus* can be seen as a “woman’s film” (Landy 1991: 232), as a “women-centred melodrama” (Moor 2001), and examine whether or not the same masculinist colonial discourse of the earlier empire films persists but in a less overt and more subtly nuanced fashion.

The force that undermines the emotional stability of the nuns is the erotic desire awakened in them by the new and strange environment they find themselves in. The very setting, both the Orient in general and Mopu in

particular, is steeped in an eroticism that will eventually overwhelm and defeat the sisters. As Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon have observed, the image of the Orient as “a site of eroticism, decadence and sexual gratification” is one that stretches back over centuries (Jordan/Weedon 1995: 263). And the palace at Mopu, the so-called “House of Women” with its erotic wall paintings and images, represents that locus of western male desire, the Orientalist erotic fantasy location *par excellence*, the harem (Young 1995). It is a place given over to a sensuality that has been sanctioned not merely on the mortal, secular plane by the old General’s father, who originally established the seraglio, but also on the immortal, religious plane, since it is a place that is watched over benignly by the soaring peak of Nanga Dali, “the Bare Goddess”. It is living in this eroticised Orientalist ‘temple of love’ that will awaken the repressed sexual desire in both Ruth, eventually pushing her towards hysteria and death, and in Clodagh, unravelling her self-discipline and sense of religious duty. It is in this House of Women, this home of ‘natural’ sexuality, that the self-restraint and self-denial of the nuns will be put under pressure.

Like the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, the two key female characters Clodagh and Ruth are positioned as psychological and sexual alter egos. In contrast to the repressed sexual longings of these two, the young figure of Kanchi is presented as the embodiment of an open eroticism unencumbered by any moral restraint or repressed desires. As one critic has put it, she is “associated with sensuality and a natural form of sexuality” (Street 2005: 41). Nor is she tormented by memories of a lost love from her past. Indeed, Kanchi has no past; she lives in the present tense of her immediate passions. She is presented as someone who would have been entirely at home in the original harem. This is made clear soon after her arrival at Mopu when, aping the erotic figures in the wall paintings in the ‘Blue Room’, she performs a seductive solo dance. Kanchi’s role in the story is to hold up a mirror to the troubled nuns. As Powell puts it in his

memoirs, it is “the young Indian girl who brings the world, flesh, and the devil into the nuns’ retreat” (Powell 2000: 574). She represents, in a word, everything that they cannot healthily be; she is the threat of the eroticized Orient to the ordered and purposeful will of the religious colonizers.

Given these primarily female-centred plot strands, it is easy to come to the conclusion that *Black Narcissus* is a story that revolves entirely around the emotional and sexual upheavals of Clodagh and Ruth. I wish to argue, however, that the key figure in the story, as in the earlier empire films, remains a man, Mr Dean, since narrative authority throughout lies in his hands and is expressed by his voice. Indeed, the telling name ‘Dean’ itself carries the suggestion that it is Mr Dean, as a kind of *Father Superior*, and not Sister Clodagh, who actually leads the religious community at Mopu. All the knowledge that we the spectators and Clodagh and her sisters gain about Mopu and the local community is mediated through Dean’s perspective. It is his masculinist and imperialist discourse that runs like a mountain stream throughout the story. Right from the beginning, as noted in the previous section, it is Dean’s authoritative ‘documentary’ voice that ‘reads’ his own letter to the Mother Superior describing Mopu, the natives and their ‘primitive’ way of life. In his sketch of Angu Ayah, for example, he notes drily that, “As a caretaker, she’s a failure, but she’s a faithful, dirty old bird who goes with the place.” Dean *knows* Mopu and its people and customs. He therefore *knows* that the Order’s project is doomed from the very beginning. In his first interview with Clodagh, Dean predicts the nuns’ failure and eventual departure: “I give you until the rains break.” The prediction is uttered in such a way as to suggest that the nuns will stay in Mopu only for the length of time that he ‘gives’ them.

Dean does not merely demonstrate and exercise his power through words, however; as the old General’s *agent*, he also controls the day-to-day life of the nuns at Mopu through his actions. It is Dean who makes it logistically possible for the sisters to get to Mopu in the first place (“First you have to

get to Darjeeling, and then I must find ponies and porters to get you out to the hills”); it is Dean, even before their arrival, who dispenses paternal advice to them on practical matters (“If you must come, bring some warm things with you”); and it is Dean, like one of the British civil engineers who constructed and maintained India’s railways and bridges, who as maintenance man keeps the infrastructure in Mopu, a microcosm of India, running smoothly (“I count plumbing among my many gifts”).

Dean’s most prolific gift, however, is not the fixing of water pipes but the stirring up of female hearts. Although keeping his own passions firmly batted down (“I don’t love anyone!”), it is Dean’s provocative and semi-naked physicality in the erotic hothouse of Mopu that not only contributes to sending Ruth to her crazed death but also distracts Clodagh from her religious duty. It is Dean’s sexual charisma that keeps both Clodagh and Ruth in a state of emotional dependence and underlines his position as the dominant personality in the film. The insidious and comprehensive control that he exercises over these two women is apparent in two parallel scenes in which they both individually lay their emotions bare to him. In the first of these scenes, Clodagh succumbs to an emotional crisis and for the first time in the film shows the feeling, suffering woman behind the stern Sister Superior. The exchange between them, teetering on a knife’s edge between courtship and confession, unfolds with breathless tension. It is Clodagh who invites the intimate tone of the conversation by asking Dean if he has noticed a change in the sisters since they came to Mopu. Dean heightens the intimacy by speaking of his impressions of Clodagh herself:

Dean: I notice a change in *you*.

Clodagh: Am I very different?

Dean: Yes. You’re much nicer.

