

# Jean Renoir's cinematic adaptation of Rumer Godden's *The River*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The French director Jean Renoir's 1951 film adaptation of Rumer Godden's novella *The River* was not only his first colour film but was the first Technicolor film to be made in India by anyone. The result, on the cinematographic level, is a beautiful and picturesque elaboration of Godden's short original text. On a deeper level, however, Renoir's film, in which he made considerable changes to Godden's story, is also a subtly orientalist vision of India which reaffirms Western imperialist attitudes towards colonial societies. This is particularly striking when one considers the timing. Godden had published her novel just a year before Indian Independence in 1947, and Renoir made his film just three years after India's separation from British rule, and yet in neither work is this tumultuous event even referred to. Both Godden and Renoir created instead their own ideal images of India, Godden's from her childhood memories and Renoir from his fertile visual imagination. In his film, Renoir elaborated from Godden's sparse prose an epic documentary-style evocation of India and its people and customs. In so

doing, he placed himself in a tradition of Western artists (particularly French artists) who used painting, photography and filmmaking to capture, interpret and exoticise the so-called 'Orient' for Western audiences. Renoir further 'orientalised' India in this film with his invention of the Eurasian character Melanie, who dances a traditional performance of the story of the wedding of Krishna and Radha. Renoir thus employed the frequently used orientalist image of the exotic female dancer to feminize his 'India'. In addition, by using a traditionally trained dancer in the *Bharata Natyam* style, Renoir could also claim authenticity in his portrayal of Indian culture. In this paper I analyse the changes that Renoir made to Godden's and examine the orientalist assumptions that underpin his idyllic image of India. My purpose will be to question the authenticity of Renoir's apparently ethnographic record of Indian life.

The Ganges, above all is the river of India, which has held India's heart captive and drawn uncounted millions to her banks since the dawn of history. The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new, is the story of India's civilization and culture, of the rise and fall of empires, of great and proud cities, of adventures of man.

Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*

What a terrible river! What a wonderful river!

Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is an analysis of the French film director Jean Renoir's 1951 cinematic adaptation of Rumer Godden's novella *The River* (1946). Specifically, my purpose here is to identify and describe the major alterations and additions that Renoir made to Godden's source story and then to examine how these directorial interventions constructed a certain

image of India and Indian people and culture. Beneath the cloak of Renoir's apparently sympathetic recording of Indian culture and the undeniably beautiful Technicolor cinematography, the film perpetuated, I shall argue, a long tradition of orientalist discourse in the West that reaffirmed India's subaltern status even at the moment of its throwing off the yoke of British imperialism. With such orientalism already deeply embedded in Rumer Godden's source novella, it is perhaps appropriate to preface the main discussion here with a brief consideration of the life and work of this lesser-known writer.

The fictional works of the British novelist Rumer Godden (1907-98), it is safe to say, have never been considered part of the canon of English literature concerned with India. Her writings, when they do find their way onto college seminar reading lists, are mostly considered to be of interest as quirky fictional expressions of the 'Raj experience' rather than as serious literary works in their own right. Compared, say, with E. M. Forster, another chronicler of pre-World War II Anglo-Indian society, Godden has been perceived as a low-to-middle brow writer and has consequently suffered from neglect by literary scholars.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless there is no doubting that she once enjoyed a considerable *popular* appeal. Though her readership may have shrunk in recent years in direct proportion to the rise of postcolonial confidence in the former colonies, her novels and stories have remained doggedly in print, and they have frequently been adapted for cinema and television. Godden's writings reached the peak of their popularity in the 1940s and 50s, when her brand of 'Raj nostalgia'<sup>3</sup> or "memsahib memories" (Lassner 2004: 70) seemed to articulate the wistful mood of the time, as least as far as deflated imperial Britons were concerned, in the wake of Indian independence in 1947. How did Godden's singular 'insider' relationship with India develop?

