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Women Writers and the End of the British Empire

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SUMMARY

Drawing on recent feminist cultural and historical scholarship on the roles of women in colonial societies in the twentieth century, this dissertation examines the works of four women writers who wrote important novels that reflect on the wider historical condition of British imperial contraction and late colonial settler crisis. The women writers in question are from Ireland, India and southern Africa, and thus their works deal with some of the key sites of British imperial crisis and collapse in the last century. Beginning with Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*, a novel which reflects on the condition of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy against the backdrop of World War One and the Irish War of Independence, the dissertation then moves on to examine two mid-century novels by Anglo-Indian writer Rumer Godden, namely, *Black Narcissus* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides*. Both novels deal with the anxieties of the English community in India in the context of World War Two and an increasingly assertive Indian nationalist movement. The later chapters in the study deal respectively with Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and with Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days*, novels that engage in diverse ways with the mentalities and predicaments of English-affiliated settler communities in Africa in the post-World War Two era as the British Empire entered its final and closing phase. Deploying a broadly psychoanalytic mode of analysis informed by the scholarship of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar as well as by that of Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, the dissertation argues that the novels in question are deeply conflicted narratives that seem overtly to offer fairly conservative

colonial settler views of the world, but which nonetheless also suggest a restive sense of impatience and frustration with the restrictions imposed on women by the colonial and imperial order of things. The source of these narrative tensions, elaborated in diverse ways in each writer, may be traced to the historically-conflicted condition of colonial women generally in the twentieth century. This was a period in which colonial women were compelled as white subjects to witness the collapse of the colonial worlds in which they had come of age, but in which as female subjects they were also drawn to the advances for women made possible by the women's movement in this period. The thesis concentrates in particular on the ways in which the novels mentioned above deal with houses and landscapes as crucial tropes that register a sense of domestic colonial crisis and with inter-racial interactions of various sorts as a means to explore the limits of the possible as one historical dispensation came to an end and a new one opened up.

INTRODUCTION

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Empire covered one-fifth of the world's land surface and exercised authority over one quarter of its population.¹ Attempting to identify the precise moment when the empire began to decline is a somewhat fruitless undertaking, but it was undoubtedly the changing world order brought about by the devastation of World War One that gave impetus to growing independence movements throughout the British colonies.² Following the second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910 marked the first fissure to manifest itself within the British Empire.³ With the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, Ireland joined South Africa to become the earliest colonies to break with the empire since the thirteen American colonies had gained their independence to become the United States of America in 1776. Egypt, a British Protectorate since the outbreak of war in 1914, gained its independence in 1922, while the Mandate of Iraq, granted to Britain by the League of Nations in 1920, ended in 1932. The loss of South East Asia to Japan during World War Two represented a devastating blow to British prestige in Asia, and accelerated a wider shift of global power to the United States and the Soviet Union in the postwar world, a transition that reduced both Britain and France, the two leading imperial states of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to second-order powers. In 1947, when Britain lost its most precious possession, India, there was a ceremonial handing over of sovereignty, following which the British

¹Robert H. McDonald, *The Language of Empire: Myths and Metaphors of Popular Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 2.

²See J.G. Darwin, 'The Fear of Falling: British Politics of Imperial Decline Since 1900', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5. 36 (1986), pp. 27-43: 27.

³See Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 141-143.

administration simply withdrew, leaving behind, as had earlier happened in Ireland, a partitioned country. Britain granted independence to the Federation of Malaya, within the Commonwealth, in 1957. In Africa, all of Britain's former colonies except Rhodesia and Namibia had achieved independence by the end of the 1960s. Britain withdrew fully from the Middle East when it left Aden in 1967 and Bahrain in 1971. However, the Dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand did not finally sever legal links with England until the years between 1982 and 1986. Likewise, Rhodesia did not gain independence until 1980 and although many Europeans had already fled the country, mostly to South Africa, the colonizers were allowed to remain, should they so wish, as citizens of the new Zimbabwe. Namibia became free in 1990, but some smaller regions continue to be the subject of dispute — Britain retains fourteen territories under the 2002 Overseas Territories Act — but for most people the loss of Hong Kong to China in 1997 represented the closing chapter in the long saga of the demise of the British Empire.⁴

Though it has to date received relatively little scholarly attention, this long decline of the British Empire generated a rich and varied corpus of writing, much of it written by women and men who had been born in the colonies at a time when that empire was still a powerful and prestigious entity. The memoirs, letters, novels and stories written in the sunset century of the empire constitute an invaluable historical archive and a rich and complex record of the sentiments of those who were born into an imperial world that was continuously contracting throughout their adult lives. In his study of Anglo-Indian fiction written between 1880 and 1960, Allen J. Greenberger identifies three overlapping phases of British imperialism: an 'Era of

⁴See Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* ([1994] London: Abacus, 2004), Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997* (London: Vintage, 2008) and John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Confidence', covering the period from 1880 to 1910, an 'Era of Doubt', running from 1910 to 1935, and an 'Era of Melancholy,' extending from 1935 to 1960.⁵ In Greenberger's view, colonial narratives written in the late Victorian period still generally focused on the adventures of the assertive British 'hero,' a figure for whom a compelling sense of the absolute necessity of Britain's civilizing mission was his *raison d'être*.⁶ Rudyard Kipling's novels and short stories illustrate some of the cardinal assumptions of the dominant strands of colonial literature in this period: Kipling believed that given the uncivilized state of their colonial subjects the British had no choice but to assume the task of civilization in Asia and to take on the burdens of a major world power.⁷ His entrenched belief in Britain as a morally superior force is also evident in works such as *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), Flora Annie Steel's tale of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India, or Maud Diver's *The Englishwoman in India* (1909). These writers were all convinced that indigenous people were irrational and morally deficient and that their English masters were working courageously to bring the benefits of modernity to a historically static subcontinent.⁸

For Greenberger, the 'Era of Doubt' commenced even before World War One, but the loss of conviction that marked this era was greatly aggravated by that war and this crisis of confidence continued to become more acute right up to World War Two. In Greenberger's schema, the dominant literary feature of this era is an increasing sense of disquiet regarding Britain's so-called 'civilizing mission.' The novels and stories of this era, Greenberger argues, resonate with a sense of imperial

⁵Allen J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁶Greenberger, p. 5.

⁷See Saros Cowasjee, *A Raj Collection* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. xiii-xiv.

⁸See Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination 1880-1930* ([1972] London: A. Lane, 1998), pp. 1-25.

anxiety; this dissonant note had already been sounded, of course, by Joseph Conrad before World War One, but it was now amplified by a much wider body of writers. As the sense of conviction in the inevitability and progressiveness of the empire evident throughout the nineteenth century began to wane, the general tone of the imperial novel became less idealistic and heroic and much darker and more satirical. The fiction of this period also registered, in a way that had not been the case earlier, the emergent nationalist forces in the colonies that were beginning to contest the inevitability of British rule. Edmund Candler's novel, *Siri Ram: Revolutionist* (1924), displayed some concern with the inadequacies of English rule in Southeast Asia, while more canonical texts such as E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), Edward Thompson's *A Farewell to India* (1931) and George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), all expressed a growing lack of confidence in Britain's ability to retain its power over the colonies.⁹

As the end of the British Empire drew nearer, writers began to take a retrospective, and often revisionist, look back at Britain's role in the colonies. In his epilogue, the 'Era of Melancholy,' Greenberger contends that John Masters's dedication to 'The Sepoy of India, 1695-1945', in *The Nightrunners of Bengal* (1951), and Mary Margaret Kaye's tribute in *Shadow of the Moon* (1953) to those members of her family who for generations had 'served, lived in and loved India,' demonstrate the melancholic tone of this retrospective attitude.¹⁰ Christine Weston's *Indigo* (1943) is another nostalgic look back to what were, in her estimation, happier times, while Jon Godden's *The Peacock* (1950) addresses a major concern of the

⁹Candler is now being re-evaluated alongside Flora Annie Steel, Alice Perrin and Christine Weston. See Cowasjee, pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁰Quoted in Greenberger, p. 179. Although outside the time-frame of this study, Cowasjee suggests that later fiction, such as J.J. Farrell's *Siege of Krishnapur* (1971), Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* (1977) and M.M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* (1978), can be placed in a fourth period, an 'Era of Nostalgia and Revaluation', in which a keen sense of irreparable loss is registered. Cowasjee, pp. xiii-xiv.

time: the problem faced by all colonists at the end of empire, that is, the question of identity and belonging. In other words, where was home, and moreover, where did the colonial settler fit in once the empire was gone?¹¹

Greenberger's division of imperial literature in terms of eras of confidence, doubt and melancholy is suggestive, but it ought not to be taken as an exact history of Anglo-Indian imperial literature in the twentieth century. His schema highlights a broad curve of literary development and some wider alterations of mood or shifts in structure of feeling as a general sense of British imperial crisis intensified in India across the twentieth century. The schema is useful insofar as it offers a rough graph of some broad tendencies in British literary narratives about the empire. But while Greenberger may be correct to say that a sense of confidence detectable in high Victorian times had given way to a sense of hopeless melancholy in the post-World War Two era, it is also the case that a sense of melancholy is already detectable in much imperial literature even in the late nineteenth century, and thus we can say that moods of confidence, doubt and melancholy were in fact registered in complex combinations in many imperial narratives throughout the century. Moreover, if we look beyond India, it is also evident that the perception that the end of the British Empire was at hand was experienced with a different intensity in different places at various times: that sense of an ending — and the attendant moods of doubt and melancholy — appeared much earlier in Ireland or in Egypt than in India, for example.

For the purpose of this thesis, one of the major limitations of Greenberger's study is that it does not sufficiently register the fact that white women writers in particular played a prominent role in registering a sense of imperial crisis from the

¹¹Greenberger, p. 180. Nadine Gordimer addresses this question in her 1959 essay 'Where Do Whites Fit In?', in *The Essential Gesture: Writing Politics and Place*, Stephen Clingman, ed. (London: Penguin, 1988), pp. 31-37, hereafter referred to *EG* in the footnotes.

very beginning of the twentieth century and even earlier in some cases. If we look beyond the literary world of Anglo-India, one of the things that might be noticed is the fact that in Anglo-Ireland, for example, women novelists had been to the fore throughout the nineteenth century in registering the travails of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy as its power waned when an increasingly assertive Irish Catholic nationalist middle-class began to challenge Protestant and British dominance in Ireland. These Anglo-Irish women writers produced a mass of Gothic and Big House novels that expressed a growing sense of class and imperial crisis long before World War One. Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *The Absentee* (1812) as well as Sommerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte* (1894) are just some of the more canonical texts in this corpus. Emily Lawless's novels *Hurriah: A Study* (1886), *With Essex in Ireland* (1890), *Grania: The Story of an Island* (1892) and *Maelcho: A Sixteenth-Century Narrative* (1894) may also be placed in the same literary tradition as these writers. As Elizabeth Grubgeld notes, Lawless's negative depiction of the Irish countryside places her fiction within the tradition of William Carleton's nightmare landscapes and Edgeworth's doomed estates.¹² Patrick Maume also places Lawless in this tradition and maintains that Lawless's recognition of the injustice on which the power of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy was founded places the writer in 'a common nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish response to aristocratic decline: the Gothic tradition of Charles Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu.'¹³ In an Asian context, texts written by women — such as Alice Perrin's collection of short stories, *East of Suez* (1901) — also demonstrated an early sense of alarm about the nature and future of British imperialism. In the case of Africa, Olive Schreiner had signalled similar

¹²Elizabeth Grubgeld, 'Emily Lawless's *Grania: The Story of an Island*, (1892)' *Éire-Ireland*, 32. 3 (1987), pp. 115-129: 128.

¹³Patrick Maume, 'Emily Lawless's *Maelcho* and the Crisis of the Imperial Romance', *Éire-Ireland*, 41, 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter, 2006), pp. 245-266.

anxieties in her 1883 novel, *The Story of an African Farm*. These women authors are all forerunners to the more famous male writers such as Joseph Conrad, T. E. Lawrence or George Orwell, who are now more widely read and much more generally associated with a modern sense of imperial crisis.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, English-language fiction written in Britain's various colonies expressed a strong sense of the inevitability of imperial decline. This deepening crisis was expressed primarily in the form of a sense of disillusionment on the part of the writers concerned regarding the ability of either the metropolitan British or the British-descended populations in the colonies to understand their colonized subjects or to continue to impose their imperial ideology upon them.¹⁴ In this period of acute crisis women's experiences of empire came to the forefront in a way that they had rarely done in earlier days when the empire was at its more confident heights. When the British Empire was still expanding, it seems to have generated a literature that was written mainly by men and that was confidently masculinist in tone; thus, the male-dominated imperial adventure novel or imperial romance, as well as the travel narrative, were the dominant genres in nineteenth-century imperial narratives.¹⁵ However, once the empire began to falter, that sense of masculine confidence appears to have waned and this may have allowed the woman novelist more scope for expression and intervention. In broader historical terms, the decline of the British Empire also took place, of course, in a century when the women's movement helped women generally to achieve more social and political power, and this wider struggle for female self-assertion also contributed to the growing importance of women's fiction everywhere. For women

¹⁴See Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 184.

¹⁵For analyses of the literature of adventure in this period see Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980), and John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (London: Verso, 1994).

in the colonies, then, the twentieth century was inevitably a deeply complex and contradictory time: one in which as members of a dominant white elite they experienced a continual erosion of class power throughout their lifetimes, but as gendered subjects they also experienced a hesitant but definite increase in their own power and visibility. This thesis will suggest that this contradictory condition of ongoing class disestablishment or even collapse, and modest gender advance, is one of the constitutive pressures that shape the twentieth-century woman's novel of empire.

Despite the emergence of this important body of women-authored and women-centred literary narratives, both the historiography and the cultural analysis of empire has until very recently been written mainly by male scholars and has focused overwhelmingly on the male experience of empire, and thus on the role played by male civil servants, soldiers, explorers and others in the formation and governance of empire. However, in latter years a growing catalogue of feminist historians and cultural critics, including scholars such as Margaret MacMillan, Margaret Strobel, Jenny Sharp, Nancy Paxton, Ann Laura Stoler, Elizabeth Buettner, Phyllis Lassner, Philippa Levine, to name but a few, have attempted to redress this gender imbalance by focusing on the historical and cultural situations of colonial women in the latter days of the British Empire.¹⁶ These critics have been important in providing a cultural and historical contextual background for this study. For

¹⁶For example: Margaret MacMillan, *Women of the Raj* ([1988] New York: Random House, 2007); Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Nancy L. Paxton, *Writing Under The Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination 1830-1947* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Phyllis Lassner, *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing The End Of The British Empire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007).

example, Sharp's *Allegories of Empire* and Paxton's *Writing under the Raj* move along a parallel trajectory by clarifying the contradictions in official discourses of empire that gave rise to the fears expressed via the trope of rape that appears almost everywhere in colonial writing. Sharp and Paxton point up the irony of a discourse that construed colonized males as effeminate, but that also took for granted all indigenous men lusted after English women. The anxiety that these tropes expressed was that the so-called 'weaker sex' would surrender to such temptation, thereby becoming vehicles through which colonized males would triumph over their Western masters, something which would in turn lead to a fatal loss of European prestige. Sharp argues that whenever the empire perceived a threat to its authority, discourses dealing with the rape of European women were allowed to circulate freely in order to justify and reinforce imperial ideology. Such discourses obviously placed real pressures on white colonial women, who, as Margaret Daymond observes, functioned as the sign of subordination that endorsed white male domination while being simultaneously exploited as a symbol that sanctioned the subjugation of indigenous people.¹⁷ In *European Women and the Second British Empire*, Margaret Strobel examines the double bind of the colonial woman by focusing on the manner in which race and gender issues interacted in an imperialist context. Her concern is to demonstrate the manner in which women negotiated the dynamics of living within a male-dominated society by simultaneously questioning and supporting oppressive colonial systems.

While engaging with these feminist historians of empire in examining the contradictory conditions of white women in the colonies, my study comes closest to the approach taken by feminist literary critic Phyllis Lassner in *Colonial Strangers*.

¹⁷Margaret Daymond, ed., *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory, and Criticism* (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. xl ff.

To date, Lassner is the only feminist scholar to offer a broadly comparative approach to women writing in the context of a declining empire. Her important study has some thematic correspondences with this thesis because Lassner also construes her authors as part of a larger transnational community of women writing from within the colonies at a moment of terminal crisis. The novels discussed by Lassner include Olivia Manning's *Balkan and Levant* trilogies (1977-1988), Ethel Mannin's *The Road to Beersheba* (1963), Muriel Spark's *The Mandelbaum Gate* (1965), Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959), Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The Orchard House* (1953) and Phyllis Bottome's *Under the Skin* (1950). Lassner's study also includes short commentaries on both Godden novels discussed in this dissertation as well as *Kingfishers Catch Fire* (1953) and Jean Renoir's 1951 film adaptation of *The River* (1946). *Colonial Strangers* takes World War Two as its pivotal moment of analysis and highlights the irony whereby the British were, on the one hand, waging war against the expansionary forces of evil epitomized by the Axis powers while, on the other hand, insisting on Britain's absolute right to maintain racialized modes of power throughout its own vast empire. In Lassner's view, World War Two highlighted the disasters of racial politics in horrific ways that inevitably undermined any lingering sense of the moral righteousness of the British Empire, and women writers, she argues, played an important role in teasing out the contradictions that the war had pressed into view.

The basic goal of my study, like those of the feminist scholars just listed, is also to investigate the experiences of white women in the colonies during the last century of the British Empire. In a similar vein to Lassner especially, my primary object is to explore how women novelists made sense of their complex situation as members of declining colonial societies in what was also a time of general

advancement for European women. However, my thesis, entitled *In Ruin Unreconciled: Women Writers and the End of the British Empire*, differs from Lassner's *Colonial Strangers* in some significant ways. Whereas Lassner's study takes as its focus the relatively narrow time-scale of World War Two, this dissertation focuses on a longer time-frame that extends from the 1919-1921 War of Independence in Ireland to the height of the apartheid era in South Africa in the 1950s. For Lassner, World War Two represented, in ideological terms at least, an endgame for empire since it so starkly exposed the depravities of racial politics and racialized states. Yet while this war was undoubtedly a critical moment for the British Empire, my study is based on the assumption that there was no single endgame for the empire; rather, that decline unfolded by way of a rolling series of endgames stretched out over different regions and over different decades of the last century. Lassner's focus on the war usefully allows her to throw a searchlight over a relatively compressed moment in time in some detail; the object of my study is to examine a diverse range of sites — Ireland, India, Southern Africa — in order to ascertain whether there are any substantial connections between women's novels of empire across this wider spectrum of cultures and times.

The study has its origins in the perception that as the British Empire wound to a close, some now distinguished women novelists such as Elizabeth Bowen, Rumer Godden, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer achieved a measure of literary prominence in their respective societies. These writers used the novel form to give expression to the emotional turmoil of their own colonial communities and to try to make sense of the wider crises of values precipitated by the approach of an imperial ending. Some of these women had taken on roles not only as writers, but also as engaged public intellectuals — Lessing and Gordimer are prominent examples of this

in our own time — who have tried to give voice to the challenges and demands imposed by history when the white elites in the colonies confronted the prospect of a final loss of power and authority. Belonging to races and classes that had long been dominant in the colonies, they possessed an intimate knowledge of the fears and anxieties of the communities in which they had grown up and to which they belonged. But as women they also knew with some intimacy what it was to be a second-class citizen in some fundamental respects at least, and their perspectives on the world were therefore always likely to be complex. One of the main aims of my study has been to examine whether such experiences have issued in similar types of novelistic forms and situations, and thus to help prepare the ground for wider studies of what is a still-understudied field of late imperial literature.

The broad thrust of my thesis therefore is comparativist in nature. To this end I have selected a number of prominent women novelists working at different moments of crisis in different regions and cultures, but who all nevertheless worked within the English-language tradition and who would therefore have shared a sense of the history of the metropolitan English novel. In other words, although they made their careers in different times and circumstances, these women can also be seen to be working out of a common literary history and we can therefore consider how they reworked the inheritance of the English ‘mother-tongue’ and ‘motherland’ for their own particular purposes. The texts I have selected for analysis are Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* (1929), Rumer Godden’s *Black Narcissus* (1939) and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* (1942), Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Lying Days* (1953).¹⁸ In each case, I have opted to focus my attention on the early novels of these authors because these are the texts in which

¹⁸Hereafter referred to as *TLS*, *BN*, *BWTN* *TGIS* and *TLD* in the footnotes.

they first began to find their literary bearings and to articulate a sense of their own formative experiences as individuals who had grown up in intense moments of late imperial crisis. The study demonstrates that the authors' engagement with the social and political issues of their time — whether they do so directly or obliquely — is motivated by their need to address, and come to terms with, a mounting sense of dread as the worlds they were born into began to fall apart. Such moments of collapse inevitably provoke sentiments of doubt (or even absolute terror and dread) and melancholic morbidity of the kind highlighted in Greenberger's schema. But in the women's novel of late empire at least, sentiments of dread at the prospect of the final collapse of the worlds they had grown up in, or of nostalgia for worlds already on the verge of dissolution, are never unmixed. The collapse and breakdown of their communities also allowed these women precarious opportunities to escape the inherited expectations of their class and gender, and to find their own voices in a manner that might have been much more difficult for them to do in more stable circumstances. This is not to argue that these novels welcome the end of empire as a happy historical outcome — indeed, they express no such simple sentiment. However, my study will contend that a commonly experienced sense of an ending seems to have compelled these writers to confront the histories of their colonial communities in ways that helped them to create very powerful and memorable novels, and in so doing, to articulate a female sense of history that might not otherwise have found expression. As my title suggests, the novels I examine may not be fully reconciled to the ruin of the colonial societies they depict, but nevertheless they do offer narratives in which their women protagonists nearly always salvage something at least from the wreckage around them.

Colonial women lived within a world that upheld their privileged status as members of the ruling class, yet denied them the same degree of independence, power or authority afforded to males. In general, white colonial women had little influence in any public sphere outside the home and in most instances they lacked the independent economic means that would provide them with substantial autonomy even as private individuals. Unless, for example, they forfeited marriage to remain single or to become non-marrying missionaries, most women were expected to marry and once married they were likely to be locked into an identity defined by marriage and domesticity. Yet though they usually possessed little personal power as individuals, women as a gender-group were of fundamental importance to empire in upholding colonial ideology. As scholars such as Anne McClintock and Ann Laura Stoler have documented, colonial women were expected, like their European metropolitan counterparts, to uphold the values of sexual purity and to be dutiful daughters, faithful spouses and nurturing, self-sacrificing mothers. In addition to this, they were also expected to be exemplars of 'whiteness' in situations where the dominant colonial society considered itself to be not simply a ruling establishment but also a civilizing vanguard in a threateningly savage and degenerate world. As such, colonial women were expected to be models of not only sexual, but also of racial purity. Even minor transgressions against such expectations were fiercely disapproved of, not only because they reflected badly on the women concerned or on their families, but because they were deemed to imperil whole communities that always felt themselves surrounded and besieged by hostile and backward majorities. In addition, the trope of the well-regulated colonial family was crucial to imperial authorities because it offered the imperial state an alibi for interference into all sorts of issues associated with the private sphere such as child-

rearing, education, and sexual behaviour. In this respect, the figure of the white colonial mother was invested with huge symbolic power because mothers were required to exemplify colonial values in the private sphere and to nurture such values in their children. The imperative to embody and inculcate imperial values within the domestic sphere — the only sphere of influence where control by women was deemed legitimate — ensured that women were charged with reproducing the colonial society in a symbolic as well as in a physical sense.

Broadly speaking, these are the general sociocultural circumstances that conditioned the lives of all of the women writers discussed in this thesis. As individuals, the women concerned all grew up in worlds where women were expected to be exemplars of the supposedly highly civilized values of the ruling minority communities to which they belonged; as novelists, they all had access to traditions of English literature, traditions they would have to rework to their own ends. What, then, are the common features that emerge in their novels? Firstly, for women novelists in the British colonies, just like those in England or America more generally, the family home proves to be a crucial site of lived experience and symbolic value. The house carries this cultural significance because it is the locus of sexual and familial intimacy, and because it also represents the site of family accomplishment, history and tradition. If the house appears to be well situated in the landscape, elegant or imposing in its design, and conveys a sense of pleasure and ease, then it serves in the novel as a powerful signifier of a healthy and balanced society. In the English women's novel tradition especially, a well-tended country house set in a well-tended landscape served as an emblem of an achieved civilization, one in which social relations and nature itself seem to have been happily

harmonized.¹⁹ Jane Austen's novels clearly serve as an important template for this kind of value-system, but the ideal established in Austen also extended to George Eliot and made itself felt well beyond the women's novel, in the works of Thomas Hardy, E. M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, and many others. In the case of the women's novels produced in the British colonies, however, the house is always an extremely fraught site and this is particularly the case in the novels examined in this study.

In the colonies, the house and its surrounding landscape are scarcely ever in harmony with each other in the manner of the English ideal; indeed, the opposite is the case because the two much more commonly appear as antagonistic and even irreconcilable forces. Thus, in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*, Danielstown, the ancestral home of the Naylor family, seems, despite its long history, never to have been properly integrated into the Irish landscape and it bears about it an air of isolation and alienation. As the novel develops, the surrounding foliage seems increasingly to press in on the house and on its lawns like some invading force, and the novel famously comes to an end with Danielstown in flames. In Bowen's world, then, the tension between the house and the countryside cannot be resolved, and in the end, the house loses its battle and is reduced to ash. In Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus*, which appeared a decade after *The Last September*, a very similar tension agitates the text. In that narrative, Sister Clodagh and her company of Anglican nuns take possession of what was once an Indian hill palace replete with its harem or women's quarters; the nuns then attempt to convert this palace into a convent and mission-house that will be a centre of English value and enlightenment to the surrounding Himalayan countryside. The metaphor of the convent built atop the Indian pleasure palace is clearly a metaphor for two competing civilizations; one

¹⁹See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Asiatic and associated with 'masculine' carnal sensuality, self-indulgence and indolence, the other English and associated with 'feminine' self-restraint, civilizing discipline and a dutiful work ethic. At the end of *Black Narcissus*, however, the nuns concede the total failure of their mission and are obliged to retreat to the city from whence they came. As was the case with *The Last September*, the feminized house is the centre of affective value and sexual intensity, and Godden, like Bowen, is unable to produce any positive sense of narrative closure in which women can take command of household space and assert their authority by doing so. Likewise, in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner is unable either to feminize or to take command of her husband's ramshackle farmhouse and it too succumbs to the encroaching landscape.

The destruction or abandonment of the house in these Irish, Indian and African novels is an obvious figure for the wider collapse of colonial settler power and for the end of the empire that sustained it. If the novels repeatedly offer their readers figures of household breakdown, burning or abandonment, this is because the colonial history and value-system that the houses embody cannot be maintained; the colonial family and colonial history cannot sustain and reproduce themselves. And, as we will see in the chapters that follow, the pressures that accumulate within the house come from both external and internal sources. Externally, colonial systems of deference and respect are shown to be breaking down as shadowy insurgent forces of various kinds within the colonies begin to challenge them. Internally, too, the old order is shown to be changing as the white women characters resist the normative gender expectations imposed on them. The house, then, may express a sense of the weight of history, but in these novels the combination of external and internal

pressures that come together within its confines often leads to an explosive or ruinous outcome.

In this sense at least, these colonial novels seem to be much closer to the English Gothic Big House tradition, represented by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), than they do the more confident, bucolic tradition associated with Jane Austen. But even in the Brontë novels, the destruction of one aristocratic house — Thornfield Hall or Thrushcross Grange for example — does not normally spell the end of the wider value-system represented by the house as such; in *Jane Eyre*, Jane and Rochester still marry despite the burning of Rochester's house and Jane bears Rochester a son, who serves as a sign of domestic fertility and familial continuity; in *Wuthering Heights*, Hareton Earnshaw and Cathy Linton marry on New Year's Day, a sign that the fortunes of these two local gentry families have been partially salvaged and restored. In contrast, the colonial novels examined in this study rarely offer any sense of positive closure of this kind. When the houses in the novels I discuss burn down or are abandoned, these acts convey a sense that history has called time on the colonial worlds the house epitomized. As we will see, the feelings provoked by the loss of the house are often mixed. Because they represent a whole history of colonial struggle and indeed of women's struggle as well, the loss of the house can generate a tremendous sense of waste and futility, even of the cancellation of self and one's historical identity; but since the house can also represent the burdens of patriarchy, its fall or desertion can also represent a kind of liberation.

If the house is a crucial site of value-struggle in all of the novels I study, so too is the physical landscape. In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer remarks that a fundamental difficulty for all colonial settler societies was

how to imaginatively inhabit the landscape they had taken command of. For Europeans, Asia and Africa, and the other far-flung outposts of the British Empire were exotic territories and everything from the climate to the natural terrain could seem bizarre when measured against European standards. But even when the climate or terrain seemed more familiar to Western eyes, the settlers were still commonly educated in a manner that took the English countryside as a model of what was natural, and thus even more familiar landscapes, such as those of Ireland or North America for example, could seem out of kilter with such models. As Boehmer observes, white colonial writers were tasked with naming and narrating the colonial landscape as a means of taking imaginative as well as actual possession of it, but they often had to do so with ‘aesthetic vocabularies imported from Europe and viewed as superior, and an environment regarded as peripheral, strange or hostile.’ The consequent ‘lack of fit,’ she adds, ‘hampered efforts to write of the land, or to come to terms with it imaginatively.’ The upshot for colonial writers was that they often seemed to be doomed to remain forever aliens in what they had come to consider their own land, exilic outsiders of sorts even in landscapes they also knew with great intimacy. In a term that Boehmer borrows from Northrop Frye’s writing on Canadian literature and landscape, she further observes that this situation can lead to a sense of ‘imaginative dystrophy’ where the writer fails to find a way to engage the landscape other than as an alien force.²⁰ Such difficulties are redoubled when one also notes that anxieties that stem from the perceived threat posed by the presence of numerically superior ‘native’ populations are commonly projected onto the landscape, which thereby comes to serve in colonial texts as a kind of anonymous stand-in for the encroaching natives. In other words, anxieties about being

²⁰Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* ([1995] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 214.

overwhelmed by ‘natives,’ which might appear crude or hysterical if they were engaged openly, can be more discreetly expressed when they are displaced onto the natural environment itself. A consequence of this, though, is that these anxieties thus take on an ontological rather than a historical quality; they seem, that is, to become an inevitable and fatal fact of life rather than something conditioned by a particular history of colonial violence and dispossession.

This sense of fear and displacement is vividly expressed in the narratives I discuss. For instance, in *The Last September*, Lois Farquar displaces her fear at the approach of a nationalist rebel onto the surrounding shrubbery: ‘Her fear of the shrubberies tugged at its chain, fear behind reason, fear before her birth.’²¹ The sense of terror and violence in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is so pervasive, and the landscape portrayed as so toxic, that it is literally conceived of as a source of rabid poison. In *The Grass is Singing*, the landscape also seethes with hostility and its chief protagonist, Mary Turner, foretells that the African veld will swallow up and reclaim, not only her husband’s farmland, but also the rundown house she must call home.²² When the colonial settler novel expresses confidence about the future, that confidence often takes the form of a faith that the landscape will respond to the care and attentions of the settler, and that one day it will become domesticated and reassuring. However, these late colonial novels express no such confidence. On the contrary, the land that once held the promise of becoming a pastoral utopia becomes associated instead with apocalyptic doomsdays that at any moment might bring the narrative to a catastrophic closure. Thus, mountains and houses alike ‘stare’ back at the narrator (and reader) or ‘lie low in fear’, trees ‘breathe coldly’ and ‘reach like arms,’ dead mills ‘grin with vacancy’, fiery skies invade the countryside, ‘creeping

²¹*TLS*, p. 33.

²²*TGIS*, p. 52.

and smouldering,' while the very atmosphere is so stressful that it has the ability to cause white bodies to erupt in hideous boils. This portrayal of colonial space as dangerously hostile, both in its actuality and in terms that again recall the Gothic novel, is an indication that the colonial women writers I examine felt themselves to be rootless aliens in the very countries they also called 'home.' To write their early novels, these women had somehow to get their societies and their environments 'into' the text and by writing novels about Ireland or India or Africa they were also in an important sense identifying themselves as writers with these lands. However, in many novels, as we will see, the land does not respond to the female protagonists or does so only deceptively since it remains full of hidden menace and threat.

The third common feature in the novels I examine is their treatment of racial relations. The colonial state, as Frantz Fanon observed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, is fundamentally a racial state and thus the maintenance of racial separation was an abiding preoccupation of the colonizers.²³ For women particularly, to have any kind of intimate relationship with native men was to violate sexual and racial purity and thus to court ruin. But in each of these novels, a female character forms an intense relationship of an emotional or sexual nature with a colonized subject. Not all of these relationships are equally charged, and some, as in the case of Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days*, deal with troubled female relationships across racial boundaries rather than with male-female interracial romance. Nevertheless, even when they are not openly or transgressively sexual, encounters across racial lines in these novels always convey a nearly calamitous quality, and many are haunted by the spectre of rape. This is especially true in the Asian and African contexts. In *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, the innocent, but transgressive friendship between

²³Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] London: Penguin, 2001), p. 40.

Emily Pool and the young student Anil ends in tragedy due to the interference of Emily's mother, as does the equally transgressive, but more intimate relationship between Mary Turner and Moses in *The Grass is Singing*. In *The Lying Days*, Gordimer displaces the topic onto Helen Shaw's tentative, but ultimately abortive, friendship with the black female student, Mary Seswayo.²⁴

Although for the purpose of analysis I have listed houses, landscapes and cross-racial intimacies as separate features, these appear in the novels themselves not as discrete elements but as part of a single complex. In other words, the house serves as a crucial and highly symbolic site of narrative action; the landscape takes on the quality almost of a surrogate character or dynamic agent of plot in its own right, and cross-racial intimacies often form part of the essential drama or action of the novel. All of these elements are, therefore, mutually interconnected in the narrative action and will be examined as such. However, since they reappear in different combinations in the texts, the ways in which the authors deal with these recurrent figures can help us to work out what we might call the politics of the individual novels. As will be seen in the various chapters that follow, even when houses, landscapes and inter-racial romances recur as interconnected complexes, they do so in quite different ways. For me, part of the fascination of reading these works is to consider how the various writers I deal with negotiate remarkably similar textual complexes and their attendant anxieties.

²⁴ Alan Paton provides an insightful analysis of the topic of inter-racial relationships and the phobia surrounding it in *Too Late The Phalarope* ([1955] Middlesex: Penguin, 1986). Among early colonial texts dealing with the subject are Mrs. F.E. Penny's *Caste and Creed* (London: F.V White, 1890), Maud Diver's *Candles in the Wind* (New York: John Lane, 1909) and *Liliamani* ([1911] New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), Alice Perrin's *The Anglo-Indians* (London: Methuen, 1912), Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Stepchildren* ([1924] Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1987) and William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* ([1925] Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 2001).

Methodologically, my study broadly follows the kind of feminist-psychoanalytical model employed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.²⁵ In their landmark analysis of nineteenth-century women writers, Gilbert and Gubar propose that even the most apparently conservative women writers are never quite so reconciled to their own oppression as women as they might initially seem. They accept that some of the major women novelists in the Anglo-American literary canon often seem to endorse the conservative gender ideologies of their day as, for example, when they fashion narratives in which 'good' women are rewarded when they uphold patriarchal social values and 'bad' women are punished when they transgress them. Gilbert and Gubar accept, too, that most women novelists in this tradition bring their novels to a close with marriages that firmly place the heroines in a domesticated private sphere, which will confine them to the roles of good wife and mother. Nevertheless, Gilbert and Gubar contend, what happens at the manifest level of plot is never all that happens in these texts. Even many of the most apparently conformist women novelists, they argue, create independent female characters who resent and sometimes seek to destroy the patriarchal structures and strictures that govern their lives. Thus, for instance, they highlight the fact that in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's eponymous protagonist fiercely resents her subordination as a woman even if she does not express that resentment in open terms. Jane's rage, they argue, finds direct outlet therefore only in her alter-ego or 'dark other', Bertha Mason, who is allowed to enact her vengeance on her husband, Rochester, and on the aristocratic and patriarchal house that has served as her prison. In Gilbert and Gubar's reading, such maddened

²⁵Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

doubles function as rebellious and asocial surrogates for otherwise docile selves.²⁶ Hence, while a text such as *Jane Eyre* overtly conforms to nineteenth-century gender ideologies or proposes only a modest reform of same, covertly it also offers its readers an apparently ‘disapproved’ or subordinate plot in which women’s pent-up fury at the injustices and restrictions imposed on them finds expression.

In a similar vein to the nineteenth-century women novelists Gilbert and Gubar examine, the women novelists I consider in this study might often appear to be relatively conservative figures — especially perhaps in their early works. Politically speaking, none of the women concerned started out as radicals and even Lessing and Gordimer, who eventually took on roles as outspoken public intellectuals and critics of their societies, have sometimes been deemed by their critics to be deeply invested in the privileged white settler societies and mentalities they critique.²⁷ In addition, stylistically speaking, all commit, in their early works at least, to modes of realist narrative rather than to more modernist or avant-garde experimental forms and many critics would argue that in this respect they hew to nineteenth-century literary traditions. Like Gilbert and Gubar, I do not try to argue away this conservatism or pretend it does not exist, but I will insist that it is not the whole story. All of the authors I examine in the chapters that follow invent characters who act out both private guilt at their own privileged lives and/or resentment at being forced to live in a male-dominated world. Thus, their novels often seem on one level to endorse the strongly racialized and masculinist

²⁶Gilbert and Gubar, p. xi.

²⁷As nAbdul R. JanMohamed points out: ‘Even the works of some of the most enlightened and critical colonial writers eventually succumb to a narrative organization based on racial/metaphysical oppositions, whose motives remain morally fixed but whose categories flex to accommodate any situation.’ ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature’, *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 59-87: 61. Rowland Smith points to criticism of Gordimer as representative of white middle-class life in apartheid South Africa. See his introduction to *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990), pp. 2-6.

assumptions of the colonial societies they depict, but even in the least radical texts there are also other narrative levels which seem to register more rebellious possibilities or more unruly desires. All of the novels tell tales about young female protagonists who struggle to find freedom in colonial worlds that are anything but free. Moreover, in the course of that struggle the reader often comes to feel that for anything to change for these women characters, everything would have to change.

One of the basic propositions of this study, then, is that a novel can operate on a 'manifest' level that appears to conform to normative social values, but can still contain a 'latent,' either submerged or not fully realized, narrative that runs counter to the 'manifest' one. The notion that the realist novel can be a 'split text' in this manner — that the novel can possess conscious and unconscious or sanctioned and repressed levels — draws on the language of psychoanalysis. Thus, my thesis explores the complexity of the characters' personal motivations and of the novels' social or political motivations by way of Freud's works on the unconscious, and in particular by way of his ideas about repressed desires that are never entirely eliminated no matter how fiercely they are stifled or kept in check. Since an inversion of normative gender roles is a notable feature in the portrayal of emasculated men and powerful women in the novels I study, I will draw at times on psychoanalytical criticism to explore the points of connection between the crisis of masculinity, race and gender issues, and the decline of empire.

II

Beginning with *The Last September*, the chapters that follow are written in chronological order according to the novels' date of publication. It may be useful

here to briefly introduce each of the authors concerned and to offer a summary overview of the novels that will be discussed in detail in later chapters.

Elizabeth Bowen was born in Dublin in 1899, the only child of Florence Colley and Henry Bowen, landlords of Bowen's Court in County Cork, a large estate that had been seized during the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland and granted in the mid seventeenth century to Bowen's ancestor. As a child, Elizabeth lived with her family in Dublin, but in 1905, when her father suffered a nervous breakdown, her mother took her to England. When Florence died in 1912, Elizabeth went to live with her aunt in Hereford, where she attended day school. She was later enrolled as a boarder in a school in Kent, after which she attended art school in London before deciding to become a writer. In 1923, the year in which her first book of short stories was published, Bowen married Alan Cameron, who later became Secretary for Education for Oxford City. She soon became part of the Oxford intellectual circle, and made friends with the writer Rose Macaulay, who introduced her to people in the publishing business. Between 1926 and 1929, besides two short story collections, Bowen published her first two novels, *The Hotel* (1928) and *The Last September* (1929). The Camerons moved between England and Ireland during the Second World War, in the course of which Bowen volunteered her services to the British government to act as a spy, her mission being to gather intelligence on neutral Ireland's attitude to the war.²⁸ Bowen inherited Bowen's Court on the death of her father in 1930 but did not live in Ireland permanently until 1952. After Cameron died

²⁸Deirdre Toomey describes Bowen's reports on Ireland as 'brilliant exercises in reportage and analysis.' In 1948, Bowen was awarded the title 'Companion of the Order of The British Empire' (CBE) for her activities, which have since become the subject of much intense debate. See Deirdre Toomey, 'Bowen, Elizabeth Dorothea Cole (1899-1973)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Lawrence Goldman, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For the debate see Jack Lane and Brendan Clifford, eds., *Notes on Eire': Espionage Reports to Winston Churchill, 1940-2* (Millstreet: Aubane Historical Society, 1999), and Susan Osborn, 'Elizabeth Bowen: New Directions for Critical Thinking', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53. 2 (Summer, 2007), pp. 225-237.

a few months later, Bowen lived alone there until 1959, when financial pressures forced her to sell the property. She then moved to Kent where she lived until her death in 1973.²⁹

Set in 1920, *The Last September* is important to the dissertation because not only does the action take place in the period immediately following World War One, when Ireland was on the brink of leaving the British Empire, its author is, in many senses, an inheritor not only of an actual 'Big House' in Cork but also of the longstanding Anglo-Irish 'Big House' novel tradition alluded to earlier. Like the other novels I examine, *The Last September* deals with a colonial world that is in freefall. However, unlike the other novels, it was not written until nearly a decade after the Irish War of Independence, against which its action is set, had ended. Bowen's novel is in this sense a retrospective one, a text that looks back on a world that had already passed into history when she undertook to write about it. For Bowen that ending had been a long time coming; in later essays she asserts that the decline of Anglo-Irish society dated back to the Act of Union in 1800, and thus to an era immediately following the building of most of the big houses in Ireland. Although built as early as 1775, her own ancestral house, Bowen's Court, she observes, was never quite completed; in this sense at least, the world she inherited, she suggests, had never really possessed any strong sense of conviction about its own endurance or permanence.³⁰ Nonetheless, despite this historical instability, politics are kept to the margins of the narrative, a feature that *The Last September* has in common with most

²⁹For Bowen's biography see Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* ([1977] London: Phoenix, 1993), Patricia Craig, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Macmillan, 1990), and Noreen Doody, 'Elizabeth Bowen: A Short Biography', in Eibhear Walsh, ed., *Elizabeth Bowen* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. 1-11.