Clodagh: Nicer?

Dean: Hm. You’re human.

This new intimacy leads Clodagh to unburden herself in a curious role reversal whereby she, the religious head of the community, ‘confesses’ her innermost secrets and weaknesses to Dean. She tells him of the lost love for a young man back in her native Ireland that still haunts her. In fact, she does more than this, since she makes the astonishingly bold confession that “I had shown I loved him.” Significantly, this twisting trail of memories and feelings leads directly back to Dean. Daring to unburden herself further, she tells Dean: “I had forgotten everything until I came here. The first day I came I thought of him for the first time for years.” The first day, in this case, refers to the first troubling interview with Dean, during which their eyes met. At this point in the conversation, she breaks down into tears:

Clodagh: I’ve been drifting and dreaming and now I seem to be living through the struggle and the bitterness again.

Dean: [*handing her a handkerchief*] Here, it’s quite clean. I washed it this morning. Don’t take on so, there’s a good girl. It’ll all blow over. There’s nothing really wrong.

From this point on in the exchange, with Clodagh showing her utter despair and weakness and literally crying for help, we can see the hierarchical gender power relations quite clearly. Dean’s reaction to Clodagh’s emotional outpouring, in true stiff-upper-lip masculinist fashion, is to trivialise it through humour and condescension. At great emotional cost, one imagines, Clodagh confesses her sense of utter failure both in love and in her vocation, and Dean’s response is to inform her that all will be well because there is “nothing really wrong” in the first place; she simply needs to be a “good girl” and not “take on so.” But this has the effect of pushing Clodagh further towards the climactic confession of what lies at the bottom of it all: “And you! Ever since we came here, over all our troubles, it’s been

‘Ask Mr Dean,’ ‘Ask Mr Dean.’” With his smug response, “There was just no-one else you could ask,” Dean demonstrates his full consciousness of the personal power he wields over the sisters.

Soon after this, the scene involving Dean and Ruth shows Dean exerting his dominant sexual power in a more brutal fashion. Ruth, having abandoned the nunnery, arrives at Dean’s house in the valley, intent on throwing herself at him. At first he reacts blandly by telling her that he will arrange for her to stay that night at the General’s rest house and then arrange for her journey to Darjeeling the next day. This coolness on his part merely fans the flames of her passion and she blurts out that she loves him. Dean retorts angrily with: “Well, if you do, you can forget about it!” As with Clodagh, it is clear that every encounter that Ruth has had with the charismatic Dean, however brief or inconsequential, has driven arrows of desire into her heart:

Ruth: You’re the only one that’s ever been kind to me.

Dean: I? I’ve hardly spoken a word to you!

Ruth: Yes, you have. The first time was when I stopped the old native woman from bleeding to death. You said you were grateful.

Dean: Did I?

Ruth: And then when you stopped me that day in the hall you said ...

Dean: Well, whatever I said, it didn’t mean a thing! Ever since you came here, you’ve all gone crazy! Well, drive one another crazy but leave me out of it!

As Ruth’s desperation and Dean’s anger both mount to boiling point, the exchange climaxes with Ruth swooning into unconsciousness. Moments later, she wakes up only to find Dean as hard and aloof as before:

Dean: Feel better now?

Ruth: All right, I'll go.

Dean: That's a good girl. Try and get some sleep. In the morning you'll wake up and be sorry you made such a fool of yourself. Come on, I'll come with you.

Ruth: I'll go alone.

Dean: [*barring Ruth's exit*] You'll do nothing of the sort!

Although superficially Dean appears to respond benevolently to Clodagh yet severely and dismissively to Ruth, his reaction to the emotional outbursts of both these women is in essence identical. In stereotypical British masculinist fashion his message to both women is to be “good girls”, to stop making fools of themselves, and to pull themselves together. To both of them he displays an aloof and patronizing attitude. What really bothers this man, one suspects, is that these meddling women have intruded into his little empire: “I told you it was no place to put a nunnery!”, he tells Clodagh. His greatest wish, truth be told, is to see all the nuns quit Mopu and leave him in the peace he needs to get on with his own imperial project. Film scholar Sarah Street is certainly correct in asserting that *Black Narcissus* is “a narrative about the decline of empire and failure of imperialism” (Street 2005: 7). The dramatization of the female experience of empire in this film is the metaphor for this decline. The whole discursive thrust of this film, however, is less a questioning of this decline than the assertion that empire-building, as Mr Dean would doubtless have formulated it himself, is best left to men.

5. Conclusion

In contrast to earlier triumphalist empire films, *Black Narcissus* seems at face value to be a post-colonial discourse that thematises the decline of empire and questions the value or even possibility of there being a

benevolent face of imperialism. The nuns' altruistic attempt to provide essential services to the local native population at Mopu is shown, after all, to be an utterly futile exercise. The death of the infant child, for example, showed the limitations of the health care that the nuns could provide, whilst the English class in which the children were made mindlessly to chant "cannon, warship, bayonet, dagger, gun" demonstrated the irrelevance of the education the sisters attempted to impart. Despite these hints at a critical view of the empire, however, a closer look at the film suggests that it was still a reactionary discourse that perpetuated colonial values even as India was becoming independent from Britain. As we have seen, it is the combination in the film of director Powell's Orientalist construction of 'India' and the overwhelming dominance of the masculinist Dean that leads to the conclusion that *Black Narcissus* was every bit as colonial as the earlier empire films, the only significant difference being that the use of twin female protagonists, Clodagh and Ruth, offered a more nuanced but not more critical view of the British Empire experience. At the end of the film, however, it is Mr Dean, dispensing grapes to his pet monkey and orders to his 'boy', who stays on to steer the little empire of Mopu.

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