Margaret Rumer Godden was born in 1907 in England, but grew up with her three sisters in Narayanganj in the Bengal province of British India,

where their 'box-wallah' father worked as an agent in a shipping company. There, comfortably at home in a rambling colonial villa, she enjoyed an idyllic childhood complete with nanny and servants. Though they grew up in a privileged Anglo-Indian environment, the children lived and played in proximity to the local bazaar and the daily life of Indians. Thus Godden and her sisters, in contrast to the offspring of the aloof British elite in Calcutta, grew up knowing a good deal about India and ordinary Indians, albeit with an unchallenged conviction with regard to their own superiority over the natives. As her biographer Anne Chisholm puts it, "For all the fun and games, the Godden children grew up well aware that, in their household as in all India, the British ruled the roost" (Chisholm 1998: 14). In her early 20s, Godden returned briefly to England to train as a dance teacher, after which she came back to Bengal and established a dance school for Eurasian girls in Calcutta. Following the breakdown of her first marriage, she moved with her two small daughters to Kashmir, where she lived in an isolated cottage in the Himalayan foothills and worked at honing her writing skills. Her breakthrough finally came with the publication in 1939 of the novel *Black Narcissus*. This popular success was crowned in 1947 by the sensational double-Oscar-winning film adaptation of the novel. In 1949, two years after independence, she left India and returned to Britain, continuing to write until her death in 1998. In all, Godden published more than sixty books, including novels, children's stories and memoirs.

As mentioned, a number of Godden's works have been adapted for cinema and television.<sup>4</sup> The two most celebrated cinematic adaptations are Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1947 film *Black Narcissus* and Jean Renoir's 1951 film *The River* (also known in French as *Le Fleuve*). Godden's first experience of witnessing one of her works adapted for the silver screen was traumatic and hugely disappointing for her. Whilst Powell and Pressburger had remained faithful to the plot and characterization of her novel, Godden hated the transfer to the screen unreservedly, declaring in her

memoirs that: "There is not an atom of truth in the film of *Black Narcissus*—famous as it has become" (Godden 1989: 51). In Godden's somewhat schoolmarmish view, the two Archers partners had completely betrayed the spirit of her novel by creating an overheated sexual melodrama. Moreover, Godden, greatly concerned in her own eyes with authenticity in her writing about India, hated the fantasy 'Shangri La' setting conjured by Powell and his artistic team at Pinewood Studios. When asked at a press conference following the film's release what she felt about it, Godden retorted stiffly: "Only that I have taken a vow never to allow a book of mine to be made into a film again" (*ibid*: 53). She would change her opinion, as we shall see, when approached with charm and tact by the distinguished French director Jean Renoir about the possibility of adapting *The River*.

## 2. Renoir's interest in Godden's *The River*

Although Godden's formative years coincided with the twilight of the British Raj, the turbulence leading up to independence in 1947 is a yawning and conspicuous absence in the works that she set in India.<sup>5</sup> Godden's interest was rather in writing nostalgically of the simple details and exotic delights of colonial Anglo-Indian life as she remembered it. It was Godden's ability to evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of India and to write in an uncomplicated yet visual fashion—a script-like fashion—that attracted the filmmakers to her writings. This is particularly the case with her novella *The River*. We can get a clear sense of her preoccupations from her published introduction to that work, where, recalling her feelings at the time she and her sister Jon were sent back to Britain briefly as children, she writes:

Perhaps the thing we had missed more than anything else was the dust: the feel of the sun-baked Indian dust between sandals and bare toes; that and the smell. It was the honey smell of the fuzz-buzz flowers of thorn trees in the sun, and the smell of open drains and

urine, of coconut oil on shining human hair, of mustard cooking oil and the blue smoke from cow dung used as fuel; it was a smell redolent of the sun, more alive and vivid than anything in the West, to us the smell of India.

(Godden 2004: xiii)

Godden based her novella *The River* on such memories of her own early years in Bengal. The main characters in the story are the three sisters Bea, Harriet, Victoria and their younger brother Bogey, who live in a large colonial villa with their mother and father, who is the supervisor of a jute-pressing works, and their nanny and servants beside a great river in Bengal.<sup>6</sup> Its story revolves around Harriet, Godden's adolescent alter ego, as she undergoes the upheavals and pain of young love through her contact with the wounded war veteran Captain John, and learns to accept the inevitability of death after a cobra kills her younger brother. The novella, with its paucity of action and dramatic events, comprises the river-like flow of Harriet's inner responses to the individuals and cycles of life and death surrounding her. The novella's chief plot points are Harriet's crush on Captain John; the lessons about life and death that he imparts to Harriet; Harriet's jealousy of his attraction to her older sister Bea; Harriet's dream of becoming a poet; and Bogey's death from the snake bite. The narrative ends with Harriet's stoical acceptance of life's ebb and flow. The Hinduism-tinged philosophy of Godden's narrative spoke directly to the film director Jean Renoir, who, at the time of his encounter with *The River*, stood frustrated at a crossroads in his artistic career and personal life. As we shall see, his adaptation of the novella would become a means of expressing himself through the discovery and depiction of an idyllic India rather than a faithful rendering of Godden's source text.