³⁰Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Big House', *The Bell*, October, 1940, pp. 71-77: 73, 76, reprinted in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, Hermione Lee, ed. (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 25-30: 27, hereafter referred to as *MT* in the footnotes.

of the novels I explore. As my analysis will show, only in Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* are contemporary issues addressed directly.

The Last September is an autumnal novel of manners and open rebellions or dramatic actions of any sort are not typical of such works. The sense of ironic self-mockery exposed by a close reading of the novel is indeed indicative of a retrospective account of decline, but I argue that Bowen does not attribute blame for the demise of the Anglo-Irish settlers to contemporary Irish political events. Rather, her novel tells a story of women who have to make do in a world of inert and emasculated Anglo-Irish men whose apathetic refusal to engage with the realities of the world ensure that they turn a blind eye to the encroaching dangers that threaten them. In this sense at least, *The Last September* is a story about denial and avoidance and, like many of the later novels I examine, it narrates a crisis in male sexuality that serves as a metaphor for a deeper lack of conviction in the Anglo-Irish world that had been created as an early forerunner to the wider British Empire. I will argue that Bowen's early novel anticipates later novels produced by other women writing the end of empire elsewhere insofar as it implies that the Big House, and all that it represents, was finally brought down not only by native insurrection, which is only the immediate cause of its ruin, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by longstanding tensions internal to its own history which were never to be resolved.

I have chosen to discuss two of Rumer Godden's novels because if Ireland was the first colony to leave the British Empire in the twentieth century, the loss of India in the 1940s was, as most historians argue, the most significant watershed in modern British imperial history. Godden's novels are important to this thesis because they span the early years of World War Two and as such they provide an extended insight into the manner in which the writer's critical thinking evolved

during this crucial historical juncture; thus, *Black Narcissus* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* are the subjects of Chapters Two and Three.

Godden was born in Eastbourne in 1907 and as an infant was taken by her parents to live in India, where her father ran a steamship company.³¹ In 1920, the family returned to England where Godden was educated. She went back to India in 1925, where she controversially opened a multi-racial dance school.³² She married stockbroker Laurence Sinclair Foster in 1934 but the marriage was not successful and when her husband enlisted in the army in 1941, Godden retreated to a house in Kashmir with her two children. Fearing an independent India but conscious of the inevitability of this, she returned to England in 1945. The Fosters divorced in 1948 and in 1949 Godden married James Haynes Dixon. She visited her sister Nancy in India in 1950 and again in 1974 to gather material for her novel *The Peacock Spring* (1975). She made her last visit in 1994 when she was approached by the BBC's *Bookmark* series to make a documentary about her life there.³³ Godden converted to Catholicism in 1968 because, as she stated, she liked its clear-cut rules, an ironic stance for somebody who had spent her life persistently flouting convention. Indeed, once she moved permanently to England Godden seems to have been keen to become part of the metropolitan English establishment. Unlike Doris Lessing, who turned down a similar offer on grounds that there was no longer a British Empire, Godden accepted the Order of the British Empire in 1993. She died in 1998.

³¹Biographical details are taken from Anne Chisholm, *Rumer Godden: A Storyteller's Life* (New York: Greenwillow, 1998). Chisholm is Godden's official biographer and she accompanied the author on her last visit to India.

³²Chisholm, pp. 58-63. European businesswomen were barely tolerated in India, but setting up a dance school was considered to be especially highly disreputable, mainly because such schools were staffed by Eurasian girls. Enrolling pupils of mixed race led to innuendo that Godden was running a brothel, and that she herself was of mixed blood. As a result, the author was snubbed socially by most of the European community in Calcutta.

³³Chisholm, pp. 292-307. *Rumer Godden: An Indian Affair*, was shown on BBC television on 11/3/95. It was nominated for an International Emmy award.

In a recent study of the author, Lucy Le Guilcher and Phyllis Lassner point out that Godden ‘has yet to find the critical recognition that would gain her a foothold on academic reading lists and in scholarly discussions.’³⁴ Other than featuring in a chapter in Lassner’s *Colonial Strangers*, *Black Narcissus* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* have received scant critical attention from postcolonial scholars, yet *Black Narcissus* remains one of the most enduring Anglo-Indian novels of the late imperial era and since its first publication, has never been out of print. Unlike her two earlier novels, which were poorly received, this novel was published in England to critical acclaim. The *Observer* called it ‘a marvellous book ... a novel of the highest quality,’ while the *Daily Telegraph* praised the beauty of the writing and imagery and called it ‘a remarkable and beautiful book.’³⁵ Nonetheless, possibly due to wartime austerity measures rather than a lack of interest, only two and a half thousand copies sold in England and it was not until it was published in America late in 1939 that the novel became a commercial success.³⁶

Black Narcissus was written in a climate conditioned by the imminent outbreak of World War Two in Europe and in an atmosphere of growing nationalist rebellion against British rule in India, where the question being asked was not whether India should gain her independence, but rather when this would come about.³⁷ However, despite this tumultuous background, there are no overt references

³⁴Lucy Le-Guilcher and Phyllis B. Lassner, eds., *Rumer Godden: International and Intermodern Storyteller* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 1- 2.

³⁵Quoted in Chisholm, p. 91.

³⁶In 1947, the year of Indian Independence, *Black Narcissus* was made into a successful film by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. It starred Deborah Kerr, Flora Robson, Kathleen Byron and David Farrar, with Jean Simmons as Kanchi. The novel was also dramatized on BBC Radio’s *Woman’s Hour Drama* in 2008. Most scholarly attention has focused on the film adaptation of the novel.

³⁷In 1883, the British Viceroy, Lord Ripon, attempted to pass a Bill that would allow native Indian judges to try white defendants, including white women. When British males protested that Indian magistrates would try to punish white women simply for sexual thrills, the Bill was radically modified and weakened. Nonetheless, it was enacted by the Indian Legislative Council in 1884. Following on the Sepoy rebellion of 1857 and its retaliatory consequences, the Indian outcry over the blatant racism

to politics in the novel. The only hint we are given in the narrative of the approaching war in Europe is when a nun arrives from China, where she had been wounded in the Japanese bombing of Canton. The sole reference to Indian nationalist politics may possibly be in the figure of the emaciated Sunnyasi, a holy man whose description recalls that of the nationalist leader, Mohandas Gandhi.³⁸ While Godden detached herself from politics in a way that other writers under discussion in this study felt unable to, such allusions may be the author's oblique way of informing her readers that she was well aware of contemporary political events. I will argue that even though *Black Narcissus* is not an overtly political text, it may still be read as a political allegory of British imperial decline in India in the context of wider global changes. This is figured not only in the decaying palace and the intractability of the Himalayan villagers, but also in the crisis of masculinity embodied in the colonial agent, Mr. Dean.

Unlike *Black Narcissus*, *Breakfast with the Nikolides* did not receive critical acclaim. A review in *The Times Literary Supplement* accused Godden of being too self-conscious, complaining that 'in her glancing style of narrative there is a degree of preciousness.'³⁹ Godden herself later acknowledged that although *Breakfast with the Nikolides* came closer to truthful writing than any of her earlier fiction, it was nonetheless faulty and its publication had 'passed unheeded, making only the slightest impact.'⁴⁰ Although the novel was written at the height of World

in the Ilbert Bill was the catalyst for the nationalist movement that would eventually force English withdrawal from India. In 1938, when *Black Narcissus* was written, there were widespread civil disturbances in India and the tide was strongly turning in favour of Indian Independence. See Christine Dobbin, 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India, 1883', *Historical Studies: Australia & New Zealand*, 12.45 (1965), pp. 87-104, and Chandrika Kaul, 'England and India: The Ilbert Bill, 1883: A Case Study of the Metropolitan Press', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 30.4 (1993), pp. 413-436;

³⁸*BN*, pp. 143-144. The bombing of Canton took place in 1937-38, while in India Gandhi was pursuing his programme of passive resistance (*satyagraha*) against the British.

³⁹*The Times Literary Supplement*, February 14th, 1942.

⁴⁰Rumer Godden, *A Time To Dance, No Time To Weep* (London: MacMillan, 1987), p. 161.

War Two, like *Black Narcissus*, it does not deal directly with the conflict as such, nor indeed does it confront the Indian nationalist movement that greatly worried both the British imperial administration and Anglo-Indian society at this time. Still, like Bowen's novel, neither of Godden's texts can escape their historical moment and each can usefully be read as narratives that try to engage with some of the heightened imperial anxieties generated by contemporary affairs. I place both *Black Narcissus* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* alongside each other as a response to imperial anxieties at a time when Britain's position as a world power was being challenged both in Europe and across its Asian Empire. The historical events of the moment may remain in the background, but they are important nonetheless because they mould the psychic dramas of the main characters that occupy the foreground of our attention.

Like Lassner's *Colonial Strangers*, my readings begin with the assumption that the tensions within the narratives are allegorical of the deeper tribulations within the British Raj. However, unlike Lassner, I do not believe that Godden's texts operate as an outright condemnation of British imperial rule. Lassner maintains, for example, that in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Charles Pool's masculine violence is deployed by Godden as a critique of British imperial authority. But while this argument certainly has merit, Lassner, in my view, misses, or underplays, many other elements at work in the novel and attributes to Charles a centrality that tends, to my mind, to obscure the extent to which much of the novel's real complexity centres on the character of the young protagonist, Emily. In my reading, Emily's troubled journey, like that of Lois Farquar in *The Last September*, functions as a narrative strategy whereby Godden works out a complex set of emotions involving the wider question of nationalist autonomy. What I propose is that *Breakfast with the*

Nikolides is indeed an exploration of Anglo-Indian late imperial anxieties but that it is also an exploration as to whether the Indians can be deemed fit for self-government and what role, if any, will remain for the British in the event of such independence.

Chapter Four offers a reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. J.M. Coetzee observes that before English-speaking authors such as Lessing wrote their deeply dystopian stories of African farms, the pastoral mode had long enjoyed a prominent position in the writings of Afrikaans-speaking settlers. Fearing the end of a nation of Boer farmers as more and more of the farming community left for the city, writers of the *Plaas Roman*, or farm novel, depicted the land they had colonized as a domestic rural idyll. This genre looked to the farm as an oasis of stability between the wilderness of the bush, or veld, and the wilderness of the new cities that were springing up in South Africa at that time.⁴¹ Jennifer Wenzel agrees that the farm novel 'came to prominence in a time of profound change.'⁴² In this chapter, I examine the tense situation in *The Grass is Singing* as an attempt to find some sort of resolution for deep social and political tensions in post-war Southern Rhodesia.

The Grass is Singing was published in London in 1950 to critical acclaim and established Lessing's reputation as a professional writer.⁴³ *Time Magazine* wrote: 'Few writers have written more devastatingly about the dream of living an easy European life against the harsh African grain,' while *The New York Times* commented:

⁴¹J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 4.

⁴²Jennifer Wenzel, 'The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The *Plaasroman* Tradition in an Era of Land Reform', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46.1 (Spring, 2000), pp. 90-113: 95.

⁴³Reprinted seven times in five months, *The Grass is Singing* was adapted for BBC radio by Michael Kittermaster in 1976. It was also adapted for the screen in 1981. Directed by Michael Raeburn, *Killing Heat* starred Karen Black as Mary, John Thaw as Dick and John Kani as Moses.

No impartial critic can fail to overlook the depth and maturity of the remarkable psychological study by a writer hitherto unknown even in her own country. *The Grass is Singing* ... is neither entertaining nor easy to read. It is a painful picture of a woman's failure, in which the drama and conflict are mostly internal.⁴⁴

Despite its initial favourable reception and a fiftieth anniversary edition, *The Grass is Singing* has in common with Godden's novels that it too has received relatively little critical attention from scholars. There is a small but significant body of criticism in various academic journals that deal with different aspects of the text and it is also mentioned briefly in some individual book chapters, but to date there has been no major treatment of the novel.⁴⁵ *The Grass is Singing* was banned in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa because it was deemed to be radically subversive in its criticism of the white regime; in 1965, because of her outspoken views on their governments, Lessing was declared a prohibited alien in both countries.

Lessing was born in 1919, in Kermanshah, Persia, to an English couple, Alfred Cook Tayler and Emily Maude (McVeagh) Tayler. On home leave in 1925, the couple visited an Empire Exhibition in London and were enticed by what they saw to move to Southern Rhodesia, where they hoped to accumulate a quick fortune in farming before returning to England. Their dreams were shattered when their farm failed, and thereafter the family lived in poverty in Southern Rhodesia for more than twenty years. In 1939, Lessing married Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children before they divorced in 1943. She later married Gottfried Lessing, a radical communist, but this marriage also ended in divorce.⁴⁶ By 1949, Lessing had moved

⁴⁴*Time Magazine*, 18/9/1950; *New York Times*, 10/9/1950.

⁴⁵Most criticism on Lessing focuses on *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and subsequent titles.

⁴⁶As the German Democratic Republic's ambassador to Uganda in 1979, Gottfried Lessing and his third wife were murdered in riots protesting against Idi Amin's rule.

to London, leaving her two older children but taking her son by Lessing with her; she also brought the manuscript of *The Grass is Singing*.⁴⁷

Despite her involvement with Rhodesian communism, Lessing never got closely involved in Black African politics. The Left Book Club to which she belonged in Rhodesia appears to have been an ideological ‘think tank’ based on the original 1936 English model and used as a cover for the outlawed Communist Party.⁴⁸ Lessing thus typifies the dilemma of white communists in colonial Africa; those who recognized the need for political change yet displayed an equal fear of both right-wing white segregationists and what most white settlers regarded as barely-civilized emerging black nationalists. The sense of historical paralysis induced by this dead-end situation is graphically displayed in Lessing’s portrayal of Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing*, a novel that succeeds powerfully in its analogical depiction of an exhausted empire. Mary’s spiritual and physical enervation and her despairing outlook on the African landscape owe much to Lessing’s appropriation of the desolate, sterile imagery of T.S. Eliot’s poem, *The Waste Land* (1922). Indeed, as Robin Visel argues, the epigraphic use of Eliot’s bleak imagery in the novel is the author’s way of reflecting contemporary anxieties regarding the settlers’ tenuous claim upon the African land.⁴⁹ Allied to the complex treatment of gender roles in the novel, such anxieties mirror the earlier tensions evident in the texts of Bowen and Godden and anticipate those in Gordimer’s *The Lying Days*.

⁴⁷For Lessing’s official biography see Carole Klein, *Doris Lessing: A Biography* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000).

⁴⁸Founded in London by Stafford Cripps, Victor Gollancz and John Strachey. In his foreword to George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Gollancz states that the aim of the club was to educate the British Left to help in the fight against war and fascism. See Paul Laity, ed., *Left Book Club Anthology* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁹Robin Visel, ‘Then Spoke the Thunder’: *The Grass is Singing* as a Zimbabwean Novel’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43 (2008), p. 161.

Although a committed communist, Lessing did not formally join the party until she moved to London, and she left it in any event seven years later following the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian Rising in 1956.⁵⁰ She then joined the New Left (non-Stalinist, non-party) that later emerged, and as a founder member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was one of the organizers of its protest marches. As a novelist, Lessing has received many honours, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (1995) and the British ‘Companion of Honour’ (1999). She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007.

Nadine Gordimer’s *The Lying Days* is the focus of Chapter Five. One of the most iconic literary and political figures of post-apartheid South Africa, most of Gordimer’s fiction deals with the tensions embedded in the apartheid regime. Yet until she was an adult the writer was apparently ignorant of such tensions. Echoing Bowen’s explanation in *Seven Winters* (1942), Gordimer recalls that her parents did not question the political status quo and, in common with most European settlers, simply took their privileged status for granted. She has written that her political curiosity was not sharpened until she read Upton Sinclair’s novel, *The Jungle* (1906), and made the connection between the workers in American meat factories and the mine-workers in her home town of Springs.⁵¹ However, she only became publicly involved in politics after the Sharpeville Massacre and the arrest of her best friend in 1960: ‘I didn’t know what politics was about,’ she wrote, ‘until I saw it happening to people.’⁵² Later, at the Rivonia Trial, she became firm friends with

⁵⁰Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: 1949 to 1962* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 57.

⁵¹Andries Walter Oliphant, *A Writing Life: Celebrating Nadine Gordimer* (London: Viking, 1998), p. 89.

⁵²Quoted in Kenneth Parker, ed., *The South African Novel in English* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 115. Bettie Du Toit (1910-2002), was an Afrikaner trade unionist and anti-apartheid political activist. In Sharpeville on March 21st, 1960, police opened fire on a large group of people protesting against the pass laws. Sixty-nine people were killed, including women and children. This incident became a watershed in South African politics; its condemnation by the United Nations led to South Africa leaving the Commonwealth in 1961. The massacre was also the catalyst for the move from passive to

Nelson Mandela's legal representatives, Bram Fischer and George Bizos.⁵³ Yet although she had close contact with the African National Congress (ANC) from this time onwards, Gordimer did not formally join the organization until it was unbanned in 1990. When Nelson Mandela was released from his Robben Island prison in the same year, Gordimer was one of the first people he asked to meet.

Gordimer was born in 1923 in a South African gold-mining town to Jewish immigrant parents. Until she was eleven, she attended a Catholic convent school, after which she was home-tutored. She began third level education, but dropped out of university after one year. Gordimer married her first husband, Gerald Gavronsky, in 1949. The couple divorced in 1952 and Gordimer married Reinhold Cassirer, an art dealer, in 1954.⁵⁴ *The Lying Days* was the first of many novels written by Gordimer.⁵⁵ She has since received international acclaim and has been conferred with several honorary degrees, culminating in the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991 and the French Legion of Honour in 2007. Unlike other white writers of her time, Gordimer has steadfastly refused to live outside South Africa; in the post-apartheid era, she became heavily involved in the fight against Aids in that country.

Initially, *The Lying Days* was viewed by the South African authorities as harmless pulp fiction rather than as a telling comment on the prevailing political situation in the country. As a result, the novel evaded the apartheid regime's rigid censorship laws and was published to mixed reviews in 1953. Writing in the radical

armed resistance by both the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Both organizations were banned following Sharpeville.

⁵³Between 1963 and 1964, ten ANC leaders were arrested and put on trial, among them such well-known figures as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki, father of Thabo Mbeki. Fischer, an Afrikaner and leading communist, was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1967. Gordimer's novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1979) is based on the lives of Fischer and his activist daughter. George Bizos entered South Africa as a refugee from Nazi-occupied Greece. Famous for defending anti-apartheid activists, he also defended Morgan Tsvangirai against charges of conspiring to assassinate Robert Mugabe before Zimbabwe's 2002 general election.

⁵⁴Cassirer established Sothebys in South Africa in 1969.

⁵⁵Gordimer's writing career began with children's tales published in the Johannesburg *Sunday Express* in 1937, followed by a short story *Come Again Tomorrow*, published in *Forum* in 1939.

South African journal *Fighting Talk*, an anonymous reviewer enthused that whereas before World War Two literature in South Africa was in its infancy, with Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948) marking its adolescence, *The Lying Days* marked South African literature's coming of age.⁵⁶ James Stern, writing in *The New York Times*, also compared *The Lying Days* to Paton's novel, finding Gordimer's 'the longer, the richer, intellectually the more exciting ... packed with insight into human nature, as void of conceit and banality, as original and as beautifully written as a novel by Virginia Woolf.'⁵⁷ However, reviewer Anthony Delius felt that *The Lying Days* lacked emotion in its depiction of characters. He also commented on references to sex in the novel, fearing that Gordimer 'might at any moment fall victim to the same subdued female hairy-chestedness that took Miss Doris Lessing in *Martha Quest* so near to becoming a half-hearted Hemingway or lacklustre Henry Miller.'⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the novel proved to be an immediate international success; by the beginning of 1954 it had already been reprinted four times in England and twice in America.

In *The Lying Days*, Gordimer deals with the insidious nature of apartheid through her approach to the relationship of power between the white ruling class and its colonial subjects. A first reading of the novel suggests that the author treats the question of colonial power solely with reference to what Doris Lessing terms the 'colour problem,' that is, through the failed relationship between a white middle-class girl and an impoverished black girl, and the suppression of violence in a black township. However, since the novel is set in a gold-mining town, a closer textual

⁵⁶A.O.D., *Fighting Talk*, 10. 3, April, 1954, *Digital Innovation South Africa*, www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/.

⁵⁷James Stern, 'Out of Rags and hovels', *New York Times Literary Supplement*, 4/10/1953.

⁵⁸Anthony Delius, 'The Next Instalment', *Standpunte* 8 (1953), pp. 66-74: 67, quoted in Judith Newman, 'An Analysis of *The Lying Days* by Nadine Gordimer', *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 160 (2002), p. 68. Delius's chauvinistic remark appears to imply that Lessing and Gordimer aspire to write in the manner of Hemingway and Miller, but that as women writers their novels lack the depth of these 'hairy-chested' male writers, of whom they are merely pale imitations.

reading reveals that the nature of power is also uncovered through the novel's figurations of economic capital and class relationships. Gordimer subtly points this up through her contrasting depictions of the privileged lifestyle of the white population *vis-à-vis* the indigenous population's lack of access to the wealth that allows for such luxury, but which nevertheless is generated through their lives spent underground in the mines.

When Gordimer wrote *The Lying Days*, South Africa was legislatively an independent country. Although the British had granted Home Rule to Afrikaners under the terms of The South Africa Act of 1909, the country remained British territory with dominion status within the Commonwealth, and was not granted legal independent status until the enactment of the 1931 Statute of Westminster.⁵⁹ Unlike Ireland, however, which unambiguously became a republic outside the Commonwealth by virtue of the 1948 Republic of Ireland Act, South Africa did not cease to be a dominion of the British Empire and remained within the Commonwealth until it withdrew in 1961.⁶⁰ For all practical purposes then, the country remained a colony to the extent that its fundamental social, political and economic structures remained the same as they had done before the Statute of Westminster became law. Therefore, even though South Africa gained home rule after the Second Boer War, its racist policies did not disappear and, in fact, were hardened by law, but now with a dual layer of British and Dutch rulers. In other words, the indigenous population was still dominated, through military force and colonial ideology, by a minority of white European settlers. Indeed, as JanMohammed observes, South Africa embodied the worst aspects of colonialism in

⁵⁹The Statute also applied to Australia, Canada, Ireland, Newfoundland and New Zealand. See John Dugard, Daniel L. Bethlehem and Max Du Plessis, eds., *International Law: A South African Perspective* ([1994] Cape Town: Juta, 2005), p. 19 ff.

⁶⁰South Africa rejoined the Commonwealth on gaining independence from white rule in 1994.

a system that rigorously systematized and codified the inequality, oppression, and deprivation of the subjugated people in ways that had not been implemented in other colonies, not even in Southern Rhodesia.⁶¹ As the narrator of *The Lying Days* succinctly puts it, for the black population, it did not matter whether their colonizers were British or Afrikans. When the Nationalists took power, the only difference in imperial policy was that now 'the velvet glove is off the iron hand.'⁶²

Although the critical consensus contends that *The Lying Days* is a straightforward *bildungsroman*, my reading will propose that, like *The Last September*, the novel is a frozen, or thwarted *bildung*, a subtle and complex narrative that undercuts the traditional genre in order to highlight the tensions created by the political situation in South Africa. Furthermore, although Gordimer claims that the novel was not written with politics in mind, that her political consciousness was too unformed at the time to deal adequately with the issue, she also admits, paradoxically, that the concept of apartheid was as natural as breathing in South Africa: 'So far as political issues are concerned,' she said in an interview, 'I've really approached them from the inside. They are implicit in my life and in my values.'⁶³ It is apparent then, that the colonial system was so deeply ingrained in settler psychology that like the other authors examined in this study, Gordimer could not help but produce a political allegory in *The Lying Days*. Therefore, while acknowledging the novel as an examination of the limits of a white liberal response to the problems of an intransigent and repressive political regime, the main focus of this chapter will be the manner in which Gordimer displays an early awareness of growing nationalist aspirations and discontent in South Africa. I read the novel as

⁶¹See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, p.79.

⁶²*TLD*, p. 257.

⁶³Quoted in Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 27.

one in which Helen Shaw's journey towards adulthood unfolds alongside the worsening situation in the country as it travels down what Stephen Clingman refers to as the 'doom-ridden slope of apartheid.'⁶⁴

⁶⁴*EG*, p. 1.

Chapter One

'As though the house had spent a day in the tropics':

The Art of Avoidance and the End of Empire

in Elizabeth Bowen's

The Last September

In a letter written to her friend, the South African writer, William Plomer, Elizabeth Bowen explains the ‘equivocal position’ of an Anglo-Irish Big House family, where ‘interest and tradition should make them support the British, [but] affection ties them to the now resistant people of their surrounding community.’¹ In this construction of Irish history, the Anglo-Irish establishment to which Bowen belonged felt itself obliged to support Great Britain by virtue of bonds of ‘interest and tradition’ but was nevertheless, like a divided or irresolute lover, ‘tied’ by ‘affection’ to an insurgent Ireland. This sense of a dual and deeply conflicted identity has dogged Bowen’s literary legacy from the start and has provoked ongoing argument among critics as to her literary purpose in *The Last September*. Thus, some critics, such as Seamus Deane and Hermione Lee, claim that Bowen is an Ascendancy-loyalist writer who offers a conservative and nostalgic retrospective on a dying class while others, like Vera Kreilkamp or Neil Corcoran, argue that she is not so much a nostalgic apologist for the Anglo-Irish as a critical chronicler of their historical doom.² But if the question of her class loyalties has divided her critics, so too have Bowen’s national literary affiliations.

¹Undated letter from Elizabeth Bowen to William Plomer (1903-1973), Durham University Library, Archives and Special Collections, *Plomer Collection*, GB 033 PLO, ref PLO/19; Plomer 19/38, quoted in Heather Bryant Jordan *How Will the Heart Endure? Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 51, and Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 55. While I have found no evidence to suggest that any of the authors I study ever met, an interesting link between them is their connection to Plomer. As evidenced by their correspondence with him, Bowen, Godden and Gordimer each counted the writer among their friends. In 1962, Lessing joined Plomer in signing the declaration of protest against the banning of the leftist South African newspaper, *New Age*. Plomer was also friends with Leonard and Virginia Woolf, whose Hogart Press published his best known novel, *Turbott Wolfe* (1925); he was later editor of Ian Fleming’s ‘James Bond’ films. See *Plomer Collection* above.

²Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revival: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), pp. 31-32; Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (London: Vision, 1981), p. 51; Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (New York: Syracuse, 1998), pp. 150-158; Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 23-24.

Whereas other Irish Protestant writers such as Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde and Louis MacNeice, to name but a few, have now been securely claimed for a specifically Irish literary tradition, Bowen has seemed, until very recently at least, a more unmoored figure; she is a writer who, by virtue of her Bloomsbury connections and long residence in England, is often linked to an English rather than an Irish literary canon. Only recently, thanks mainly to critical essays in anthologies such as Éibhear Walsh's *Elizabeth Bowen* (2009), and Susan Osborn's *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives* (2009), has Bowen been evaluated as a writer with strong claims to a place in the world of twentieth-century Irish writing. In Walsh's view, as modernism recedes into the historical background, closer critical scrutiny is being focused on Bowen. He attributes this renewed interest in her work to more recent schools of literary criticism, such as feminism, new historicism, psychoanalytic and queer theory.³

For her own part, despite her Ascendancy upbringing, Bowen always insisted on an Irish identity:

I regard myself as an Irish novelist. As long as I can remember, I've been extremely conscious of being Irish — All my life I've been going backwards and forwards between Ireland and England and the Continent, but that has never robbed me of the strong feeling of my nationality. I must say it's a highly disturbing emotion. It's not — I *must* emphasize — sentimentality.⁴

Nonetheless, despite her insistence on her Irishness in passages such as this, Bowen's role as a contributor to British intelligence during World War Two and her comment in *Vogue* magazine in 1953 on the coronation of Elizabeth II — 'We behold Elizabeth our

³ See *Elizabeth Bowen*, Éibhear Walsh, ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp. xii-xiii.

⁴ 'Meet Elizabeth Bowen', *The Bell*, No. 4 (September, 1942), also quoted in Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (New York: Syracuse, 1998), p. 141. Original emphasis.

undoubted queen' — demonstrate that her national loyalties were never simple, and that even if she felt a strong sense of Irishness, she also remained a committed English subject and cultural anglophile.⁵ Unlike many Anglo-Irish writers of her time who immersed themselves in Irish legend and folklore, or who followed the progress of the Gaelic League with interest, or who even tried to learn Irish, Bowen never displayed any strong interest in the Irish Revival or in coming to grips with any aspect of Gaelic Ireland. At school in England in 1916, it was only on learning of the Easter Rising that she even became aware that a nationalist political and cultural revival had been underway in Ireland for some time. In Declan Kiberd's view, her ignorance of political and cultural developments in Ireland before World War One may be attributed to the fact that the revival and growing nationalist discontent may have been judged far too inconsequential for Bowen's family to have formed any clear opinion of these issues. This attitude, Kiberd suggests, ought not to be attributed to any ill-will on their part, but rather to a feeling of baffled incomprehension. Kiberd believes that in *The Last September*, Mrs. Vermont's reaction to the War of Independence — 'Who would have thought the Irish would turn out to be so disloyal?' — might well be taken to reflect the Bowens' general response to events in Ireland.⁶ Some years later, in *Bowen's Court* (1942), Bowen openly acknowledged that her ancestors had built their lives on the 'negation of mystical Ireland', with its 'ceaseless poetry of lament,' which, historically, the Ascendancy class had driven underground.⁷ In her childhood reminiscence, *Seven Winters* (1942), she explains that while living her early years within the enclosed world

⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, 'An Enormous Channel of Expectations', *Vogue* (July, 1953), pp. 54-55.

⁶ *TLS*, p. 46. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), pp. 364-365.

⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court* ([1942] London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 22, 97, hereafter referred to as *BC* in the footnotes.

of Anglo-Irish society, she was simply unaware that the Catholic 'others' formed the majority population, and not her own people, as she had believed:

It was not until after the end of those seven winters that I understood that we Protestants were a minority, and that the unquestioned rules of our being came, in fact, from the closeness of a minority world ... I took the existence of Roman Catholics for granted but met few and was not interested in them. They were, simply 'the others,' whose world lay alongside ours but never touched.⁸

Even later, in her 1952 preface to a new (USA) edition of *The Last September*, Bowen recalled that while living among the 'articulate and the learned' in the civilized atmosphere of Oxford in 1928 (the year in which she wrote *The Last September*), she had become physically and emotionally detached from Ireland. Yet paradoxically, she confessed, although she was keen to disavow any sense of sentimentality or heightened or showy emotion, Ireland produced in her a 'highly disturbing emotion.'⁹ Accordingly, in Bowen's writings on Ireland we can see a consistent tendency on her part to oscillate between declarations of affection and attachment and declarations of ignorance or detachment.

For these reasons perhaps, the writer seems never to have strongly identified herself with a specifically Anglo-Irish tradition of letters. Unlike W. B. Yeats, say, she never claimed Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, Samuel Ferguson or Standish O'Grady as significant antecedents. As a consequence, she became identified in time with an English literary tradition and more specifically with an Austenesque

⁸Elizabeth Bowen, *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood* ([1942] London: Vintage, 1999), p. 508, hereafter referred to as *SW* in the footnotes.

⁹Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, Hermione Lee, ed. (London: Virago, 1986), p. 124, hereafter referred to as *MT* in the footnotes.

comedy of manners and restrained social satire.¹⁰ Maud Ellmann, like other commentators, acknowledges Austen's influence on Bowen, but sees Bowen's fictional world as 'too precarious for history to recede into the wings' as it does in Austen's settled English world. In Ellmann's view, political and social history provides the background to Austen's stories, but such forces scarcely ever encroach directly on the lives of her protagonists. In contrast, Ellmann explains, in the much more fragile Anglo-Irish world of *The Last September*, human lives are wholly controlled both by the prevailing political situation and by forces set in motion long before their birth.¹¹ Thus, there may well be traces of Austen's influence in *The Last September*, but neither Bowen's culture nor background are comparable to Austen's. The country houses of nineteenth-century England were, in all likelihood, nearly as dependent as those of the Anglo-Irish on colonial exploitation — one thinks, for instance, of the plantations that maintain the Bertrams's estate in *Mansfield Park* (1814) or that lie behind Mr. Rochester's wealth in *Jane Eyre*. But English writers in the nineteenth century could assume, with good reason, that the domestic and imperial political structures that framed both their lives and their writing were quite stable. Living in a very different situation, Anglo-Irish writers, on the other hand, had never been in a position to take the same for granted.

In an interesting new departure in Bowen criticism, Jed Esty has proposed that the entire Anglo-Irish Big House novel tradition should be situated in an imperial rather than in either an exclusively Irish or an exclusively English national context. For Esty,

¹⁰Gearóid Cronin, 'The Big House Novel and the Irish Landscape in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen', in *The Big House in Ireland*, J. Genet, ed. (Dingle: Brandon/Mount Eagle Publications, 1991), pp. 143-62: 144.

¹¹Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 42.

Anglo-Irish Gothic and the Big House novel are variants of what he calls 'plantation gothic'; a creole or settler genre of writing that emerged in the plantocratic contact zones of the first English Empire that stretched from the Irish plantations to the slave economies of the West Indies and the New World, in nineteenth-century Irish and American Gothic fiction and the twentieth-century works of William Faulkner and Jean Rhys, and also in the Caribbean zombie films of 1940s Hollywood. All these, in Esty's view, belong to the transnational literary world of 'plantation gothic.' In addition, Esty highlights narrative similarities between *The Last September* and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), noting that the experience of Bowen's young protagonist, Lois Farquar, resembles that of Woolf's heroine, Rachel Vinrace. Neither Lois nor Rachel, Esty contends, can ever get their bearings in the worlds they inhabit nor realise a satisfactory adult identity. Both heroines are, he suggests, exemplars of an 'arrested development,' or of an inability to achieve maturity, something he connects to a wider loss of faith in nineteenth-century ideals of personal development and to a loss of liberal confidence in ideas of imperial progress. In Esty's view: 'It is surely no coincidence that the great Irish novels of the two generations preceding Bowen's, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* (1916) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), both organized their plots around the problematics of a youth that cannot come of age in the proper temporal order.' Moreover, Esty indicates that *The Last September* has some affinities with E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* by pointing out that both novels depict dramas of decline played out at the edges of what he terms a 'moldy chivalric British garrison.'¹²

¹²Jed Esty, 'Virgins and Empire: *The Last September* and the Antidevelopmental Plot', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53.2 (Summer, 2007), pp. 257-259: 258.

In this chapter, I want to develop Esty's suggestion that *The Last September* may be read as a novel indebted to both Irish and English literary traditions, but which is also an early example of late imperial fiction. *The Last September's* affinities with the English country house novel exemplified by Jane Austen are apparent in Bowen's style — a style characterized by a cool sense of comic irony, sharp but subdued social commentary, and a tendency to focus on the domestic and to keep any more eventful historical dramas of any kind firmly in the background of the narrative. But if *The Last September* is a slowly unfolding domestic novel in which nothing much seems to happen, it also famously ends with a violent intrusion of history when the Irish rebels burn down Danielstown, the Big House at the narrative centre of the novel, as well as several other neighbouring manors. Thus, while Bowen's novel may appear to keep a cool and aloof distance from history in the manner of Austen, it also acknowledges the futility of such detachment, and the dramatic denouement is therefore much closer in many respects to more sensational or 'gothic' works such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and indeed to 'plantation gothic' generally than it is to Austen. The near-apocalyptic ending of *The Last September*, in other words, departs from any Austenesque comic ending and signals Bowen's awareness that the world that the Big House embodied will not endure, and will also end in some kind of inferno. In this sense, we can see Bowen's affinities with both 'plantation gothic' and with late imperial narrative more generally since these modes of fiction are always haunted by intimations of collapse and disaster. As Esty remarks, Bowen's static protagonists who can never fully achieve themselves in any sense in the world also share much in common with the protagonists in other early modernist

bildungsmans who endure similar predicaments. Yet there is little sense that Bowen is attracted to the 'foreign' worlds of French decadence or artistic bohemia in the manner of Wilde or Joyce. Nor does she pursue the more radical experimental techniques of the modernist bildungsroman exemplified by Joyce's *Portrait* or Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* (1918). Just as she seems to be strongly attached to and yet also detached from the world of the Big House, Bowen also appears to be attached to the restrained realism of the English tradition exemplified by Austen and at the same time *The Last September* also accommodates 'gothic' and other 'foreign' elements alien to that tradition. This chapter will argue that we must try to grasp this strange sense of attachment-detachment in order to come to any full understanding of this novel.

In the analysis of *The Last September* that follows, I will argue that Bowen's disposition towards the world of Danielstown, and the Ascendancy history it embodies, might best be described as a complex mixture of defensiveness and passive aggression. On the one hand, Bowen seems to associate Danielstown with a kind of determined and stoical refinement that, in the face of chaos, represents a moral order of some kind, one worth preserving or at least commemorating. On the other hand, despite its long history, the house seems to remain totally detached from the landscape it inhabits and its occupants appear to be able to keep going only by means of a strenuous avoidance of almost everything that might challenge their world. *The Last September* is in many respects a study in denial, or in averting attention from everything that troubles an apparent sense of assurance. Bowen seems to acknowledge that the world of Danielstown is founded on colonial violence and class privilege and is dependent in the last analysis on English military support rather than on its own merits. At the same time,

her perception of the world outside the Big House is limited and as my reading will outline later, the alternative worlds of either Ireland or England are represented in *The Last September* as either shadowy gothic figures or somewhat comic realities. Thus, while the novel seems in large degree to attribute Danielstown's downfall to its own inherent weaknesses and contradictions, it also seems unable to imagine with any sympathy a satisfactory alternative. This dilemma explains the terrible sense of impasse that seems to hold all of the main characters, and indeed the narrative itself, firmly in its grip.

In this reading, *The Last September* is a work that displays some of the same characteristics demonstrated by Bowen's major protagonists. As mentioned earlier, these protagonists are studies in avoidance, specialists in deflecting attention (or pretending never to notice) what is also staring them in the face. The double-mindedness or passive aggressiveness of *The Last September* with regard to the Ascendancy is reflected in the way it handles its two main Ascendancy couples, the land-owning Naylor and their friends, the Montmorencys. Bowen offers a generally — though not entirely — positive affirmation of the Ascendancy in the figure of the Naylor, a well-meaning if ineffectual couple who display an admirably stubborn tenacity in the face of adversity and collapse, even if that tenacity also depends on avoidance. But Bowen's more aggressive feelings towards the Ascendancy find expression in her depiction of the Montmorencys, a pair of listless failures who have already lost (or abandoned) their own home, and who live as perpetual guests in other people's houses. The Montmorencys have no house of their own, no children, no social commitments or moral purpose of any kind. They had once planned to migrate to Canada, but that plan, like all their other

plans, was never carried through. They represent, therefore, everything that is most pitiable in a rentier class that lives parasitically on a world with which it has lost all contact, and which can only look backwards to what was supposedly a more stable era. Caught between the Naylor and the Montmorencys, Lois and Laurence — the two young people nearest the narrative centre of the novel — are just as aimless and helpless as the Montmorencys. But *The Last September* positions its readers in a way that invites them to share Lois's increasing restlessness with the charade she is forced to live, and to empathize with her desire for a more active response to the world. By structuring her novel in this way, Bowen conveys a passive-aggressive attitude to the world she depicts, one which partly wants to commemorate Danielstown as a work of civilized accomplishment, and that partly wants to consign the house to the past as a symbol of a failed, deluded and restrictive enterprise. In other words, *The Last September* offers neither a strong endorsement of Danielstown nor a strong critique of it; the result is a novel that both explores and to some degree exemplifies a sense of impasse.

Although the novel is set in Cork, more distant worlds continually impinge on *The Last September*. The Black and Tan armies fighting the Irish insurgents are comprised of men who have returned from the trenches of World War One, a conflict that seems to have changed everything in both England and Ireland. Beyond this wider European context, there are also numerous, though always subtle, references to an even wider imperial world: there are references to the Canada where Hugo and Francie once planned to emigrate, and tiger-skins and elephants from India furnish the interior of Danielstown. Most significantly of all perhaps, in a scene in which Bowen describes Danielstown lit up in a radiant autumnal sunshine that anticipates its final burning, the

house is described as '[e]xhausted by sunshine,' its window-frames blistered, its furniture faded by too much light 'as though the house had spent a day in the tropics.'¹³ In these small but always carefully positioned and telling details, Bowen suggests that the end of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy may well signal the wider end of an empire. In these details, she also associatively links Anglo-Ireland with other colonial societies and with worlds that may one day share the Irish Ascendancy's fate.¹⁴ True to form, Bowen's style is muted and restrained and thus these links to the crisis-ridden world of the British Empire after World War One are hinted at, not confronted directly — a form of acknowledgement and avoidance that is part of the whole drama of *The Last September*. But in the steadily encroaching and hostile landscape that threatens to collapse the house, in the narrative of increasingly restless colonial women, and in the figures of the impotent colonial male, there is much in *The Last September* that anticipates the imaginative worlds of Godden, Lessing and Gordimer that we will examine later in this study.

II

Bowen was at pains to point out her unease regarding her method of relating the story of Danielstown in the ordinary past tense. She was concerned that 'looking, backward — down a backward perspective of eight years,' was not a forceful enough device to elicit in her readers a sense that in the few years between the writing of *The Last September* and 1920, the year in which it is set, the world of Danielstown had

¹³*TLS*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴See Julia McElhattan Williams, 'Fiction with the Texture of History: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41.2 (1995), pp. 219-242: 223.

disappeared, it was 'done with and over.'¹⁵ Bowen's anxiety was unfounded, for in describing the appearance of Lois, the anonymous narrator makes it abundantly clear that the events about to be related have taken place in the past: 'In those days, girls wore crisp white skirts and transparent blouses clotted with white flowers; ribbons, threaded through with a view to appearance, appeared over their shoulders.'¹⁶ This narrative 'pointer,' as Bowen puts it, serves the function of bringing home to the reader a consciousness that 'Lois's ribbons, already, were part of history.'¹⁷

Standing with Lois on the steps of Danielstown, Sir Richard and Lady Myra Naylor are eagerly awaiting the arrival of their guests, Hugo and Francie Montmorency. However, the excited 'agitation of greeting' displayed by the family as the Montmorencys' car comes into view is tinged with relief, for this is rural Ireland during the War of Independence and the sound of a car engine could equally announce the approach of either a nationalist or a Black and Tan patrol: '... you came quite safe?' Sir Richard enquires of his guests, 'No trouble: Nobody at the cross-roads? Nobody stopped you?'¹⁸ Notwithstanding this sense of anxiety, the Naylor's are remarkably short-sighted when it comes to acknowledging the historical drama taking place at the gates of their demesne. They either fail to understand, or refuse to recognize that in Ireland nowhere can be immune from politics. Dismissing the news relayed by the Montmorencys that 'things were bad in Cork,' Sir Richard replies to Francie's anxious query — 'Are you sure we will not be shot at if we sit out late on the steps? — by making fun of her.'¹⁹ Dismissing stories of IRA infiltration onto his property as scaremongering, he refuses to

¹⁵*MT*, p. 124.

¹⁶*TLS*, p. 7.

¹⁷*MT*, p. 124.

¹⁸*TLS*, p. 8.

¹⁹*TLS*, p. 23.

allow a search for the rebel guns that a workman suspects are buried on the plantation: ‘Ah, that’s nonsense now!’ he expostulates, ‘Michael would see anything: he is known to have seen a ghost. I will not have the men talking, and at all accounts I won’t have them listened to.’²⁰ When Hugo later asks Lady Naylor’s nephew, Laurence, his opinion of the political situation, the latter’s nonchalant reply that things seem to ‘be closing in ... rolling in rather,’ draws an instant admonishment from his aunt not to exaggerate matters.²¹ Lady Naylor refuses to admit that anything is amiss: ‘We never listen. I have made it a rule not to talk either ... if you talk to the people they’ll tell you the whole thing’s nonsense.’²² It is in the Naylor’s own interest to avoid confronting the true state of affairs in the district. As Julian Moynahan explains, and as evidenced by Bowen’s letter to Plomer, as proprietors of the Big House, the Naylor’s find themselves in an awkward position. They cannot take sides with the British forces imported to ‘protect’ them from the native population any more than they can champion the insurgents. If they show sympathy for the rebels’ cause, they are likely to be burned out by the Black and Tans, and if they are friendly towards the British, they risk a similar fate at the hands of the rebels.²³

The tensions caused by these concerns make the significance of the novel’s setting — the house, the physical landscape and the socio-political environment — crucial to a reading of *The Last September*. Bowen places great emphasis on the importance of location in her writing:

Few people questioning me about my novels, or my short stories, show curiosity as to the places in them. Thesis-writers,

²⁰*TLS*, p. 25.

²¹*TLS*, pp. 24-25.

²²*TLS*, p. 26.

²³Julian Moynahan, *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 240.

interviewers or individuals ... all, but all, stick to the same track, which by-passes locality. On the subject of my symbology, if any, or psychology (whether my own or my characters'), I have occasionally been run ragged; but as to the *where* of my stories, its importance in them and for me ... a negative apathy persists ... Why? Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large? ... for me, what gives fiction verisimilitude is its topography.²⁴

Bowen's employment of symbols and psychology to represent the demise of colonial Ireland is undeniably closely allied to the 'where' of her stories. *The Last September* is an anxiously tense novel, one in which the emotions and fears that cannot be openly articulated by the protagonists are repressed and projected onto both the house and onto the landscape in which it is planted. As Phyllis Lassner notes, the house and its inhabitants serve as metaphors for each other's destinies. The human characters formulate their identities, examine their pasts and speculate about their futures under the influence of the values inherent in the life and history of this symbol of colonial rule in Ireland.²⁵

However, like all Anglo-Irish Big Houses, Danielstown is not at all at home in its environment. It is a perforated space, punctured by events that not even the house, 'staring coldly over its mounting lawns,' or the trees that 'reached like an arm from behind the house — embracing the lawns, banks and terraces,' can prevent from following its inevitable course.²⁶ The house that should be a safe haven for the family and their guests is fraught with threats of unspoken violence, a menace represented on one side by British military convoys that prowl about the countryside and on the other by nationalist rebels who encroach on the demesne grounds. Hints of growing instability are evident in the disturbances that disrupt the family's everyday activities. Sir Richard

²⁴*MT*, pp. 281-282. Original emphasis.

²⁵Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 28.

²⁶*TLS*, pp. 7, 22.

complains of being delayed on the road by a military tank, while a lorry full of rowdy Black and Tans terrifies Lois and her friend Livvy, forcing them to take refuge in a narrow side road:

The voices ... tunnelled through the close air with a particular horror. To meet in this narrow way would be worse than a dream ... if Black and Tans saw one hiding they were sarcastic. They heard the lorry grind past the mouth of the breen with apprehension, feeling exposed and hunted.²⁷

Ascendancy females travelling outside the demesne ought to be reassured by the appearance of British soldiers, since the latter were supposedly in Ireland to uphold the established order. 'We came to take care of all of you,' an officer's wife reassures a perplexed Mrs. Carey, an Anglo-Irish neighbour, who, in the tradition of turning a blind eye to political events, is unaware that she is in need of protection from anyone.²⁸ Yet Sir Richard's jocular reassurance that so far Danielstown has escaped rebel raids is not enough to quell Lois's sense of impending horror as she takes an evening stroll along the avenue. The approach to a shrubbery, 'solid with darkness,' fills her with a primal fear:

Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of leaves were timid and dank, like tongues of dead animals. Her fear of the shrubberies tugged at its chain, fear behind reason, fear before her birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in Laura. She went forward eagerly ... a hand to the thump of her heart, dramatic with terror ... and as she began to notice the displaced darkness thought what she dreaded was coming ... she was indeed clairvoyant, exposed to horror and going to see a ghost.²⁹

Lois's conviction that she is about to witness an apparition undercuts Sir Richard's denigration of the Irish as irrationally superstitious, yet her fears are realized when a

²⁷*TLS*, pp. 26, 75-76.

²⁸*TLS*, p. 47.

²⁹*TLS*, p. 33.

trench-coated rebel appears from the shadows like a spectre. Lois studies him closely, grateful for the 'fleshliness' of his manly 'resolute profile,' but lurking in the shrubbery, 'blotted out in her black,' her pleasurable illusion of him as a romantic figure borders on voyeurism. However, despite her thumping heart, she is drawn to the rebel's sense of purpose. As Claire Norris has argued, for personal identity to be created, national and physical spaces first need to be identified and recognized as belonging to the 'I.'³⁰ It is this sense of belonging that Lois recognizes in the nationalist — an identity based on a sense of possession that she lacks. As he strides purposefully through the demesne, she stares at him with a mixture of dread and admiration:

It must be because of Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from the mountains, making a short cut through their demesne. Here was something else that she could not share. She could not conceive of her country emotionally: it was a way of living, an abstract of several landscapes, or an oblique frayed island, moored at the north but with an air of being detached and washed out west from the British coast.³¹

In this scene, the anonymous rebel may appear to lack an identity, but, in Lois's view, his stride indicates a real sense of purpose and conviction, qualities she conspicuously lacks. He has a mental map of the country to orient him; she does not. Ireland is, to her, 'abstract or 'oblique' or 'frayed'; it is 'moored' to England 'at the north' but elsewhere seems to be drifting away westwards from 'the British coast.'

Bowen maintains that this 'equivocal position' was more upsetting to the Anglo-Irish than they cared to show. As she explained to Plomer, families such as the Naylor were caught between inherited loyalty to England, with which they had close historical ties 'and to which they owed their "Ascendancy" lands and power,' and the

³⁰Clair Norris, 'The Big House: Space, Place, and Identity in Irish Fiction', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Eireanach Nua*, 8.1 (Spring, 2004), pp. 107-121: 118.

³¹*TLS*, p. 34.

pull of Ireland, which they now considered their homeland.³² It is not surprising that Lois can only think of Ireland from an Anglocentric stance, the point of view of her own colonizing class.³³ Her sense of alienation and disconnection from Ireland stems from this sense of insecurity, from the injustice on which, as Bowen later painfully acknowledged in *Bowen's Court*, Anglo-Irish hegemony was founded: 'My family got their position and drew their power from a situation that shows an inherent wrong', she records.³⁴ Lois begins to understand the consequences of her own lack of involvement in 'her country,' the 'oblique frayed island' that is no more to her than an abstract 'way of living.' Because of this new awareness, she suppresses her instinct to make her presence known; finding herself unable to connect with the intruder any more than she can relate to the landscape, she remains passive and allows him to pass unchallenged. Bowen suggests that Lois's lack of reaction is, in part, an act of self-preservation. Like the author herself at this time, having come through the trauma of the Great War, all Lois craves is order, to be part of a pattern, to be related, as she puts it.³⁵ This would account for her understanding that in the current climate, to speak of the episode would be an additional threat to the already precarious stability of Danielstown and it is because of her acute awareness of this that she makes her decision not to report the incident to the Naylor.

Lois's resolve is reinforced by her knowledge of Ascendancy feelings of insecurity; that even the most minute change in its structure would rattle the ordered life and sense of inherited privilege that it had built up over many centuries of occupation. In

³²*MT*, p. 125.

³³See Esty, p. 266.

³⁴*BC*, p. 453.

³⁵*TLS*, p. 98; *MT*, p. 126.

order to stave off any breakdown in the status quo, Danielstown adhered to a rigid structure of social etiquette. Aware from the incident of the hidden guns that his control over the estate is already slipping, Sir Richard is visibly vexed when Francie upsets his strict routine by presenting herself too early for dinner: 'He was bothered.'³⁶ This growing sense of uneasiness is not without foundation. The impression that all is not well at Danielstown is signalled by the sense of deterioration and decay that emanates from the Big House and runs to the tennis courts, in nets that are 'full of rents' and in neglected shrubberies where tennis balls lie abandoned since before the Great War.³⁷ Such factors embody the potential disruptions that underlie the apparently cordial and gracious world of tennis parties and tea dances at which Anglo-Irish families such as the Naylor family entertained officers of the British army. Bowen explains that while it might indeed appear either foolhardy or inhuman to carry on such a conventional social life under the prevailing political circumstances, to the Anglo-Irish, ignoring the situation by pretending that all was well 'appeared the best thing to do.'³⁸ This determination to keep up appearances and to adhere strictly to inherited social rituals, and indeed to studiously ignore the realities of native resistance, is something that Bowen's *The Last September* both explores and yet also exemplifies. The novel might well be said to be a study of a class's denial of history, a study in avoidance of what is also obvious. But if this is one of the essential features of Bowen's narrative, it is also one that recurs again and again

³⁶*TLS*, p 22.

³⁷As early as 1833, Maria Edgeworth's description of a visit to Ballinahinch Castle, home of the writer Mary Martin, notes that 'the castle was much dilapidated: there were broken windowpanes and leaks in the roof; splotches of damp in the ceilings and walls; and the furnishings were meagre and makeshift.' Quoted in Moynahan, p. 80. Perhaps Katherine Everett relates the most telling story of deterioration. Everett explains that from the time of her birth in 1872, her uncle's estate, Muckcross House in Kerry, was in decline. Added to the expenses incurred by the 1861 visit of Queen Victoria, a forced reduction in rents and profligate spending by its landlord ensured that twenty years later, the house was closed. Katherine Everett, *Bricks and Flowers* (London: Reprint Society, 1949), pp. 11-14.

³⁸*MT*, p. 125.

in the novels of the other women writers I will examine in later chapters. The sense of an empire coming to an end, an end which must somehow be ignored if one is to muddle through, is, in other words, something Bowen shares with fellow writers such as Godden, Lessing and Gordimer.

III

Tennis parties notwithstanding, British officers were traditionally entertained at Danielstown, for as Bowen confesses, the military were always welcome in the Big Houses.³⁹ However, ‘the Troubles troubled everything, even friendliness.’⁴⁰ In colonial Ireland, unlike India or Africa, social separation took the form of religious rather than of colour differences. While officers such as the subaltern, Gerald Lesworth, constituted pleasant tennis partners for young Protestant Anglo-Irish women, local girls were not generally available to British soldiers. Those who flouted this unwritten law were heavily punished if found out. Sir Richard, who thinks that ‘subalterns should be fewer and more infrequent,’ relishes the story of three young women ‘who had had their hair cut off by masked men for walking out with the soldiers.’⁴¹ Bowen explains Sir Richard’s lukewarm reaction to the military presence as reflecting a growing sense of disenchantment and repugnance towards the Black and Tan patrols with their marauding raids and their ‘proclaimed intention of “holding the country down.”’⁴² His wife does not agree. On the contrary, her anxiety to maintain tradition ensures that Lady Naylor is

³⁹*TLS*, p. 61.

⁴⁰*MT*, p. 125.

⁴¹*TLS*, p. 61.

⁴²*MT*, p. 125.

prepared to face the risk of reprisals presented by the officers' presence, a risk great enough however, to prevent her from inviting the patrolling non-officer ranks to Danielstown.⁴³

The presence of the military is also a reminder of the army's reason for being in Ireland in the first place. In an involuntary admission that Irish independence is a foregone conclusion, Lesworth flippantly promises the Hartigan sisters that the army would leave Ireland 'as soon as we've lost this jolly old war.'⁴⁴ But unlike Sir Richard, the unmarried sisters are excited by the company of soldiers and would prefer the army to stay. The sexual titillation that the soldiers' proximity to death arouses in the young women is made explicit in the reaction of Lois's friend, Livvy, to her admirer, David Armstrong. Livvy eroticizes the danger inherent in active duty. She 'felt in her spine, running down it from under her waist-band, a sharp little thrill. She felt all the soldiers' woman, and said in a glow: "Well, I call that too awfully dangerous.'" The officer's reply — 'It's what we're here for' — causes acute embarrassment to the couple, both his admission and their mutual understanding of this sexually ambiguous remark.⁴⁵ What Armstrong's inuendo implies is that the soldiers are present as a prelude to having a sexual encounter in case they get killed, and as evidenced by Livvy's physical response, the girls are there to oblige. As an English officer's wife slyly remarks: 'A boy needs keeping, if you know what I mean.'⁴⁶

The preoccupation with sex in the novel is a telling reminder that the slaughter of the Great War had created a huge vacuum in the supply of eligible men for young

⁴³*TLS*, p. 31.

⁴⁴*TLS*, p. 38.

⁴⁵*TLS*, p. 39. See Margot Gayle Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 184.

⁴⁶*TLS*, p. 198.

women of marriageable age.⁴⁷ Such an unfortunate state of affairs ensured that the need to find a suitable husband in the early twentieth century was just as imperative as it had been in Austen's, or indeed in Maria Edgeworth's time, a circumstance that makes Lois the focus of Lady Naylor's anxiety.⁴⁸ There was only a small margin of time for a young girl to make a good match and since the Naylor's are childless, if Lois does not marry, the Naylor line will die out. Moreover, as Sir Richard's orphaned niece, under these circumstances Lois would be forever dependent on her uncle.⁴⁹ However, in *The Last September*, any idea of a hetero-normative society is undercut by Sir Richard's surrender of patriarchal authority to his wife, intimations of homosexual tendencies in both Lois and Laurence and by the effete uxoriousness of Hugo, who is so sexually ineffectual that he too seems incapable of paternity.

Lois initially attempts to conform to her society's expectations by convincing herself that she is in love with the young officer, Lesworth, but she soon discovers that her suitor fails to live up to her girlish notions of romantic love. Lesworth proves to be too solid, too steady, lacking the romantic idealism that she attributes to the Irish rebel. Lesworth does not think of love as something lofty and abstract as Lois does. Her reaction to their first kiss recalls that of Jane Eyre to St John Rivers's kiss, which Jane expresses in terms of control: 'I felt as if the kiss were a seal affixed to my fetters,' she

⁴⁷About a quarter of a million Irishmen of all religious denominations, officered largely by sons of the Irish Ascendancy, fought for England in World War One. See Fergus Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 196.

⁴⁸*TLS*, p. 42.

⁴⁹Anna Parnell, sister of Charles Stuart Parnell, makes explicit that the Anglo-Irish custom of patrilineal inheritance ensured that its women were 'at the mercy of family fortunes – if these declined, then one of the first economies was to cut off these stipends.' Such women, Parnell points out, were 'little less the victims of the landlords than the tenants themselves.' See Backus, p. 172.

recalls.⁵⁰ Likewise, Lois experiences Lesworth's kiss, not as a mutual expression of sexual attraction, but as one of military-like domination:

She could not remember, though she had read so many books, *who* spoke first after a kiss had been, not exchanged but — administered. The two reactions, outrage, capitulation, had not been her own.⁵¹

Lesworth's affections are depicted as architectural structures: like a barracks, his emotions are described as 'four-square — occurring like houses in a landscape.' His feelings have been deposited in a sequence of 'repositories ... his mother, dog, school, a friend or two, now, crowningly, Lois.'⁵² The word 'repository,' Backus suggests, presents Lois as 'the consummate object of heterosexual male desire, an empty vessel to be filled with projected, inchoate desires — penetrated, impregnated, occupied, like the country itself.'⁵³

Laurence also finds himself in a precarious position. Because he is Lady Naylor's, not Sir Richard's nephew, he cannot inherit Danielstown. In the absence of male heirs, the property should fall to Lois, who is Sir Richard's niece.⁵⁴ They are not blood related, so potentially Laurence should be a natural choice of husband for Lois. However, unlike Laurence, who appears to be quite comfortable in his sexuality, Lois is confused about hers and develops a crush on Marda Norton, who is some years older

⁵⁰Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 405.

⁵¹*TLS*, p. 152. Original emphasis.

⁵²*TLS*, p. 41.

⁵³Backus, p. 172.

⁵⁴Joan de Vere writes that she was 'keenly aware of being cut out of the inheritance' of Curragh Chase in Adare, Co. Limerick. She points out that in the absence of direct male heirs, the entailment of an estate could be broken, an act that her own mother refused to carry out in her daughter's favour. Joan De Vere, *In Ruin Reconciled: A Memoir of Anglo-Ireland 1913-1959* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1990), p. 46. Likewise, Lady Gregory could never own Coole Park, which was passed to her son Robert, and following his death, to his wife as guardian of their son. The estate was sold to the Irish Forestry Commission in 1927; the house was demolished in 1941.

than Lois and the latest guest to arrive at Danielstown.⁵⁵ When Bowen wrote *The Last September*, same-sex relationships were still largely taboo subjects, and although the focus of contemporary scientific and psychological analysis, were not discussed openly.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, although cloaked in allusion and inuendo, the subject is often introduced in Bowen's fiction, which often features characters who are either clearly, or ambiguously, homosexual. For instance, *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938) both depict same-sex relationships. In the later *The Little Girls* (1962), the topic is introduced more openly, but when a character is asked directly if she is a lesbian, the question is, nonetheless, left open at the close of the narrative. In *The Last September*, Bowen very adroitly introduces the issue by having Lois try on Marda's clothes: 'Oh, the *escape* in other people's clothes! ... how she could live, she felt.'⁵⁷ Lois does not aspire to married life, nor is she interested in male endeavours. She likes 'unmarried sorts of places ... I think ... I must be a woman's woman ... I hate women, but I can't think how to be anything else ... I would hate to be a man. So much fuss about doing things.'⁵⁸

⁵⁵Lois is nineteen years old, Marda is twenty-nine. This theme has autobiographical echoes. Bowen had at least two relationships with women, including the younger writer May Sarton, but distinguished such casual relationships from lesbianism as a lifestyle, of which she disapproved. For a discussion of the relationship see Patricia Coughlan, 'Woman and Desire in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen', in *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, Eibhear Walshe, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), pp. 103–134.

⁵⁶In light of the consequences of Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895, homosexuality became a subject surrounded by silence and fear. The law against homosexuality in England and Wales was not abolished until 1967, in Scotland, 1980 and Northern Ireland in 1982. Late 19th century sexologists included Karl Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. Freud published *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905 and *Certain Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia, and Homosexuality* in 1922. Interestingly, Freud believed that all humans are initially bisexual, incorporating aspects of both sexes, and only achieve a 'normal' sexual identity through successful negotiation of the oedipal complex. Elizabeth Cullingford points out that although there is no hard evidence to suggest that Bowen read Freud, she would doubtless have absorbed these contemporary discourses in London, in the salons of friends such as Rose Macaulay. See Elizabeth Cullingford, 'Something Else: Gendering Onliness in Elizabeth Bowen's Early Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53.2 (Summer, 2007), pp. 276-305: 280.

⁵⁷*TLS*, pp. 76-77. Original emphasis.

⁵⁸*TLS*, p. 99.

The inter-action between Lois and Marda is so heavily coded that the sexual preference of either is a narrative strand that proves difficult to decipher. Nonetheless, when Marda asks Lois if she has 'ever been abroad,' it soon becomes apparent that the reader is invited to understand this as a euphemism. The suggestion is that Marda really wants to know whether Lois has ever 'crossed over,' that is, if she has ever transgressed sexual norms by engaging in a lesbian relationship. In an exchange that demonstrates the unspeakability of homoerotic attraction of the period, when Lois wonders if her engagement to Lesworth will give 'a good impression,' the imperative to keep an outward semblance of normality ensures that Marda's response is unequivocal: 'Well, it furnishes you rather.' This remark suggests that in accordance with contemporary morality, and indeed the law, marriage provides a veneer of respectability for a same-sex relationship.⁵⁹ Marda's bisexuality is also heavily coded. On the one hand, she is portrayed as having masculine features. She is 'tall ... her back ... was like a young man's in its vigorous slightness. She escaped the feminine pear-shape, her shoulders were square, legs long from the knee down.'⁶⁰ On the other hand, Marda's feminine side is displayed in her pots of cosmetics and face powder, the 'pink smell of nail-varnish,' and the lovely dresses 'trickling over a chair,' that Lois longs to try on.⁶¹ Infatuated, Lois stands in Marda's bedroom, unwittingly foretelling the fate of Danielstown by wishing that 'instead of fading to dusk in summers of empty sunshine the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night to make one flaming call upon Marda's memory.'⁶²

⁵⁹*TLS*, pp. 99-103, see Backus, p. 263.

⁶⁰*TLS*, p. 79.

⁶¹*TLS*, p. 96.

⁶²*TLS*, p. 98.

Lois had originally set out to fall in love with Hugo, who had once been engaged to her mother, Laura. The engagement had come to nothing when Laura had run away to marry Lois's father, the more sexually potent Farquar: to use the narrator's euphemism, 'the rudest man in Ulster.'⁶³ However, Laura had died when her daughter was still a schoolgirl. Freud's theory of the oedipal complex would argue that as a consequence of her mother's premature absence from her life, Lois has failed to switch her erotic object choice from women to men, and thus remains arrested in the pre-oedipal phase.⁶⁴ Rather than becoming attracted to Hugo, she is pre-disposed to succumb to the charms of Marda and to conflate this attraction with the love she had shared with her mother. Lois's confused sense of 'self' becomes apparent when she accidentally overhears Lady Naylor and Mrs. Montmorency discussing her from behind closed doors:

The voices spoke of love; they were full of protest. Love, she had learnt to assume, was the mainspring of woman's grievances. Illnesses all arose from it, the having of children ... 'Lois is very —' She didn't want to know what she was, she couldn't bear to: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round lifelong inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler?'⁶⁵

To silence the voices, Lois rattles her washing utensils loudly, cracking the basin in the process. Her alarm stems from the fear that if she hears her personality defined she might then feel constrained to conform to the Naylor's expectations. This would entail getting married and having children in accordance with her upbringing, thus leaving her unable to forge her own identity independently of the Big House. Given her confused sense of 'self,' Neil Corcoran views the crack in Lois's basin as a metaphor for 'the

⁶³*TLS*, p. 107.

⁶⁴See Cullingford, p. 281. Freud discusses female homosexuality in his 1920s paper, *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman*.

⁶⁵*TLS*, p. 60.

fissure running through any assured sense of personal or even sexual identity.’⁶⁶ Lois’s lack of self-formation is attributable to her existential anxiety that, as Hugo later reminds her, had he married her mother she would not exist. This sense of insecurity is further aggravated by her consciousness that if Hugo had managed to father her, she would have been a different person entirely.⁶⁷ The pair cannot relate, not because Lois reminds Hugo of Laura, but because she is a tangible reminder that had he managed his affairs more diligently, his life might have turned out differently. Perhaps Hugo would even have proved himself capable of paternity and in doing so, raise himself from his debilitating apathy by ensuring a future for Anglo-Ireland. What the novel appears to indicate here, in however subdued form, is that had Anglo-Ireland been less apathetic, had it managed its affairs more diligently, the outcome in Ireland might also have turned out differently.

Accompanied by Hugo, Lois and Marda set out to explore the countryside. The sudden appearance of a derelict and decayed mill startles them, ‘staring, light-eyed, ghoulishly round a bend of the valley.’⁶⁸ This imagery is reinforced by a dead crow and cracks in the structure of the mill that Lois expects to widen, ‘to see the walls peel back from a cleft — like the House of Usher’s.’⁶⁹ The roofless and floorless mill ‘grinned with vacancy ... it took on all of the past to which it had given nothing.’⁷⁰ As Hugo begins to explain, the ruined mill is ‘another of our national grievances. English law strangled the —’⁷¹ In all probability the dead mill most likely belonged, if not to Sir

⁶⁶See Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 52-53.

⁶⁷*TLS*, p. 64.

⁶⁸*TLS*, p. 122.

⁶⁹*TLS*, p. 124. Crows often feature in literature as harbingers of doom and death.

⁷⁰*TLS*, p. 123.

⁷¹*TLS*, p. 123.

Richard's forebears, then to some other Anglo-Irish proprietor. Bowen introduces it as a bleak token of the lack of investment in Irish industry by both Anglo-Ireland and England, a deficiency that had led to the country remaining a stagnant economic failure. Corcoran sees Hugo's ellipsis as the gap through which Anglo-Irish history falls; it is the fissure that opens between a politically and historically exhausted past and a non-existent future. The mill, he insists, 'is the terrible secret of Anglo-Irish history still architecturally articulate on the land, even in its desolation.'⁷²

The sight of a rebel in the mill shocks Marda and Lois into silence. 'It is time,' the rebel said, prophetically, 'that yourselves gave up walking. If you have nothing better to do, you had better keep in the house while y'have it.'⁷³ What is telling about this hostile warning is the unexpected inversion of authority. It is not the Ascendancy party that has the upper hand or commanding tone; in this instance the rebel is in charge and his challenging tone makes it quite clear that he regards the Ascendancy women as intruders on his territory. If the Irish are 'other' to their colonizers, this episode suggests, the Anglo-Irish will always be the outsiders in Ireland. As he glares at them with 'uneasy dislike,' it takes a moment for the women to notice the pistol that the nationalist points at them, 'short-looking, scarcely more than a button.'⁷⁴ When the gun is accidentally fired, the bullet grazes Marda's hand and this impotent act, violence without agency, as Kiberd writes, finally alerts Lois to the gravity of the political situation, which up until now she had avoided. Kiberd and Lassner both agree that in the vacuum of authority left by Sir Richard as representative of the Ascendancy, the fact that the gunshot is accidental and not over-dramatized in the novel calls attention to the

⁷²Corcoran (2004), pp. 52-53.

⁷³*TLS*, p. 125.

⁷⁴*TLS*, p. 124.

impotence and sense of powerlessness of all protagonists in the on-going conflict.⁷⁵ Esty neatly sums up the outcome of the incident: 'Colonial violence is temporarily broached, obscurely sexualized, narratively displaced, and finally just dispersed into reverberating anticlimaxes until the two sides retreat uneasily behind the *cordons sanitaires* of a dying imperialism.'⁷⁶

Nonetheless, Lois's second close encounter with a rebel reinforces her envy at the nationalists' sense of purpose. Recognizing in the young men the transgressive traits of her dead mother, she is torn between an urge to emulate Laura by running away and her deep-seated need to be part of the vacuous 'pattern' that constitutes life in Danielstown. Once again acknowledging her own irrelevancy in a country where she is clearly unwelcome, Lois becomes aware that the Anglo-Irish way of life is doomed; she 'felt quite ruled out.' Lois had already complained to Francie of a sense of helplessness following a violent confrontation between the rebels and the police at a nearby barracks: 'Do you know,' she had told Lesworth:

that while that was going on ... I was cutting a dress out ... and playing the gramophone? ... How is it that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness, there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say? I might just as well be in some kind of cocoon.⁷⁷

Understanding that soon she will have no choice in the matter, she silently agrees with the rebel that 'she had better be going,' but the only escape she can envisage is through marriage to Lesworth: "I must marry Gerald," she thought.'⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Kiberd, p. 372; Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 41.

⁷⁶ Esty, p. 266.

⁷⁷ *TLS*, p. 49. This incident may be an oblique reference to the confrontation that took place between the IRA and the Black and Tans at Kilmichael in County Cork on 28th November, 1920, or Dublin's Bloody Sunday a week earlier, when the Auxiliaries opened fire on a crowd attending a Gaelic football match in Croke Park.

⁷⁸ *TLS*, p. 125.

The phallic symbolism of the gun in the mill lays bare the impotence of Hugo, who failed to react to the situation. Waiting by the river, he has been indulging in fantasy about his own infatuation with Marda and rehearsing how he would approach her. In Hugo's eyes, it is Marda, not Lois, who is the reincarnation of the impulsive Laura and it is Marda who is his wife's 'other,' the person Francie might have been had their marital relationship been more dynamic. Unlike the semi-comatose and enervated Francie, Marda is gregarious and charismatic — 'a clear ruddy-white mask of surprise,' who 'impinged on the whole of him, on his most intimate sense of himself.'⁷⁹ The besotted Hugo finds the sight of Marda's blood unnerving:

Something released in his voice; he said: 'Marda — for God's sake—' ... Lois, as though the mill were falling, went white, then crimson ... He was set on transgressing the decencies. 'Don't you realize you might have been —' ... He looked at her [Marda's] lips — no higher — angrily, burningly.⁸⁰

Lois's recognition of Hugo's feelings for Marda and her consternation at the urgency in his voice mark her growing sexual awareness: 'I've had a ... a revelation,' she stammers. Her emotional reaction to Hugo's outburst stems from a concern that the delicate sense of intimacy between herself and Marda is in danger of being shattered:

Marda put an arm round her waist, and in an ecstasy at this compulsion Lois entered the mill. Fear heightened her gratification; she welcomed its inrush, letting her look climb the scabby and livid walls to the frightful stare of the sky. Cracks ran down; she expected, now with detachment, to see them widen, to see the walls peel back from a cleft — like the House of Usher's. 'Hate it?' said Marda. 'You'd make me do anything.'⁸¹

⁷⁹*TLS*, p. 126.

⁸⁰*TLS*, pp. 126.

⁸¹*TLS*, pp. 123-4, 128. The intimacy between Lois and Marda prefigures two of Bowen's later stories, also set in turbulent times. Both *Mysterious Kôr* and *The Happy Autumn Fields* are stories from World War Two that feature disoriented young females who, like Lois and Marda, also find themselves in same-sex relationships.

The sexual metaphors in this passage are subtly suggestive, but in the event Lois's fears are groundless, for stories of Hugo's vacillating nature were legendary. As 'an experienced fellow-visitor,' Marda 'had heard of him in all parts of the country.' Under these circumstances, she 'wanted nothing of Mr. Montmorency but entertainment.' He may well amuse her, but like Laura before her, Marda is set on a more sexually potent partner: 'She had realized, almost upon arrival, that the worst thing she could do would be to attract Mr. Montmorency.' Finding him 'womanish' and repellent, she pours scorn on Hugo's lack of sexual prowess: 'He couldn't be anything's father,' she declares. Marda rejects Hugo because 'to be loved by him would be the culminating disaster of her unfortunate visits.'⁸²

The women coerce Hugo into a pact not to betray the gunman to the authorities. However, without consciously admitting it, by not responding the trio again become complicit in the repressed discourse of 'keeping a lid on things.' Backus views the pact as creating an implicit bond between the Anglo-Irish women and republican rebels in recognition of their shared status as victims of patriarchal hegemony. She sees the women's choice as an angry alternative to the burden of inheritance forced upon them as heirs to a redundant Ascendancy.⁸³ Kiberd also views the women's refusal to report the rebel as a manifestation of female rage at their political and social impotence.⁸⁴ Lois tries to articulate this sense of helplessness to Francie: 'It's just that I feel so humiliated

⁸²*TLS*, pp. 80, 116, 128.

⁸³Backus, p. 179. Successive Land Acts had left landowners with their Big Houses, but without the rents from the tenant farmers that had maintained them. Without this income, the onus of maintenance often fell to Ascendancy daughters, who were expected to provide for the upkeep of Big Houses by attracting a rich husband, while still remaining victims of the patriarchal system of entailment. Even when, like Bowen, they could inherit, women were often left without the means to pay for the upkeep of these Big Houses. They could then either sell up, as Bowen did, or struggle to pay off the debts accrued by a succession of imprudent landlords.

⁸⁴Kiberd, p. 374.

the whole time.' As she complains to Lesworth: 'You don't know what it's like for a snail, being walked on ...'⁸⁵

The suggestion of a sexual relationship between Lois and Marda is not developed in the novel. Although she would like to take Lois 'abroad,' Marda shrewdly engages her superego as a controlling force to suppress her libidinal feelings towards the young girl, opting instead for the security of a heterosexual marriage and the promise of children. Marda's narcissism is displayed in her obsessive interest in her propensity to bleed, a trait that she had acquired in childhood.⁸⁶ In the knowledge that both the Naylor and Montmorency families are non-regenerative families going nowhere, she chooses to escape the sterility of the Big House. Since the prime function of the ego is self-preservation, she gets out while she can; leaving the country to avoid the fate that she senses is in store for Lois, who is once again left bereft.⁸⁷ 'Nothing we said to each other mattered, it hasn't stayed, she goes off to get married in a mechanical sort of way,' she laments.⁸⁸

In a similar vein to Lois's earlier prophetic wish, Laurence also looks forward to the destruction of Danielstown. Anxious for 'some crude intrusion of the actual,' he tells an appalled Hugo that he would like to be present when Danielstown burns.⁸⁹ Laurence is down from Oxford and bored. He is not allowed to bring his friends to Danielstown because, as Lois tells Francie, 'the ones he brings over from Oxford are all wrong ... inconvenient.' What Lois means is that it would be socially awkward for the

⁸⁵*TLS*, pp. 187, 191.

⁸⁶*TLS*, pp. 75, 81.

⁸⁷*TLS*, p. 85.

⁸⁸*TLS*, p. 191.

⁸⁹*TLS*, p. 44.

Naylors to have Laurence's homosexual friends as guests in their home.⁹⁰ Therefore, Laurence grumbles that due to financial difficulties he has been unable to spend his summer holidays abroad with these friends: 'I was to have gone to Spain this month with a man and last year I should have gone to Italy with another man,' he complains.⁹¹ Laurence's sexuality is also gradually revealed through allusion, in oblique hints that nonetheless suggest that his preference is an open secret: 'It would be the greatest pity if we were to become a republic and all these lovely troops were taken away,' he muses. "'Fool," said Lois across the flowers,' signalling that she understands his implication.⁹² 'I'm afraid,' Francie comments: 'I had no idea how to talk to him. I suppose *you*'d never find that difficult. I expect now, Lois, you're very modern.'⁹³

Laurence soon becomes aware that he is not the only effete male in *The Last September*. In common with Marda, he also thinks that Hugo is 'womanish.' In Laurence's view, Hugo 'was married, had given away his integrity, had not even a bed to himself.' Yet seeing his own lack of drive mirrored in the older man restrains Laurence from tormenting Hugo about his ineffectual lifestyle and his failure to emigrate to Canada.⁹⁴ The narrative suggests that a prime cause of this decline in masculinity, epitomized by the males of Danielstown, is attributable to inbreeding:

⁹⁰*TLS*, p. 21.

⁹¹*TLS*, p. 44. As Cullingford reminds us, Renaissance Florence was a locus classicus of homosexuality. See Cullingford, p. 283.

⁹²*TLS*, p. 26.

⁹³*TLS*, p. 21. Original emphasis.

⁹⁴*TLS*, pp. 43-44. Political elites in the colonies were dominated by British immigrants before World War One. This is especially true of Kenya, which attracted the upper classes in great numbers. However, in the case of Canada, the evidence suggests that after the Great Famine exodus, emigration of all classes decreased considerably in the early 20th century, when the outbreak of war brought emigration to a virtual halt. Emigration of Irish males dropped from 17,737 in 1910 to 1,137 in 1919. See W.E. Vaughan and A.J. Fitzpatrick, *Irish Historical Statistics: Population 1821-1971* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), p. 265, *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, Letters*, Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 29-40, and *Encyclopedia of Canada's People*, Paul Robert Magocsi, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 763-783.

‘The Trents,’ said Lois to Mr. Montmorency ... ‘swear that you and they are related ... it is a perfect obsession of theirs.’ When he said he supposed that he was ... she became pensive. ‘I expect,’ she said ... ‘you are related to every one.’ ‘The longer one lives in this country,’ he all too agreeably said, ‘the more likely that seems.’⁹⁵

As Lady Naylor remarks to Lesworth: ‘We must seem ridiculous to you, over here, the way we are all related.’⁹⁶

Displaying all the classic traits of a passive-aggressive personality, Hugo’s character is linked to his lack of masculinity. His relationship with Lois’s mother had floundered, he tells his wife, because Laura had ‘wanted her mind made up’ and he, being obsessed with his own ego, was incapable of bolstering hers.⁹⁷ The inference is that Hugo had refused to take the initiative to engage in a sexual relationship with Laura and she had reacted by taking flight. Hugo’s behaviour is marked by a persistent pattern of negative poses — the woman he never married, the children he never fathered, the Canada he never reached. His attitudes manifest themselves as consciously acquired helplessness, procrastination, intractability, resentment and sullenness, traits that are demonstrated in his deliberate and much-repeated failure to accomplish essential tasks; Lois’s childhood memory of him is of a sleeping ‘monolith’, large and inert.⁹⁸ Hugo makes grandiose plans but can never carry through on a decision; no sooner had he married Francie than he impulsively sold the family home and put its furniture into storage. His initial intention in doing so was to emigrate to Canada, but he had long since abandoned this plan.

⁹⁵ *TLS*, pp. 27-28.

⁹⁶ *TLS*, p. 178.

⁹⁷ *TLS*, p. 19.

⁹⁸ *TLS*, p. 27.

The passive-aggressive persona is adept at undermining self-confidence in others and is typically attracted to a partner with low self-esteem, especially those who will excuse the bad behaviour of others. Francie blames herself for Hugo's continued failure to provide her with a home:

Now she would always blame herself for not having dissuaded him, but he had been so set at the time on an idea of going to Canada and she was so foolishly anxious to compensate him for what she was not by going there with him and thriving. So when the idea of Canada failed, they had no house, and she, after all, no vocation.⁹⁹

While such individuals cannot be seen to be dependent, they are nonetheless unsure of their autonomy and scared of being alone. Consequently, they fight all dependency needs, usually by inverting the order of dependency through manipulation of those closest to them.¹⁰⁰ Even though it is Francie who is connected to the Naylor's by marriage, Hugo's relationship with the estate is more organic, 'an affair of generations.'¹⁰¹ Since their marriage twelve years ago, he had denied his wife access to Danielstown. She had until now been 'ordered abroad for successive winters, to places he could not expect to endure. He came and went without her, going for consolation, of course, to Danielstown.'¹⁰² Hugo's control over Francie is complete; he tells her what to wear, when to lie down, and even tucks her, like a child, into bed. His wife fears that the Naylor's will believe this to be her fault; that she 'had taken the brilliant young man he'd once been and taught him to watch her, to nurse her and shake out her dresses. She cannot explain 'how Hugo was too much for her altogether. How she had tried, but had

⁹⁹*TLS*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁰See Martin Kantor, *Passive Aggression: A Guide for the Therapist, the Patient and the Victim* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2002).

¹⁰¹*TLS*, p. 14.

¹⁰²*TLS*, p. 15.

not been able, to keep him — first from marrying her, then from giving up Canada ... or from brushing her hair in the evenings.’¹⁰³

In most colonial fiction, illness is linked to public and social narratives as a metaphor for colonial dysfunction; it therefore has political connotations. In *The Last September*, Hugo is accustomed to Francie’s ‘long queer relapses into silence ... as from a death-bed.’¹⁰⁴ Her persistent lassitude and Hugo’s melancholia point to the exhaustion of Empire.¹⁰⁵ Hugo uses his wife’s poor health as an excuse for his inability to follow through on his promises:

Their life, through which they went forward uncertainly, without the compulsion of tragedy, was a net of small complications. There was the drag of his indecisions, the fine snapping now and then of her minor relinquishments. Her health, his temperament, their varying poverty — they were delayed, deflected.¹⁰⁶

Sean O’Faolain notes the use of the passive voice here to draw attention to the inertia of both the Montmorencys: ‘It hits off a flaccid type,’ he writes, ‘as it is intended to.’¹⁰⁷ Francie’s permanent state of exhaustion is a somatic protest at her own lack of fulfillment, or as she herself puts it, of ‘vocation,’ in other words, motherhood. She is not physically ill, neither is she a hypochondriac such as is found in *Emma*’s Mr. Woodhouse, nor even a neurotic like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Rather, Francie is incapacitated by her husband’s impotence. The implication is that the Montmorencys do not have a normal marriage, that Francie is debilitated because her marital relationship is distorted by her husband’s lack of masculinity, a lack that he displaces by his extreme uxoriousness and lack of drive.

¹⁰³ *TLS*, pp. 18, 29.

¹⁰⁴ *TLS*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁵ Ellmann (2003), p. 61, n. 21.

¹⁰⁶ *TLS*, pp. 122, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Sean Ó’Faolain, *The Vanishing Hero* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1956), p. 177.