Renoir (1894-1979), the son of the great Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir, was "by far the greatest and most influential director to

emerge from French poetic realism” (Cook 1996: 381). His career in cinema began in 1924 with an erratic series of nine silent films, but it was in the following decade that Renoir began to establish his reputation as a filmmaker. He made his sound debut in 1931 with the two films *On purge bébé* [Purging the Baby] and *La Chienne* [The Bitch], followed in the next year by his Chaplinesque *Boudu sauvé des eaux* [Boudu Saved from Drowning]. In 1934 Renoir directed a fine version of *Madame Bovary* (1934), which, though a commercial failure, represented an early experiment in symbolist cinema. By the mid-1930s Renoir was associated with the Popular Front, and several of his films reflect the political philosophy of that movement. In 1937 he made what is widely considered to be his masterpiece, *La Grande Illusion* [The Grand Illusion], starring Erich von Stroheim and Jean Gabin. A pacifist film about a series of escape attempts by French POWs during World War I, the film was enormously successful but was also banned in Germany, and later in Italy, despite winning an award at the Venice Film Festival. This was followed by another cinematic success: *La Bête Humaine* [The Human Beast], a film noir tragedy based on the novel by Émile Zola. In 1939, now able to finance his own films, Renoir made *La Règle du Jeu* [The Rules of the Game], a satire on contemporary French society. Banned by the Vichy government, it was his greatest commercial failure. When World War II came, the 45-year-old Renoir was drafted into the French Film Service, and was sent briefly to Italy to teach film at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome. The French government hoped that this cultural exchange would help to maintain friendly relations with Italy, which had not yet entered the war. But when Germany invaded and occupied France in May 1940, he was recalled to France, after which he fled to the United States. In Hollywood, Renoir had difficulty finding projects that suited him. In 1943, he produced and directed an anti-Nazi film set in France, *This Land Is Mine*. Two years later, he made *The Southerner*, a film about Texas sharecroppers that is often regarded as his best work in

America. This was followed by the last films Renoir made in that country, *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946) and *The Woman on the Beach* (1947), both of which were poorly received. Thus Renoir arrived at the crossroads of his life.

Frustrated with Hollywood, Renoir now desperately began looking around for fresh inspiration and discovered it in *The River*. It was a review in the *New Yorker* in 1946 that first drew his attention to Godden's novella. As Renoir commented in a letter, the story was "the type of novel which would give me the best inspiration for my work—almost no action, but fascinating characters; very touching relationships between them; the basis for great acting performances" (Chisholm 1998: 200). And in his filmed introduction to *The River*, Renoir recalls thinking that "it was a marvellous starting point for a movie."<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, therefore, that from the very beginning of the adaptation process, Renoir viewed Godden's work as a sketch rather than a blueprint. Indeed, he would entirely refashion the source story to accommodate the full scope of his artistic vision.

Knowing of Godden's negative feelings about the Powell and Pressburger adaptation of *Black Narcissus*, Renoir took a cautious approach in winning Godden's initial agreement not only to the project but also to the considerable changes that he knew he wanted to make to her story. After securing her consent, Renoir invited her to his Beverly Hills home and during the summer of 1949 they worked together on the script, though with the director clearly taking the initiative. Godden recalls Renoir declaring at the outset of their collaboration: "We will put the book up on the shelf. Then we can keep the flavour while we recreate it in another medium" (Godden 1989: 104). Thus Renoir's strategy, for want of a better word, was to coax Godden along the path that he already saw the film heading. In one letter to her he writes *faux* apologetically of "my fear of taking any road you may be reluctant to step on" (Renoir 1994: 243). Nevertheless, step-by-step he cajoled her into leaving her original story up on the shelf. His softly-softly



approach certainly paid off. After the film's release, Renoir wrote to the producer Lester Cowan: "In *The River*, I was entirely at ease because Rumer Godden accepted to invent another story together with me. We were both faithful to the spirit of her novel, but she left me free to imagine the situations, the dramatic progression, the contrasts, and even to add new characters" (*ibid*: 288). Godden, lulled like a cobra into acquiescence by the flute of Renoir's Gallic charm, concurred: "We changed, unchanged, but not the idea, the flavour" (Godden 1989: 105). Though the director generously placed Godden's name above his own in the screenwriting credits, the film was undeniably Renoir's concept and creation. I turn now to a consideration of the image of India that Renoir constructed in *The River*.