Freud insists on sexual desire as the driving force of human personality. Without the driving force of her libido, which she has perforce driven into her subconscious, Francie's repressed sexuality is likely to surface as neurosis and to become manifest as hysterical illness, hence her constant lethargy. Hugo is adept at dodging his marital responsibilities. He makes it appear as though he is a most loving partner, yet, as is evident from his abortive relationship with Laura, he is as unable to form an emotional connection with any woman as is Laurence, and indeed, Lesworth. As we shall see, Hugo has much in common with Mr. Dean of Godden's *Black Narcissus*; lacking ambition, he asks nothing more of life than to remain sequestered at Danielstown forever: 'I was happy here at your age,' he tells a dissatisfied Laurence, 'I was full of the place, I asked nothing better. I ask nothing better now.'¹⁰⁸

Francie is disadvantaged on two fronts; not only is she at the mercy of her husband's whims, she is also a victim of her privileged lifestyle. In keeping with her status, like Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, Francie's culture leads to her withdrawal from reality: 'Mrs Montmorency, in an absence of mind amounting to exaltation, had soared over the company. She could perform at any moment, discomfitingly, these acts of levitation.'¹⁰⁹ For many years, Francie had tolerated the presence of the 'ever-living' Laura in her marriage. Prompted by her husband's inappropriate behaviour, her ability to remove herself from reality is a survival mechanism, subconsciously designed to protect her ego from collapsing in face of Hugo's unseemly pursuit of Marda. Seeing them together, Francie's refusal to react to the situation stems from an awareness that

¹⁰⁸*TLS*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁹*TLS*, p. 28.

once again her husband's sense of self-delusion has caused him to reach for the unattainable.

The Montmorencys embody Lois's great fear — the pattern of their lives does not fit — they are intransitive, unrelated.¹¹⁰ Ineffectual and lost, they represent, in Jill Franks's words, 'a wan etiolation of body and spirit that characterizes a doomed way of life.'¹¹¹ As one 'incorrigible visitor' to another, Hugo tells Marda that just as his visits were ending, he had heard her expected 'at Johnstown and Ballyduff and up in the North.' 'Where do we go next?' he asks his wife: 'We've got to fit in the Fitzgeralds before October. Oughtn't you to be writing to somebody?'¹¹² An exasperated Lady Naylor comments that not only have the Montmorencys gone off the idea of building a bungalow, they are now thinking of emigrating to Madeira.¹¹³ As symbols of Anglo-Ireland, these hopeless parasites are figuratively castrated. They will never emigrate; they will never reach either Canada or Madeira, any more than they will build a bungalow or take their furniture out of storage.

Bowen's portrayal of the Montmorencys is a forceful indictment of the Anglo-Irish who, in her view, stood by and refused to act while their world of privilege fell apart. She reserves her disdain, however masked, for Hugo and Francie and not, as one might expect, for the Naylor. Notwithstanding their evident shortcomings, this couple she admires, overall, as exemplary models of the Anglo-Irish order and self-discipline that she attributes to her ancestors:

The security that they had, by the eighteenth century, however ignobly gained, they did not quite use ignobly. They began to

¹¹⁰*TLS*, p. 98.

¹¹¹Jill Franks, 'Sex, Guns and Death: Deborah Warner's Adaptation of *The Last September*,' *New Hibernia Review/Iris Eireannach Nua*, 10.3 (Autumn/Fómhar, 2006), pp. 122-136: 125.

¹¹²*TLS*, pp. 81, 184.

¹¹³*TLS*, p. 204.

feel and exert, the European idea – to seek out what was humanistic, classic and disciplined.¹¹⁴

Bowen indeed presents the Naylor as models of politeness and social decorum, but she is also aware that they are living in the past. The Naylor are not destroyed by either financial profligacy or licentious behaviour, a common cause of Ascendancy ruin in earlier Big House novels; they are brought down by their lack of dynamism, by a refusal to engage with the majority Catholic population or to acknowledge the social changes wrought by the Great War.

That the Naylor are relics of a bygone era is suggested by the jaded atmosphere of the house. Lois frequently trips over a mouldy old tiger skin spread out on the floor of the ante-room. On the walls of Danielstown there are photographs of ‘pale regimental groups, reunions a generation ago of the family or the neighbourhood gave out from the walls a vague depression,’ while ‘a troop of ebony elephants brought back from India by someone she did not remember ... that throughout uncertain years had not broken file ... paraded across the tops of the bookcases.’¹¹⁵ Juxtaposed alongside the decrepit and malodorous animal skins, the disintegration of empire is also evident in the house’s decaying furnishings:

The high windows were curtainless; tasselled fringes frayed the light at the top. The white sills, the shutters folded back in their frames were blistered, as though the house had spent a day in the tropics. Exhausted by sunshine, the backs of the crimson chairs were a thin light orange ... Behind the trees, pressing in from the open and empty country like an invasion, the orange bright sky crept and smouldered.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Elizabeth Bowen, ‘The Big House’, *The Bell*, October, 1940, pp. 71-77:73, 76, reprinted in *MT*, pp. 25-30: 27.

¹¹⁵*TLS*, pp. 10, 34.

¹¹⁶*TLS*, pp. 9-10, 22.

Like the neglected mill, the sense of decay that this passage elicits signals Bowen's acknowledgement of the long decline in Anglo-Irish hegemony since the time of her Cromwellian ancestors. Moreover, this invasion by the landscape not only exposes the decrepitude of the room, the references to the tropics — blistered paint and worn out furniture 'exhausted by sunshine' — indicate a strong colonial link between Ireland and the wider empire, also suggested by the frequent references to Canada, reminding the reader that the Anglo-Irish were heavily involved in the administration of Empire.¹¹⁷

IV

As discussed above, in *Seven Winters*, Bowen confesses her ignorance of the Catholic majority, those whose 'predisposition to frequent prayer bespoke ... some incontinence of the soul.'¹¹⁸ In *Bowen's Court*, she explains this negative attitude, how as a class the Anglo-Irish found it difficult to conceive of the native Irish as 'anything but aliens:'

... sub-human — potato-eaters, worshippers of the Pope's toe.
The squalor in which the Irish lived was taken to be endemic in

¹¹⁷One sixth of administrators in the East India Company were Anglo-Irish. See Joseph Ruane, 'Colonialism and the Interpretation of Irish Historical Development', in *Approaching the Past: Historical Anthropology through Irish Case Studies*, Marilyn Silverman and P.H. Gulliver, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 292-323, and David Fitzpatrick, 'Ireland and the Empire', *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. III, Andrew Porter, ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 494-521. For example, Coole Park was purchased by Robert Gregory in 1768 on his return to Ireland following service in the East India Company. Maria Edgeworth's half-brother, Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, was a prominent member of the Indian civil service. See Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, *India in the Age of Empire: The Journals of Michael Pakenham Edgeworth, 1812-1881* (Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications, 1997). Joan de Vere writes of time spent travelling throughout the empire with her father in his role as Chief Justice. See de Vere, p. 40. Bowen's great-uncle, Major General Sir George Pomeroy Colley, was killed during the first Boer War. See *BC*, p. 383, and Ian Castle, *Majuba 1881: The Hill of Destiny* (London: Osprey Military, 1996), p. 82.

¹¹⁸*SW*, p. 508.

their mentality: it would have seemed fantastic to reform their conditions. To distract the English conscience the buffoon Paddy was to come into being — the capering simians of the Cruikshank drawings for Maxwell's *Irish Rebellion in 1798* represent him exactly.¹¹⁹

Driving home from a visit to a neighbouring Big House, Lois and Hugo pass the Connor farmhouse. The exchange of greetings with the farmer at first appears amiable and polite, befitting the mannerly social code between the Ascendancy and the local people, yet masking veiled hostility: 'And no news at all of Peter?' Lois asks Michael Connor, whose son is on the run from the Black and Tans. 'We have not,' was his father's short reply.¹²⁰ Strategically withdrawing from the conversation, the farmer's retreat highlights the gap between the Anglo-Irish and those they regard as 'our people,' by implying that Lois cannot be trusted to keep Peter's whereabouts secret. As McElhattan Williams points out, this episode implies that the Anglo-Irish have mistaken pragmatism for loyalty and have merely deluded themselves as to their place in the affections of the people, who will be glad to see the back of them.¹²¹ The refusal by the Anglo-Irish to recognize that their neighbours have become revolutionaries, that their 'others' have acquired a focused political agenda, leads to their further exclusion from the emerging Irish nation, the community from which the Connors are drawn.¹²²

The scene at the Connor farm highlights the growing irrelevance of the Ascendancy as they move from centre to periphery, the farmer again making it abundantly clear to Lois that she should be on her way. As she and Hugo drive off, a

¹¹⁹*BC*, p. 263. See William Hamilton Maxwell, *History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798: with Memoirs of the Union and Emmet's Insurrection in 1803* (London: Bell and Daldry, 1866).

¹²⁰*TLS*, p. 65.

¹²¹McElhattan Williams, p. 233.

¹²²Cullingford, p. 291.

window glitters after them, ‘like an eye.’¹²³ They ‘both felt that their pause, their talk, their passing had been less than a shadow;’ even the flock of farmyard geese turn their oblivious backs to them, making the trap and the couple in it, an illusion.¹²⁴ Having read *The Last September*, O’Faolain wrote to Bowen: ‘Is the wall between Danielstown and Peter Connor’s farm as high as ever? I fear to think it is.’ O’Faolain wished for a ‘truly contrapuntal narrative about a Danielstown House that was at least aware of the Ireland outside ... that, perhaps, regretted the division enough to admit it was there.’¹²⁵

Approaching the demesne, Lois’s already shaken perception of her place in Danielstown’s ‘pattern’ is heightened by an unfamiliar view of the house from above. From this panoramic perspective, only the roof of the house is visible, its lawns ‘blotted out in the pressure and dusk.’ Lois can now grasp the significance of its vulnerable position and wonder why its occupants, who pretend that all is as it should be, are not ‘smothered’ and ‘afraid’ by the surrounding danger.¹²⁶ The house, which only a short time ago had stared defiantly at the landscape, now lies low in fear, gathering its trees as

¹²³*TLS*, p. 65.

¹²⁴*TLS*, p. 65. Lack of empathy with the local population is a recurrent theme in colonial literature. In Lennox Robinson’s 1928 play, *The Big House: Four Scenes in its Life*, Kate Alcock inherits the burnt-out family estate following the death of her two brothers in the trenches. When her attempts to become accepted by her Irish neighbours are rebuffed, she vows to rebuild the razed house and to uphold the traditions of her Anglo-Irish ancestors. Kate rejects the ‘democratic snobbishness we went in for’ and makes clear her intention to proudly claim her separate identity: ‘I threw a bridge across the gulf and ran across it and called Pat, Mick and Larry by their Christian names, and hobnobbed with priests and creamery managers and Gaelic teachers — but it was only a bridge, the gulf remained and when the moment came they instinctively forced me to stand on the farther side ... I was wrong, we were all wrong, in trying to find a common platform, in pretending we weren’t different from every Pat and Mick in the village ... We were ashamed of everything, ashamed of our birth, ashamed of our good education, ashamed of our religion, ashamed that we dined in the evenings and that we dressed for dinner, and after all, our shame didn’t save us or we wouldn’t be sitting here on the remnants of our furniture.’ Quoted in Christopher Murray, ‘Lennox Robinson, *The Big House*, *Killycreggs in Twilight* and “The Vestigia of Generations”’, in *Ancestral Voices: The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature*, Otto Rauchbauer, ed., (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1992), p. 112.

¹²⁵Quoted in Kiberd, p. 366, and Glendinning (1993), pp. 120-121.

¹²⁶*TLS*, p. 66.

a protective screen against its rejection by a world it can no longer comprehend, a victim of the hostile countryside that like the glaring sun, now threatens to invade it:

The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had her vision of where it was. It seemed to gather its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide, light, lovely unloving country, the unwilling bosom whereon it was set.¹²⁷

This portrayal of Danielstown moves away from its previous depiction as an aloof, commanding presence in the landscape. Its imposing dimensions now shrink to a personification of fear. It is the physical setting of the house — like a ‘dropped pin’ in the ‘dark formal square’ of its surrounding trees — that, unlike the organically situated English country house, marks it out as a parasite clinging to an ‘unwilling bosom.’ As the muted apocalyptic tone suggests, the house is, in effect, portrayed as though besieged by the landscape beyond the demesne, highlighting the tension between Danielstown as victim of the land and the land as prisoner of the house.¹²⁸ Lois quickly suppresses this uneasy glimpse of an uncertain future by speeding homewards with Hugo, the two now brought closer together by turning their thoughts to dinner in the house that despite Lois’s growing desire to flee, is nonetheless ‘a magnet to their dependence.’¹²⁹

The impending danger becomes even more apparent on a family visit to Mount Isabel, a neighbouring Big House. Viewed from the mountain, the people appear as ants, so that rather than sustaining the inbred sense of self-importance that for centuries had contributed to the colonizers’ detachment from reality, the guests are now diminished by

¹²⁷*TLS*, p. 66.

¹²⁸Cronin, p. 153.

¹²⁹*TLS*, p. 67.

their sense of isolation. A feeling of being secretly looked down upon by a faceless enemy creates a growing sense of paranoia:

A sense of exposure, of being offered without resistance to some ironic incuriosity, made Laurence look up at the mountain ... In some gaze — of a man's up there hiding, watching among the clefts and ridges — they seemed held, included and to have their only being. The sense of a watcher, reserve of energy and intention, abashed Laurence, who turned from the mountain.¹³⁰

As the encroaching nationalist conflict makes its presence felt, it becomes more and more difficult for the Ascendancy to ignore their vulnerability to the political situation. Even the somewhat scatter-brained Marda snaps: 'Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?' she asks helplessly.¹³¹ Ironically, given his blinkered nature, only Hugo is perceptive enough to comment on the gravity of the situation and the consequences of refusing to take a stand. The Anglo-Irish side, he declares, 'is no side — rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn't there — that never was there.'¹³² What Hugo refers to is the perpetual myth of the Big House as a symbol, not only of settler permanence and continuity, but also of political stability. This was an ideology so deeply ingrained that it was accepted as an absolute truth. It is her mistaken belief that Anglo-Ireland would be forever sustained by this myth that leads Lady Naylor to direct her energy towards moulding Lois as a compliant upholder of this fiction.

For his part, Sir Richard can only dream of forestalling the inevitable. On hearing from Lesworth that he has arrested Peter Connor, Sir Richard shocks the young officer with his sympathy for the family: 'I'm sorry to hear that,' he comments, 'his

¹³⁰*TLS*, p. 119.

¹³¹*TLS*, p. 82.

¹³²*TLS*, p. 82.

mother is dying.’¹³³ Yet Sir Richard has a dream that belies his apparent sympathy with the nationalists. In Freudian terminology, all dreams are forms of ‘wish fulfillment’ during which the unconscious attempts to work through inner conflict.¹³⁴ Sir Richard dreams that he is a Black and Tan, a hero who ‘rode round the country on a motor-bicycle from which he could not detach himself.’¹³⁵ This nightmare vision of his ‘dark other’ represents Sir Richard’s unconscious desire to become a man of action like his Cromwellian ancestors. It may well contain a touch of dark comedy, but anxiety dreams like Sir Richard’s are connected to forbidden impulses, those that allow repressed wishes to become manifest. As Ellmann writes, ‘Sir Richard’s dream suggests that he is implicated in the violence of the Black and Tans, but also that he finds these battle-crazed recruits more nightmarish than the rebels. His dream dramatically highlights the equivocal position of the Anglo-Irish. Emotionally ill-equipped to handle the turbulence of the War of Independence and the decline of his class, the emasculated Sir Richard subconsciously identifies, tellingly, not with the rebels as Lois does, but with the brutal and desensitized officer, Daventry, whom Lois compares to Satan.’¹³⁶ This shell-shocked and enraged war veteran hates the very smell of Ireland and roams the countryside terrorizing the people in a virtual rape of the country, a scenario already hinted at in Lois’s earlier near-encounter with the Black and Tans.

Sir Richard’s subliminal identification with the violent and unhinged Daventry — the only character in the novel with the nerve to stare back at the Big House — highlights the historically lethal collusion that irrevocably separates the Anglo-Irish

¹³³*TLS*, p. 91.

¹³⁴Later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discusses dreams that do not appear to be wish-fulfillment.

¹³⁵*TLS*, p. 107.

¹³⁶*TLS*, p. 157; Ellmann (2003), p. 57. For a reading of Daventry as a gothic figure, see Corcoran, pp. 55-60.

from the indigenous population. Only in his dreams can Sir Richard acknowledge the truth of the situation, that even though he feels sympathy for the plight of his tenants, he is, whether he cares to acknowledge it or not, dependent on British military power to maintain his position as their landlord. His dilemma lies in his growing consciousness that notwithstanding his insistence on the niceties of civilized living, no matter how deeply he tries to repress it, the future of Anglo-Ireland depends on the success of the violence represented by his alter ego, the satanic Daventry and the barbarity of his nightly raids.

This alliance, already evident at the tennis party, is given further emphasis at the officers' dance at the local barracks. Although protected by sentries and heavily wired walls, the revellers are just as vulnerable here as are the Naylor's at Danielstown. High spirits are tempered by an underlying fear that they might be shot at through the windows: 'Tell me,' asks an officer's wife, 'are we terribly reckless? Would this annoy the Irish?' Yet the presence of a Catholic girl at the dance — 'It seemed so queer to think that she worshipped the Pope' — is precisely what would annoy the Irish.¹³⁷ However, this is no ordinary Irish girl; she is the District Inspector's niece, whose presence adds a degree of piquancy to the merriment. Interestingly, however, not only is she effaced by being left unnamed by the narrator, the young girl is crudely described by Daventry as a 'common little hell-cat,' insinuating that she is a coarse and promiscuous native 'other,' unlike the virginal and unattainable Lois.¹³⁸

At the dance, Lois's sense of loss and isolation at what she considers to be Marda's defection reinforces her determination to marry Lesworth. However, in her

¹³⁷*TLS*, pp. 143, 155.

¹³⁸*TLS*, p. 156.

aunt's eyes, such a union would be almost as transgressive as marriage to the Irish rebel. Therefore, when the young couple become engaged, they rapidly fall foul of Lady Naylor's ascendancy version of miscegenation — the difference of class. Lady Naylor regards the young soldier as a most inappropriate suitor, chiefly because he is a 'nobody' from Surrey but also because he is a prime example of the social decline evident in the officer ranks since the Great War. In other words, in Lady Naylor's view, Gerald is 'common:'

No, *he* of course is charming, but he seems to have no relations. One cannot trace him. His mother, he says, lives in Surrey, and of course, you do know, don't you, what Surrey *is*. It says nothing, absolutely ... Practically nobody who lives in Surrey ever seems to have been heard of ... Of course, I don't say Gerald Lesworth's people are in *trade* ... if they were in trade there would be money ... No, I should say they were just villary.¹³⁹

As this passage indicates, social dynamics were irrevocably altered when the war forced the British army to open up its officer ranks to non-aristocrats. 'The Army,' protests Sir Richard, 'isn't at all what it used to be ... They tell me there's a great deal of socialism now in the British Army.'¹⁴⁰ As Kiberd points out: 'War has modernized the national manners: where once the English repressed feeling, now they express it.'¹⁴¹ Mrs. Carey fears that she can discern in an English officer's wife 'a tendency, common to most English people, to talk about her inside. She often wondered if the War had not made everybody from England a little commoner.'¹⁴² Lady Naylor is also quite dismayed by the English inclination to 'tell one the most extraordinary things, about their husbands, their money affairs, their insides ... and they seem so intimate with each other; I suppose

¹³⁹*TLS*, p. 58. Original emphasis.

¹⁴⁰*TLS*, pp. 25- 26.

¹⁴¹Kiberd, p. 370.

¹⁴²*TLS*, p. 46.

it comes from living so close together.’ Her antipathy towards the British is evident when she questions ‘whether there’s really much there to disintegrate.’ When her English friend argues that at least the English poor are ‘loyal,’ she ripostes that ‘they hadn’t got any alternative, and if they had an alternative I didn’t suppose they’d see it.’¹⁴³ This remark also signals the beginning of a new era, betraying as it does a hope, however deeply repressed, that in Ireland there *will* be an alternative.¹⁴⁴

Sir Richard’s diminishing relationship to the domestic and political worlds of Danielstown mirrors the fact that he is not present in any of the novel’s crucial scenes. In contrast, Lady Naylor’s role is fundamental to the narrative, particularly regarding the destabilized social values exhibited by the younger generation, as represented by Lois’s relationship with Lesworth.¹⁴⁵ Lady Naylor, as Lorna Reynolds persuasively argues, is a ‘suave bully, always satisfied with her moral judgements. She is a fine example of an Anglo-Irish snob, obtuse, bossy, and sublimely self-confident: she is also dangerous, because she thinks she has the right to interfere in everybody’s life.’¹⁴⁶ By her own admission, Lady Naylor usurps Sir Richard’s authority as head of the household to arrange a meeting with Lesworth. She informs him that since he is an English ‘nobody’, lacking the family background that is so important to the Anglo-Irish preoccupation with lineage, marriage to Sir Richard’s niece is out of the question. While acknowledging the fact that she herself will never have an heir and Laurence is ‘too modern: he does not seem to care about girls at all,’ Lady Naylor makes it quite clear to the hapless Lesworth

¹⁴³ *TL*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁴⁴ Backus, p. 180.

¹⁴⁵ Lassner and Derdiger, p. 198.

¹⁴⁶ Lorna Reynolds, ‘*The Last September* — Elizabeth Bowen’s *Paradise Lost*’, in Rauchbauer, pp. 150-153.

that he does not fit the bill.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, in a process of decline reinforced by her own infertility, Lady Naylor annihilates the possibility that Lois will marry and produce a male heir to Danielstown. The terrible irony is that since Lois is excluded from the sexual potency represented by the Irish rebels, as a British officer, Lesworth remains the only virile male available to her in the course of this narrative. The new blood that a union with Lois would introduce is exactly what is called for in order for the Anglo-Irish to reinvigorate their class by eliminating the sense of in-breeding implied by Hugo and by the reference to Poe's *House of Usher*. Such a marriage would hopefully raise Danielstown from the woeful apathy epitomized by the Montmorencys. As it stands, unless Lesworth puts an end to his relationship with Lois, Lady Naylor's veiled threat implies, she will use her influence to have him kicked out of the army.¹⁴⁸ Otherwise, the best that can be expected from such a misalliance is that he and Lois will make a living by 'going out to one of those coffee or orange places in Africa,' a fate she has already assigned to Livvy and her English fiance.¹⁴⁹ Stunned by Lady Naylor's cruelty, yet well aware of her control over Lois, Gerald preempts further insult by calling off the engagement.¹⁵⁰ This crushed relationship conveys a sense of loss that symbolizes the breakdown of the alliance between Anglo-Ireland and England: 'Why can't we all go home? Why did we stay here?' wails an officer's wife on hearing of Lesworth's death in an IRA ambush.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷*TLS*, p. 182.

¹⁴⁸*TLS*, p. 179.

¹⁴⁹*TLS*, pp. 178, 185.

¹⁵⁰*TLS*, p. 179.

¹⁵¹*TLS*, p. 199.

In the event, Gerald's death puts an end to Lady Naylor's manipulations, yet she cannot restrain herself from writing a hypocritical letter to his mother expressing sorrow at his loss.¹⁵² Neither is she embarrassed to tell her friend, Mrs. Trent, who for a moment displays 'an uneasy, exposed look' at this duplicity: 'We've been so much shocked and distressed about that unfortunate young Lesworth. I think I felt it particularly ... though it was a shock, too, for Lois.'¹⁵³ As Lois's surrogate mother, Lady Naylor should be the nurturer who perpetuates the continuity of the family and its values, but her refusal to contemplate a future free from the paralyzing effects of class and social constraints ensures that the opportunity for Lois to reinvent either her 'self' or Danielstown is lost. Ideally, Lois ought to have a say in her own future, rather than be a mere flunky, fetching and carrying for her aunt. However, since, as Laurence observes, sex seems 'irrelevant,' and the opportunity represented by Lesworth lost, the house is destined to remain barren.¹⁵⁴ Despite Lois's desire for autonomy, Lady Naylor's authority over her proves to be the catalyst that stymies her physical and psychological independence. No longer relevant to the future of the Big House, Lois is eventually shuffled off to France, not to the promised school of art, but to 'an interesting, cultivated family,' to improve her French.¹⁵⁵ In failing to produce a happy-ever-after ending for Lois, *The Last September* fails to fulfil the requirements of either the family romance or the bildungsroman. Lois will never know who she really is; in all likelihood, she will

¹⁵²*TLS*, p. 205.

¹⁵³*TLS*, pp. 204-205.

¹⁵⁴*TLS*, p. 42.

¹⁵⁵*TLS*, p. 204.

become a governess like Jane Eyre, the chances being that she will never return to Ireland. For his part, Gerald has died for nothing, offering protection to a class of settlers who, as exemplified by the Naylor and their culture of 'not noticing,' appreciate neither his masculine presence nor his patriotic love of empire.¹⁵⁶

Gerald's death provides a prelude to the traumatic climax of *The Last September*. Perhaps because they are not direct heirs, neither Lois nor Laurence have been able to invest emotionally in Danielstown. Unlike their ancestors, they come to see the Big House, not as a guarantee of their futures, but as an albatross, a hindrance to self-fulfillment that is fated to end in catastrophe. The provocative desire on the part of Danielstown's children that their home should burn proves to be prophetic, and although Bowen's Court escaped such a fate, is an enactment of Bowen's worst fears for her ancestral home:

I was the child of the house from which Danielstown derives. Bowen's Court survived — nevertheless, so often in my mind's eye did I see it burning that the terrible last event in *The Last September* is more real than anything I have lived through.¹⁵⁷

The novel concludes with a graphic description of the burning of not only Danielstown, but also two other Big Houses in the district:

Next year, the chestnuts and acorns pattered unheard on the avenues, that, filmed over with green already, should have been dull to the footsteps — but there were no footsteps. Leaves,

¹⁵⁶*TLS*, p. 41.

¹⁵⁷Reprinted in *MT*, p. 126. Although Bowen's Court survived the burnings, Bowen's fears are justified, as her introduction of Canada in *TLS* is surely no coincidence. During the Easter Rising of 1916, Captain Bowen-Coldhurst, a Bowen cousin in the British army, had falsely arrested and executed Francis Sheehy Skeffington, suffragist, pacifist and writer, friend of James Joyce and Oliver St. John Gogarty. Although ordered to do so by Westminster, Sir John Maxwell, commander-in-chief of British forces in Ireland, initially refused to arrest Bowen-Coldhurst, who was eventually court-martialed and charged with murder. However, following a cover-up by Westminster, the captain pleaded insanity as a result of shell-shock in the Great War. He was sent to Broadmoor for eighteen months, then to Canada, receiving an honourable discharge on full pension. The officer who reported Coldhurst-Bowen's crime was dishonourably discharged because of his action. See Glendinning, pp. 37-38. This incident must have contributed to Bowen's anxiety that Bowen's Court would be burned in reprisal.

tottering down the slope on the wind's hesitation, banked formless, frightened, against the too clear form of the ruin. For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death — execution, rather — of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night ... It seemed ... that the country itself was burning ... The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic. Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps.¹⁵⁸

The three Big Houses in the district burn together, swept before the wind and leaving no doubt as to the further implications of their destruction.¹⁵⁹ This is made explicit in the closing line of the novel: 'Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly.'¹⁶⁰ Standing for the last time on the steps of Danielstown, the Naylor's 'saw too distinctly' that the myth of their lives had literally exploded. As Cullingford observes, the truth that the Anglo-Irish had always repressed is now exposed; that is, their true status as excluded members of the national family and spoiled, self-centred monopolizers of Irish resources.¹⁶¹

The Naylor's represent a society that cannot come to terms with the disruptions to its hegemony, already threatened by the Easter Rising and by successive Land Acts and now about to be brought to conclusion. Unlike Rochester's house in *Jane Eyre*, which must first burn to the ground to allow for regeneration, the promise of Danielstown's youth is lost, for there is no sense of renewal in *The Last September*. Jane's pregnancy is symbolic of a new beginning that will ensure the future of

¹⁵⁸*TLS*, p. 206.

¹⁵⁹Patricia Cockburn recalls a Big House burning where the family was given two hours notice to remove valuable objects. When the allotted time had elapsed, 'dozens of priceless pictures and wonderful pieces of eighteenth-century furniture were incinerated.' Patricia Cockburn, *Figure of Eight* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), p. 6.

¹⁶⁰*TLS*, p. 206.

¹⁶¹Cullingford, p. 293.

Thornfield Hall, but Lois has been exiled from this just as surely as the Naylor's walk away from the furnace at Danielstown; their lack of an heir ensures that they do not leave any mark on the landscape. The house's permanent sterility has already been foreshadowed in the imagery of the exposed and barren pistil that lies among the dying flowers in Lois's bedroom:

Noiselessly, a sweet-pea moulted its petals on to the writing-table, leaving a bare pistil. The pink butterfly flowers, transparently balancing, were shadowed faintly with blue as by an intuition of death.¹⁶²

It would seem that the only future open to the Naylor's is life in 'villa-ry,' which, in Lady Naylor's estimation, is a fate worse than death. Without the military and political edifices that had shored up their hegemony, there will be no place in for the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy either as a political or even a social force after Independence. They may well claim to be Irish, but it is a different, and more hybrid sort of Irishness to that of the indigenous population; they certainly did not fit into the concept of 'Irishness' espoused by Daniel Corkery and organizations such as Conradh na Gaeilge.¹⁶³ Demoralized by the burning of some two hundred Big Houses, many of the old Ascendancy class felt that they had no choice but to simply pack up and leave for a safer, if somewhat impoverished, life in England.¹⁶⁴ However, as Bowen herself indicates, others continued, if not to flourish, then at least to adapt to their altered circumstances in Ireland:

¹⁶²*TLS*, pp. 162-163. Bowen's choice of words is deliberate. Pistils form the reproductive organs of a female flower.

¹⁶³See Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1931). Conradh na Gaeilge (The Gaelic League) was founded by Douglas Hyde in 1893 to promote the Irish language and culture. Initially apolitical, it committed to the nationalist movement in 1915. Hyde was Anglo-Irish, the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman. In 1938, he became the first President of the Irish Republic.

¹⁶⁴The Protestant population in the south of Ireland declined by approximately one-third in the period 1911-1926. See Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana, 1985), p. 116.

I recognize that a class, like a breed of animals, *is* due to lapse or become extinct should it fail to adapt itself to changing conditions — climate alters, the feeding grounds disappear. The gentry, as a class, may or may not prove able to make adaptations . . . To my mind, they are tougher than they appear.¹⁶⁵

The feeding grounds have certainly disappeared, but rather than find fresh pastures in Africa or India, the Naylor's will probably retreat, if not to the dreaded villa-ry of Lesworth's world in Surrey, then perhaps to another part of Cork. After the shock of losing the house has worn off, as Moynahan somewhat cynically points out, the Naylor's will qualify for compensation money and perhaps end their days at Rushbrook, the community of mini-estates overlooking Cobh Harbour to which many of the Munster landlords retreated after their Big Houses were destroyed.¹⁶⁶ In her later novel, *The House in Paris* (1935), Bowen would write:

Rushbrook is full of Protestant gentry, living down misfortunes they once had. None of them, as a matter of fact, had done too badly, or they would not be here, for most of the big villas are miniature 'places' that need some keeping up. The nineteenth-century calm hanging over the colony makes the rest of Ireland a frantic or lonely dream.¹⁶⁷

Even so, she continued to have faith in the notion the Anglo-Irish influence could prevail. Two decades after the events described in *The Last September*, Bowen tries to explain their dispossession by arguing that 'The big house people were handicapped ... by their pride, by their indignation at their decline and by their divorce from the countryside in whose heart their struggle was carried on.'¹⁶⁸ Still, Bowen firmly, if somewhat naively, continued to believe that the Anglo-Irish would find a place in the new order and tried to justify their position by arguing for their way of life as an ideal:

¹⁶⁵BC p. 456. Original emphasis.

¹⁶⁶Moynahan, p. 241.

¹⁶⁷Elizabeth Bowen, *The House in Paris*, pp. 74-75, also quoted in Moynahan, p. 241.

¹⁶⁸BC, p. 453; 'The Big House', p. 76, also published in *MT*, pp. 25-29: 27.

From the point of view of the outside Irish world does the big house justify its existence? I believe it could do so now as never before ... the idea from which these houses sprang was, before everything, a social one. That idea, although lofty, was at first rigid and narrow – but it could extend itself, and it must if the big house is to play an alive part in the alive Ireland of today ... ‘Can we not’, big, half-empty rooms seem to ask, ‘be, as never before, sociable? Cannot we scrap the past, with its bitternesses and barriers, and all meet, throwing in what we have?’¹⁶⁹

In 1963, when writing her Afterword to a new edition of *Bowen's Court*, Bowen remained adamant that the Ascendancy remained hugely symbolic and would even rise again. She insisted that one could not say that the space on which her house had stood was empty, but ‘more, it is as it was – with no house there,’ in much the same way that she had depicted Danielstown and the ruined mill.¹⁷⁰ In a way, Bowen was not wrong. Like the mill, the dead house is the archetypical image of a dying class; the fire that devoured it also destroyed its influence and its privileged way of life. However, the very nature of its demise has ensured its survival by burning it into the collective memory of the Irish national psyche. In the end, the collapse of Danielstown is analagous to the fall of empires, the irony being that both are destroyed by the very violence that had given them birth.

¹⁶⁹‘The Big House’, p. 76.

¹⁷⁰*BC*, pp. 458-459.

Chapter Two

A Narrative of Imperial Retreat:

Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus*

From the early eighteenth century, before the Charter Act of 1813 that allowed missionary societies of all Christian denominations to operate in India, the success of the political system that the East India Company put in place in the colony rested on the support of elite indigenous communities. The ancient religious institutions of these elites could not be violated or treated as inferior to Christianity for fear the Indians might take offence and become alienated from the Europeans and their expansionist ambitions. Thus, while the Company had always tolerated Catholic missionaries, before the Charter Act it had vigorously opposed the entrance of Protestant missionaries to the subcontinent. This anomaly is explained by the fact that Protestant missionaries were regarded as convert-seeking evangelists; hostility towards them stemmed from the Company's anxieties that they would antagonize the local people by interfering with their traditional religious practices. Catholic missionaries, on the other hand, were understood to follow a different agenda. Firstly, rather than seeking converts, their mission was to serve the spiritual needs of Indian Catholics, a small but long-standing religious community, and secondly, they also served the religious needs of the Irish soldiers in the British army, who, as noted in the previous chapter, and indeed as portrayed in Kipling's *Kim*, formed an important part of the British forces in India.¹

When central government in London took control of India following the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, the British came to realize that they could not depend solely upon either military or economic power to maintain their hegemony in India.² Henceforth, colonial power was to be maintained by an encouragement of British

¹Kenneth Ballhatchet, 'The East India Company and Roman Catholic Missionaries', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 44. 2 (April, 1993), pp. 273-288: 273.

²Direct rule was imposed with the 1858 Government of India Act.

cultural attitudes that, it was hoped, would ensure the loyalty of the Indian population. This ideal was to be achieved by convincing the people of the benefits of imperialism while at the same time inculcating in them a sense of the absolute rightness of British rule.³ Initially, the Anglican Church in India was controlled by a Bishop, but in order to accomplish the imperial objective, in 1858 Protestant missionaries were finally allowed freedom of movement and subsequently travelled to India in great numbers. As they spread throughout the country, often in advance of the military and civil service, these evangelists became of vital importance in spreading colonial ideology. From early on, the evangelists sought to bring imperial models of civilization and modernity to the Indian masses by means of western enlightenment philosophies.⁴ Although officially the British government claimed neutrality on missionary endeavours, unofficially the idea behind such activity was that the battle for hearts and minds would be won by anglicizing the Indian population through the English Protestant-oriented education that missionaries such as those portrayed in *Black Narcissus* would provide. As Jawaharlal Nehru records in his autobiography: '[the missionaries] were bent on saving us regardless of our desires in the matter.'⁵

From early on in imperial history, missionary proselytizing justified its activities by offering the British public at home a model of 'civilized' expansionism and colonial management that helped to transform the imperial project into a moral crusade, an approach that provided both the missionaries and their supporters with a

³For British discourses of rule in India, see Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries* ([1972] London: Verso, 1998), Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Stanley Wolpert, *India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

⁴See Robert Eric Frykenberg, 'Christian Missions and the Raj', in *Missions and Empire*, Norman Etherington, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.107, and Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.

⁵Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1936), p. 428. Also quoted in Parry, p. 29.

sense of justice and high moral authority.⁶ Viscount Alfred Milner of South Africa believed the imperial project to have ‘all the depth and comprehensiveness of a religious faith.’⁷ In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë makes abundantly clear the qualities required, and the respect afforded to missionaries by Victorian society: ‘God had an errand for me,’ St John Rivers tells Jane, ‘to bear which afar, to deliver it well, skill and strength, courage and eloquence, the best qualifications of soldier, statesman, and orator, were all needed: for these all centre in the good missionary.’⁸ Rivers sees missionary work as the ‘foundation laid on earth for a mansion in heaven.’ He hopes to be ‘numbered in the band who have merged all ambitions in the glorious one of bettering their race — of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance — of substituting peace for war, freedom for bondage, religion for superstition, the hope of heaven for the fear of hell ... it is dearer than the blood in my veins.’⁹ The parson wonders why everyone is not infused with his evangelical zeal: ‘There is my glory and my joy. I am the servant of an infallible Master. I am not going out under human guidance ... It seems strange to me that all round me do not burn to enlist under the same banner — to join in the same enterprise.’¹⁰ Such sentiments are echoed by the nuns of *Black Narcissus* as they set off on their mission: ‘They were going into the wilderness, to pioneer, to endure, to work.’¹¹ As the front line of the imperial project, nuns such as those portrayed in the novel were highly complicit in spreading the ideology of empire in all its guises.

⁶See Jamie S. Scott’s Introduction: ‘Onward, Christian Britons!’ in *And the Birds Began to Sing: Religion and Literature in Post-Colonial Culture* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), pp. xv-xxviii, and Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.

⁷High Commissioner of Southern Africa during the second Boer War. Quoted in Robert H. McDonald, *The Language of Empire: Myths and Metaphors of Popular Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 4.

⁸*Jane Eyre*, p. 417.

⁹*Jane Eyre*, p. 431.

¹⁰*Jane Eyre*, p. 463.

¹¹*BN*, p. 11.

In 1938, the year in which Rumer Godden wrote *Black Narcissus*, A.J. Farish of the Bombay Government wrote:

The natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could have.¹²

To give effect to this imperial ambition, Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Minute on Education* (1835) was utilized by missionaries to such an extent that the English-language education of the indigenous people in India came to be identified with both evangelical success and with the safeguarding of British rule in India.¹³ As Gauri Viswanathan comments: 'British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education.'¹⁴ Bolstered by the double endorsement of 'the bible and the flag,' explorers and other adventurers intent on exploiting the subcontinent did not hesitate to take advantage of the aura of moral responsibility implied by the missionary effort to enlighten the 'barbaric' people of India.¹⁵ The missionary

¹²Quoted in Kelly Davidson and John Hill, 'Under Control? *Black Narcissus* and the Imagining of India', *Film Studies* 6 (Summer, 2005), pp. 1-12: 2.

¹³For the historical background to Macaulay's *Minute*, see Elmer H. Cutts, 'The Background of Macaulay's *Minute*', *The American Historical Review*, 58.4 (July, 1953), pp. 824-853. Macaulay acknowledges the impossibility of transforming the whole of India into an English-speaking country. He calls for a class of educated Indian intermediaries between the British and their colonized subjects. These 'mimic men' are to use their education to disseminate English culture to the Indian masses: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.' *Thomas Babington Macaulay, Selected Writings*, John Clive and Thomas Pinney, eds. ([1835] Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 249.

¹⁴Gauri Viswanathan, 'The Beginning of English literary study in British India', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft et al., eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 431-438: 434.

¹⁵Scott, p. xv-xxviii; Johnston, p. 1.

project became severely compromised when its aim of evangelical success became conflated with the cynical exploitation of India and its people.¹⁶

II

Anne Chisholm writes that as a young girl, Godden had read E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and was so appalled by its negative depiction of the British in India that she spent the rest of her life maintaining an aloofness from the world of Anglo-India and all that it entailed in terms of conforming to the 'club' ethos of colonial society. As Chisholm writes, rather than identify with the character Adela Quested, who, like Lois Farquar of *The Last September*, could not, or would not, come to terms with the country and its landscape, Godden identified with Forster's Mrs. Moore, who allowed herself to be open to the mystery and power of India. Godden was sufficiently encouraged by the success of Forster's novel to also write about alternative modes of life in India.¹⁷ Like Forster, she does not follow the pattern of the earlier genre of romantic melodrama and adventure stories featuring confident 'manly' adventurers and men of action, such as are to be found in the novels of Maud Diver and Flora Annie Steel. Moreover, neither are her English characters in *Black Narcissus* the self-consciously British *memsahibs* and efficient bureaucrats for whom the Raj is such an onerous responsibility in *A Passage to India*.¹⁸ In this novel, Godden feminizes the imperial project by making her chief protagonist a missionary nun, while the leading white male figure is portrayed as

¹⁶Johnston, p. 1.

¹⁷Chisholm, pp. 39-40.

¹⁸Women writers who wrote light fiction about life in an 'imagined' India include Annie Besant (1847-1930), Bithia Mary Croker (1847-1920), Fanny Emily Farr Penny (1847-1939), Alice Perrin (1867-1934) and I.A.R. Wylie (1885-1959). See Parry, pp. 78-102.

something of a womanizer and a drunkard. Perhaps Godden chose to portray nuns because missionary societies in England approved of benign imperialism. As Robert H. McDonald points out, 'ethical' imperialists such as the Society of Friends, or Quakers, disapproved of land-grabbing and 'little wars,' but at the same time believed whole-heartedly in British colonial government and what they termed 'benevolent stewardship' — that is, adherence to the proclaimed civilizing mission of enlightenment thought and progress, the ideal that Britain had always employed to lend legitimacy to its overseas incursions.¹⁹

In *Black Narcissus*, a small group of Anglican nuns set out from their base in Calcutta to establish a convent in a remote area of the Himalayas, the fictional village of Mopu. Under the leadership of their newly-appointed religious superior, Sister Clodagh, the nuns have been invited by a prince, the pro-British 'old General', Toda Rai, to establish 'a hospital and a dispensary and a school, for children and girls,' on the site of a former mountain palace overlooking the local village.²⁰ This palace had once housed a harem, a so-called 'House of Women' that had initially belonged to the old General's father. By settling the nuns in this 'ramshackle house facing the Himalayas,' Toda Rai hopes to westernize it and to purge it of its former associations with oriental decadence and lasciviousness.²¹ The sisters hope that refashioning the people will make them fit the mould of western standards of civilization. They plan to achieve this aim by instilling in the people an agenda of physical and moral improvement inspired by an ethos of Christian cultural imperialism. In other words, as the vanguard of imperial expansion, the sisters take

¹⁹Robert H. McDonald, *The Language of Empire: Myths and Metaphors of Popular Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 6.

²⁰Rumer Godden, *Black Narcissus* ([1939] London: Pan, 1994), p. 32. Greenberger notes that in the literature of the Era of Doubt, a new stock type emerged — the Indian prince loyal to the crown — the antithesis of Congress agitators. Greenberger, p. 141.

²¹*BN*, pp. 12, 16.

on the civilizing mission of the British Raj. But the local people are suspicious of the nuns from the moment they arrive in the region. One of the villagers astutely sums up the entire imperial project: 'I think they're like a row of teeth,' he comments: 'I can't see any difference between them and they'll eat into the countryside and want to know everything and alter everything. I was peon at the Baptist Mission and I know.'²²

The four sisters accompanying Clodagh differ in temperament and ability and Godden intends us to see their individual traits as representing various aspects of the imperial presence in India in the moment before things fall apart. Sister Briony has been chosen to go to Mopu for her pragmatic nature, Sister Blanche (familiarily known as Sister Honey) for her sunny disposition, and Sister Philippa for her expertise in market gardening and husbandry. A note of discord is introduced with Sister Ruth, who is presented to Clodagh by the Mother Superior, Dorothea, as something of a challenge. Ruth's mental stability and commitment to her vocation are in question even before she leaves Calcutta, but it is hoped, erroneously as it turns out, that in the cooler climate of the Himalayas she will achieve stability by taking on the responsibility of teaching the local children.²³

Clodagh herself is Anglo-Irish but, in common with most Anglo-Irish children, such as Lois and Laurence in Bowen's novel, she had been educated in England; Briony remembers her from her schooldays at Canstead.²⁴ Clodagh is portrayed as being supremely confident, even hubristic: first, in her role as would-be fiancée to an Anglo-Irish landowner; later, in her role as religious evangelist in India. Mother Dorothea is compelled to remind her that 'The Superior of all is the servant

²²BN, pp. 5-6.

²³BN, pp. 10-13. See Sarah Street, *Black Narcissus: British Film Guides Series* (London: I.B Tauris, 2005), p. 36.

²⁴BN, p. 9.

of all.²⁵ However, as John Stone indicates, in Mopu, rather than being a ‘Servant of Mary’ in the service of the poor as the name of her Order implies, Clodagh’s Ascendancy background in Ireland marks her out as a somewhat overbearing cultural imperialist, an experienced colonizer, and a willing servant of Empire.²⁶ Dorothea discusses her in a letter to Father Roberts, the Anglican priest into whose pastoral jurisdiction the convent will fall:

It’s a kind of innate superiority ... She has always felt herself just a little better than anyone else. What makes it so hard to deal with, is the fact that she undoubtedly is. She has great gifts and one can’t deny it.²⁷

Yet far from having authoritative and secure positions as colonizers, Godden’s characters will prove to have much in common with those in Forster’s novel; her protagonists will also become considerably more unstable and insecure as the narrative unfolds. The nuns must strive to remain true not only to their religious vocations but also to their roles as colonizers, and as the narrative progresses, each nun will react to the strangeness of her new milieu in a way peculiar to her personal temperament. The overall effect, however, will be the same – a shifting in focus from spiritual preoccupations to secular and psychosexual concerns.

On an earlier inspection visit to the site, Clodagh had been met by the old General’s English agent, Mr. Dean, and it is he who provides the first presentiment that the nuns’ mission is doomed to failure by repeatedly warning her that the area is an unsuitable location for a convent. As the nuns attempt to settle into an orderly routine, the villagers arrive at the convent so fast that the sisters find themselves barely able to cope. However, their initial zeal is somewhat undermined when their

²⁵BN, p. 11.

²⁶John Stone, ‘Gothic in the Himalayas: Powell and Pressburger’s *Black Narcissus*’, in *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard, eds. (London: McFarland, 2004), pp. 264-286: 284, n. 27.

²⁷BN, pp 79-80.

young Indian interpreter, Joseph Antony, informs them that if the old General has not bribed the villagers to attend both the dispensary and the school, they would not have come.

When some time later Dean arrives with a seventeen year old orphan girl, Kanchi, Clodagh reluctantly accepts her into the life of the convent. The girl, it is suggested, has been sexually promiscuous and so must be cloistered for a few months while her uncle attempts the onerous task of finding a husband whose family will be willing to accept her.²⁸ Toda Rai's nephew, Dilip Rai, also arrives at the convent but for different reasons. Dilip Rai is the 'Black Narcissus' of Godden's title, so called because of the perfume he wears. This 'young General' had been eagerly looking forward to a university education in England, but since he is Toda Rai's heir, he must remain in India so that in time he too will produce an heir. Dilip Rai hopes that if he proves himself to be a willing pupil his uncle will change his mind and send him to Cambridge after all. Aware of the danger inherent in having Kanchi and Dilip Rai under the same roof, Dean warns Clodagh to refuse the young man's request. However, feeling that she cannot afford to offend his uncle, Clodagh sets aside her misgivings and admits the old General's nephew to the school.

The nuns had arrived in Mopu in October. With the onset of winter, they find it more and more difficult to adjust to the pagan Himalayan atmosphere. In this hostile environment they become increasingly distracted from their religious duties. Under these strange conditions, Blanche's maternal instincts resurface and are channelled into an obsessive concern for the local children, while Ruth develops such a pathological desire for Dean that it precipitates her descent into paranoia and madness. Only the pragmatic Briony appears to be impervious to outside influences,

²⁸BN, pp. 69-70.

but even she succumbs to the environment by developing a fetish for parsimony that threatens to overtake her devotion to religion. Philippa puts all her energies into cultivating the convent garden but is so undone by the environment that, rather than sowing vegetables to make the nuns self-sufficient, she wishes instead to plant English flowers. The usually rational Sister Clodagh becomes so haunted by memories of her youth in Ireland that she also finds her self-control slipping, and as a result her authority over both the convent and the villagers soon begins to dissipate. The sisters try to counteract this growing sense of crisis by organizing a traditional Christmas Service. But their equilibrium is further disturbed when their carol singing is interrupted by the arrival of a highly intoxicated Dean, who, when confronted by Clodagh, mocks the nuns by parodying their singing. A further confrontation takes place between Clodagh and an increasingly hysterical Ruth. When Clodagh questions her about her unseemly attraction to Dean, Ruth throws the accusation back at her by accusing Clodagh of also being attracted to the agent. This scene brings the growing hostility between the two nuns into the open and is the prelude to the disaster that will follow.

The first major crisis arises when, despite Dean's advice and Sister Briony's instructions to the contrary, Blanche treats a sick baby who later dies. This creates tension between the villagers and the nuns, resulting in the people shunning the convent. The sisters cloister themselves, waiting nervously in fear of violent reprisals, but Ruth escapes Clodagh's vigilance and makes her way to Dean's house, where she openly declares her feelings for him. Dean reacts angrily and rejects her advances outright, for while native girls are deemed to be 'fair game' for the colonizing male, the white woman's body is sacrosanct and strictly off limits, the more so if she happens to belong to a religious order. Completely deranged by this

rejection, Ruth returns to the convent. Finding Clodagh ringing the convent bell, she tries to push her over the edge of the precipice but slips and falls to her death. With Ruth and the baby dead and the villagers refusing to return to the convent, the nuns find themselves without a mission, and, much demoralized by its collapse, they have no option but to abandon Mopu and return to the convent in Calcutta.

III

In this chapter I want to suggest that *Black Narcissus* is a deeply contradictory text that keeps two almost diametrically antithetical conceptions of British rule in India in tension with each other. The nuns' mission to Mopu is in very obvious ways a complete and even pitiable failure: the sisters fail to convert the natives to either Christianity or to modern Western values, and instead the alien Himalayan location mocks their evangelical ambitions by unleashing the nuns' own repressed sexual desires in ways that are at best self-defeating and at worst catastrophic. The Indian subjects merely regard the newcomers with tolerant but mocking amusement and they later withdraw entirely from the mission, thus making clear the redundancy of the whole enterprise. On this level at least, it can be argued that *Black Narcissus* is an allegory of British imperial failure and retreat: the imperial agents are undone by their inability, despite their best efforts, to impose themselves on either the natives or the landscape. In a mocking reversal of imperial ambition, the Indian environment triggers off in the nuns the very kinds of unruly sexual desire that they had hoped to tame in the undisciplined Indians. Read in this way, Godden's novel might appear to be a radically subversive text in which the author's admiration for Indian intransigence and otherworldly mysticism seems to

overwhelm any apparent commitment on her part to the Western imperial mission or to the self-mutilating discipline it requires.

But while this subversive undercurrent courses through *Black Narcissus* it is also clear that Godden manages to rein in such sentiments in multiple ways. Thus, although the novel intimates that the British Empire is doomed to fail in India, it also strives to convert that sense of failure into an honourable or worthy failure at least. As mentioned earlier, because it is associated with a largely 'feminine' attempt to bring the benefits of religion, medicine and education to the natives, the imperial mission is construed in Godden's novel in largely benign and humanitarian terms. If that mission cannot succeed it is not because it is construed as violent or exploitative, or as something militantly opposed by the natives, but rather because the Indian landscape and Indian culture are just too stubbornly impervious to transformation and because the Westerners, even at their best, can never really control their subconscious desires. Read thus, the novel seems to suggest — in a manner that is closer to E. M. Forster's mournfully regretful *A Passage to India* than to Orwell's sourly satiric *Burmese Days* — that the British mission in India was doomed because of a fundamental 'clash' of Western and Eastern cultures that were always too alien to be usefully integrated. This view offers a rather self-exonerating narrative of the British occupation of India; it expresses a worldview that remains ideologically tied to the very imperial mentalities and discourses it partially challenges. Moreover, while *Black Narcissus* invites its readers to empathize to some degree with the struggling white female colonizers, it also contains a contrary counter-narrative that suggests that the cynical and morally delinquent male colonizer, represented in the text by Mr. Dean, may have had a better grasp of Indian realities than the more morally-disciplined and well-intentioned female nuns. This would seem to imply that

a 'feminized' notion of empire as a Christian and humanitarian crusade was always a self-delusion and that an earlier and more 'masculine' idea of empire, one that frankly acknowledged its exploitative dimensions, was more solidly founded and more realistic. In this chapter, I will argue that Godden's novel veers uncertainly between 'feminine' and 'masculine' conceptions of British colonial rule, and proves to be almost as contradictory in its treatment of gender as in its racial politics. Furthermore, I contend that at this historical juncture, Godden was losing faith in Britain's civilizing mission, but like her literary predecessors, Forster and Orwell, was sceptical of India's ability to do any better as an independent nation.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that the women's novel is commonly torn between an outward conformity to patriarchal values and a suppressed rage that is displaced onto 'crazed' female figures who openly express the anger or uncontrolled sexual desires that more idealized women cannot legitimately acknowledge. *Black Narcissus* adheres in many ways to this pattern: Sister Clodagh, a nun who was once in love with an Ascendancy Irish landowner but who has renounced that girlish romance and dedicated herself to celibacy and to her mission in India, feels an attraction both to Dean, the sexually-permissive white male colonizer, and to Dilip Rai, an equally licentious Indian prince. While these desires eventually sap her confidence in her capacity to fulfil her mission to Mopu, Clodagh herself never succumbs to her libido and always manages to maintain self-discipline. Sister Ruth, on the other hand, is too weak-minded to maintain such control and is ultimately overwhelmed by her sexual urges, expressing a hysterically phobic revulsion for Dilip Rai and an equally hysterical lust for Dean. By structuring the narrative in this way, *Black Narcissus* suggests that British notions of the disciplined and self-restrained self are never very secure, and may even be without

any reliable foundation. At the same time, the novel manages to contain this heretical view of things by displacing uncontrolled and transgressive female desire onto the 'hysteric' Ruth, the nun diseased by desire who is eventually expelled from the narrative in violent terms. We could say, therefore, that *Black Narcissus* works on two levels — one that undermines the idea of British 'feminized' self-discipline and an imperial work ethic, and another that salvages something of that ideal by means of its almost entirely disapproving treatment of Ruth. Here again, *Black Narcissus* proves to be a novel that expresses something controversial, but that also censors and disowns its own more subversive impulses.

As we saw in the last chapter, the shadow of the wider British Empire repeatedly falls across Elizabeth Bowen's Protestant Ireland in *The Last September*. In other words, even as it depicts the end of the Ascendancy and of empire in Ireland, Bowen's novel also manages to suggest that there is an affinity of some kind between Ireland and other regions of the British Empire, and especially with India. As noted, Bowen's Big House is lit up by a too-radiant sunshine, a sunshine that, like the terrible heat of India or the tropics, exhausts and incinerates rather than nurtures. Curiously enough, in Godden's novel there is a reverse sense of things: if *The Last September* seems to hint that what is now happening in Ireland may eventually happen throughout the empire, *Black Narcissus* suggests that the collapse of the imperial mission that is now happening in India has already taken place in Ireland. Put differently, in Bowen's text, Ireland is obscurely shadowed by India, while in Godden's text India is shadowed by Ireland. As evidenced by Clodagh's psychological turmoil, her Anglo-Irish back-narrative indicates that the world of *Black Narcissus* is haunted by a half-repressed site of an earlier imperial trauma that returns in ominous ways at various moments in the novel to trouble this text.

The enterprise the nuns are about to undertake at the start of *Black Narcissus* had been attempted earlier by a group of monks, whose sudden and unexplained departure is shrouded in mystery. When the sisters arrive at the deserted building, no trace of the brothers remains except for half-finished classrooms and a bell that hung 'rusty and still' on its post.²⁹ Nobody will articulate why the brothers had failed to secure a place for themselves as a civilizing influence or why they had been so roundly rejected by the indigenous population; all enquiries as to why their mission had failed are met with evasiveness. The monks' withdrawal, or expulsion, is ominous of failure and foreshadows the nuns' eventual retreat from Mopu; the breakdown of both enterprises serves to suggest that there is something stubbornly intractable about the region, something that is impervious to the forces of western religion and civilization.

In common with Bowen, for Godden, and indeed for Forster, setting functions not merely as a backdrop to the main plot, as in the colonial narratives of Greenberger's 'Era of Confidence', but as a principal character in an 'other' world of colonial imagination. In their respective descriptions of the landscape, what both Forster and Godden endeavour to capture is what is sometimes referred to as the 'Soul of India.' This 'soul' is the omnipotent, unknowable, and eternal force that emanates from both Forster's Marabar Caves and Godden's Himalayan Mountains. While each author may take a different approach in attempting to capture this intangible essence, the effect of its force is the same: when they feel its mesmeric power, the colonizers are left with no option but to recoil and retreat. William York Tindall argues that the intended effect of the caves in *A Passage to India* is to reduce: 'all human aspiration, sense and nonsense alike, to an odious echo' and this,

²⁹*BN*, p. 22.

he says, gives Forster's novel 'a sense of both terror and mystery.'³⁰ The Himalayas work to similar purpose in *Black Narcissus*. Just as the Marabar caves serve to create an atmosphere of disorientation and crisis in *A Passage to India*, as evidenced by their surreal effect on Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore, so too the Himalayas function in *Black Narcissus* as a site of mysterious Indian 'otherness' for the nuns. It is the soaring peak of Kanchenjunga that stands as a symbol of all that is mysterious and ineffable about India, and by utilizing this landscape, Godden undercuts the imperial objective by challenging the idea that the colonizers, as represented by the nuns, are rational human beings capable of successfully realizing their colonial ambitions. In this untamed mountain region imperial subjects and imperial certainties will break down.

Western representations of oriental cultures as sites of eroticism and exoticism are not original to Forster and Godden; they are part of a western writing tradition that has endured for centuries.³¹ Abdul R. JanMohamed argues that this tradition is based on a Manichean allegory that divides the world into an Occident that is ordered, rational, masculine and individualist, and an Orient that is chaotic, irrational, feminine and communalist.³² In colonial India, this juxtaposition of West and East, of civilization and barbarity, is embodied in early imperial texts where the collective primitive 'other' is introduced as a theme against which to define British colonial identity. In *Black Narcissus*, Godden appears to reinforce this stereotype

³⁰William York Tindall, 'Rumer Godden: Public Symbolist', *College English*, 13. 6 (March, 1953), pp. 297-303: 301.

³¹As a construct of the western imagination, this myth of the Orient stems from the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC. For Herodotus on India, see Aubrey De Selincourt, trans., *Herodotus: The Histories* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1953), Bk. III, 97-106, pp. 245-247. See also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978); Nicolas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the making of Modern India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001); Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

³²Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 59-87: 63-64. See also his *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983).

and to uphold the imperial image of India as 'other.' However, even though this is true, she also employs the rarefied mountain air as a motif through which she can question the values of imperialism. In addition, Godden questions Britain's insistence in continuing the imposition of its own totalizing will and culture on the colony in a time of imperial decline. To effect this, she utilizes the assigned qualities of what Marianna Torgovnick terms the 'feminine, collective, and ecstatic' primitive as a staging ground to challenge, rather than to endorse, the British Empire's deeply embedded notions of imperial identity and autonomous colonial 'selfhood.'³³ For Godden, this approach necessarily involves representing both the Himalayas and the indigenous people as exotic and eroticized foils to destabilize the secure identities of the nuns as racial superiors. If we understand Godden's deployment of the Himalayas as a typically imagined 'other' space to highlight European weaknesses, then her portrayal of an acute sense of failure deep within the empire certainly places *Black Narcissus* in the same imperial context as Forster's text.

As in all Eurocentric colonial writings, the depiction of white imperialism embedded in the imperial gaze such as Clodagh focuses on the Sunnyasi is also embedded within a primitivist representation of the colonized people. Anne McClintock stresses that as a colonial representation, the primitive spectacle is politically produced to assign people such as the villagers of Mopu to the lower strata of the hierarchy of the 'family of man' while the white colonizers, as epitomized by the nuns, are placed firmly at the top.³⁴ For example, the old Sunnyasi might be read as a negative emblem of Indian superstition and unworldliness: he does not engage with the material world in any way; he is mute and ragged and he brings no obvious benefit to the natives who venerate him. But it is important to

³³Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 15.

³⁴McClintock, pp. 14, 38.

recognize the ambivalences within Godden's fiction because in *Black Narcissus* there is a blurring of otherwise rigid colonial subject-object relations that also challenge this Manichean dichotomy. Rather than belittling him and his belief system, Godden takes care to elevate the Sunnyasi's unshakeable stoicism and dignity above the nuns' diminishing Christianity. The nuns do not belong to a contemplative Order, so despite their rigid adherence to Lenten fasting, they cannot hope to emulate the holy man's austerity; his quiet constancy is a reproach to their faltering vocations and therefore may be taken as a rebuke to a faltering imperial mission.³⁵

Godden projects a strong sense of surreal influences onto her own internalized idea of India, influences that draw their power from the suggestion of mysterious and uncontrollable gothic forces that have gathered to expel parasitic intruders such as the missionaries. The former harem, once a site of decadent sensuality, resists transformation into a chaste and orderly convent. The more the nuns try to reshape it in the image of the mother-house, the more western certainty begins to yield to eastern eroticism and mysticism. Even the convent bell surrenders to the immensity of its surroundings. It '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.'³⁶ The same wind that muffles the sound of the 'doubtful' convent bell lends strength to the temple bell, which, in taking control of the wind, thus asserts its inviolable place in the landscape.³⁷ In the face of this strong symbol of paganism, a symbol which threatens to outdo their Christianity, the nuns' confidence diminishes, and their place in the world becomes

³⁵*BN*, p. 141.

³⁶*BN*, p. 57. Goontu is a nearby market town.

³⁷Street, p. 31

more and more untenable. Similarly, the Empire is beset by an increasing sense of insecurity and uncertainty as to its power and status.

The sisters' troubles seem ultimately to emanate from this pagan element; it inheres in the bells, in the close proximity of the mountains, and in the vestigial memories of the feudal harem on which the convent is superimposed. The holy monks have left hardly a trace, but the former concubines remain as a subtle, yet influential presence:

[Sister Clodagh] ... seemed to hear the door opened in the night, and hear them coming, running, gauze hurriedly twisted round their bosoms, flowers seized and pinned in the hair, feet with anklets chiming, hastening to the door. She heard them come and she heard their voices, whispering as they gathered their finery, coming to the door to welcome Dilip Rai. '*This house used to be not good. I give you until the rains break.*' The Brothers had left their ruins in the grass.³⁸

Like the concubines, Clodagh occupies a tenuous position within a patriarchal ruling structure that also keeps her dependent and vulnerable. She therefore has more in common with the former residents of the harem than she might care to acknowledge, for as Phyllis Lassner notes, this passage signifies the dangers of a sequestered and dependent life. The concubines have vanished because the doors of the harem were not stout enough to protect them from those who ought to have been their protectors.³⁹ The reader is then left with the uncomfortable thought that the reason the monks' departure had been so shrouded in mystery, the reason they 'had left their ruins in the grass,' is perhaps because, like Dean, they too had abused their position as imperial protectors and had taken advantage of the pleasures the harem had to offer. Unlike the sequestered concubines, the nuns have chosen their own path, but their self-imposed isolation will not protect them from the consequences of the

³⁸*BN*, p. 105. Original emphasis.

³⁹Lassner, p. 79.

colonial romance in which they play an important supporting role.⁴⁰ Lassner also points out that in this passage Godden 'exposes the double bind in which women's choices for self-determination are already scripted as a problematic fiction within the realpolitik of colonial relations. The absent women who are never seen or heard ... haunt the nuns' story with the illusion that any of them could matter.'⁴¹ Clodagh will soon comprehend that the nuns' presence in India is 'no more than a cobweb that would be brushed away.'⁴²

While they are not a cloistered Order, the sisters should nevertheless be able to retreat to the peace and tranquility and to the certainties of a disciplined life that a convent normally provides. However, they cannot do so, for the surreal landscape invades their minds just as insistently as the wind pervades the cracks in the convent walls. As the pagan atmosphere of the former brothel overwhelms the nuns, they begin to exhibit all the psychological paranoia and physical disturbances typical to the geographically displaced. These symptoms are similar to the agonies endured by the *memsahibs* in India as portrayed by Maud Diver and to the psychology of the characters portrayed in *The Last September*, and also, as will be demonstrated, in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*.⁴³ The 'something' in the mountain air is sexual repression and the nuns' reaction to their new surroundings has as much to do with the inevitability of becoming repressed on entering a convent as with the actual physical landscape in which they find themselves. Just as the Anglo-Irish Big House had been built as a replica of its English country house counterpart, so too had the nuns' convent in Calcutta been built in the image of the motherhouse in England.

⁴⁰Lassner, p. 79.

⁴¹Lassner, pp. 79-80.

⁴²BN, p. 105.

⁴³Diver excuses the anti-social behaviour of Anglo-Indian women towards the indigenous people by pointing out the formidable obstacles that they faced. Chief among these were the killing heat, ignorance of the country and its customs, and fear of the unknown. Maud Diver, *The Englishwoman in India* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1909). See MacMillan, p. 59.

Twice displaced from familiar surroundings, the nuns find themselves thoroughly disorientated. As the unfamiliar sights and sounds of this new landscape stir their repressed natural instincts, long-forgotten memories resurface. Clodagh, usually a rational utilitarian, is almost undone by her new surroundings. When she first meets Dilip Rai, the Indian prince, her thoughts become blurred, and she momentarily confuses him with her lost Irish love, Con: 'He was just as she remembered him ... she looked at him without speaking and tried to think just why it was he made her think of Con. She could hardly bear to look at him.'⁴⁴

The disturbing atmosphere in Mopu also affects the nuns' spiritual lives. The mountain range towering over the convent on one side and the holy man overlooking it from another combine to exert an irresistible hostile force that thoroughly unnerves the European women. It drains the nuns' collective religious will and undermines their religious vows to the extent that they allow the natural rhythms of the region to overtake the strict regime of the convent bell: 'It was amazing how quickly the hours came round,' Philippa remarks, 'it seemed that the bell had hardly rung, when it rang again.'⁴⁵

'Really, no sooner have I started than I have to stop ... and there's so much that has to be done.' Sister Briony complained that she took time from the laundry to work in the garden, certainly she took it from her own recreation, but she had to interrupt her work it seemed to her continually, she hardly found time to work at all. She took to going into chapel at the last minute, not even waiting to wash her hands. 'What am I thinking of?' she said, 'interrupting my work to go to chapel! What has come over me to make me think like that. It used to be, it ought to be, the other way round.'⁴⁶

Fearing that her religious vocation is slipping away, Philippa requests, and is granted, a transfer: 'I was putting my work before my religious life. I was losing

⁴⁴BN, p. 90.

⁴⁵BN, p. 77.

⁴⁶BN, p. 78. Original emphasis.

sight of God in it. I was losing the spirit of the Order.’⁴⁷ What the narrative succeeds in conveying here, in metaphorical terms, is that England is in danger of losing sight of the spirit of empire. The implication is that the empire will lose its moral authority if it fails in its duty to adhere to the tenets of its proclaimed mission of ‘benign stewardship’ that will improve the lives of the colonized through progressive educational programmes.

Despite this cautionary or even critical note, Godden buys into the idea of India as an exotic and unknowable entity. The narrative suggests that the strange influence on the nuns draws its power from mysterious and uncontrollable, even evil forces that have been gathered into the Himalayas in order to reject the interlopers and their well-meaning but futile philanthropic efforts. It is the cumulative effect of all these forces that the sisters begin to experience. The sense of spiritual and physical enervation that they experience begins to undermine their ability to exert any authority over the beneficiaries of their endeavours. Analogically, the empire is also beset by an increasing sense of uncertainty as to its power and status, and not only the effect of all this on their colonized subjects, but also on the colonizers themselves. Resisting all their efforts to domesticate the people and the landscape, the atmospheric mountains unleash in the nuns erotic desires against which their vocation should render them immune.

As they succumb to this atmosphere, Mopu becomes the locus for the return of the nuns’ repressed sexuality but because, like Francie Montmorency in *The Last September*, they are unable to give expression to this, their bodies respond in somatic protest. As this protest becomes inscribed on their bodies like a pestilence, the nuns are beset with mysterious pains, their skins erupt in spots and boils, and like Francie,

⁴⁷BN, p. 138.

they are debilitated by insomnia and lassitude.⁴⁸ In light of these difficulties, the religious persona with which Clodagh had protected her damaged ego begins to unravel. Surrendering herself to the gothic influence of the makeshift chapel, her thoughts progress in an associative sequence from the glow of the altar lamp to the young prince and finally to Con. As she kneels, she pleads not for the presence of her God as a nun ought to, but for her long-lost lover:

Sister Clodagh was the last to leave the chapel; she put out the candles dreamily. As they went out one by one and the room grew dim, the night and the stars seemed to come closer to the windows, pressing cloud and gold against the glass. Now only the red lamp was burning in front of the altar; it was the colour of cherries; Dilip would have called it the colour of rhododendrons, he always said 'red as rhododendrons', 'white as rhododendrons' ... She knelt down before leaving the chapel ... 'Con, come back. Come back for a moment. I want to speak to you.'⁴⁹

As her thoughts conflate Dilip Rai and Con, Clodagh must struggle to keep the colonizer/colonized relationship in place, but her reaction to her new surroundings demonstrates the extent to which her resurfacing sexuality affects her state of mind. Her first sight of the Himalayas had reminded her of Ireland: 'Why, when it was entirely different? Was it the unaccustomed greenness, or the stillness of the house after the wind outside?'⁵⁰ Distracted by memories of her youth in Ireland, she mentally notes that the young prince 'slashed with his cane at the bushes, and she was suddenly back, walking down the Wishing Lane at home with Con ... and Con was slashing at the hedge to show his temper.'⁵¹ Son of an impoverished Ascendancy landlord, like so many Anglo-Irish heirs when faced with the task of trying to shore up the failing fortunes of the Big House, Con had taken flight; he had rejected Clodagh and his family estate to follow the American dream. However, just as in

⁴⁸*BN*, p. 47.

⁴⁹*BN*, p. 104. Godden's choice of flower is perceptive. The rhododendron is the state flower of Kashmir and the national flower of Nepal.

⁵⁰*BN*, p. 11.

⁵¹*BN*, p. 65.

Bowen's novel *Lesworth's* pride had led him to abandon his relationship with Lois, so too had Clodagh preempted Con's departure by leaving first to join the convent in England. As we have seen in *The Last September*, the hopes and dreams of the landed gentry in Ireland rested on future generations. Mirroring the breakdown in the relationship between Lois and Lesworth in Bowen's novel, the expectations for the future embodied in the union of Con and Clodagh were also dashed. This sense of sterility places *Black Narcissus* alongside *The Last September* in pointing to the lack of a future for the British Empire.

Clodagh's association of the Himalayas with Ireland and her conflation of Dilip Rai and Con bear strongly on her sub-conscious by reminding her of the overwhelming sense of failure she had felt at the loss of Con. In triggering this associative link between Ireland and India, Godden not only reminds the reader of the loss of the former colony, she also anticipates the later loss of England's most crucial colony, India. Clodagh's frustrated failed romance with Con, which antecedes the narrative proper, thus prefigures the failure of her second romantic dream, that of domesticating India. By mentally linking the two countries in the troubled erotic subconscious of Clodagh, Godden suggests that Britain's attachment to India is, in part at least a psychological compensation for the earlier loss of Ireland, but that this compensation too is destined to failure. As an allegorical text, *Black Narcissus* expresses a growing lack of confidence in the imperial project. The novel provides us with access to an empire in a state of flux, and Clodagh's inner turmoil may be read as mirroring the state of Ireland; a country that has already lived through the growing state of nationalist tension in India as the world hurdles towards a second catastrophic world war.

Dean's drunken appearance at the nuns' Christmas Service serves to exacerbate the growing sense of uneasiness by reminding Clodagh of his earlier warnings. Because he has immersed himself in the life of Mopu, Dean is familiar with the people and their customs, and is certain that the nuns' mission is doomed to failure. He has repeatedly insisted to Clodagh: 'It's no place to put a nunnery ... it's an impossible place for a nunnery ... I give you to the break of the next rains.'⁵² Above all, Dean warns the sisters of possible reactions to their well-meaning but ultimately futile medical endeavours. He tells them to be wary of treating any serious illnesses because, as he says: 'If you had a case that went badly or if one of your patients died, you'd have all the people up against you.' A previous accident involving a baby had resulted in the murder of Dean's predecessor.⁵³ These warnings fill Clodagh with an ominous presentiment of failure:

His laugh had broken the silence. Though the house was quiet it seemed to be full of people; behind Dilip Rai it lay with a teeming life of its own. She had a sudden sense of dismay that came from the house and not from Mr. Dean, a sense that she was an interloper in it and the Convent life no more than a cobweb that would be brushed away. The house had its own people, strange bare-footed people who had never had a Christmas, nor a star, nor a Christ. Dilip fitted them, standing in the porch with his horse as if he had just come through the forest. '*The grandfather kept his women here.*'⁵⁴

Neither a soldier nor a civil servant, Dean is the antithesis of earlier frontier heroes of imperial adventure fiction. As a white male colonizer, he ought to be a protector to the white females, but he is not at all what one might expect the moral and physical mainstay of empire to be; rather, he is reputed to embody all the vices that lead to the degeneration of true British stock. Dean had come to India because, construed as decadent, the Orient was considered to be a prime location where the

⁵²*BN*, pp. 33-35.

⁵³*BN* pp. 50, 177.

⁵⁴*BN*, p. 105. Original emphasis.

white male could safely indulge his vices. He is well aware that his sexual incontinence would not be tolerated in the West, but for fifteen years the people of Mopu 'had assisted him when they could.'⁵⁵ Father Roberts had warned Clodagh about the agent: 'He has a very bad reputation ... I believe he's really a very objectionable fellow ... He's said to have gone native; lives like one and they say he drinks and is ... bad with women.'⁵⁶

Although there is no suggestion that Godden admires Dean as she will Charles Pool in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, the narrative is ambiguous in its treatment of the agent. His ironic stance towards Clodagh — 'You will be doing me a great favour when you begin to educate the local ladies, Sister,' he mocks — provides Dean with an air of colonial authority but at the same time it points up Godden's anxiety to downplay the inversion of power that is inherent in his inferior role as the old General's agent. Furthermore, while adapting to village life distances Dean from the contemporary colonial discourse that classified indigenous people as 'others,' he does not hesitate in his colonial readiness to take advantage of the local women, as his distasteful sexual inuendo implies.⁵⁷

Yet even though he despises them a little for indulging his sexual appetites so readily, the narrative implies that Dean's relationship with the villagers is one of mutual understanding. In return for sexual favours, he accepts the people as they are without feeling any need to interfere or to alter the pattern of their lives as the sisters do. Thus Dean provides a vital link between the convent and the village, and Clodagh has no choice but to depend on him as an intermediary. Furthermore, in this role, the agent would appear to be more of a mentor to the nuns than Father Roberts,

⁵⁵BN, p. 23. The reader is not told how Dean came to be in India. The inference is that as a consequence of his sexual incontinence, he had no choice but to leave England.

⁵⁶BN, p. 26.

⁵⁷BN, p. 32. See Kelly Davidson and John Hill, 'Under Control? *Black Narcissus* and the Imagining of India', *Film Studies*, 6 (Summer, 2005), p. 8.

who is depicted as emasculated and sickly. Like Diver's *memsahibs*, Father Roberts is unable to stand the Indian climate and is never on hand to attend to his duties as the nuns' spiritual director:

Father Roberts wrote that he was in bed again with his lumbago; he could not move out of bed. '*It always catches me in the spring,*' he wrote, '*and I shall be worse when the rains break. I really ought not to be sent to a climate like this and I don't know when I'll be able to see you.*'⁵⁸

Dean, on the other hand, is totally acclimatized to India. But Godden again undercuts the notion of white male supremacy by infantilizing the agent. In his drunken sluggishness, Dean surrenders any sense of masculine control and becomes emasculated and just as ineffectual as the missing Father Roberts.

Because he is an Englishman, Dean understands the imperial background of the nuns and their civilizing mission, but Godden has him gibe at their piety and at their naivety about the local Indian culture. Clodagh requests him to refrain from working at the convent on Sunday: 'Sunday with us is a day of quiet,' she tells him, 'and we find it disturbing to hear you when we're in chapel.' 'In chapel you oughtn't to hear me,' he said gravely, 'If you were truly in prayer nothing could disturb you.'⁵⁹ On arrival in Mopu, the nuns had been arrested by the sight of the old General's uncle, who had also once been a prominent British ally, but who had since renounced the world in order to become a Sunnyasi, a holy man whose sense of 'self' has led him to renounce the trappings of empire and who is now content to spend his life in contemplation of the never-changing Himalayas. Since he had taken on this role, no one had ever heard him speak, witnessed him move, or do anything other than contemplate the mountain peak of Katchenjunga. Dean's rebuke suggests that rather than allowing themselves to be distracted by worldly matters, perhaps the

⁵⁸BN, p. 161. Original emphasis.

⁵⁹BN, p. 59.

nuns ought to be more like the holy Sunnyasi, whose devotion to prayer renders him impervious to outside influences.

The divine aspect of the landscape is invoked when Dean tells Clodagh that the people worship the mountain, that they think it concerns itself with them.⁶⁰ Dilip Rai believes that God dwells there, and that getting too close to it will drive ordinary people mad; only the holy man is strong enough to gaze on the face of God. As he explains to Adela: 'You have to be strong to live near God or a mountain.'⁶¹ Overwhelmed by its magisterial proximity, Philippa believes that, like the Sunnyasi, she too is gazing on the face of God: 'He is everywhere, before and about and in our house.'⁶² In His presence, she adds, nothing seems to matter: 'I think there are only two ways to live in this place,' Philippa remarks, 'you must either live like Mr Dean or like the Sunnyasi; either ignore it completely or give yourself up to it.' 'Neither would do for us,' retorts Clodagh.⁶³ In answer to Dean's questions: 'Is yours a contemplative Order? Do you live in meditation, or whatever you call it? Do you keep solitude?' Clodagh explains: 'Our Order isn't in the least like that. We're very busy people.'⁶⁴ Since the ethos of their religious Order demands philanthropic endeavour, these remarks refute any possibility that the nuns can either assimilate themselves to the native way of life as Dean does, or immerse themselves in contemplation like the holy man. They cannot ignore the mountain and all it entails, yet neither can they embrace it. If the nuns simply 'go native' and surrender to India, like Dean, then they abandon all sense of commitment to their missionary aspirations. If, however, they persist in their endeavours, they will continue to appear as aliens and as objects of either passive resistance or undermining derision. On the

⁶⁰*BN*, p. 84.

⁶¹*BN*, pp. 152-3.

⁶²*BN*, p. 119.

⁶³*BN*, pp. 139-140.

⁶⁴*BN*, p. 32.

larger scale, the narrative appears to suggest that this poses an irresolvable problem for the British. They cannot succeed in their imperial project without adapting to India, but if they do adapt, they will simply succumb to it and thus fail as a civilizing presence. What Godden appears to advocate is some kind of synthesis, a balance that will provide education and healthcare to the Indian population while resisting the urge to overwhelm them with Christian religiosity.

As a symbol of imperialism, the convent serves as a means of social control, but the nuns' failure to establish their authority in Mopu is reflected in their failure to gain the respect of the local villagers, and this is dramatized in the novel as a failure of the imperial gaze.⁶⁵ As representatives of the superior civilizing culture, the nuns ought to command the deferential regard of the locals, but instead the sisters themselves become a spectacle of amused observation. When Clodagh disapprovingly gazes at them, the people stare back, the holy man with indifference, the villagers with amused contempt, laughing and joking among themselves. They 'took to sitting on the path to watch the nuns; they laughed and talked about them and handed round cigarettes and made a party of it. They embarrassed them acutely.'⁶⁶ Clodagh would forbid this oppositional gaze, but because both the Sunnyasi and the villagers refuse to conform to her ideas of western civilization, she cannot. *Black Narcissus* deconstructs the imperial image of native Indians as passive by assigning to them an agency that undercuts the colonial stereotype. As can be seen from their response to her watchful eye, the imperial idea of the primitive spectacle that Clodagh would like control is transformed by the villagers themselves.

⁶⁵E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁶⁶*BN*, p. 62. Similarly, when Livingstone tried to convert members of the African Makololo tribe, 'the tribe's favourite pastime was imitating Livingstone reading and singing psalms. This would always be accompanied by howls of derisive laughter.' Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 104.

Neither the malleable objects of colonial imagination nor the 'aspects of nature' to which the natives are reduced in Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937), the villagers neither need nor require Christianity and all it entails in altering the pattern of their lives, and there is a strong suggestion that they have already exercised their collective will to eject the monks. In this not quite British, not quite independent space, the people feel that the price they are required to pay for colonial intrusion is too high. Although they live in benign serfdom, the locals consider themselves to be free. Because they lack possessions, they appear to have no need of laws; following its natural rhythms, life simply flows along. With supreme contentment the villagers assure the General that he has 'only to smile and grow rich.'⁶⁷ There is nothing Toda Rai can do for them in return except to provide whatever misguided progress is to be achieved through the agency of the nuns. The villagers do not appear to object to having ailments such as ringworm and have no desire to be cured of their traditional physical disorders if the price of the cure is higher than they are prepared to pay. To put it another way, they will not renounce their own way of life and their own native gods if the price to be paid is the imposition of an alien culture and a strange religion called Christianity. Aware that, like the brothers before them, the presence of the nuns is transient, the villagers claim the right to do and go where they please, and like the rebel nationalists in *The Last September*, they proceed with the assurance that the land they walk upon is their own.

Unnerved by this intransigence, which expresses itself less as outright hostility or opposition than as indifference to their presence, Sister Clodagh would deny the people the right to walk through the convent grounds, and just as she obscures the mountain by fitting curtains to the convent windows, she also asks Dean

⁶⁷BN, p. 20.

to remove the Sunnyasi from her sight.⁶⁸ But Dean insists on the natural rights of the holy man and the villagers. As he explains to Clodagh, the people are rather proud of their famous Sunnyasi, who is a much travelled, highly decorated hero:

He was the great General Kundra Rai with all sorts of titles and orders ... He'd been decorated by four foreign governments and he was asked to London for the Jubilee; Queen Victoria's I mean, not King George's. I've never heard him speak but they say he talked several European languages.⁶⁹

As things fall apart, the nuns' ideas of Christianity seem trivial alongside the spiritual wholeness of the holy man. Kundra Rai's conception of the cosmos, and of the relationship between human endeavour and the natural world, is utterly at odds with that of the nuns, who want to recreate the natural world and human nature in conformity with western practices. The holy man's religiosity, on the other hand, is of a wholly contemplative nature and, like the villagers, he appears indifferent to notions of social or natural transformation. The sisters' industry and commitment to social engineering are in contrast with his supreme passivity, his apparent lack of agency. But ultimately their diligence is all in vain, as it is the values that inhere in the holy man's spiritual contemplation of the eternal mountain that appear to be the stronger of the two warring belief systems.

It was a commonplace of imperial discourse that if the colonizers as rulers had faith in their own superiority and refused to surrender to local ways, then the subject peoples would inevitably surrender to them. In *Black Narcissus*, this does not happen. In the early period of the mission, Clodagh had believed that the nuns' efforts would prove successful. The school and the clinic had been well utilized by the villagers in what seemed to be an affirmation of the sisters' agenda, but this is

⁶⁸BN, pp. 59, 62-3.

⁶⁹BN, p. 62. General Ranajit was the Sunnyasi's brother and the old General's father. It was he who had leased the original palace/harem, not as a home for himself, but to house his concubines.

totally undermined by the knowledge that the old General had simply bribed the people to attend.⁷⁰ From this point on, the not-quite-colonial, not-quite-princely space becomes a site of highly ambivalent civilizational struggle. It is in the figure of the old General that Godden questions the paternalism of empire most effectively. Although usually white women are subordinated to the European male, they always remain dominant over the indigenous people of a colonized region. However, in Mopu, Toda Rai holds as much power over the nuns as he does over the villagers and Dean; it is he, not the British Empire, who is the supreme patriarch in Mopu, and who manipulates the situation both in the village and in the convent. Since the convent that the sisters occupy belongs to him, they live there at his discretion. Therefore, while the nuns rely on Dean as mediator, in the final instance it is to the General that they must defer. Nevertheless, while the apparent social and political freedom that the villagers enjoy may appear to undercut the imperial gaze, the people do not have total freedom, and neither in fact does the General, who in the end also occupies an anomalous position in Mopu. The villagers live and work on the General's tea plantation, which he, in turn, leases from the British. Built on a precipice, the convent looks down with a panoptical eye on the plantation. If we view the empire as the convent writ large, we can also see this as ensuring that here, as in the rest of India, all remains under the authoritative gaze of the Raj. Godden reinforces this when she undermines the General's authority and aspirations in her parody of his broken speech patterns: 'I be-lieve in pro-gress, Sis-ter Clo-dagh ... I call a hos-pital pro-gress, don't you?'⁷¹ In this way, the narrative invites the reader to view Toda Rai as a puppet, only allowed to remain *in situ* because the British found the rulers of such princely states useful political allies.