### 3. The 'imaginary geography' of Renoir's India

In his landmark work *Orientalism* Edward Said advanced the proposition, now a key tenet of orientalist and postcolonialist theories, that: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1995: 1). Godden's vision of India in *The River*, as well as in her other India-set novels, stories and memoirs, is an orientalist or Eurocentric rendering of an imagined 'India'. In *The River*, we find all the factors listed above by Said. To be sure, Godden, who spent a large portion of her life living in India, certainly knew the country and its people well. Nevertheless, her perspective was without doubt always enjoyed from the unassailable heights of her social and cultural superiority as a *memsahib*. Godden, writing both during the colonial era and after, as both an insider to the settler's experience and an outsider to indigenous India, occupied an ambiguous and liminal position. In *The River* this is most obviously apparent in the fact that her sole concern is with recounting the remarkable experiences the *British* characters had in this wonderland of romance and "haunting memories and landscapes." Indians, when they appear at all, are

relegated to supporting roles and local colour. This observation should not be read as a harsh criticism of Godden. She was, after all, a product of her colonial times, in which Indians were, at best, exotic characters, but more usually, servants or ‘coolies’, a word that frequently crops up unselfconsciously in her writings. A further clear indicator of Godden’s orientalist tendencies is the fact that the ‘India’ in this novella is marked by the conspicuous absence of the contemporary realities of the mid-1940s. Published just months before Indian independence on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947, the reader discovers, as biographer Anne Chisholm notes, that “there is not a political thought or word in *The River*” (Chisholm 1998: 198). Godden, Chisholm adds, “never wrote directly about the British departure or how it affected the [novel’s semi-fictional] family” (*ibid.*). Indeed, the timeless riverside life enjoyed by Harriet and her family may be seen as the very denial of the tectonic shifts rending and reshaping India at that time, as an attempt to turn the clock back, as it were, to the happier and less complicated days of the Raj.

It was this very timelessness and universality that captured the attention of director Jean Renoir. For Renoir, Godden’s novel was a key that unlocked the door to an idyllic ‘India’ that appeared to have already existed inchoately in his yearning imagination. In the early days of the production, having travelled around with his crew to complete some documentary footage for the movie, Renoir wrote to an executive at the appropriately titled Oriental-International Film Incorporated, the company producing the film, that:

What I discovered now is the beauty and the quality of the ancient world. I had always imagined that the contemporaries of Ramses II or of Socrates were walking, sitting down, eating, making love with a great nobility of attitudes, but that was only a supposition. In India I saw them, because practically India didn’t change in four thousand years, and is still living with an aristocratic style which has about

completely disappeared in our mechanized civilization. To be confronted every day with boatmen working their oars in the Ganges River who are directly stepping out of an Egyptian bas-relief, or with a girl dressed in a sari just buying in a market, looking like an animated Tanagra statue, believe me, that's exactly the shock I was needing after eight years in Hollywood."

(Renoir 1994: 224)

Here, Renoir can be seen consciously conflating ancient Egypt and contemporary India chronologically and ethnically into a single sweeping panorama of a mythic and transhistorical 'Orient'. The film he made out of Godden's novel was his attempt to capture and make comprehensible that orientalist vision. Hence, interspersed throughout the film, are extended documentary-style sequences shot with what I shall call his 'ethnographic camera' that bring to stunning life the nostalgic memories of Godden. The adaptation of *The River* was not only Renoir's first colour movie, it was his first film in Technicolor; indeed, it was the first Technicolor film ever made in India. At that time, Technicolor was a very challenging medium even in Hollywood or London with the full resources of processing labs on hand; in India, the absence of such technical resources became a huge logistical nightmare for the director (Sesonske 2005). Thus his decision to use this more 'painterly' medium is a clear indication that Renoir had set out to create a work of beauty that would bring his idyllic 'India' to full chromatic life on the screen. He recalls that: "I saw colours in India as marvellous motifs with which to test my theories about colour films" (Bergan 1995: 271).