⁷⁰Macaulay strongly opposed the suggestion that Indian students should be paid to attend classes.

⁷¹*BN*, p. 38.

The old convent retainer is also caricatured. Angu Ayah's physical appearance is constructed as degenerate; she is 'brown and withered like a ginger root,' and as Clodagh gazes at this relict of the former harem, she is totally horrified by the familiarity Angu Ayah displays in her relationship to Dean: 'Ayah laughed ... and slapped him on the elbow as he passed. Sister Clodagh was shocked. A native to slap a European in that friendly familiar way!'⁷² In contrast, Godden's description of the young General's appearance fits the western fantasy of 'other' as overly exotic and feminine. Dilip Rai's clothing is over-elaborate, and the novel would appear to deride his educational aspirations when he approaches the convent elaborately dressed and heavily perfumed:⁷³

It was suddenly in these days of cold, that the young General Dilip Rai discarded his heavy cloth coat and came for his lesson in an achkan of corded white silk, buttoned with balls of gold ... each one as lovely as the last; a maize colour patterned with flowers in damask, a white brocade with a gold sprig; a dove grey satin and one with stripes worked entirely in petit point ... he changed his earrings every day and he smelled strongly of scent.⁷⁴

Dilip Rai reinforces his feminized stereotype when he insists: 'But you needn't count me as a man ... I'm only interested in studious things. I needn't count as a man.'⁷⁵ Yet the fact that he announces with pride that his perfume, 'Black Narcissus', is a cheap import purchased at the British Army and Navy store is Godden's way of ridiculing the notion of eastern exoticism and 'otherness.' As described in the novel, Dilip Rai's appearance is indeed exotic, but this is merely a façade; the young general's exoticism does not emanate from some innate Indian essence. Rather, it is an imperial fantasy, part of an 'imagined' India projected onto the native population by the colonizers. The paradox of the young General is that he wants the best of both

⁷²*BN*, pp. 34, 53.

⁷³Street, p. 88.

⁷⁴*BN*, p. 122.

⁷⁵*BN*, p. 91.

worlds. In a similar vein to the veterinarian Narayan, as we shall see in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Dilip Rai longs for what the British Empire has to offer yet ultimately is too weak to resist the sexual attractions of Kanchi, whom he wishes to claim as his own while refusing to make her his wife.⁷⁶ Like the Sunnyasi and the villagers, in his rejection of western norms, Dilip Rai finally renounces what the British Raj has to offer him and turns, literally, to the embrace of his ancestral culture. He proves unwilling to relinquish his belief in ancient Indian culture and soon conforms to the Eastern custom of an arranged marriage, while keeping Kanchi as his concubine.

This portrayal might seem to confirm the idea that Orientals are as impervious to European ideas of sexual control as to other kinds of 'improvement,' but here we are presented with yet another paradox. Dilip Rai's linguistic misunderstandings when he requests to be taught mathematics by the 'Mathematical Sister' and physics by the 'Physical Sister' might seem to make him a figure of mild ridicule.⁷⁷ In fact, however, the prince grows in stature in the novel when he ceases to accept the nuns' tutelage or to be a feminized Anglophile princeling and embraces his own Indian manners and customs. In other words, Godden does not deride Dilip Rai's return to Indian ancestral ways. On the contrary, she lends this return a degree of dignity that compels the reader's approval. Nevertheless, because the young Indian represents India's future in the novel, when he retreats into his oriental past, he wipes out the old General's hopes of implementing a programme of western progress in Mopu. Neither is Toda Rai entirely without blame, for in forbidding his nephew a Cambridge university education he denies the country a progressively

⁷⁶Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 38 (1984), pp. 125-33: 128.

⁷⁷*BN*, p. 92.

educated leadership, and so is also complicit in ensuring that India remains stuck in the condition of oriental stasis assigned to it by writers such as Katherine Mayo.⁷⁸

If the colonial subject-object binary is troubled by the way in which Godden presents Dilip Rai as a curious hybrid of eastern and western male sensuality, the depiction of Kanchi seems only to reassert and reinforce that binary. The young Indian girl is displayed as a prime example of a primitive native whose rampant sexuality needs to be controlled and contained.⁷⁹ Allowed to speak only through her blatant sensuousness, Kanchi has no voice in the narrative; like the Sunnyasi, her silence serves to highlight her fascinating ‘otherness’ to the European nuns and thus reinforces her inferior status as a colonized subject. Her silence also serves to underline her seductive ‘otherness’ and is in stark contrast to the increasingly hysterical voices of the repressed sisters. The young girl, the reader is informed, has been throwing herself at Mr. Dean, but his sexual appetite for native women is diminishing: ‘When you’ve shot everything ... it palls’, he had told Sister Laura.⁸⁰ Dean makes it quite clear to Clodagh that it is the sexual aspect of the young girl’s nature he expects her to control: ‘Isn’t it your business to save souls? I thought you might like to try your hand on this one.’⁸¹ Clodagh does not immediately try to impose her moral beliefs on Kanchi, and is sceptical of her request for conversion: ‘Almost too wonderful’, she tells Blanche, ‘you can teach her some Scripture if you like, providing her uncle doesn’t object.’ However, evangelism is part of the nuns’ vocation and it played a vital role in imperial hegemony, and thus Clodagh begins a translation of the Catechism into the local dialect, together with ‘some prayers and a

⁷⁸In *Mother India*, Mayo insisted that due to his excessive sexuality, the Indian male was unfit to rule his own country. In her opinion, India could not hope to progress unless it remained under the control of the Raj.

⁷⁹Robert Cross, ‘*Black Narcissus*: A Post-Colonial Empire Film?’ *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture*, 9.4 (2007), pp. 593-611: 563-564.

⁸⁰*BN*, p. 29. Sister Laura had accompanied Clodagh on her first exploratory trip to Mopu.

⁸¹*BN*, p. 70.

few easy hymns' as part of Kanchi's 'rehabilitation.'⁸² Placed alongside the life-denying stance of the holy man and the tormented celibacy of the nuns, and unburdened by an overlay of Christian notions of morality or repressed desires, Kanchi's sexuality can be seen as energetically life-affirming: 'She was like a basket of fruit, thought Clodagh, piled high and luscious and ready to eat ... the fruit was there to be eaten, she did not mean to let it rot.'⁸³ Clodagh is acutely aware of the danger of bringing Kanchi's unbridled sensuality into the world of the convent and the disruption this is likely to cause: 'How could she take this unwilling, ripe, breathing thing into her house?'⁸⁴ As her authority breaks down, Clodagh fails in her efforts to control Kanchi, who uses her raw sexuality to seduce Dilip Rai. Yet, unlike her colonial literary predecessors, Godden does not displace the nuns' complex sexuality onto the 'eroticized' natives; rather, the sexual nature of the relationship between Kanchi and Dilip Rai is presented as untroubled and natural.

The narrative makes it clear that we are to see Kanchi's relationship with Dilip Rai as the re-enactment in sexual terms of Clodagh's relationship with Con. That Clodagh's and Con's relationship had been consummated is disclosed in the novel when Clodagh tells Dean that she had 'shown I loved him.'⁸⁵ Clodagh has a dream in which 'Dilip and Con had held mirrors in the palms of their hands, and she had tried to attract them but could only echo what they said.'⁸⁶ Yet even though it is Dilip Rai that she associates with Con, it is Dean who reawakens feelings in Clodagh that she would rather keep repressed and it is he who finally makes her aware of herself once more as a sexual being. The tension-laden encounters between the pair mask their mutual attraction, which, if given the full expression displayed by the

⁸²*BN*, pp. 83-4.

⁸³*BN*, p. 69.

⁸⁴*BN*, p. 70.

⁸⁵*BN*, p. 158.

⁸⁶*BN*, pp. 68, 124.

young Indian couple, would destroy Clodagh's carefully constructed religious identity just as surely as Ruth is later destroyed by her increasingly uncontrolled desire for the agent. What we are given to understand here is that if Dilip Rai and Con are mirror images of each other, and Clodagh certainly sees them as such in her narcissistic dream — 'she had dreamed of them in one' — then this again blurs the colonizer/colonized relationship and brings into question the status of the young General as 'other.' Although not elaborated upon, it also introduces, however subtly, the vexed question of inter-racial relationships, a topic Godden had introduced in *The Lady and the Unicorn* (1937) and one that she would pursue, again somewhat tentatively, in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* (1942).

When Clodagh allows her past to invade her present, she loses the psychological will to exercise authority over both her missionaries and the villagers, and once the nuns lose their certain ground as colonizers, things rapidly fall apart. A crisis arises when Sister Honey ignores Mr. Dean's advice not to interfere in village affairs by treating a sick baby. Her inept idea of healthcare proves futile and the baby dies. The nuns and the convent are then boycotted by the villagers, and have to shut themselves in for fear of violent reprisals; a short time before, a child had been accidentally killed by a white man, who in turn had been killed by the villagers. This episode signals an inversion of the norm in colonial relations. When the villagers desert the convent, the sisters' work is shown to be irrelevant. Rather than the nuns altering the site of the palace and the lives of the natives in line with the imperial project, the site and the people alter not only the nuns' self-image of themselves as ministering angels, but also their faith in the entire imperial project. Without the peasants, they have no ministry, with all its connotations of philanthropy and power. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the sisters need the peasants more than the

peasants need the sisters. By analogy then, the suggestion is that Britain needed India more than India did Britain.

The crisis precipitated by the sister's naive medical intervention might suggest that Godden's novel conforms to a wider strain of colonial discourse that attributed the demise of the British Empire to the failure of its women to adapt to the imperial mission. In this discourse, the empire was held to be on strongest grounds in its earliest days when its agents were almost entirely male and mingled freely with colonial subjects. Later, when the colonies were more established and more women settled there, the white enclave became more self-enclosed and cut off from native society. European women were then held responsible for the construction and maintenance of informal colonial manichean ideology, and thus blamed for widening the chasm between colonizer and colonized.⁸⁷ *Black Narcissus* conforms to this discourse in some ways. Mr. Dean, for example, is an 'old-style' male agent of empire who mixes freely with native women and who thus has intimate knowledge of local ways. The nuns, in contrast, represent a more feminized 'new style' of imperial rule, but, while they have a discipline and conviction that the more cynical Dean lacks, they are also ignorant of Mopu society and are thus unable to secure local affections.

In the debacle of the nuns' medical intervention, *Black Narcissus* succeeds in questioning the false rationale that Britain's civilizing mission was undertaken for the good of the native people. The novel queries the possible benefits of missionary enterprise in improved education and advanced medical care for the people of India. It seems to suggest that the people of Mopu, who by western standards are hopelessly backward, would nonetheless be utterly changed to their detriment if

⁸⁷For the discourse that blamed women for the failure of empire, see Sharp, pp. 1-23, Strobel, pp. 1-15, and Beverley Gartrell, 'Colonial Wives: Villains or Victims?', in *The Incorporated Wife*, Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener, eds. (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 165-185.

forced to accept European values. In dealing with the futility of forcing progress in India, the novel addresses the question first addressed by Forster in 1924, and again by George Orwell in *Burmese Days* (1934). These novels express the structures of feeling characteristic of the eras of doubt and melancholy described by Greenberger. The defining feature of these eras, Greenberger argues, is characterized by a lack of faith in the assimilation of the Orient into Western culture.⁸⁸ What Godden points up is an acknowledgement that as colonizers, the Anglo-Indian community simply did not fit in, and like the nuns, it too would eventually be simply 'brushed away,' a point already elaborated by Bowen in her portrayal of the Anglo-Irish in *The Last September*. Godden was undoubtedly aware of contemporary political issues in India and the narrative suggests that without willing and grateful subjects, the Raj's justification for imperialism was void, and in such circumstances there should be no need for the continuation of a ruling colonial presence. This fatalistic sense of crisis becomes evident in Sister Ruth's increasingly reckless behaviour.

As the other nuns become seduced by the Himalayan landscape, Ruth becomes possessed by it, and while they struggle for self-control and either seek a transfer, as in the case of Philippa, or come to their senses as Clodagh eventually will, Ruth goes insane. Mother Dorothea had already explained to Clodagh that Ruth was fragile: 'she hasn't been well.'⁸⁹ We soon come to understand that Ruth's illness is psychosexual and that her hysterical misbehaviour is a manifestation of her inability to cope with a celibate life, with all its connotations of repressed sexuality. When Clodagh rebukes her, suggesting that she has been 'thinking too much of Mr. Dean,' Ruth quickly snaps back at her: 'All the same, I notice you're very pleased to

⁸⁸Greenberger, p. 160.

⁸⁹*BN*, p. 10.

see him yourself!’⁹⁰ The accusation is true, but unlike the frankly sexual young Indian couple, neither Clodagh nor Dean can possibly admit to such an attraction and as a result they become trapped in a denial of what Kanchi and Dilip Rai feel is part of nature’s way. In psychological terms, Ruth is essentially a displacement of the unacknowledged desire of Clodagh and Dean for each other. They cannot speak this yearning, but Ruth represents an unbridled desire that transgresses all bounds and that does speak itself, only to be horribly punished for so doing and to be evicted from the narrative thereafter.

In *Black Narcissus*, as in all colonial writings, the depiction of white imperialism is embedded within a primitivist representation of colonized men and women.⁹¹ It is important, however, to recognize ambivalences within Godden’s fiction, because in this novel, there is a blurring of otherwise rigid colonial subject-object relations. From the moment he arrived at the convent, the young General had seemed very beautiful to all the nuns, except Ruth, for whom Dilip Rai becomes an object of appalled fascination. The perfume that he wears suggests an exotic flower typical of the Orient, the total opposite of the English flowers that Sister Philippa hopes to cultivate in the convent garden. Its pungent smell makes Ruth’s head reel, and she scorns Dilip Rai’s attempts at self-improvement: ‘He’s so vain,’ she mocked, ‘like a peacock, a fine black peacock. I’m going to call him Black Narcissus.’⁹² Heretofore, Freud’s pre-oedipal, or oceanic, stages of human development have been projected by the nuns onto the native people, but the growing tension between Ruth and Clodagh culminates in the resurfacing of Ruth’s sexual and essential ‘self.’ For

⁹⁰*BN*, pp. 109-10.

⁹¹Torgovnick, p. 15.

⁹²*BN*, pp. 122-123. As its name suggests, the narcissus is perceived in the West as a symbol of vanity. The irony, of course, is that being equally at home in England and India, it is precisely the flower that Philippa ought to cultivate in the convent garden.

all her racist disdain, gazing at the 'primitive' body can unleash dangerous and forbidden desires. As Torgovnick writes:

Fascination with the primitive can nurture forbidden desires to question or escape western norms ... It can nourish intense desires to void the idea of the autonomous self and merge or connect with life sources ... Such desires are often identified in western thinking with what Freud called the 'pre-Oedipal' or 'oceanic' stages of human development, by which he meant fetal, infantile, or what he saw as 'regressive' states in which individuals do not perceive the boundaries of the 'self' and the inevitability of subject-object relations.⁹³

Far from being repulsed by Dilip Rai, Ruth's disgust is a hysterical disavowal of the attraction she instinctively feels towards the young prince. Since such feelings are taboo, she displaces her libidinal longings onto Dean in feelings that are made manifest in her unremitting advances towards the horrified agent. Whereas Dilip Rai's perfume had filled her with revulsion, the scent of Dean's rugged male odours fills her with passion:

The dusty smell of the pony, and the smell of leather and tea and tobacco and sweat and eau-de-Cologne that came from him filled her nostrils. She shut her eyes and humbly kissed the back of his hand among the chestnut hairs ... 'I can't help it ... I love you. I want to be with you always.'⁹⁴

Dean rejects Ruth's unremitting sexual advances outright: 'Sister!' he cried in horror. 'Sister! Stop it. How can you! What on earth are you doing? You can't behave like this.'⁹⁵ In the British Empire, abandoning civilized behaviour by 'going native' is tolerated, even allowable on occasion, in male colonizers such as Dean, but is strictly forbidden for the female. In her depiction of Ruth's descent into madness, Godden makes manifest western hysteria about the unthinkable effects of a decadent Orient on Europeans, and on European women in particular. The sex-crazed young nun becomes a figure for a nightmarish fear of loss of control and the narrative

⁹³Torgovnick, p. 15. It is interesting to note Torgovnick's observation that because Freud viewed the 'oceanic' as a form of death wish, he was hostile towards such experiences.

⁹⁴*BN*, p. 188.

⁹⁵*BN*, p. 188.

attaches to her a sense of horror about the dangers of desire unleashed, for besides transgressing the religious code of her vocation, Ruth has also transgressed the very code of civilization itself, and has blurred all boundaries between East and West. In so doing, she experiences, not so much the spiritual register of ecstasy demanded by her vocation, but the sexual register of ecstasy normally assigned by the colonizers to natives such as Dilip Rai and Kanchi. As Anh Hua explains it, in Freudian terms, when Ruth abandons the struggle with her repressed sexuality, she transgresses the boundaries of the 'self', and allows herself to merge with the oceanic and ecstatic, with disastrous consequence.⁹⁶ For while Kanchi's sexuality is depicted as natural and even positive, the young nun's desire for Mr. Dean is conveyed as wantonly pathological. Such lack of restraint, it is implied, can only lead to disaster. Ruth thus functions as the embodiment of the dangers inherent in Clodagh's sexual repression. But in acting out Clodagh's desire for Dean, Ruth also bears the consequences of her superior's denial. The unstable nun becomes Clodagh's 'doppelganger,' the rampant Id to Clodagh's controlling Ego. Simply put, she is Clodagh's psychological and sexual alter ego, her 'second self,' the person Clodagh might have been with Con in Ireland. But Clodagh had repressed that sexuality when she left Ireland, and, sublimating it, had displaced it into something higher and, in her estimation, more noble — her vocation as an agent of Christ and of the British Empire.

Ruth's transgressive behaviour situates her in what Homi Bhabha calls a third, or interstitial space of conventional Manichean polarities.⁹⁷ In having Ruth blur these imperial dichotomies, Godden draws our attention to the impossibility of the British Empire's rigid binary categories, and insists on the tormented, troubled ambivalence of the imperial process itself. Yet if Ruth's disastrously uncontrolled

⁹⁶Anh Hua, 'Primitive Spectacle in *Black Narcissus*', *Journal of Social and Political Thought*, 1. 2 (June, 2000), pp. 1-20: 15.

⁹⁷Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 269.

sexuality represents one kind of danger to the western imperial conception of things, the narrative suggests that the repression of sexual desire also exacts a terrible cost, for in the struggle between the polarities of piety and passion, good and evil, rational and irrational, in keeping with the classic tradition of the 'doppelganger' only one of the pair can survive the encounter with the other. Ruth's behaviour, as we shall also see in the female protagonist of *The Grass is Singing*, is identified with the inadmissible permissiveness of the 'other' and cannot therefore be allowed to triumph.

Because she is a nun, a bride of Christ, Ruth's resurgent sexuality is rendered as a sort of demonic possession. However, paradoxically, her death may be seen as a distortion of the crucifixion of Christ. In her derangement, as she tries to push Clodagh over the convent precipice, the ground beneath her feet gives way gives way and she herself plunges to her death. Impaled on a bed of cut bamboo, Ruth ironically achieves the penetration she had longed for and been denied in life:

She had fallen where they had been cutting the bamboos.
Her hand and veil were flung curiously sideways. A spike
had driven through her chest, holding her up with her head
hanging down.⁹⁸

The imagery of phallic impalement here is clear: Ruth's demented desire is associated with an eroticized death wish that culminates in a kind of grotesque ecstasy. But as Clodagh places both herself and her Christianity in direct conflict with Ruth and her demonic associations, the power of her superior intellect and her determined superego ensure her survival and save her from Ruth's terrible fate. Viewed in psychoanalytical terms, the 'self' needs its 'other' to define its identity. Just as Jane Eyre needs Bertha Mason as 'other,' and just as Bertha has to die in order that Jane might at last define her own identity, so Ruth must die in order that

⁹⁸BN, p. 205.

Clodagh can redefine and rescue her faltering religious identity. In some respects then, Ruth's death has been cathartic, for by acting out Clodagh's rage at her sense of loss and helplessness, she has liberated her from her repressed past. In the end, no longer in denial and no longer haunted by memories of Con, Clodagh consciously consigns both her sexuality and her lost youth to her past in Ireland.

However, while she succeeds in controlling her own sexuality, Clodagh fails on both counts to safeguard those entrusted to her care, for besides being responsible for controlling Kanchi's sexuality, as Sister Superior, she had also been responsible for controlling Ruth's. Distancing herself from the entire missionary project, Clodagh abdicates responsibility for both young women. Abandoning Ruth's burial place to Dean's care, she also tells the young General: 'Kanchi doesn't belong to me ... It can be nothing to do with us now.'⁹⁹ Godden appears to intend these decisive acts to be read as metaphors for a British Empire about to relinquish responsibility for its actions in India.

IV

Although the novel's focus on female characters marks a clear break with earlier male-dominated Anglo-Indian novels, Godden is nonetheless constrained by the imperial framework in which she lived and worked. The radical gender shift in *Black Narcissus* does not signal a sea-change in the way the structure and values of the British Empire are represented. Rather, it is the method of colonial intervention that Godden questions, not the imperial idea itself, and this is depicted in her treatment of the male colonizer, Dean, *vis-à-vis* the sisters. Dean sees from the start

⁹⁹*BN*, p. 212.

that the nuns' insistence on civilizing the natives has no hope of success. As a 'superior' white male, his experience and rationality enable him to predict the failure of the nuns' imperial mission, while the 'hysterical' white females lack such insight. Nonetheless, the vindication of Dean's predictions may be seen merely to represent the triumph of one form of western intervention over another in Mopu.¹⁰⁰ While he objects to the nuns' mission intruding on his lifestyle, Dean himself is not free from colonial attitudes, either in his one-dimensional view of the villagers as children or in his cavalier sexual attitude towards the colonized women. In this and other respects his presence is extremely significant, especially since he represents a class of Englishman who has learned to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the remoteness of the Himalayan region.¹⁰¹ Like Hugo Montmorency in *The Last September*, he asks nothing more than to remain in Mopu forever.

Yet even as Godden presents Dean as the antithesis of the imperial hero of earlier fiction, in the end, the novel is underpinned by all the hallmarks of a masculinist, imperial, perspective.¹⁰² For although infantilized, and therefore, in colonial terms, feminized, in some areas, Dean's role in the text is never entirely negated. He may well have gone against the norm by giving into the land and the people, but while the nuns are displaced in their environment and are depicted either as hysterical like Ruth, or repressed and controlled like Clodagh, Dean is always comfortably at home in his role as an imperial agent. As Ella Shohat points out, while the narrative is largely focalized through the nuns, the textual norms in *Black Narcissus* are ultimately embodied by the British man. It is through Dean's voice that we hear the history of Mopu, its palace, its people, and their customs; it is from

¹⁰⁰Street, p. 59.

¹⁰¹Street, p. 59. In this respect we can compare Mr. Dean to Flory in Orwell's *Burmese Days*. While he does not 'go native' in the manner of Dean, Flory too has a sexual relationship with a native woman.

¹⁰²See Cross, p. 12.

him that we hear the story of the mute Sunnyasi and Kanchi, and it is Dean, not the sisters, who remains to carry on, if only in the short term, the faltering imperial presence in the Himalayas.¹⁰³ His continuing civilian presence in Mopu is an indication that despite her critical stance, Godden still believes in some form of benevolent British presence in India. In the figure of Dean, Godden appears to advocate an agent who will act as an intermediary during the transition from dependency to independence, but without feeling the compulsion to engage in any modernizing endeavours: despite his position as agent on the tea plantation, Dean is never proactive in pushing progress forward, as does the more dynamic Charles Pool in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*.

By turning his back on the imperial enterprise, Dean stands alongside Dilip Rai and the old General in allowing a state of stasis to remain in India. Moreover, like the nuns, he never engages in any meaningful dialogue with the villagers either. He merely accepts the status quo and, like the Sunnyasi, albeit in a cynical manner, also surrenders himself to the stream of time. In this respect Godden would appear to be in agreement with Mayo's insistence that Indians were not capable of self-government, that left to rule themselves the people would allow the country to return to the state of 'barbarity' in which the British had found it. Yet despite his paternalism and arrogance, Godden employs Dean's authoritative figure as a foil to the female 'hysteria' induced in the nuns by their surroundings. Dean's overt masculinity, his rejection of Ruth, and his denial of his attraction to Clodagh — 'I don't love anyone,' he shouts at Ruth — also place him as a controlled alternative to the feminized, and sexually incontinent Dilip Rai.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, p. 166, quoted in Street p. 57.

¹⁰⁴*BN*, p. 193.

It can be argued that Ruth's death fulfils the need for retribution, that in the wake of the Indian baby's death a balance has been achieved that, in metaphorical terms, cancels things out and thus absolves the damage caused by imperialism. Yet while Godden acknowledges the imminent demise of the British Empire in *Black Narcissus*, nowhere, either here or in her other writings on India, does she actually condemn the enterprise. It is evident, however sympathetic her stance in the novel, that Godden fits JanMohamed's profile of otherwise enlightened colonial writers who cannot help but succumb to the Manichean dichotomy. In her treatment of the Indian villagers, this racism is perhaps unconscious, but at the same time evident in the language her narrator assigns to Sister Briony: 'I wouldn't go close to those coolies, if I were you. Look at that man with the fork, I'm sure he's not safe.'¹⁰⁵ This lack of trust in the native workers reflects wider British anxieties regarding their fate as India moves inexorably towards Independence. The language employed thus draws attention to the impossibility of friendship between colonizer and colonized that is evident in *A Passage to India*. Godden's text does not suggest that the polarities between the two cultures should be celebrated, but the intervening years have not eliminated any of the obstacles to friendship that had been explored by Forster's characters. The barriers to friendship with the British will not fall until India's independence in 1947.

V

Coupled with the baby's death, Ruth's fall is the culmination of events that finally overwhelm the disorientated sisters. The nuns, like the empire itself, define

¹⁰⁶BN, p. 178.

their collective identity through their work ethic. When the peasants desert them following the death of the baby, without the villagers to minister to, the nuns are set adrift. Finding it impossible to adapt themselves to either the inhabitants or the geography of what they have experienced as an alien and hostile region, they realize that they have no choice but to retreat.¹⁰⁶ The nuns eventually come to realize that their efforts are in vain, that their presence, like the monks before them, is superfluous. Within philanthropy are embedded notions of patriarchy and power and here, once again, Godden undercuts the imperial mission. The project, so the official rhetoric went, was undertaken for the good of the colonial subjects; this was its justification. The sisters now have no ministry, and therefore no identity. Without willing subjects then, there should be no need for a continuing colonial presence.

Although the double tragedy provides the catalyst for their retreat, it cannot mask the deeper reason for the failure of the convent to make an impact on the lives of the villagers. The underlying reason lies in the sisters' mistaken idealism; they had come to Mopu for the wrong reasons and because of this they lack any hope of success. However well intentioned, the nuns' educational and medical enterprises are useless and have no value in a place such as Mopu. By refusing to come to terms with the culture of the indigenous people, they have not only failed, but have actually caused harm. As we have seen, rather than changing Mopu and its inhabitants, rather than retaining the sense of 'Britishness' so important to the colonial endeavour, the opposite occurs; the nuns are changed by their surroundings, while the people of Mopu continue the pattern of their lives uninterrupted and uncontaminated. The withdrawal of the missionaries therefore, may be seen as Britain's failure to

¹⁰⁶Ironically, Christian missions often attracted their greatest followings in places such as Mopu, where the connection to imperial authority was least in evidence. However, dissenting, low church, and non-British missions flourished while missions too closely connected to the Anglican establishment faltered. See Frykenberg, p. 107.

anglicize the ancient land of the Himalayan Indians. The novel concludes with a telling scene of farewell:

They thought Ayah was longing to be rid of them. 'You want us to go, don't you, Ayah?'

But Ayah answered, 'Yes and no.' For once she did not seem quite certain what she wanted. 'I thought I would be glad and so I am,' she said. 'I hoped you'd go and quickly too, and now I'm sorry. Yes, in a way I'm sorry. But I'll soon get over that,' she added cheerfully.

'I'm sure you will,' said Sister Clodagh. 'You'll have forgotten all about us, and if anyone speaks of us, you'll wonder who we were. You don't remember things for long here, do you?' 'Why should we?' asked Ayah. 'And yet,' she said, 'I remember my Srimati Devi here. I don't know why that is. You are better to me than she was, but she belongs here and you don't.'¹⁰⁷

This passage suggests that unlike Ayah and Srimati Devi, whose presence, like the concubines, has endured, as the monks before them had vanished, so too the nuns will soon be forgotten. As a symbol of Christianity, their strange convent and the way of life they would impose on the people is simply a colonial palimpsest. Just as the nuns had tried to create an ascetic institution from the remnants of a palace given over to sexual licence, so too the British had tried to establish dominion and a Protestant work ethic in a part of the world alien to their nature and temperament. Simply put, the British have no roots in India; it is not their country and they are not welcome. Under the circumstances, the best that can be hoped for, for both the sisters and Empire, is a dignified, strategic, withdrawal.

Still, while the enterprise at Mopu is a failure, Clodagh is made whole by her experiences there; in this sense at least, the mission has been redemptive. For if, as with the dynamics of Brontë's text, Ruth has to die in order that Clodagh may survive, then Clodagh's emotional recovery, like Jane's, must be complete. Clodagh's initial sense of hubris gives way to a consciousness that, like the flawed

¹⁰⁷*BN* pp. 209-210. Srimati Devi is the old General's sister, and Angu Ayah's former mistress. She had been disowned by her husband for her bad sexual behaviour, but had been allowed to live in the palace/harem with her children, among who was Dilip Rai. The suggestion is that this is Kanchi's future; this is what she returns to.

aspirations of Britain's imperial enterprise, she had been overly ambitious in her missionary zeal. The Sister Superior now becomes humble and wise:

In these long sad days something strange was happening to Sister Clodagh. She thought it was as if she were born again; as if at the end of their time at Mopu had come the birth of a new Clodagh, a birth out of death. First there had been the days when she had dreamed and drifted, her life shaping itself to the old dreams of Con with the little sharpness of reminders from the young General and Mr. Dean; then the days had become altogether sharp and she had striven with intensity and agony. Now all that had fallen away; she was defenceless and unencumbered as a new-born child. She had no pretences, no ambitions and no pride; she hardly had an identity. She was not Sister Clodagh any longer, she was a new, not very certain Clodagh, and it seemed to her that she had new eyes and a new understanding.¹⁰⁸

Whereas her first meeting with Mr. Dean had been hostile, when she bids him farewell, Clodagh can engage with him in companionate banter on an equal footing. The pride and hubris with which she set out on her mission has been replaced by a new humility and a self-awareness which allows her to accept the failure of her mission and also to admit to her own personal failings. This seems to suggest that, like Clodagh, the British in India had once been too sure of themselves, but they have been chastened by experience and have emerged with, in Godden's view, some dignity at least. In other words, if *Black Narcissus* is to be read as a metaphor for Britain's eventual withdrawal from India, then, as Ian Christie observes, Clodagh retreats to the convent in Calcutta in noble defeat, with her vocation and her sense of 'self' intact.¹⁰⁹ Clodagh had tried her best; there was nothing more she could do, and therefore she cannot be faulted for her honest endeavours. As the British Empire itself will try to do in the Indian situation, she attempts a rational retreat from something she had never wholly owned and had never managed fully to understand. In this way, through the figure of Clodagh, Godden suggests that the political

¹⁰⁸BN, pp. 206-207.

¹⁰⁹Ian Christie, *Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p.61.

collapse of empire may nonetheless yield a kind of moral wisdom and self-renewal. We may take it then, that rather than conceding the violence of or exploitation of empire, and rather than searching for forgiveness, what Godden ultimately seeks is redemption for the lofty ideals of the British Empire and its emissaries, and that this is to be found, again metaphorically, in the recovered personage of Clodagh. To the Sister Superior, and so to an empire drawing to a close, belongs, in Godden's terms, a limited moral victory.

While my reading suggests that *Black Narcissus* may be read as an allegory of imperial decline and disillusion, I do not want to suggest that Godden intended to write a consciously anti-imperial text. The construction of the novel, both in terms of its discourses and its plot devices, suggests that Godden had indeed come to view the British mission in India as ill-conceived and futile. But the novel also serves to redeem the British Raj in several respects, most obviously by constructing it in terms of a benevolent and well-intentioned 'feminized' mission of improvement that, despite their best efforts, goes badly wrong. The nuns' mission to Mopu ultimately fails for a variety of reasons, some of which stem from the intractability of the natives and their refusal to adapt to European ways, others that arise from the nuns' inability to govern their own repressed emotions and sexual desires once they come in contact with the more frankly libidinal landscape of undomesticated and 'uncivilized' India. What we get in *Black Narcissus*, in other words, is a narrative in which British political failure in India is converted into a tale of sexual failure. Things fall apart because the local Indians are too primal to be domesticated into good British subjects, and because the force of the local landscape is ultimately so strong that even the well-intentioned British subjects themselves come apart at the seams and threaten to 'go native.' Confronted with the chaos of desire beyond all

governance, the nuns have no option but to admit defeat. The failure of the empire thus appears to be both the failure of good intentions and a consequence of British hubris or excessive self-confidence in their own powers. Like the nuns, the British fail in the end because they do not really know India or themselves as well as they ought to have done.

Chapter Three

A Passion for Alteration:

Rumer Godden's *Breakfast with the Nikolides*

I

The action of *Breakfast with the Nikolides* shifts from the mountain landscape of *Black Narcissus* to the agrarian plains of Bengal, yet the reader experiences in this novel the same keen sense of timeless Indian culture and tradition evident in Godden's earlier novel. However, the author's concern here is not with the timelessness of India and its recalcitrance to European modernization, but with the imperative for progress that she had tentatively explored in *Black Narcissus* through the evangelizing mission of empire and that she now treats with a heightened sense of urgency as Indian independence draws ever closer. In *Black Narcissus*, attempts to impose progressive European ideas on India had proved futile because such ideas had no value in the day-to-day lives of the Himalayan villagers. Now, with British hegemony about to end, this later novel portrays a country reluctantly beginning to admit the imperative to adopt new technology if it is to survive in a modern post-colonial world. At the same time, there is a strong feeling that India must struggle to retain its ancient traditions. Thus *Breakfast with the Nikolides* expresses a desire, not for the total abandonment of everything old in India, but for a selective inclusion of new sciences, while also stressing the need to find a space in which to accommodate ancient customs.

Thus, the motif of change permeates *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, assuming a far greater importance than had been the case in either of Godden's previous Indian novels.¹ As we have discussed, the villagers in *Black Narcissus* choose to adhere to their old customs rather than to submit to change. Similarly, *The Lady and the Unicorn* (1937) had failed to anticipate change because Godden had allowed her characters to

¹Godden's first novel was *Chinese Puzzle* (1936).

become preoccupied with phantoms of the past rather than deal with the prospect of an uncertain future.² However, in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* there is a heightened atmosphere of progression, stimulated by Godden's anxiety to point out the necessity for change before Britain inevitably hands over power to India. Therefore, the novel examines the antagonistic relationship between modern ideas of science and technology and the archaic culture of India's ancient civilization. Yet even as Godden employs her familiarity with the country and its customs to explore the possibility of assimilating new techniques into the timeless traditions of the native population, her personal struggle with her ingrained orientalist view of India becomes evident throughout the narrative. In this chapter, I argue that Godden's attitude to progress in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is mixed and ambiguous, and operates at two levels of meaning. On one level, the novel may be read as a work of psychological realism, dealing with issues of domestic strife and violence on both sides of the cultural divide, while on another level it may also be read as an allegory of imperial decline. Since the figurative and the more psychological levels do not link up in any obvious way, the interest, and indeed dilemma, of this radical novel lies in trying to tease out the connections between them.

The main male protagonist in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is Charles Pool, an agricultural expert who struggles to promote modern farming methods among the Indian peasants. However, in contrast to the British agents of improvement portrayed in so much earlier Anglo-Indian fiction, Charles is a deeply flawed figure; he is a man with great ambition and commitment to India but also one given to violent and destructive rages. In the grip of one of these rages, Charles has proved a violent husband who has beaten and raped his wife. He possesses, then, the drive and determination of the heroes

²*The Lady and the Unicorn* explores the plight of the Eurasian, or mixed race, community in India.

of earlier colonial fiction but his irrational impulses clearly signal to the reader that something is seriously amiss with the colonial representatives of empire. Furthermore, just as Godden undercuts conventional images of the imperial improver in the figure of Charles, likewise her female protagonist, Louise Pool, also departs from the usual conventions that govern the depiction of British heroines in colonial literature. Louise is a misfit and unlikely heroine and not at all like the noble self-sacrificing women portrayed in *Black Narcissus*. Unlike the zealous nuns, Louise has no sense of philanthropy or vocation; India, and the native peasants who spend their lives in abject poverty, are objects of her scorn and disgust, rather than of her concern. Rather, we can discern similarities between Louise and Lady Naylor of Bowen's *The Last September*, for even though she is a mother, Louise lacks a nurturing aspect to her character. Moreover, since she is also financially dependent, she finds herself in similar circumstances to Lois Farquar, for where Lois is helpless against Lady Naylor's bullying tactics, so too Louise finds herself at the mercy of Charles. However, unlike Lois, who meekly submits to her aunt's will, Louise refuses to be compliant and instead reacts with defiant rage towards her subjugated status by refusing to fulfil the role expected of her as an 'incorporated wife.' Imperial mores dictated that the sole function of the Englishwoman was to marry an Englishman whose entire life was dedicated to the service of the empire, and with few exceptions, such as unmarried missionaries or the nuns of *Black Narcissus*, for instance, the *memsahib*, like the women of Forster's *A Passage to India*, derived her identity and social status from her husband's position.³ Refusing to fulfil this role ensures that the pattern of Louise's life does not fit that

³For the role expected of a colonial wife see Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener, eds., *The Incorporated Wife* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

expected of an English *memsahib*. Therefore, like Lois, she finds herself intransitive, without a goal in life. Despite being an able and intelligent woman, Louise is shown to be difficult and headstrong, a mother who makes grave mistakes with her children and whose judgement is, at a crucial point in the novel, distorted by her racist attitudes to Indians. In this at least, we can say that Louise displays some of the features of a typical *memsahib*, since we observe in her the same lack of empathy with the indigenous population, also evident in Forster's text, that had led to the persistent accusation against Anglo-Indian women that they were a destructive force responsible for poisoning the relationship between the British Empire and India.⁴ Representing two troubling aspects of colonialism — the racist *memsahib* and the paternalistic but rigidly controlling imperialist — Charles and Louise Pool are flawed individuals living together in an angry and uneasy relationship, whose portrayal in the novel poses some vexing questions.

If the narrative is troubled by its depiction of Charles and Louise, its characterization of their young daughter, Emily, is also problematic. One way to understand Emily would be to see her as a figure representing Godden's hope for a new mode of British management of India. She is Indian-born and, unlike her mother, loves the country; as such, Emily may express Godden's desire for a mode of British imperial authority more attuned to Indian sensitivities. In many ways, *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is about Emily's maturation from dependency on her parents to adolescence as she negotiates her way, like India, towards adulthood and eventual autonomy. This reading is frustrated however, since Emily will fail to fulfil the promise of her youth and innocence when she takes on board her mother's fear of contamination by India. Even to

⁴I follow Godden and Lassner in applying the term 'Anglo-Indian' to British colonizers. Following independence, the term became applicable to people of a mixed Indian and European identity. See Lassner, p. 212, n.1.

the casual reader of *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, the disturbed state of the Pool family is enough to signal that the Anglo-Indian world of Godden's imagination is a deeply troubled one. In short, in a similar vein to *The Last September* and *Black Narcissus*, this novel is not one of imperial confidence but one of imperial crisis.

What must be reconciled in this novel is Godden's complex portrayal of Charles as both a rapist and as a supposedly rational, enlightened imperialist. Early writers of high imperialism never offered a negative vision of the imperial mission by depicting a rape perpetrated by a European male, nor indeed did they ever depict a spousal rape; this would be unthinkable. On the contrary, ever since the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, rumours of the rape of white women by the Indian male had abounded and stories of this 'black peril' were employed by numerous Anglo-Indian writers, not only to uphold the necessity of empire, but also to justify orientalist conceptions of the Indian population.⁵ This rape motif was ubiquitous in Anglo-Indian discourse but what makes its presence in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* so compellingly subversive is Godden's reworking of the trope so that it becomes a marital rape within a European marriage. As Katherine Mayo's controversial *Mother India* makes clear, and as we have observed in Mr. Dean's horrified reaction to Sister Ruth's advances in *Black Narcissus*, colonial discourse typically ascribed sexual mistreatment of women not to British but to Indian men. As we shall see, by juxtaposing Charles's rape of Louise with the false accusation of sexual assault on Emily against a young Indian student, Godden exposes the colonial double standard that attributed sexual licence and sexual violence towards women solely to the Indian male. In so doing, her narrative also uncovers the uncomfortable truth that

⁵For the effect of these rumours on the Anglo-Indian community's relationship with India, see Sharpe, pp. 1-23, Strobel, pp. 1-15, and M.K. Naik, *Mirror on the Wall: Images of India and the Englishman in Anglo-Indian Fiction* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1991), pp. 34-45.

the British Raj continually attempted to justify its exploitative rule in India by persistent reference to the myth of a 'black peril' and, furthermore, that Anglo-Indian writers were complicit in this discourse. Placing a British protagonist who has raped his wife, a wife who is herself a racist, at the centre of her fiction, ensures that Godden goes further perhaps than almost any other British writer in her transgression of the conventional norms of the colonial novel. Indeed, given the state of turmoil in India when she wrote *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Godden's treatment of the topic could be read as an attempt to undermine an established sense of British superiority. However, this potential subversiveness is undercut, or thwarted, by the narrative's treatment of sexual relations between the races. As JanMohamed notes of otherwise sympathetic colonial writers, Godden falls within the category of those who succumb to a narrative organization based on Manichean racial oppositions. The author may introduce the topic, but she can no more allow an actual inter-racial rape to take place within her narrative than can Forster in *A Passage to India*.⁶ M.K. Naik observes that it is only from a distance of almost two decades from the collapse of the Raj that Paul Scott, in *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), can write of an actual rape perpetrated by a native on a European woman.⁷

In fact, the lack of an indigenous voice leaves a significant gap in early colonial fiction. We do not find fully rounded non-Europeans, for instance, in the fiction of Kipling, Conrad, or even Orwell. These writers provide an account of colonialism strictly from the point of view of the colonizers, usually male. If there are indigenous characters in their fiction, they are either objectified or presented as exotic stereotypes;

⁶See JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory', p. 61.

⁷Naik, pp. 44-45.

there is no depiction of them as fully realized human beings, and certainly no account is taken of their reaction to their colonized status.⁸ Forster had made some attempt to portray the Indian doctor, Aziz, as a fully-realized fictional character, but although, crucially, the narrative makes clear Aziz's negative feelings towards the British following his trial, this hostility is either mediated through the voice of Fielding, or related to the reader through that of the omniscient narrator, not through Aziz's own voice. Throughout the novel, Aziz is portrayed as a 'type,' a typical Macaulay 'mimic man.' His function in *A Passage to India* is to offset, or highlight, the caring side of the Raj in the person of Cyril Fielding, in contrast to the unsympathetic and harsh imperialism of Ronnie Heaslop.

However, in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Godden attempts to provide a more balanced account of the colonial experience by the introduction of fully realized Indian characters. She had, of course, introduced indigenous characters in *Black Narcissus* — the exotic and lascivious native girl, the feminized oriental prince, the ascetic holy man and the wizened old hag — but these are also stock characters, or 'types,' deployed merely as objects of justification for the so-called civilizing mission. As we have seen, the narrative focus in *Black Narcissus* is directed towards the missionary nuns; at no point in the novel is the reader provided with any sense of access to the interior lives of the indigenous people. In *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Godden cannot be accused of the false consciousness of *Black Narcissus* or of earlier colonial fiction; that is, of a failure to fully represent the reactions of her Indian characters through their own voices. The

⁸For example, in Kipling's *Kim* (1901), the Lama is Kim's "trove," of which he 'proposed to take possession.' In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Marlow's helmsman is referred to as a piece of machinery, Kurtz's African mistress as a piece of statuary. In Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), Flory's concubine is portrayed as a prostitute, bought from her parents for three hundred rupees.

significance of this, and what makes this text pivotal to colonial studies, is that for the first time in Anglo-Indian fiction we are provided with access to the interior lives of Indian characters, through their own voices. By allowing her Indian characters to speak for themselves, Godden allows, as the phrase has it, her subalterns to speak and thus provides them with a narrative status approaching that of the European protagonists.

Nonetheless, Godden clearly identifies herself with the empire-builders and those deemed responsible for its maintenance. As noted in the previous chapter, in Orwell's *Burmese Days*, the character Flory believes that the Raj should be more honest and simply admit to its exploitation of the Indian subcontinent.⁹ Godden reacted strongly to such a notion, and especially to Jawaharlal Nehru's declaration that Britain had left India socially and economically stunted.¹⁰ Godden's biographer, Anne Chisholm, writes that 'underneath Rumer's detachment from politics and her dislike of the conventions and repressions of British society in India was a strong sense of pride in what people like her father had achieved in India and given to India.'¹¹ Since self-rule for India was fast becoming a reality, in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* Godden reiterates the same belief in some form of British presence in India after independence, such as the administrative roles played by her father and others, that in *Black Narcissus* she had cautiously registered through the character of Mr. Dean. In a letter to her sister Jon in 1942, Godden wrote:

I am going to try and write a book in answer to that [Nehru's accusation]. Not a challenge or criticism or anything like that,

⁹Flory confesses to Dr. Veraswami: 'I'm here to make money like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man's burden humbug ... Even those bloody fools at the Club might be better company if we weren't all of us living a lie the whole time ... the lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them ... We Anglo-Indians would be almost bearable if we'd only admit that we're thieves and go on thieving without any humbug.' Orwell, *Burmese Days*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁰See Chisholm, p. 141.

¹¹Chisholm, p. 140.

but by a reportage [*sic*] of all and every sort of work that is being done every day, on all days, by English men and women in every part and corner of India, a great part of which is government inspired. I don't mean anything moving or noble, but just ordinary everyday English work and duty, and the extremely concrete results obtained ... I mean every work, forests, agriculture, railways, irrigation, transport, medical, educational, missionary.¹²

Godden does not appear to notice the comedic element in her elevation of the 'ordinary' British ethic of colonial service to a noble status worthy of the highest respect while at the same time denying that this is her intention. However, as the daughter of an Anglo-Indian imperialist it is perhaps understandable that the author should retain some commitment to the imperial idea. As we shall see, what she objects to in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is not British rule in India, which she evidently sees as good and even necessary, but the manner in which the British go about the business of rule. When, as the narrative unfolds, Louise becomes responsible for the destruction of Emily's dog, it is not the action itself that is indicted in the novel, since this is ultimately found to be the correct decision, but the imperious and ham-fisted manner in which the entire business is carried out. Likewise, the British Empire is not indicted in principle; what is indicted is the authoritarian manner in which it operated. Given his insistence that his family continue to live in India even after independence, a problem that remains unresolved in the narrative is the contentious issue as to whether Charles's ambition to retain control of the land is a fictional delusion on her character's part or whether, at the time she wrote the novel, Godden actually saw a continued English presence in India as a distinct, even necessary, possibility.

¹²Quoted in Chisholm, p. 141. Godden attempted to fulfil this promise with *Bengal Journey: A Story of the part played by women in the Province, 1939-1945* (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1945). Godden writes of British women's part in the war effort; she does not mention the two and a half million Indian men and women who had contributed by joining the British armed forces.

As I read it in this chapter, *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is a novel tense with contradictory and conflicted impulses. By deploying the rape trope in a manner that attributes it to the brashly modernizing European imperial male, *Breakfast with the Nikolides* flouts one of the most consistent conventions in Anglo-Indian colonial fiction in which one of the key functions of the British imperial male is to protect British women from the sexual predations of lascivious Indian males and thus from racial pollution. Here, however, the imperial male is himself the rapist, one who inflicts brutal and traumatic violence on his own spouse and who breaks up his own household. Moreover, when an Indian character is later accused by the main female protagonist of sexually molesting her child, this accusation is not only shown to be utterly false but to be prompted by the accuser's traumatic response to the earlier spousal rape and indeed by her racist attitude to Indians. When we add to this the fact that in this novel Godden goes further than any of her more famous male fellow-novelists such as Kipling or Orwell, to develop sympathetic and well-drawn 'native' characters such as Anil, Narayan and Shila, then there is much to suggest that radical energies course through *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, impulses that threaten at times to break down the established Anglo-Indian imperial frame or worldview in very disconcerting ways. Not perhaps until we come to Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* will the established colonial worldview again be so seriously called into question. And yet, all this notwithstanding, *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is not in the end a politically radical novel. Whatever radical impulses it may possess are always contained by the novel's dominant impetus which is to suggest that the modernizing drives represented by Charles Pool are, whatever the violent excesses they may prompt

on occasion, essentially well-intentioned and positive in their long-term effects. Indeed, as *Breakfast with the Nikolides* has it, India's best hope for a prosperous and humane future after independence is to harness Charles's 'Western' modernizing drives with the Indians 'Oriental' commitment to tradition so as to achieve a harmonious balance between the two. Thus, Godden develops her plot in such a way that the Western victim of rape, Louise, is eventually reconciled with her husband, Charles, in a move that suggests that his earlier violence has not irrevocably shattered their marriage or their home. Moreover, in the case of the Indian couple, it is the wife, Shila, who is positioned as the spokesperson for Oriental 'passivity' and 'tradition' while her more Western and modernizing husband, Narayan, has to concede ground to his wife, thereby learning to accommodate his modernity to her traditionalism. In its drive to produce a final reconciliation that balances British innovation and Indian tradition and also to harmonize male and female desires for progress and established modes of domesticity, Godden's novel clearly remains within conservative colonial and gender discursive hierarchies and ultimately stifles its own more radical impulses. However, there are several moments in the novel where more radical possibilities emerge, however fleetingly, and even if these are closed down in the end, they are never entirely forgotten by the reader.

II

Breakfast with the Nikolides begins with Louise Pool returning to India, having fled the country some years earlier following a violent marital rape. Having settled in

Paris with her two young daughters, Louise is again put to flight by the German invasion of France in World War Two. This political background, coupled with contemporary debates on the racist ideologies of the Third Reich *vis á vis* those of the British Empire, leaves little doubt that Paris, once a place of revolution and enlightenment but now overrun by aggressive Nazi imperialism, was deliberately chosen by Godden for its symbolic value.¹³ Pre-war Paris should have been a space where Louise might have hoped to repair her damaged psyche following her brutal rape, but when the city succumbed to the Nazi invasion, she had no option but to return to her abusive husband. The reader is first alerted to the circumstances of her initial escape by the omniscient narrator's description of a recurring nightmare that plagues Louise, one in which she is relentlessly pursued by an apocalyptic horseman:

Louise had lately been having a dream. It was a dream in which a man rode on a horse, and the man was Pestilence or Famine or Death or simply a rider, an ordinary man, but Louise did not know that because she would not look at him ... she refused to look till he was close, riding her down, and then it was too late. The dream was a symbol for what was happening now, in this terrifying repetition that washed away the years and made her catch her breath with panic.¹⁴

The background to this nightmare is alluded to repeatedly throughout the narrative but it is only during a heated argument towards the end of the novel that the truth is fully revealed, when Louise baldly reminds her husband of his attack on her: 'You forced yourself on me,' she shouts at him.¹⁵

¹³ At the outbreak of war, Gandhi offered non-violent moral support to the British war effort but nonetheless remained suspicious of Britain's intentions towards India. He repeatedly pointed out the hypocrisy of Britain fighting a war for democratic freedom while denying such freedom to its Indian subjects, which is precisely the argument presented by Lassner in *Colonial Strangers*.

¹⁴ *BWTN*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *BWTN*, p. 177.

On her return, Louise is accompanied by Emily and her second daughter, Binnie, who is the child of the rape. Charles is aware of Binnie's existence, but has never seen her and cannot bring himself to recall her name.¹⁶ He displays a preference for Emily and presents her with a puppy named Don. But the dog contracts rabies and escapes from the house one night to run wildly through the grounds of the adjacent agricultural college. There he bites an Indian student, Anil, who is chatting with his close friend, the college veterinarian, Narayan Das. Once Louise suspects that the dog is rabid, she sends her children to safety downriver, where they are to have breakfast with the Nikolides, the only other Europeans in the area. This Greek family have no further function in the novel, but the children's visit to them becomes the catalyst for the drama that follows. While they are away, Louise uses her privileged position as a *memsahib* to force Narayan to put the dog down, even though at this point in the narrative it is not yet established beyond doubt that Don is rabid. When Emily discovers that her pet has been destroyed without her knowledge, she is furious. Mother and daughter then become locked in a destructive battle of wills to see which one will gain the psychological upper hand.

In the event, Louise's fears prove to be well founded and Anil contracts rabies. As the disease progresses, he repeats the actions of the unfortunate animal by wandering restlessly throughout the countryside. The madness infecting Europe and Asia at this time is suggested by Anil's agitated psychological state as the poison spreads and his own madness increases. Encountering a disconsolate Emily in the college grounds, he introduces her to the Hindu ceremonial rite of *puja*, before offering to walk her safely

¹⁶*BWTN*, p. 20.

home.¹⁷ On arrival, they are met by a hysterical Louise, who, because Anil is Indian, assumes that sexual contact has taken place and accuses him of molesting her daughter. Stung by this racist insult, the furious student makes his way to Narayan's house where he collapses and is taken to hospital. When he 'disappears,' rumours of a conspiracy fly about the college. As a result, his fellow students and a crowd of curious onlookers stage a noisy protest in the course of which the threat of violence is only quelled when Narayan announces that Anil has died. Once the furore of his death dies down, the Pool family are reconciled. Emily successfully negotiates her oedipal journey and peace is established between mother and daughter. Louise and Charles suppress the memory of marital rape and violence and at the end of the novel also reach a truce that enables them to stroll arm-in-arm through the college grounds in the company of Binnie, while Emily performs the ritual of *puja*, not for Anil, but for her pet dog.

During the years of his wife's absence, Charles has established and now manages a government farm by the river at Amorra in East Bengal. Like the nuns of *Black Narcissus*, Charles is also on a mission; indeed his missionary zeal proves to be far greater and more enduring than that of the nuns because Charles is committed to the idea of progress and improvement with a ruthlessness that far exceeds the sisters' devotion to religion. The crucial difference between them lies in Charles's apparently cool rationality, which can be contrasted with the increasingly hysterical behaviour of the nuns: 'Europeans in India are like cut flowers,' interjects the omniscient narrator,

¹⁷*Puja* is the ceremonial act of offering reverence to a spirit that the villagers of *Black Narcissus* had offered to Sister Ruth following her death in Mopu.

‘that is why most of them wither and grow sterile; they cannot live without their roots, and so few of them take root; but Charles had taken root.’¹⁸

Complaints about the Indian climate and its ‘withering’ effect on Europeans are ubiquitous in colonial fiction. Flora Annie Steel’s *The Potter’s Thumb* (1894) reports that ‘the difference between 84° and 85° of the Fahrenheit instrument embraces the difference between comfort and discomfort.’¹⁹ In Dennis Kincaid’s *Durbar* (1933), the character Mrs. Hilton is constantly exhausted: ‘I do tire quickly. It’s the climate of this horrible place,’ she complains.²⁰ Even for Orwell’s Flory, who is otherwise sensitive to Asia, the relentless heat becomes a symbol of something primeval and malignant in the very nature of the Orient: ‘There was something horrible in it — horrible to think of that blue, blinding sky, stretching on and on over Burma and India, over Siam, Cambodia, China, cloudless and interminable.’²¹ However, Charles refuses to allow himself to be intimidated by the Indian climate; ‘he was burned so brown that he hardly looked European.’²² When Emily and Binnie see their father for the first time, his appearance horrifies them. Charles waits for their steamer in the midday sun ‘without a hat, in shorts and a khaki shirt, no coat and no collar or tie or socks. He looked to them wild ... Emily knew that the same dreadful thought had struck them both. “Is he — black?”’²³ Charles has not ‘gone native;’ he is indeed dark and hairy, but his complexion comes from working in the sun, while his brilliant blue eyes and commanding height ensure that he appears as the very embodiment of the colonial sahib.²⁴ Charles loves India; he believes

¹⁸*BWTN*, p. 11.

¹⁹Flora Annie Steel, *The Potter’s Thumb* ([1894] Montana: Kessinger, 2004), p. 139.

²⁰Dennis Kincaid, *Durbar*, ([1933] London: Arnold Heinemann, 1987), p. 204.

²¹Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p. 33.

²²*BWTN*, p. 8.

²³*BWTN*, p. 19.

²⁴*BWTN*, pp. 8, 19.

that he belongs there and has no intention of quitting. He holds the land as a sacred trust; his ultimate desire is to be buried in Indian soil, where, somewhat arrogantly, he hopes that even then he can do the land some good. Still, despite his industry, Charles is aware of the danger of giving in to India in the indolent manner of Mr. Dean in *Black Narcissus*:

He had grown a certain laziness in these years; perhaps, like most Indians, he wished more than he did — hoping, almost believing, that wishing is the same as thinking, and thinking is tantamount to doing. He had been contented and that had made him lazier still; laziness, dilatoriness, is natural to India; the sun steals the marrow from the bones, and Charles had worked for eight years out under the sun in the fields ... and he had not finished yet ... Because I believe in it, said Charles ... I am of the country now, I am not an exile, I am not even an alien ... My results are creeping like a tide across the land ... and when I die, said Charles ... Put me into the soil where I belong, where I may do some final good to a patch of wheat or a mango-tree.²⁵

For Godden, the model farm is symbolic of all that is good and positive about the imperial mission, but since the British Empire is about to collapse, Charles's aspirations will prove to be just as futile an exercise as Sister Philippa's vegetable garden or Sister Blanche's clinic.

Nonetheless, to the staff of the college, Charles appears as an able and enlightened administrator whose sole interest is in progress, and whose authority is virtually absolute. In this sense, Charles can be said to harbour a Prospero complex. As Philip Mason writes, by choosing a colonial career, a man like Charles becomes 'conscious of powers he cannot exert to the full among his peers, a magnificent leader among people who give him unquestioning homage and do not compete with his

²⁵*BWTN*, p. 18. Charles's sentiments echo Walt Whitman's poem *Leaves of Grass*: 'I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,' which Willa Cather quotes in her pastoral novel, *O Pioneers!* ([1913] New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

greatness.²⁶ However, for the students, the monocle that Charles sports provides them with the opportunity to treat him with some undermining humour; to them he is 'One-eyed Carlos,' or 'Charlie Chang,' which in itself indicates a change in attitude towards British authority. In Amorra, however, Charles's personal life remains an enigma. Rumours abound that he 'had been degraded to the region from a very senior post,' suggesting that his demotion was caused by the scandal surrounding his violence and the disappearance of his family.²⁷ Ignorant of his past history, or that he has a wife and family, Charles's new Indian colleagues are also unaware that beneath his cool exterior lurks a violent and destructive man, one who is prepared to go to extreme lengths to get his own way. For just as Sister Clodagh had sublimated her sexual drive into her obsession with organizing her convent, so Charles's pathological obsession with improving the land fulfils another deep psychological need, one that somewhat eclipses his Prospero complex. Charles's modernizing zeal, in other words, is a displacement, a manic sublimation of the ungovernable sexual drive that had forced his wife to flee India.

Charles had allowed his id to overwhelm his ego. He had literally run rampant, and the novel's sense of decline is evident in his broken down and patched-up furniture, an imagery of disrepair that reminds the reader of the rundown convent in Mopu and the decrepit state of affairs in Danielstown. The furniture had been irreparably damaged when in a fit of jealous rage Charles had physically attacked Louise, raped her, and smashed up their home in front of the infant Emily. Now, in Amorra, he has taken pains in trying to recreate his home in the image of the one he had once shared with Louise.

²⁶Philip Mason, Introduction to Octave Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonialism* (New York: Praeger, 1966), pp. 11-12. See Parry, p. 47.

²⁷*BWTN*, p. 8.

The furniture was now polished and waxed, and the floors shine like mirrors.²⁸ Nevertheless, despite this façade, the images of Charles's rundown house tell us that things are disintegrating, falling apart. His Indian colleague, Sir Monmatha Ghose, notices the broken furniture under the polish and orderliness, and wonders why Charles had even bothered to mend it.²⁹ In other words, Charles's newly-ordered home cannot conceal a history of extraordinary violence and devastation. Like the British Empire, it may flaunt its polish and orderliness but cannot quite conceal a violent history. Sir Monmatha's query as to whether it might not have been better to get entirely new furniture prompts the question as to whether India, too, might not be better to recommence its history after independence on some new premises and foundations, rather than simply try to bend inherited British structures to new purposes.

Unlike Mr. Dean, who does not attempt to force change in Mopu, Charles is ruthlessly intent on changing the local topography in Amorra, to the extent of playing God by changing the course of the river. To the resisting farmers, Charles's ploughs are much like the nuns' metaphorical teeth eating into the land in *Black Narcissus*, only stronger, for according to their traditional farming practices, he is walking all over a country to which, despite his protestations, he does not, and cannot, belong. However, it is not the novel's intention to deploy the relationship between Charles and the local farmers as a means to highlight colonial violation. On the contrary, the text invites the reader to admire Charles and to see his efforts as a herculean re-enactment of Godden's own father's sense of vocation and drive. Therefore, unlike the nuns, Charles never gives up on his mission and his ambitions are grand:

²⁸*BWTN*, p. 9.

²⁹*BWTN*, pp. 9-10.

He had pushed out and across the plain, patch after patch, crop after crop; and it had not been easy, for with every field he pushed out into the waste, he was pushing the whole of India before him.³⁰

In *Black Narcissus*, the nuns had abandoned Mopu to leave the Indians to their apparently immobile traditions. However, in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, in preparation for independence, the old ways are gradually giving way to the new. Although he may well be pushing modernity too fast in a country not yet willing to throw off its traditional methods of cultivation, Charles is shown to be working hard to overcome the backward and fatalistic attitudes of the Indian farmers. As an imperial agent, his authority is accepted, and although the farmers at first resist his progressive ideas, we begin to see a tentative acceptance of advanced technology as Charles's tenacity gradually begins to show results. The narrator describes the predicament of the farmers and the frustration felt by Charles at their obstinacy:

Charles's talk of manures and water-conservation and crop-rotation only made the villagers lift their eyes for a moment and sink back into the ways of their great-grandfathers' great-grandfathers' grandfathers again ... 'It does not matter how we farm,' they said. 'If we farm well in a bad year, still we get bad crops; if we farm badly in a good year, still we get good crops ...' 'There shall be no bad years,' said Charles and talked of wells, and Persian wheels, and levelling and terracing the rainfed land to hold the water and conserve the topsoil ... He was like a gnat in their ears. Grudgingly, in one or two villages, they began to follow him.³¹

This stereotyped apathy of the Indian farmers is reminiscent of the resistance to change portrayed in *Black Narcissus*, which confirms that in this later novel Godden's attitude to India continues to be shaped by inherited orientalist ideas, as suggested by Charles's aggressive modernization programme. Charles obstinately dismisses Anil's holistic view

³⁰*BWTN*, p. 18.

³¹*BWTN*, pp. 5-6. In her autobiographical *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 69, describing her father's time at a large Agricultural College and farm, Godden quotes almost verbatim from the above two passages in contrasting her father's work ethic to that of the Indian peasants.

that Indian agriculture needs to be accommodated to the circle of life in the Indian tradition. The young student has been drawing an analogy between the seasons and the daily lives of the farmers, but Charles is obdurate: 'If he saw a pattern at all, he saw it as a long, long line, like a road beginning far back out of vision, continuing broader and broader out of sight.'³² Charles has an absurdly linear conception of progress but, for Godden, he, and others like him, achieve results by the dogged persistence that she so admires in her father and of which she writes in her letter to her sister. In contrast to the *laissez faire* values represented by the feckless Mr. Dean, or by the Indian peasants in the passage just cited, what Godden appears to advocate for India in this novel is a continuation of the British Protestant work ethic to be found in the day-to-day duties performed by men such as Arthur Godden. In other words, what this passage suggests is Godden's belief that without men like Charles, India would revert to the state of primitivism in which the nuns had left Mopu.³³

In Amorra, the old and the new aspects of India exist side by side. One side of the Pool's house adjoins the agricultural college, which in the eight years of Charles's management 'had become an Industrial and Research Centre, with an annual exhibition; it had a Stud Farm and a Veterinary Research Annex.' Students had come from 'all parts of the province to study livestock, crop-husbandry, bacteriology, agricultural botany, mycology and entomology.'³⁴ On the other three sides, separated by a wall, is the traditional bazaar of ancient India, where, like the pagan bells of Goontu in *Black Narcissus*, 'the drums and cymbals in the temple by the banyan tree were very

³²*BWTN*, p. 54.

³³What Godden neglects to point out is that all advances in India were for the benefit of empire. As Benita Parry notes: 'The texts of British India in the age of empire erase all traces of base interests — India as a fount of raw materials, cheap labour, markets, and investment opportunities, and India as a linchpin of Britain's wider imperial ambitions.' Parry, p.10.

³⁴*BWTN*, p. 7.

constantly beaten.³⁵ Godden evokes a vivid picture of the timelessness of the bazaar from three narratological points of view. The omniscient narrator describes the scene from the perspective of the wandering animals:

For the goat the bazaar was a pleasant place to wander, full of pickings and leavings, though her kids became entangled with legs and wheels and the butchers' shops had heads and entrails and whole corpses of little kids hung up on hooks. The live kids filled the air with their hungry bleatings but no one heard them, they were only one more noise in the hubbub of noises ... the bull took no notice of any of them, nor of his patient relations the buffaloes, as they walked leadenly along with their carts, overloaded, hot and dusty. The bull swung his dewlap and went off to lick a pile of soft sugar in the sweet-shop; his horns were tipped with brass and he wore a necklace and a hump cap made of blue-and-white beads; and — another side of veneration — a little sick cow stood on three legs and shivered before it limped off starving down the road.³⁶

The indifference of the animals to the agricultural college seems to mock its very existence, reminding the reader of the oblivious geese in the farm scene of *The Last September*. This passage also anticipates Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* by suggesting that despite Charles's aspirations, his model farm is transient; unlike life in the bazaar, neither the agricultural college nor the Pool house will survive the passage of time. All of these colonial settler narratives register a deep anxiety that everything accomplished by the settlers is transient; that a postcolonial society will ultimately efface all record of their endeavours and achievements. The sense of insecurity about the ability of the colonial settlers to leave any permanent mark on the landscape is palpable in all of these novels. On a different register, the passage also seems to denigrate Indian religious belief and social customs by its sarcastic reference to the indifference of the people to the hunger and sufferings of the animals. Overall, though, the confusion in the

³⁵*BWTN*, p. 22.

³⁶*BWTN*, p. 48.

bazaar reinforces a sense of the necessity of the good order that Charles would impose on Amorra, his drastic intervention being approved of as an alleviation of such conditions.

The scene as described by the narrator is not unique to Amorra. As with the inhospitable climate, complaints about the smells and squalor of India were frequent in Anglo-Indian fiction. For instance, in *Burmese Days*, Veraswamy observes: 'You English have the sense of smell almost too highly developed. What torments you must all suffer in our filthy East.' 'Abandon your noses, all ye who enter here, what?' Flory replies, 'They might write that up over the Suez Canal.'³⁷ Louise would certainly agree. For her, the entire country is an open sewer, a pestilence, 'a patch like plague against the walls of the house.' In a shift from the narrator's voice, Louise's attitude towards all things Indian is conveyed through her own voice and is reflected in her graphic and pitiless description of the people of the bazaar:

I smell the street and the nest of lanes behind it as one foul latrine ... If I walk through it I am contaminated even through my shoes ... soiled and contaminated. It is filthy, unhealthy, dangerous; there is cess in the gutters where the men squat down even while I am passing, there are stains and patches where betel-nut and cough-phlegm are spat out on the stones, there are flies that rise up from litter heaps and settle on the sweets and foodstuff in the shops. I smell the rancid ghee in these shops and the smell of mustard oil and garlic and rotting fruit and meat that has hung too long, and in the road all round me is the smell of refuse and the smell of unwashed sweat and oil from the coolies ... on some days I smell the burning of a body from the burning ghat ... It is hideous and cruel. I see the woman with elephantiasis, and the beggars withered, distorted, deformed, and among them the leper ... The children's stomachs are swollen with fever and spleen, and the babies have flyblown ophthalmic eyes.³⁸

³⁷Orwell, *Burmese Days*, p.150.

³⁸*BWTN*, p. 61.

Louise sees only what is sordid and suffering and her disgust prevents her from seeing India as a site of exploration or adventure; for her, the bazaar is a stagnant cesspool, totally lacking a productive life of its own: 'It has no muslins or silk or pottery or weaving or rugs or ivory,' she observes.³⁹ Yet it is difficult not to find some small measure of sympathy for Louise here. Although the narrative implies that she had grown up in India, she had become accustomed to western living standards during the eight years spent in Paris. Nonetheless, as the newly-returned insensitive *memsahib*, Louise quickly becomes a Ruth-like figure who is also overwhelmed by revulsion at her displacement from Europe. Louise retains, as the narrator remarks, 'a peculiar, distorted, even diseased idea of the Indian, of his life and his religion, particularly if he were a Hindu. Nothing Charles could say would shake her.'⁴⁰

The above images of life in the bazaar encapsulate the idea of India as a country of great poverty, conditions not evident in *Black Narcissus*, which portrays a happy and contented people being taken care of by the Old General in his princely State. Unlike Charles, who, although clearly exasperated by the farmers' lack of drive, sees the urgent need for reform, it does not occur to Louise that she should undertake any philanthropic mission to alleviate such poverty. Her horror at the surrounding deprivation is evident, yet the novel does not comment on her lack of sensitivity towards the indigenous people. However, the impact of the harsh images evoked by Louise is countered by the novel's representation of Emily's initial reaction to her surroundings. For Emily, India is a paradise, a constant source of curiosity and delight:

I see the bazaar ... it is interesting and exciting. The first shop you come to is the shop where they make kites; you can buy

³⁹*BWTN*, p. 62.

⁴⁰*BWTN*, p. 88.

twelve kites for three annas in colours of pink and green and white and red, and a wicker spool to fly them with, and a pound of thread ... the sweet shops have balls like American popcorn and other balls that are like marshmallows, and clear toffee sweets that are made in beautiful spiralled rings. Mother says we must never taste them but we have.⁴¹

Conspicuously distinct from the Europeans who find themselves displaced in India, Emily had felt out of kilter in France. In Kim-like fashion, she feels at home in India and like Charles, who, we are given to believe, was also born in India, she feels comfortable in her surroundings.⁴² Rather than focusing on its squalor, Emily accepts the country as it is, finding colour and beauty where Louise finds only ugliness and degeneration. Even so, it is only the sensuousness of India that Emily responds to — the colours of the kites and the taste of the sweets; there is no social interaction with the people of the bazaar. Similar to the nuns' convent in Mopu, the isolated roof of the Pool house provides a panoptical view of the people below. Emily and Binnie fly their kites from this elevated height, cutting adrift those of the local children when they become entangled with their own.⁴³ This severing signifies the extent of the gulf between the Anglo-Indians and the native people, who do not have a voice in these passages. The narrative is silent about their reaction to the Europeans who live in such close proximity, but who choose to remain socially isolated from them.

⁴¹*BWTN*, pp. 69-70

⁴²*BWTN*, p. 21. Charles's grandfather was Dutch. He had built his house with an axe that Charles keeps over his fireplace, indicating that the family has a history in India. The narrative implies that Charles had used this axe to break up the family home.

⁴³*BWTN* p. 69.

III

In contrast to the backward Indian farmer immersed in immobile ways of life, and the atmospheric chaos of the ancient bazaar, the new, forward-looking progressive India is portrayed in the figure of Narayan Das. The novel does not provide us with the circumstances, but like Kim in Kipling's novel, Narayan has been plucked from the gutter by the British and provided with a western education. Thanks to the British, Narayan has been shown a different side of life to that of the people in the bazaar, but his education has resulted in a divided 'self,' and has caused him to reject Indian culture as backward and superstitious in favour of a more western model, which he regards as modern and progressive. Yet rather than displaying the gratitude expected of him as a rescued, 'untouchable' street urchin, Narayan bears some animosity towards his mentors for contributing to his confused sense of identity. The narrative allows us access to his innermost feelings as he mentally addresses Anil:

I stand in a street in the back streets of Calcutta ... I missed it when I was picked out of the garbage and taken to school — and that was done by the detestable British ... the Imperialistic British, who bothered to take up a gutter-boy and give him life. Am I grateful? I need not be so very; the British have a passion for alteration ... they had my mind and my body for seven years, and for seven years I learnt to keep my heart shut away in darkness and starvation.⁴⁴

Narayan is aware that his education, rather than being an altruistic gesture on the part of the British, is a reward for accepting colonization, and that, like Kim, he is now expected to serve the interests of the Raj. However, even though his education does not provide access for him to Charles's world, Narayan's position as veterinarian to the state-run agricultural college has allowed him to rise above his lack of caste to marry his

⁴⁴*BWTN*, p. 31.

young Hindu wife, Shila. It also enables him to form a close friendship with the high-caste Anil, whose wealthy Brahmin ancestors can be traced back for twenty-seven generations.⁴⁵ However, Narayan clearly understands that his lack of status excludes him not only from Anglo-English but also from elite Indian society. For whereas Anil's traditional 'loose white draperies moulded his thighs and flowed around him' with natural ease, Narayan's ill-fitting European clothes only bear testimony to his uncomfortable hybridity.⁴⁶ He inwardly acknowledges the transgressive nature of his relationship with the young student:

What would your father think if he saw us together? I know quite well ... He would look at me and his eyes would see at once what kind of a fellow I am and then he would turn his eyes away and not be interested to look at me again, in spite of anything you could tell him ... He holds minutely to the ideal of non-contamination, even a shadow in the street would defile him ... if you took me to your home I should contaminate your house ... they would have my shadow cleaned from the house wherever it had fallen ... Narayan ... stretched himself as he stood up ... there was the sharp sound of a tear and the back of his coat split and at the same time his collar stud gave way and one side of his collar sprang up against his cheek. 'That comes of wearing what does not suit you,' said Anil, laughing at him.⁴⁷

The social gulf between the friends is wider, and even more rigid, than that between Narayan and his colonial benefactors, for although a contentious issue, the hierarchical caste system remained a social fact and a political reality in India. As Lassner observes, embedded in Narayan's racial shame is each culture's entrenched belief in its own unassailable superiority.⁴⁸ Narayan's wish for upward social mobility and modernizing

⁴⁵*BWTN*, p. 32.

⁴⁶*BWTN*, p. 29.

⁴⁷*BWTN*, pp. 32, 34-35. Traditionally, Untouchables were not allowed to let their shadow fall upon a person of caste and they were required to sweep the ground where they had walked in order to obliterate the pollution caused by their footfall. Untouchability was formally abolished by the new Constitution of India in 1950. For a day in the life of an untouchable see Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* ([1935] London: Penguin, 1986).

⁴⁸Lassner, pp. 92-93.

self-improvement runs up, in other words, against both the racist ideology of the Raj and the hidebound traditionalism of a rigid caste system. He is forced to confront a barrier that separates him from Anil just as surely as he must acknowledge the obstacles that separate him from the world of the Pools. Nevertheless, Narayan hopes that a homoerotic union with Anil will eradicate his humiliation by erasing caste differences and colonial rejection. He would therefore transform the object of his desire into his 'second self,' a doppelganger in his own colonized image: 'You are myself. You are all that I want to be,' he confesses to Anil.⁴⁹ Ironically, Anil's father unconsciously stands with Narayan by insisting that his son achieves first class honours in his examinations. Thus the pair unwittingly become complicit in wishing for Anil the same reward for accepting colonization that had removed Narayan from the slums of Calcutta.⁵⁰

Complying with the empire's 'passion for alteration' Narayan wishes to extend the empire's modernizing mission into the domestic sphere. The tension between tradition and modernity is made evident in the relationship between Narayan and his wife. Like Emily and Louise, they too are locked in a psychological battle of wills, but for different reasons. As an Indian wife, Shila wishes to adhere to traditional Hindu customs and is dismayed to discover that her husband is trying to coerce her into becoming westernized. However, she resists Narayan's demands for a modern companionate marriage by clinging to as many traditions as she dares. Rather than adapt to Narayan's wishes, Shila prefers to sit still in the sun, daydreaming, not of what might be, but of all that she presently enjoys.⁵¹ Forced out of this comfort zone by her husband's demands, Shila finds herself caught in a double bind in which she becomes

⁴⁹*BWTN*, p. 36.

⁵⁰See Lassner, p. 93.

⁵¹*BWTN*, p. 56.

torn between her own conception of her wifely duty to obey Narayan and her desire to follow the teachings of her ancestors. Even more troubling is Narayan's dilemma, for where Shila is at least secure in her Hindu identity, her husband is doubly hybridized; first, as a stereotypical British 'mimic man', and secondly, as a non-caste Indian. The problem for Narayan is whether he can achieve a successful balance between his acquired British culture and Shila's traditionalism that will secure a place for him in the new, post-imperial, India.

While making heroic efforts to comply with her husband's wishes, aided and abetted by her maid, Tarala, Shila must also find ways to preserve as much of her cultural identity as possible. Her psychological torment is reflected in her pathetic efforts to call Narayan by his first name, in her terror at answering the telephone, and in being sociable with his guests, all of which are anathema to her.

Narayan has so many moods and he does not like me to watch him, it irritates him ... He does not want a wife like the wife I have been taught to be; he calls her a slave and a shadow, and he says he wants me to be myself. He makes me call him Narayan or Indro, as if he were not my husband at all; he makes me sit down in the room with his friend and he has asked me to eat with him, but this I cannot learn to do.⁵²

But the biggest threat to Shila's sense of her 'self' as a woman and a traditional Hindu wife is the unorthodox homoerotic relationship between Narayan and Anil. Left in no doubt as to the mutual attraction between them, she vies with Anil for her husband's attention:

She looked at him pleadingly. She had on a sari of fine blue gauze that almost hid, in its draperies, the present vase shape of her body ... her arms and neck were bare in a cut-away bodice edged with silver ... her skin shone and her hair shone too, glossy blue-black in its coil. Narayan did not look at her ... In

⁵²*BWTN*, p. 56.

the distance Anil began to sing; his voice came back to her on the wind. 'I hate him,' whispered Shila.⁵³

Narayan would appear to uphold the conventional Anglo-Indian colonial discourse that centres sexual incontinence on the indigenous male, a trope that characteristically shows the Indian to be possessed of rapacious sexual appetites, or to be effeminately deviant. The narrator relates that despite being married to Shila, the veterinarian 'loved Anil, he was in love with Anil:'

I can never see you quite properly, Anil, because you dazzle me ... I cannot forget you for a moment, when I am with you I cannot forget myself ... I have crossed blood in me that makes me dark and thick and slightly squat; your stride is longer than mine, and your body is built so that you go forward strongly and gracefully; my air grows close to my head like a Negro's, but yours [*sic*] grows loose and most poetically. When you take my hand I see our wrists together and mine is heavy and dark-looking beside yours ... I see your shoulder, thin in its fine white muslin shirt; I see the line of your cheek, thin too, but softly young and dark, and I see the darkness of your hair.⁵⁴

Yet Narayan remains fully in control of his id; he sublimates his passions and the sexual aspect of his relationship with the student is not developed in the novel and is in any event negated by Anil's death. Instead, it is the supposedly enlightened and rational European Charles, not the 'lascivious' and 'decadent' native, who proves to be sexually incontinent.

Narayan describes himself as dark and hairy, like Charles. However, rather than marking him out as a leader, the novel makes it clear that this description contains a suggestion of Darwinian degeneration and that, like Angu Ayah of *Black Narcissus*, Narayan's appearance is intended to emphasize his racial inferiority. He longs to be friends with Charles and to enjoy a relationship of professional collegiality, but taking

⁵³*BWTN*, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁴*BWTN*, pp. 30, 33.

on a new culture can lead to the deconstruction of one's sense of 'self' and Narayan is fully aware that as a hybridized subject he might never realize this ambition and must always defer to Charles as his superior:

When Charles came in Narayan did not move but every hair of him altered and stiffened into defence. He waited for whatever it might be, a question or a criticism or an order ... 'You should have been a doctor.' 'I should have — did funds permit ... They did not permit.'⁵⁵

Colonial ideology does not allow Narayan to be an innovator like Charles; he must take orders, even from Louise, who is not his professional equal, but he is not allowed to issue them. Although it is dictated by the situation, such deference, according to Indian patriarchal custom, demeans him. Thwarted in his ambition to become a doctor, and unmanned by Louise's order to put down the potentially rabid dog, Narayan replicates Charles's rage towards his wife by displacing his own sense of shame and frustration into rage against Shila. Subjugated by his colonized status, Narayan abuses the only power he possesses, that of an Indian husband over his wife. This indisputable status enables him to strip Shila of the only authority she holds, that of a traditional wife in her own domestic sphere. He may well insist that she emerges from purdah, but by constantly mocking Shila's attempts to please him, Narayan's emotional abuse of his wife rapidly becomes as potent as Charles's physical abuse of Louise. The irony is that by her own traditional standards, Shila has no alternative but to bow to Narayan's demands, a capitulation that not only mimics the tense situation between Narayan and Louise, it also renders Shila as invisible to her husband as Indians in general are to the European woman. As Lassner notes, such bullying tactics effectively reduce Shila to the

⁵⁵*BWTN*, p. 51.

same subservient status as her husband in relation to the colonial structure.⁵⁶ Furthermore, since Narayan, like Louise, is subordinate to Charles, he also replicates Louise's over-controlling relationship with Emily by assigning to his wife the role of a dependent child:

Narayan did not look at her. He said hastily, 'Go to bed. I am walking home with Anil.' 'But it's late.' 'It's late. It isn't late.' He mocked her. 'You are asleep. You don't know what you say ... Leave me alone'.⁵⁷

However, in allowing Louise to dominate him — an inversion of gender roles that would appal Charles — Narayan undercuts the patriarchal persona he presents to his wife; ultimately the episode with Louise shows Narayan to be somewhat feminized. He had hoped to invite the Pools, or at least Charles, to dine at his home, but when he compromises both his professional and personal integrity under pressure from Louise, Narayan's submission to her not only highlights the political and cultural gap between them, it also lays bare the utter futility of his social aspirations. It is only following his realization that he can never fit into either Anil's upper-caste or Charles's Anglocentric society that Narayan chooses to reclaim his own Indian heritage.

However, Narayan's compliance with Louise's order to administer the fatal injection to Don has deeper implications for him. The act not only controverts his training as a veterinarian, but also that part of his Indian heritage that holds all life sacred. Narayan is horrified when he understands the personal consequences of destroying the animal:

Until that day I worked to save life, never to destroy. My cases have died, but that was in spite of me — not because of me ... What a fuss! What a fuss to make about a dog when men were dying, men and women and children, crushed from existence,

⁵⁶Lassner, p. 91.

⁵⁷*BWTN*, pp. 27-28; Lassner, p. 91.

hundreds at a time ... But it is the same — even if it is one dog and a hundred men. It is against, not for; it is counter — an offence against life. By my guilt I have laid more guilt upon mankind overlaid with guilt already; and this, when each one of us should be a rock against evil ... I have done violence, and the stain is deepened because of me.⁵⁸

In this passage Godden allows her thoughts on the war to creep into her narrative. While ostensibly it allows us access to Narayan's feelings of revulsion towards Louise's hysteria, it also clearly signals Godden's own disgust at the violence taking place both in Europe and in Asia. These feelings are also reflected in Louise's terror at her geographical displacement and her status as a victim of rape, making clear her double abuse, both at the hands of her violent husband and by the violence of war. Louise has displayed great resilience in her struggle for survival in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles, so her plight should command the reader's sympathy. However, any compassion we feel for her is quickly checked by the narrative's indictment of her imperious racism.⁵⁹ Louise is appalled by any contact with Indians; to her they are an invisible, nameless mass:

They quarrelled over Charles's Indian friends. Louise could not understand how an Indian could be a real friend ... She hardly saw Sir Monmatha, though she had met and dined with him often. The students who worked and played and lived next door to her were quite unnoticeable unless they made too much noise; when, if Charles were out, she would send Shah to stop them as if they were street boys.⁶⁰

⁵⁸*BWTN*, pp. 186-187.