The travelogue sequences are accompanied by frequently pedantic voice-over explanations by the older Harriet. The very opening of the film, different from the novella, sets the educational tone with one such exhortatory narration: "In India, to honour guests on special occasions,

women decorate the floors of their homes with rice flour and water. With this *rangoli* we welcome you to this motion picture.” This prelude immediately banishes any prospect for the audience of mere entertainment; Renoir’s purpose with *The River* is to present the real India. The film proper then opens with the older Harriet again narrating over picturesque 1950s National Geographic-style footage of indigenous fishermen and boatmen happily at work, singing authentic Bengali songs as their boats sail past temple *ghats* and lush tropical vegetation.

A more fully developed example of this explicatory approach of narration combined with beautiful documentary-style photography is the extended Diwali sequence. The short and sparse two-page passage in the novella tells how Harriet and her sisters loved this particular celebration, and focuses on the delight they felt at the sound of the village drums and at the magical sight of hundreds of oil lamps burning in the darkness. Significantly, Godden describes the festival from the point of view of the sensual response of the girls. The only real fact explained in the novella is the simple one that Diwali is the Hindu festival of light. The corresponding sequence in the film, however, is much expanded, running to more than five minutes, and its focus is on ordinary Indians. Thus it shows Hindus lighting oil lamps and offering them at shrines; fireworks being set off; traditional musicians playing their instruments; and so on. It also includes greatly expanded factual narrations by Harriet. For example, she explains pedantically that: “Hindus believe in one god, but they worship different symbols which they regard as the embodiment of virtues and qualities of the Supreme Being. That is why there are many kinds of temples and images all over India. Among these symbols is Kali, goddess of eternal destruction and creation, creation being impossible without destruction.” The narration continues in this manner, foregoing drama for explication, and expanding the sparse sense impressions of the novella into a fully-fledged travelogue. Even the tragedy of Bogey’s death and funeral becomes in Renoir’s film the occasion

to demonstrate in a very picturesque manner further aspects of Indian customs (the weaving of funeral garlands, singing of traditional Hindu funeral songs, the carrying of the coffin to the river, and so on) and pseudo-Hinduistic philosophy (the un-Western stoicism of Harriet's parents at the loss of their young son, their forbidding her to keep Bogey's flute, and the happy expectation of the 'reincarnated Bogey' in the form of the new baby, and so on).

Renoir's most significant and radical change to Godden's source text was his invention of the character of Melanie, the mixed-race daughter of Mr John, the Indophile neighbour of Harriet's family. The creation of Melanie is one of the keys to an understanding of Renoir's approach in this adaptation. The 'India' in Godden's novella had been mediated entirely through the nostalgic Eurocentric eyes of Godden and her alter ego the older Harriet. Renoir, uneasy about this one-sided perspective, felt that a bridge would be needed between East and West, namely the invented Eurasian character of Melanie. Thus he looked for a person who, in portraying this character, could present the traditional face of India and found her in the young dancer Radha Sri Ram, trained in the *Bharata Natyam*<sup>8</sup> style and steeped in the study of Sanskrit and theosophy.

Melanie's first appearance in the film is when she arrives home at the end of her schooling at a Catholic convent. At first she is dressed in a dowdy grey uniform, in which she is obviously uncomfortable. Her hair is tied up in a chaste-looking braid, and her speech and movements are unnatural and stilted. Soon after, however, having shed this dual straitjacket of the uniform and her convent-imposed Western-ness, we see her transformed, reborn almost, into a radiant Indian beauty dressed in a sari and with long lustrous hair flowing down her back. Her father is delighted to discover that she looks just like her late mother. But Captain John, slipping into 'Pinkerton-mode', blurts out: "Wonderful. Changed into a pretty little butterfly." Melanie, however, has become secure in her new post-convent Indian

identity and she is not going to let herself be ‘butterflied’. “From a grub,” she shoots back without missing a beat.

This scene sets up the dynamics for the rest of the film. The role of Captain John in the film, much more so than in the novella, is to be the gauche outsider—for which read Western cinema audience—in need of education about Indian culture. Harriet undertakes to teach him (and us) and it is Melanie’s purpose to enact these ethnographic lessons through her dance. Harriet’s personal motivation for explaining India to Captain John is quite simply to win his attention away from the other girls. The voice of the older Harriet recalls: “I decided to win his heart with tales of India.” Young Harriet continues on camera by proclaiming to Captain John: “I write a song in praise of the Lord Krishna.” Her extemporized story segues into the story-within-a-story that Melanie then enacts in a traditional dance-drama about the love between Krishna and Radha. Harriet’s voice-over narration explicates what is considered by many to be the most memorable and mesmerizing scene in the whole movie.

In this context it is instructive briefly to compare this sequence with the dance scene in the *Black Narcissus* film—also a fabrication on the part of the director—in which Kanchi, the seductive young Indian girl, dances erotically in the convent at Mopu. The first point to be emphasised is that Renoir, like Powell, employed the well-established orientalist trope (for the Western male gaze) of the exotic female dancer.<sup>9</sup> This is a discursive strategy that seeks to establish the ‘Orient’ as the ‘feminized other’: subservient, erotic/exotic and available.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, with this sequence Renoir, in contrast to Powell, was clearly aiming at an *authentic* way of representing his idealized vision of India. The casting of *bona fide* traditional dancer Radha Sri Ram in the role of Melanie—where Powell had cast the young black-faced English ingénue Jean Simmons as Kanchi—appeared to sanction this authenticity as she became the object of Renoir’s ‘ethnographic camera’ and the audience’s imperial gaze. Furthermore, Melanie/Radha’s

performance undeniably constituted an authenticate dance in the *Bharata Natyam* style set to authentic traditional music, whereas Kanchi's performance was a *mélange* of Martha Graham, ballet and belly dance set to Brian Easdale's equally hybrid East-West musical score. If Renoir was using his cultural ambassadress Radha Sri Ram to purvey authentic Indian culture to his audiences, then Powell was employing his erotic vamp Kanchi to seduce them. Two approaches to photographing 'Indian' dance, but ultimately the same feminized 'Orient' served up for Western consumption.

Renoir's quasi-documentary filming followed in the path well beaten by French 'ethnographic' painters (the 19<sup>th</sup> century French Orientalist school of painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Eugene Delcroix), photographers (Maxime Du Camp, Félix Teynard, Felix Bonfils, and others) and filmmakers, who, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued, "transformed European spectators into armchair conquistadors, affirming their sense of power while turning the colonies into spectacle for the metropole's voyeuristic gaze" (Shohat/Stam 1994: 104). In the 1930s, just as Britain and Hollywood had their so-called "empire films," so France had its *cinéma colonial*.<sup>11</sup> Renoir's *The River* dovetailed perfectly into this French tradition of using the visual arts and photography in particular to capture, classify, exoticise and thus gain cultural control over the colonized 'Orient'. This is not to suggest that Renoir was engaged in producing an overtly imperialist film. Nevertheless, there are some troubling moments for present-day postcolonial sensibilities—when the Older Harriet talks of her father loving the sight of the "coolies" bearing their vast bundles of jute into the factory, for example—which suggest that the French director was still a willing, though perhaps rather naïve, participant in his own country's long tradition of colonialism. As a non-Briton, Renoir was able to escape being tarred with any colonial Raj brush; as a Frenchman, however, any orientalist discourse created by him necessarily linked him to France's considerable history of brutal imperialism; after all, European colonial powers, Britain and France

in particular, had long swum in the same dirty water. It should be noted that Renoir's *The River* was released in 1951, just at the moment when the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria was gearing up for its bitter guerilla war against the French oppressors in that colony. It is certainly striking, therefore, that Renoir could make a film about India—and India is the main 'character' in the film—without making even the most fleeting reference to the earth-shattering moment that was represented by independence in 1947.

#### 4. Conclusion

In stark contrast to Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus*, Godden found Renoir's adaptation of *The River* "exquisite" (Godden 2004: xiii). "Renoir believed passionately, as I do," she wrote, "that in cinema the authenticity is truth so that he would not have a Bengali peasant, field worker or boatman singing or talking in English as they did in *Black Narcissus*. Nowhere in the film of *The River* is there anything artificial that should be real" (Godden 1989: 105). Her satisfaction with Renoir's authenticity—what she saw as his use of real locations, untrained actors, authentic costumes, music, language and customs, etc.—overrode any possible misgivings that she might have nursed regarding the swingeing changes that he made to her story.

Godden's work, as noted above, was predicated upon the orientalist and Eurocentric assumptions of a writer who had grown up in India and whose response to the end of the Raj was to deny any reference to the 'earthquake' of independence. The only conclusion that one can draw from Godden's lovingly nostalgic recreation of her privileged childhood in Anglo-India is that she remained at heart an imperialist—one who genuinely loved India, to be sure, but an imperialist all the same—who laid claim to *her* India even as independence loomed and threatened to shatter that very image of the colonial life she deeply cherished. Thus it is entirely understandable that she



would have given her seal of approval to a cinematic adaptation that visually expressed the 'India' she recognized and loved. Whilst there are some grounds for agreeing with Godden that Renoir tried to achieve a degree of authenticity in his portrayal and explication of Indian culture, it is clear that Renoir could not escape the Eurocentric and orientalist tradition of which he was such a part, even as he tried to create a sympathetic film about India.

Though never a commercial success, the film took the International Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. As a work of cinematographic art rather than as a saleable box office commodity, the influence of *The River* on other filmmakers has been profound. American movie director Martin Scorsese, for example, has described *The River* as "one of the two most beautiful color films ever made" and one of his "most formative movie experiences."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it was the experience of seeing *The River* that inspired a number of prominent Western directors to follow in Renoir's footsteps by journeying to the subcontinent to make their own 'India' films: Fritz Lang's *Taj-Mahal* (1956, subsequently abandoned), Roberto Rossellini's *India* (1958), Louis Malle's *Phantom India* (1969), and the early films of James Ivory, in particular *The Householder* (1963), *The Delhi Way* (1964), *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), *The Guru* (1969), *Bombay Talkie* (1970). Yet more telling, from the Indian side, was the 'negative' influence of the film. The young Satyajit Ray, who worked as a novice assistant director on *The River*, saw through the Eurocentric perspective of Renoir's film. Ray recalled his disappointment at hearing Renoir declare at a press conference during the early stages of the production that *The River* was being made

expressly for an American audience, that it contained only one Indian character—a servant in a European household, and that we were not to expect much in the way of authentic India in it. Of course the background would be authentic, since all the shooting was to be done on location in Calcutta. I could not help feeling that it was

overdoing it a bit, coming all the way from California, merely to get the topography right.

(Bergan 1995: 271)

The upshot of this experience was that Ray was inspired or emboldened to 'go one better' in the authenticity stakes, as it were, by making *Pather panchali* (1955), the first part of his celebrated triptych of Bengali peasant life, the Apu trilogy.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Renoir's *The River* is a film of great beauty and importance. What I have attempted to demonstrate here, however, is that the movie, despite the abundant sympathy and apparent authenticity that Renoir brought to the project, remains a classic orientalist discourse. The film's perpetuation of the condescending Eurocentric colonialist view of India, I have argued, can be seen in various distinct ways. First, there was Renoir's denial of the contemporary political realities of the newly independent India. Instead, we watch coolies working away, dare one say, like slaves for their white *sahib*, Harriet's father. Second, and related to the first point, is Renoir's stated conflation of modern India with Pharaonic Egypt. A common pattern in orientalist discourse is such 'flattening' of differences between various colonized societies, with the result that the 'Orient' becomes one transnational and transhistorical site of the 'other'. Thus, for Renoir, river boatmen, whether working their oars on the modern Ganges or the ancient Nile are interchangeable. Third, there is the overt Eurocentricism of Renoir's setting out, in a kind of show-and-tell manner, to record Indian culture with his 'ethnographic camera' and then explain it for the benefit of Western audiences through the narrations of the omniscient older Harriet. Finally, there is Renoir's use of the common orientalist trope of exotic dance to feminize the 'India' he was engaged in constructing. Is *The River*, as Godden claimed, authentic? In so far as Renoir photographed real Indians in real Indian locations and situations, the

answer must be a qualified yes. Nevertheless, the Indians 'captured' in the movie are never allowed to speak for themselves or to show what they or their country, recently independent, could be like without the continuing presence of the imperialists. Instead, they row boats, fish, and heave bales of jute. The film, beautiful and sympathetic, never shifts its primary focus from the lives and experiences of the only people who really mattered both to Godden and Renoir, namely the European masters.

### Notes

- 1 This study is a revised version of a paper presented on Sept. 21, 2007 at the Association of Literature on Screen Studies 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference held at Oglethorpe University, Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A.
- 2 The book-length studies of Godden's life and work comprise Hassell A. Simpson's *Rumer Godden* (1973), Lynn M. Rosenthal's *Rumer Godden Revisited* (1996), and Anne Chisholm's biography *Rumer Godden: A Storyteller's Life* (1998).
- 3 Here I borrow the term coined by Salman Rushdie with regard to Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* in his essay "Outside the whale" in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-91* (1992).
- 4 The cinematic adaptations of Godden's works are *Black Narcissus* (1947), *Enchantment* (1948, adapted from the novel *A Fugue in Time*), *The River* (1951), *Innocent Sinners* (1958, adapted from the novel *An Episode of Sparrows*), *The Greengage Summer* (1961, also known in the U.S. as *Loss of Innocence*), *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* (1965, adapted from the novel *Affair at the Villa Fiorita*). The adaptations for television comprise *The Kitchen Madonna* (1969), *In This House of Brede* (1975), *The Diddakoi* (1976), and *The Peacock Spring* (1996).
- 5 As Chisholm (p. 60) observes, Godden "found herself instinctively sympathetic towards [Indian] impatience with British rule; but was not herself much interested in politics [. . .] Like most people from her background, Rumer was wary of open support for Indian nationalism in the 1930s."
- 6 Godden, seeking to universalise the message of her story, leaves the river unnamed in the novella: "The river was in Bengal, India, but for the purpose of this book, these thoughts, it might easily have been a river in America, in Europe [. . .]" (p. 1). From the linkage to Hindu philosophy and the cycle of life and death, however, it

seems clear that the river is the Ganges.

7 Included in the Criterion DVD edition of *The River* (2005).

8 *Bharata Natyam*, nurtured in the temples and courts of southern India since ancient times, is one of the oldest dance forms of India. In the early 20th century, a renewal of interest among India's educated elite prompted a rediscovery of its beauty.

9 An excellent discussion of this trope may be found in Studlar (1997).

10 See Ella Shohat (1997) for a full description and analysis of the feminization of the 'Orient'.

11 The best survey and analysis of "empire films" is Chowdhry (2000). For an excellent discussion of French *cinéma colonial* see Slavin (2001).

12 From Scorsese's introduction to the film included in the Criterion DVD edition (2005). The other film he mentions is Powell and Pressburger's 1946 Technicolor adaptation of Godden's *Black Narcissus*.

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## 要 約

フランスの映画監督ジャン・ルノワールは1951年にルーマー・ゴッデンの小説『河 (The River)』を映画化したが、これは初めてインドで撮影されたテクニカラー映画であった。この作品は、映写レベルでは、ゴッデンのオリジナルの短編を絵のように美しく描いているが、ルノワールは原作をかなり変更しており、より深いレベルでは、植民地社会に対する西洋帝国主義的態度が再確認できる、インドへの微妙なオリエンタリスト的イメージを有している。ゴッデンの作品が1947年のインドの英国からの独立の一年前に、ルノワールの映画が独立の数年後に発表されているにもかかわらず、両者ともその作品において、この激動の出来事について全く触れていない。ゴッデンは幼少期の記憶から、ルノワールは豊かな視覚的想像力から彼らにとって理想的なインドのイメージを創造したのである。

ルノワールは、ゴッデンの小説を、インドやその人々、習慣を描いた壮大

なドキュメンタリー風の作品に仕上がっている。西洋の観衆向けに、いわゆる“オリエント（東洋）”を捉え、説明するために、絵画や写真などを利用した、西洋の芸術家の伝統に従っている。ルノワールは作品の中で、白人とアジア人の混血であるメラニーを登場させ、伝統的なダンスを踊らせることで、さらなるインドの“東洋化”を試みている。また異国風の女性ダンサーのオリエンタリスト的イメージを、自身の“インド”を女性化するために用いている。さらに、伝統的なインド式のダンサーは、インド文化描写における真正性を主張することも可能にしている。本稿では、ルノワールが映画化に際し行った原作の変更を分析するとともに、インドに対するイメージを固定化するオリエンタリスト的想定とはどのようなものか検証する。また、ルノワールのインドに対する視点がどこにあるのかを本稿の問いとする。