⁵⁹Godden was clearly not a feminist. She wrote in her journal: 'I never long to be a man as much as in my writing, because I should have a man's wholeness. To me that is what a woman can never be; I think she can never be whole, whole physically or whole hearted. If she is whole then she is useless as a woman ... complete wholeness is male, a woman cannot hope to achieve it ... Men have this robust easy power and they do not even know that they have it ... it is no use resenting it.' Quoted in Chisholm, p. 119.

⁶⁰*BWTN*, p. 88. Louise's attitude is typical of the *memsahib* in India. In the 1830s, when asked by writer Julia Maitland what she had seen of the country and the natives since she had been in India, an Englishwoman of her acquaintance replied: 'Oh nothing!, thank goodness, I know nothing at all about them, nor I don't wish to: really I think the less one sees and knows of them the better!' Quoted in MacMillan, p. 52.

In common with her literary predecessors, Louise blames Indian political unrest on what she considers to be Charles's unreasonable behaviour in insisting on treating his Indian colleagues with dignity: 'No wonder in this country we cannot be reasonable; even the weather is unbalanced, a parabola outside normality ... the country was a hyperbole of heat and terror and disease.'⁶¹

Her refusal to interact with the people of the agricultural college ensures that Louise, like the nuns of *Black Narcissus* and the Naylor's of *The Last September*, must remain isolated within her enclosed garden. Charles refuses to allow her to relieve her boredom by aiding him with his administrative duties; he reacts to her attempt to do so with outright derision: 'My work belongs to me. That is one thing you won't get your hands on,' he tells her. In retaliation for his obstinacy, Louise refuses to play her assigned role in creating a pleasant home environment for Charles:

The evenings passed in silence and constraint until one night when Charles came up in an old pair of shorts stained with oil and chemicals and a shirt frayed, with all its buttons gone, and bare legs, native sandals and an old checked coat ... 'You put on your worst mind to dine with me,' said Charles mildly, 'so I put on my worst clothes to dine with you.'⁶²

Charles's shabby attire is an offence against British imperial dress codes, which placed great emphasis on a sharp appearance and proper deportment to stress the distinction between English rulers and their Indian subjects. Good dress suggested good discipline and proper moral order; Charles's disregard for appearance thus not only intimates aggression towards Louise, but also hints at a state of moral disorder within the empire.

Charles's inability to exercise either a material or a moral discipline contrasts sharply with Narayan's ability to control his id. Somewhat akin to the nuns of *Black*

⁶¹*BWTN*, p. 96.

⁶²*BWTN*, pp. 86, 91.

Narcissus, Charles is undone by a libido he cannot govern and his image as a benevolent agent of progress is seriously undercut by his lack of self-control. In both novels Godden intimates that the British work ethic — the nuns' educative mission and Charles's agricultural counterpart — require a fierce self-discipline, but one that can always be undone by a return of the repressed, by the release of desires denied or sublimated but not evacuated. The difference between Charles, Narayan and the nuns lies in Charles's aggressive masculinity. Whereas the nuns had admitted defeat and simply retreated, and Narayan will eventually make concessions to Shila, Charles's ungovernable behaviour has already been responsible for the breakup of his family. Now, Louise's voluntary return has made her dependence on Charles manifest and the form of protection he offers remains controlling and possessive. Helpless in the face of his power over her, Louise conflates her suppressed rage and impotence into sexual desire. Notwithstanding their many years of separation, she is shocked to discover that Charles still holds a fatal attraction for her. On first becoming aware that Emily's dog is rabid, she panics and bursts into her husband's bedroom:

Charles was lying on the bed watching her, raised on one elbow, wearing nothing but a lungi wound round his waist. His chest and legs and arms seemed brilliantly brown and strong on the white sheet, and the sun shone on his head and made hundreds of dark bright points on the hair on his legs and arms and chest ... She wanted Charles. She wanted his actual physical presence here beside her, she wanted to feel him and to touch him.⁶³

Charles is in denial of his marital rape because he is convinced that a man cannot be accused of raping his own wife, whom, he firmly believes, is his lawful property.⁶⁴ He

⁶³*BWTN*, pp. 64-65, 146.

⁶⁴This widely held belief, that a woman surrenders sexual consent on entering marriage, and that marital rape was therefore exempt from the law, was given credence by Sir Matthew Hale's analysis of common law, but was never formally inscribed in the statutes of British law. In the case of criminal rape, Hale states: 'But the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their

taunts Louise with what he regards as her submission to him: 'You came. I didn't ask you to. You came,' he gibes at her.⁶⁵ Moreover, Charles coldly accuses Louise of inviting the brutal rape and he even insists, erroneously, that she enjoyed it: 'There was one thing you could not forgive me about that night, Louise ... and that was that you liked it.'⁶⁶

Godden's introduction of the rape theme would appear to be radically subversive in relation to contemporary discourse on the topic but she totally undercuts the value of displacing the theme onto the European male by providing mitigating circumstances for Charles, suggesting that Louise's bad behaviour had provoked him to jealousy beyond reason. Since Godden approves of Charles, she refuses to pass moral judgement on him; there is little or no narratorial censure of her hero. Furthermore, Godden attempts to exonerate Charles by having him insinuate that had an actual rape taken place, then Binnie could not have been physically perfect: 'That doesn't make sense, does it?' he asks.⁶⁷ Binnie is barely present in the narrative, yet she functions in the novel as a device that serves to focus and to underline the guilt that Charles feels for his rape of Louise. Initially, he had been too scared to look at Binnie and later tells Louise of his fear that his brutality might have physically damaged the little girl.⁶⁸ But whereas Godden refuses to provide a moral commentary on Charles's behaviour, she does judge, and asks her reader to judge, Louise. The narrative implies that Charles

mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband which she cannot retract.' *Historia Placitorum Coronae: The History of the Pleas of the Crown* ([1736] London: Lawbook Exchange, 2003), p. 628. It was not until 1991 that the notion of marital rape exemption was abolished in England by the House of Lords, which stated that the exemption was a common law fiction which had never been a true rule of English Law and had therefore never been on the statute books.

⁶⁵*BWTN*, p. 40.

⁶⁶*BWTN*, p. 178.

⁶⁷*BWTN*, p. 177.

⁶⁸*BWTN*, pp. 20, 177.

could not help himself; he had lost his temper because his wife had provoked the violence perpetrated upon her by playing a destructive psychological game:

You married a man, when all you wanted was a money-box ... you wanted to spend all your money and be rich ... you wanted to marry and not be married ... you wanted to be trusted and have the fun of being untrustworthy — you did have fun, didn't you, Louise? And you wanted me to be jealous — without being inconvenient.⁶⁹

Thus Charles is allowed to suggest, without any narrative qualification or rebuttal, that his wife had behaved badly, that perhaps she had even been unfaithful, and that she had exploited their relationship by wanting to be married to Charles for his money, while refusing at the same time to take on the responsibilities of marriage. But Louise cannot forget the rape; for her there is no excusing it, and the suggestion that male spousal violence is permissible under certain circumstances ensures that her return leaves her in a position just as vulnerable as she had been in the flight from France. Voluntarily placing herself in Charles' hands means that any attempt at resistance now would be a meaningless empty gesture. Nevertheless, Charles's rough handling of Louise signals his continuing desire for her also. Despite their open hostility, his fascination with her is undiminished:

He wondered why she always wore these soft falling-away colours that he hardly noticed at the time and could not forget afterwards. He wondered why her hair shone so deeply in the light that it had all the shades of gold in it ... He wondered why he still could not keep himself from the thought of touching her hair — and her skin; he could not forget the touch of her skin, he could not be satisfied until he touched it again.⁷⁰

The fraught situation within the Pool marriage mirrors the tension between Louise and Emily. We are made aware from the beginning of the novel that the relationship

⁶⁹*BWTN*, pp. 176-177.

⁷⁰*BWTN*, pp. 132-133.

between mother and daughter had been in crisis for some considerable time; Emily winces when Louise touches her, and we are given to understand that this is a regular reaction.⁷¹ The young girl displays her displeasure towards her mother at every opportunity, while Louise grows increasingly angry at her own inability to respond adequately to the breakdown in their relationship. On the night that Don escapes from the house, Emily is awakened by a scream, followed by a laugh. Although she does not understand the significance of this disturbance, the reader is aware that the dog has bitten Anil. As she awakes, Emily's thoughts slip in and out of the past in an associative pattern of confusion reminiscent of Sister Clodagh's reveries in *Black Narcissus*:

What was that scream and that laughing, high with fright? What was it? ... ('What was it, Mother?' 'Nothing.' 'What was that?' 'Nothing.' That was a lie, it was almost next door, but Louise told lies. At least she never exactly told the truth.) ... Will there be a crash? Will there? Remember, Emily, remember. This is not France, this is India. Remember! India ... Slowly she began to relax. She had been born in India; she, Emily — not Binnie ... If you are born in a place does a little of it get into your bones? Yes. I think it does ... ('What do you call people who live in a country always, Charles?') ('Natives, I suppose.') ('No, not natives. People who come to it and want to belong to it and never go away.') ('Domiciled citizens.')

The ellipsis in this passage mark Emily's rapid thought processes as she associates Anil's scream with her memory of the Nazi invasion of France from which the family had fled. What they indicate is the resurfacing of Emily's repressed terror as she recalls her mother's efforts to withhold the truth of their perilous situation from her. As the narrator comments, it is therefore 'entirely natural to Emily that screams and laughing

⁷¹*BWTN*, p. 15.

⁷²*BWTN*, pp. 37-38. Domiciled citizens — a minority who had elected to settle permanently in India — occupied the lower strata of Anglo-Indian society. See Charles Allen, *Plain Tales from the Raj* ([1975] London: Abacus, 1994), p. 97.

should be mingled and entirely natural that on hearing them she should be nipped cold and still with fear.’⁷³

The nuns of *Black Narcissus* had been terrorized by a sense of being obliterated by a vast space. However, in Amorra, as Emily becomes aware of her new surroundings, she is suffused with a sense of calm. Emily experiences the immensity of India, as does her father, as a source of security; she had felt its comforting influence immediately upon arrival in the country: ‘We are in another world,’ she muses, ‘nothing can get at us here.’⁷⁴ This new sense of security, so important to her after the chaos of Europe, is totally undermined by Don’s death. The deceptive environment of the Pool home is evidenced by the fact that Louise had sent the children to the Nikolides rather than allowing them to confront the truth. Matters are made worse when Louise, in response to Emily’s emotional aggression, withdraws into a state of aggrieved detachment. That Louise is proven right, and the dog is in fact rabid, does not excuse her cruel indifference to Emily’s grief and the child’s need to bid farewell to her pet: ‘I wanted him,’ she tells Louise, ‘even if he were dead, to hold in my arms, but you said he had been taken away.’⁷⁵

Emily’s single-minded campaign to undermine her mother bears an emotional resemblance to the pressure being placed on the empire by the Indian nationalist movement at this time. Like India, Emily struggles for her right to be treated as a grown-up and her retaliatory offensive against Louise is an effort to right what she considers a grievous wrong. She pretends that Don is still alive and puts on a performance so successful that the household servants begin to adopt an exceedingly respectful and

⁷³*BWTN*, p. 37.

⁷⁴*BWTN*, p. 38.

⁷⁵*BWTN*, p. 116.

appeasing manner of speaking to her. What begins as an act becomes almost a reality for Emily; as rumours of the dog's ghost spread throughout the locality, she begins to believe in her own myth and half expects Don to rise from the college tank.⁷⁶ When the infected Anil finds Emily alone and inconsolable by the lake, it is perhaps understandable that Louise should react strongly when she sees them together. Her racist attitude to Indians triggers her fears of the sexually incontinent Oriental and her hysteria is, in turn, a displacement of sexual anxieties inflamed by her own personal experience of rape. The reader can therefore appreciate, even if not identify with, her particular sentiments. As Naik points out, the motif of false accusation of sexual assault, found in both Forster and Scott, may be interpreted as an unconscious attempt at the transference of guilt and fear onto the despised and 'treacherous' Oriental.⁷⁷ This is true of Louise, whose anger towards Charles and uneasiness at her maternal treatment of Emily causes her to displace the rage and violence she cannot openly express onto Anil.

In colonial fiction, subject people are commonly depicted as obedient servants in thrall to their imperial masters. As Saros Cowasjee ironically observes: 'The good Indian is the obedient Indian, and the best Indian has a childlike dependence on the English rulers.'⁷⁸ In the 1880s, Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the world Boy Scout movement, could write to his mother in England:

As you ride or walk along the middle of the road, every cart or carriage has to get out of your way, and every native, as he passes you, gives a salute ... If you meet a man in the road and tell him to dust your boots, he does it.⁷⁹

⁷⁶*BWTN*, p. 158. The tank is an artificial lake.

⁷⁷Naik, pp. 43-45.

⁷⁸Saros Cowasjee, *Women Writers of the Raj* (London: Grafton, 1990), pp. 13-14.

⁷⁹Quoted in Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1997), p. 435.

However, attitudes were changing as the empire drew to its close. Edwin Pratt, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Indian army who remained in India after Independence, recalled that when he first went to Calcutta he could walk down the street and the Indians walking in the opposite direction would just get out of his way, but later the time had come when the Indians just continued to walk where they were and it was the European who got out of the way.⁸⁰

In this new social climate, rather than submitting to Louise's implacable will as Narayan had done, Anil stands his ground and rejects her false accusations outright. On the one hand, this act of insubordination forces Louise to acknowledge the fact of India and its indigenous people, but on the other hand, her assumption of Anil's guilt also assumes her imperial right to inflict punishment on him. Here the novel presents a paradox. As she loses control, Louise exhibits the type of hysterical behaviour that in colonial discourse is normally attributed to the 'feminized' Indian, yet her hysteria takes the form of the European, and male, prerogative to administer 'justice' to the 'submissive' native. When she accuses Anil of sexual misconduct with her daughter, Louise is given license by her own political culture to identify with her abusive husband by articulating his power: 'If I were a man I should horsewhip you ... Flog you so that you should never forget,' she warns Anil.⁸¹ By juxtaposing Louise's own rape alongside her false accusation of rape against Anil, the narrative also makes clear Louise's own subjugated position in relation to that of the student. Notwithstanding her mistreatment of him, Louise's position within the patriarchal colonial system is ultimately just as unstable as Anil's and Narayan's; all are subject to Charles's overall control. Yet despite

⁸⁰Allen, p. 245.

⁸¹*BWTN* p. 163. See Lassner, p. 88; Naik, pp. 44-45.

her husband's patriarchal authority, as a white woman Louise is always in a superior position to the Indians within the colonial system. Thus, it is almost impossible for her not to be complicit with the colonial project. This enables Godden to reveal in microcosm an ugly picture of British attitudes towards the indigenous people of India in that Louise inevitably abuses the sense of power produced by her access to the prerogatives of imperialism. Despite the fact that Anil comes from an upper-caste background and Louise has neither independent financial support nor resources of her own, she is situated, as both Lassner and Naik point out, within a power structure that enables her to use her fears to justify her treatment of Anil.

Although he is not one of the more fully developed characters in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Anil nevertheless bears great symbolic significance. His terrible suffering and horrible death convey something of the pain suffered by India under the Raj. Anil contains within himself in a particularly acute way the conflict between the old and the new. Even though he comes from a traditional Brahmin background, he had been sent to the Agricultural College to learn modern technology. Nonetheless, like Louise and Narayan in their ridiculous European clothes, Anil is also a misfit in Amorra. He is a dreamer, like Shila, who rejects modernization in favour of writing poetry. As a poet, he is therefore 'feminized' and hence deemed too unworldly and traditional to rule a free India. Anil's dilemma recalls the struggle for survival between Sister Clodagh and Sister Ruth; since Anil is Narayan's doppelganger, only one of the pair can survive the struggle between the past and the future. Therefore, as a figure associated with the old poetic and premodern India, Anil must die in order that Narayan and Shila can fulfil their destinies as parents to the future of India. With Anil out of the way, the Das's

unborn child will be a symbol, an accommodation of Shila's tradition and Narayan's modernity that will represent a positive Indian future. Yet Anil's short life is not entirely negated by the narrative. When Narayan discovers a collection of poems the young student had written, Sir Monmatha promises to see to it that they are 'printed and published in India on Indian paper, bound in khuddar, with a hand-made Indian design.'⁸² Such details clearly negate Louise's disparaging remark that India had no productive life of its own.

IV

Following her meeting with Anil, Emily makes her way to Narayan's home where she at last learns the truth about Don from the veterinarian. Later, finding herself at the kitchen entrance, she witnesses Shila preparing for an Indian festival. Shila has also received a European education and, despite her traditionalism, has learned the colonizer's language. She responds to Emily's attempt to speak to her in the local vernacular by replying to her in English. However, her English is infused with the rhythms of her own native tongue, not 'clipped like Anil's or Narayan's' in imitation of the British, with whom they have close contact.⁸³ Shila is crafting the figure of a goddess and decorating its stand with timeless patterns: 'How do you know the pattern?' Emily asks. 'I know it. My mother knew it and her mother. Even my mother's mother's

⁸²*BWTN*, p. 211.

⁸³*BWTN*, p. 198.

mother.⁸⁴ Unlike her husband, Shila retains an inviolable selfhood that enables her to remain beyond the reach of colonialism. We hear of her hopes and fears through her own voice, and, for the first time in Anglo-English fiction, we are even provided with access to her home and the traditional customs practised there: ‘You have come to the back of the house,’ she tells Emily, ‘here we are domestic in the Indian way.’⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Shila’s kitchen is just as perforated a space as the Anglo-Irish Big House and Emily’s intrusion is as potentially transgressive as that of the nationalist rebel in *The Last September*; even more so, since in this instance, Emily represents the colonizer, not the colonized. In this novel, as in *Black Narcissus*, the idea of cultural integration is not entertained at any level. Since the narrative does not allow Emily to cross the threshold of Indian domestic space, and given that Louise will not allow Charles to entertain his Indian colleagues in her home, the reader can only assume that the author condones such cultural apartheid. *Breakfast with the Nikolides* thus reinforces the stand taken in *Black Narcissus* regarding the social and cultural differences between the peoples of the East and West and the importance of recognizing and preserving these differences. Emily intuits that her presence in Shila’s kitchen would represent a reversal of the contamination feared by Louise; she therefore remains at the kitchen entrance and does not cross over the threshold.⁸⁶ Lurking in the background of the narrative is a concern that the races should be kept separate so as to prevent such pollution.⁸⁷

⁸⁴*BWTN*, p. 198. This phrase is repeated in *Shiva’s Pigeons: An Experience of India* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 249. In *A Time To Dance, No Time To Weep*, p. 161, Godden relates her attempts to learn this art of *Alpona* during the 1951 shooting of the film based on her novel, *The River* (1946).

⁸⁵*BWTN*, p. 199.

⁸⁶*BWTN*, p. 199.

⁸⁷In reality some European women were allowed access to the zenana as teachers but there was never a question of their assimilation into Indian culture.

As Emily becomes aware of changes taking place within her, she realizes that the psychological war with her mother has gone beyond the matter of Don's death and has become a struggle for the survival of her autonomous 'self:'

I have turned old ... she felt infinitely removed from the Emily who had gone out to breakfast with the Nikolides ... I shall never go blind like that again. I shall never be blind ... and even to so young a girl as Emily there was something pitiable in the loss of that heedlessness. Breakfast with the Nikolides was always to be the last hour of her childhood.⁸⁸

The reference to 'the last hour of her childhood' gives meaning to Godden's title to the novel. That particular breakfast signifies the end of a world of childhood innocence, the beginning of a more painful world of experience and knowledge. It suggests that the timeframe of the novel is an in-between one, a time when an old era is over, or nearly so, and another one painfully underway. Emily wins the contest with her mother and seems to gain some self-reflective insight. She becomes self-aware enough to understand that there must be a price as well as a reward for her victory and that she must learn to accept the losses that come with her new maturity.

However, as she matures, Emily becomes more like her mother than she might care to acknowledge. Despite being raised in liberal Paris, she is fast approaching the point where she too will perpetuate the stereotype of the *memsahib* in the image of Louise. At the end of the novel, Emily, who has been allowed limited access to indigenous culture and who up until now has displayed a great degree of sensitivity towards Indian customs, has an outburst of utter revulsion towards her surroundings. Caught up in the crowd of student protestors who are demonstrating over Anil's death and finding herself in too-close proximity to the beggars who have joined the

⁸⁸BWTN, p. 115.

procession, Emily's previously romantic view of the bazaar now dissipates into a disgust that is every bit as keen as Louise's:

Emily was among the beggars who had clustered round the College gates; they hopped on sticks or were dragged in wooden boxes on wooden wheels, or pulled themselves along on one another's shoulders; there were armless ones, and legless ones, one with no nose, one with his teeth growing through his cheek; they ran with sores, and from their rags came a putrid old dead smell; and Emily, shuddering and sick, hurled herself away from them into the crowd.⁸⁹

Displaying no interest in what had motivated the protest, Emily feels only a compulsive desire to escape. As this passage indicates, Louise's destructive nature exposes the infection that has poisoned the relationship between Britain and India for generations and which she now passes on to Emily.

Anil's death provides the catalyst for revolt among the Indian students and his 'disappearance' provokes similar responses to those encountered following the trial of Aziz and the departure of Mrs. Moore in Forster's novel. The students' reaction also reminds us of the reaction to the death of the Indian baby in *Black Narcissus*. The protesters hold Emily responsible for Anil's troubles, but now, like Charles, Emily is also blinkered and does not comprehend that the effigy she sees being carried by the crowd is her own image: 'Where is your beastly daughter, Charlie?' they shout.⁹⁰ In danger of being overwhelmed by the mob when the scene turns ugly, Emily is rescued by Shah, into whose care Charles has entrusted his children. Unfortunately, Emily has also intuited from the encounter between her mother and Anil that any form of physical contact with indigenous males is strictly taboo for the Anglo-Indian female. When Shah

⁸⁹*BWTN*, p. 201.

⁹⁰*BWTN*, p. 207.

pulls her to safety inside the gate of the compound, she reacts with the same racist fury with which Louise had addressed Anil:

‘Why did you touch me? What made you do a thing like that?’ she said severely ... I shall report you to the Sahib.’ Deeply affronted, she walked up the drive to find Louise.⁹¹

Rather than taking her cue from Charles, whom she adores and who goes some way towards establishing an integrative relationship with the indigenous people, it is interesting that Emily, who professes to hate Louise, chooses to emulate her mother here. To Emily now, all Indians look alike and can be dismissed from her consciousness. She does not recognize Anil when she meets him again and later remains ignorant not only of his death, but of the central part she and her dog had played in it: “‘I wonder what has happened to him,’ said Emily; ‘but of course all the students have gone home.’”⁹² Having fought so valiantly to assert her independence, Emily is in danger of allowing her character to be stunted by the same imperial psychology that will perpetuate the racial divide between colonizer and colonized to the detriment of both.

Caught up in the new spirit of revolt, the crowd ‘booed and called and whistled ... “‘We want – Anil Banerjee. We – want – Anil.’” Charles ‘looked at them with tired naked eyes, and they felt his look pitiful and stern as if he had something to tell them that was grim and sad.’⁹³ His loud and paternal ‘Hush’ silences the crowd. As Lassner notes: ‘In this prelude to the end of Empire the sahib knows he has got to act like a sahib;’ a maxim also expressed by Orwell in *Shooting an Elephant*. To retain his

⁹¹*BWTN*, p. 202. This incident has its precedent in fact. A *memsahib* described to the writer J.R. Ackerley (1896-1967) what had happened when a servant saved her life by pulling her back from stepping on a poisonous snake: ‘Then the servant did a thing absolutely without precedent in India – he touched me – he put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me back.’ While recognizing that the servant had saved her life, she told Ackerley, ‘I didn’t like it all the same, and got rid of him soon after.’ Quoted in MacMillan, p. 117.

⁹²*BWTN*, p. 213.

⁹³*BWTN*, p. 206-207.

superior status, Charles must enact his power by showing that the choice to relinquish it is his.⁹⁴ As he allows Narayan to address the crowd, the veterinarian is uncertain; he trembles and needs physical support; it is as though he is standing on Charles's shoulders.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, as an emblem of a new India, Narayan's voice, although small, is clear and far-reaching:

His voice sounded very large to him; the whole of him was in it, it seemed to break the sky and come back to him, but it sounded very little to the students after Charles's – little but very clear. It reached even to their outskirts. They all heard it. 'You – must – be – quiet,' said the little voice, 'Anil is – dead.'⁹⁶

The students' protest is a microcosm of the nationalist unrest taking place in India at the time *Breakfast with the Nikolides* was written. Yet while, on the one hand, the narrative implies that this is a moment of transition when, however reluctantly, power is handed over to India, on the other hand, the British Empire's longstanding disdain for nationalism and a refusal to take it seriously can still be felt. This is reflected in the farcical imagery of the crowd's lack of a sense of direction and leadership:

The procession had been round the town. It went to the Principal's house to make a demonstration, but when it arrived there was no one to see it; the Principal had left for the college in his car ... Someone suggested they should throw stones, but it was no part of their programme to be undignified and the procession returned through the bazaar. Here among the lanes and side-roads it was forced to split up and many little processions went wandering off by themselves and remained lost for the rest of the day.⁹⁷

Even at this late stage of imperialism, Godden treats Indian discontent as mere localized disturbances and dismisses it as unworthy of her reader's respect or serious attention. In common with Bowen and, as we will see, with Lessing also, Godden's novel does not

⁹⁴Lassner, p. 95; Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* ([1936] London: Penguin, 2003).

⁹⁵*BWTN*, pp. 207-208.

⁹⁶*BWTN*, p. 208.

⁹⁷*BWTN*, p. 200.

allow Indian nationalist politics into her narrative in any substantive way. Like Bowen, she acknowledges its existence, but treats it by keeping it at a distance in narrative terms and she emotionally distances it by a mixture of cool irony or slightly mocking ridicule. The shadow of insurgent nationalism falls across the novels of Bowen, Godden and Lessing; in all three cases, though, the novels shun any direct engagement with the nationalist challenge.

At the height of the rioting, Louise finally admits to herself that although she felt that she had acted in the best interests of Emily, the panic that she had fought so hard to control had broken through the surface of her consciousness and had been responsible for her unseemly actions. This panic had flooded her brain and infected her with a madness akin to that of the dog and Anil:

I did kill Don. You guessed it and you were right. I did lie to you. Yes, I did. I did. I did. I did it all so swiftly that it happened in one impulse. I was caught in it even before it was done and that is why I did it; under the laudable, plausible motives, that is why I did it. Panic comes like blood to my brain ...⁹⁸

The realization that she has acted in error enables Louise to eventually capitulate and apologize to Emily: ‘She said it in an unaccustomed way, stiffly and politely, but with a quietude that Emily had not heard before: ‘Louise was new. “I am sorry,” said Louise.’⁹⁹

Until Anil’s death, while Narayan has certainly been allowed a voice in the narrative, his actions and demeanour towards Shila have always been in support of the British Empire. It is not until Shila’s insistent voice begins to bear influence that he learns to compromise. He discovers his own links with the past, the traditions and beliefs of his Indian heritage that go beyond his wretched origins and the vexation of his

⁹⁸*BWTN*, p. 147-148.

⁹⁹*BWTN*, p. 204.

'crossed' blood. This new knowledge enables him to reach out to Shila in a welcome acceptance of their shared cultural inheritance; in doing so, he gains a new sense of his true 'self':

I have been wrong all this time. I have been going in the wrong direction; all this force and striving, this breaking away and smashing down of obstacles, has been wrong – is still wrong. I should have left it alone. I wish I had left it alone; but what else could I do? I had to make myself, and make myself strong. Now I want to go back, behind that street, behind my birth, accepting them, go back to the only mother I have, to India herself.¹⁰⁰

Repudiating the brash breakneck modernization associated with Charles Pool, what the novel is at pains to point out here is the hope that with Anil's death the flow of poison is stemmed and that the accommodation reached by the young Indian couple will ensure that the safe future of India will lie in their unborn baby. It is this child, not the Pool children, who symbolizes the approaching new India; it is their son, not the Pools's daughters, who will inherit the Indian earth.

V

As I have argued, *Breakfast with the Nikolides* is not a critique of the British Empire *per se*. The hope expressed in the novel is that at the close of empire, what the emerging new State must do is to attempt to find a balance, a collaborative synthesis between old methods of production and the opportunities for Indian advancement afforded by new scientific methods of modernization. In Godden's estimation, this cannot be achieved without the expertise contributed by people like her father, Arthur, and her fictional character, Charles Pool. Given the divergence of their different backgrounds and talents, Narayan and Charles between them should embody the forces

¹⁰⁰*BWTN*, p. 33.

for change that are needed to revitalize the land and make India new again. Their combined strengths ought to be a potent and collaborative force that can lead to the gradual breakdown in caste and class barriers that will ensure a successful accommodation of tradition and modernity. However, as he gazes at her 'ridiculous elegance,' Narayan finds himself cheered by the knowledge that Louise is just as out of place in India as he had been in his European clothes: 'She is not,' he declares, 'altogether changed.'¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, despite this sense of continued cultural separation, the idea of friendship between colonizer and colonized that had been rejected outright by the villagers of Mopu becomes a distinct possibility in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*. Although he cannot forgive Louise, either for her role in his guilt for destroying Don or for her racist abuse of Anil, Narayan bears no animosity towards Charles.¹⁰² From the beginning of the narrative, he understands intuitively that it is unlikely that they will become friends in the immediate future but like Dr. Aziz at the conclusion of *A Passage to India*, 'he felt, quite certainly, that presently this would be.'¹⁰³

Passing Narayan on the farm road, Charles and Louise appear to reach the same degree of amiable compromise achieved by Narayan and Shila and by Sister Clodagh and Mr. Dean in *Black Narcissus*. What Godden seems to advocate is that Charles, like Mr. Dean, could perhaps play a part in the transition to independence by offering his agricultural expertise. However, the prevailing political climate in India does not allow for such an unlikely narrative resolution: since it assumes a continuing British presence in India, Godden's romantic ending represents an act of political denial. In *Black*

¹⁰¹ *BWTN*, p. 212.

¹⁰² *BWTN*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁰³ *BWTN*, p. 54.

Narcissus Clodagh and her sisters can either continue their civilizing mission in other outposts of empire or return to the mother convent in Sussex. However, as potential ‘domiciled citizens’ who have no roots in either India or Europe, the future for the Pool family in an independent India is far more uncertain than Godden’s optimistic closure acknowledges.

Important to Phyllis Lassner’s *Colonial Strangers* is the idea that the writers she discusses felt an uneasiness regarding their privileged status within the ruling class. Yet this is patently not the case with Godden. Her comment that she and her family felt entirely at home in India is a version of colonialism that, like Elizabeth Bowen’s, would deny the truth that their comfort was provided for at the expense of the indigenous population and that such privilege would end with the empire.¹⁰⁴ It was not until a servant tried to poison her and her daughters that Godden was disabused of the notion that she was accepted in India. Only then did she finally admit that ‘the only authentic healing the postcolonial Englishwoman can represent is to leave.’¹⁰⁵ Yet Godden’s imperial ideas remained strong. In her unabashed slide into a nostalgic memory of India in *Two Under the Indian Sun*, *Shiva’s Pigeons* and *A Time to Dance, no Time to Weep*, Godden quotes freely from *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, persistently portraying as truth her belief that the Indian peasant is inherently and immutably indolent compared to the dedicated industry of Europeans such as her father. In this sense at least, Godden’s later texts anticipate the tradition of ‘Raj Nostalgia’ that gripped postcolonial England in the decades following the demise of its empire. Despite her acknowledgement of its faults,

¹⁰⁴Godden wrote: ‘Our house was English streaked with Indian, or Indian streaked with English. It might have been an uneasy hybrid but we were completely and happily at home.’ Jon and Rumer Godden, *Two under the Indian Sun* (London: Macmillan 1966), p. 46.

¹⁰⁵Lassner, *Colonial Strangers*, p. 117.

what the novels clearly indicate is her continued belief in the validity of the Raj long after its demise.

Chapter Four

The Waste Lands of a Dying Colonialism:

Racial Desire and Racial Terror

in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

Settler societies are distinguished from 'colonies of exploitation' such as India, where the appropriation of natural resources and labour entailed indirect control of the colony through a relatively small group of civil servants, entrepreneurs, military personnel and missionaries. Settler societies, on the other hand, were characterized by a much larger invasion of people, those who went to colonies such as Ireland, Southern Rhodesia and South Africa intent on permanent settlement.¹ Britain's colonial rule in Southern Rhodesia extended from the establishment of the Government of Southern Rhodesia in 1923 to Prime Minister Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of independence from Britain in 1965, when the British Empire was almost at an end and colonial rule was already waning in Africa. From 1953 to 1963, Southern Rhodesia was part of the multiracial Central African Federation set up by Britain, but this arrangement collapsed when Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland became the independent states of Zambia and Malawi respectively and Southern Rhodesia reverted to a crown colony. In a move recognized only by white South Africa, the country ceased to be a colony of Britain when Smith declared the Republic of Rhodesia in 1970. Nonetheless, when *The Grass is Singing* was published in 1950, although still officially part of the British Empire, white Southern Rhodesia had already considered itself unofficially independent. Unlike

¹See *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, Daiva K. Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis eds., (London: Sage, 1995), p. 3. Albert Memmi uses the terms 'colonialists' and 'colonizers' interchangeably, but in her introduction to his text, Nadine Gordimer makes a distinction between the colonialists, who advocate and administer the policies of colonization, as in India, but who remain citizens of their home country, and the colonizers, those of Anglo-Ireland and Africa, for instance, who permanently settle on the land from which the indigenous people have been forcibly uprooted. What Gordimer fails to mention is that both groups had the same exploitative objective in mind. See Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* ([1957] London: Earthscan, 2003), pp. 30-31.

Ireland and India, settler children born in the colony were mainly schooled locally and over time, although they still looked to England as the homeland, the settlers gradually began to identify themselves as Rhodesians and achieved what amounted to effective political independence from Westminster in a way that India had not.² Furthermore, as Allister Sparks points out, the colonizers developed much more elaborate political and economic infrastructures as methods of exploitation than had been the case in India.³ As Sparks also observes, the Rhodesian Government never instituted a policy of legal apartheid along South African lines. Rhodesians ‘talked of “partnership” rather than domination, and of maintaining “standards” rather than racial identity, but the system they imposed was segregationist and discriminatory and designed to keep the white minority in overall control. It was less dogmatic, less severe, less overt, and more hypocritical [than the South African system]. In the end it proved no less inflexible or more capable of averting its own revolutionary overthrow.’⁴ Indeed, Lessing concedes that there was not very much difference between the Rhodesian experience and the South African experience, and that in fact *The Grass is Singing* ‘could have been about white people anywhere south of the Zambezi.’⁵ I read the tense situation in *The Grass is Singing* as a microcosm of the prevailing political situation in Southern Rhodesia at a time when people on both

²For a detailed history of Southern Rhodesia see Shula Marks, ‘Southern Africa’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. IV, Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis, eds. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 545-573, and Christopher Saunders and Iain R. Smith, ‘Southern Africa, 1795-1910’, in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. III, Andrew Porter, ed. (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 597-623.

³Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1990), pp. 49-50.

⁴Sparks, pp. 49-50. When apartheid formally became law in South Africa following the general election of 1948, people were classified into distinct racial groups — White, Black, Coloured and Indian. This was mirrored in Britain, where the 1948 British Nationality Act distinguished between two classes of subjects — citizens of the United Kingdom and its colonies (White colonials), and Commonwealth (Black and Asian) citizens. For the effects of these distinctions, see Louise Yelin, *From the Margins of Empire* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 59.

⁵See Stephen Gray, ‘An Interview with Doris Lessing’, *Research in African Literature* 17 (1986), p. 331 and Roy Newquist, ‘Interview with Doris Lessing’, in Doris Lessing, *A Small Personal Voice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 46.

sides of the political divide were beginning to question the legitimacy of colonial rule in Africa.

Lessing was heavily influenced by Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which she had read as a teenager. Like Schreiner's much earlier novel, *The Grass is Singing* is also a dystopian text, one that may be placed alongside Alyse Simpson's *The Land That Never Was* (1937) and Daphne Rooke's *A Grove of Fever Trees* (1950) as a novel that debunks both pastoral idealism and the dream of empire that enticed Lessing's parents to Africa.⁶ There is, in Lessing's novel, none of the nostalgic romanticism of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937) or Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959).

The Grass is Singing is written from a third person omniscient point of view but because, in contrast to Godden's *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, its narrative focus rests almost solely on its white characters, it maintains a somewhat narrow perspective. Such an approach suggests a restricted awareness on the part of the white protagonists, whose consciousness throughout the novel retains an introverted and narcissistic outlook on events. Thus, as we shall see, although the black farm worker, Moses, plays a crucial role in the narrative, there is only a limited attempt on Lessing's part to explore his inner life. Moses's actions are described solely from the narrator's point of view and, since his psychology is never revealed, the reader must attempt to interpret his motives. Given this narrative disposition of things, *The Grass is Singing*, as Katherine Fishburn points out, is a novel in which its white protagonists' view of the world is registered in sharply defined Manichean terms. In

⁶Simpson and her husband left England for Kenya between the wars. *The Land That Never Was* is a fictionalized account of their years in Africa. Despite their efforts, their farm failed and they returned to England after a few years. Rooke's novel relates the story of an impoverished widow trying to raise her family on a farm in South Africa. Well-known in their own time, both these writers are now being re-evaluated.

a similar vein to Albert Memmi, Fishburn argues that given the prevailing segregationist policies in Southern Rhodesia at the time the novel was written, it is inevitable that Lessing should realistically foreground racial issues in her novel.⁷

However, in her preface to the 1964 edition of *Collected African Stories*, Lessing maintains that although some reviewers were bound to describe *The Grass is Singing* as a novel about what was then referred to as the ‘colour problem,’ this was not how she herself regarded it.⁸ In an interview with Stephen Gray in 1986, Lessing explained that due to her cultural distance from black people, she was less concerned with racial issues than she was with the vulnerability of her chief protagonist, Mary Turner, and the dynamics of Mary’s encounter with a much stronger personality — Moses. As Lessing confessed of her life in Africa: ‘I didn’t meet anybody, of course, but whites, because one didn’t.’⁹ In an earlier interview with Michael Thorpe, the author had already conceded the extent of the divisions caused by institutionalized racial segregation, admitting that she was unable to portray Africans in her fiction because, as she said: ‘in Rhodesia as a white person, my contact with the blacks as equals was simply non-existent.’¹⁰ Discussing *The Grass is Singing* with Eve Bertelsen in 1984, Lessing reinforced this racial division, observing that she had portrayed Moses as more of a symbol than a person because: ‘It was the only way I could write him at that time, since I’d never met Africans excepting the servants or politically in a certain complicated way.’¹¹

⁷Katherine Fishburn, ‘The Manichean Allegories of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*’, *Research in African Literature*, 25. 4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 1-2. See also Memmi, pp. 30-31.

⁸Doris Lessing, *Collected African Stories*, vol.1 (Herts: Triad, 1979). p. 9.

⁹Gray, p. 330.

¹⁰Michael Thorpe, ‘Interview with Doris Lessing’, *Kunapipi*, 4.2 (1980), pp. 95-103: 102.

¹¹Eve Bertelsen, ‘Interview with Doris Lessing’, in *Doris Lessing*, Eve Bertelsen, ed. (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1985), pp. 93-118: 102; also quoted in Dennis Walder, ‘Alone in a Landscape: Lessing’s African Stories Remembered’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43 (2008), pp. 99-115: 109.

Pointing out that this perception of racial difference initially came about due to economic considerations, Abdul R. JanMohamed explains that before the establishment of the slave trade, Africans were perceived by Europeans in a more or less neutral and benign manner. However, once slavery was established, black people were commodified and quickly came to be characterized as subhuman chattels, a situation which quickly led to a system of informal segregation throughout all the colonies.¹² Fishburn writes that due to this tradition, Lessing's treatment of her black characters underlines this theory of a Manichean allegory, and that consequently, rather than being a critique of colonialism, *The Grass is Singing* is a novel that 'reinscribes the power and dominance of the white colonial ruling class.' Fishburn believes that the novel's narrative resolution lends credence to this argument. She suggests that although the text 'reveals the greed, ruthlessness, moral turpitude and sheer self-interested stupidity of the settler community,' it is in fact a novel that is complicit with the very system it purports to subvert.¹³ Following Memmi and Fanon, Robin Visel and Sue Kossew both concur with Fishburn in emphasizing the complicity of the white woman colonizer in shoring up imperial practices. Explaining the mediatory role of women writers whose 'sympathy for the oppressed and simultaneous entrapment within the oppressive group on whose behalf they may desire to mediate complicates their narrative stance,' these critics insist that although she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, the colonial woman cannot help but share in the power and guilt of the dominant class.¹⁴ This criticism implies that the colonial writer, whether male or female, is socially

¹² Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', p. 63.

¹³ Fishburn, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ Robin Visel, 'Then Spoke the Thunder': *The Grass is Singing* as a Zimbabwean Novel', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43 (2008), pp. 157-166; Sue Kossew, *Writing Women, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2004).

conditioned to reproduce dominant racial ideologies and can, whatever his or her conscious intentions, rarely overcome this constraint.

It is true that Lessing's novel may be read as one in which the ends are neatly tied up to provide, in colonial terms, a satisfactory Darwinian narrative resolution, one in which the 'evil', or weak, characters are eliminated, while the strong masculine, pioneering white 'hero' triumphs. From this point of view, the novel can indeed stand accused of reinscribing the supremacy of the settlers, with the implication that destroying its vulnerable characters as social degenerates is a necessary sacrifice in the best interests of the white community. Read thus, Lessing leaves herself open to the accusation that her novel fails to challenge the political system or to overcome the tensions of settler colonialism. However, in this chapter I argue that while *The Grass is Singing* may replicate some of the prevalent assumptions of colonial discourse, it would be imprudent to assume that the novel endorses racial segregation or its methods of application. As we shall see, the novel makes clear that the ruthless Charlie Slatter could not have achieved his successful transition from the slums of London to economic success in Rhodesia without the practices of forced resettlement and labour engendered by settler colonialism. Therefore, I shall demonstrate that while Lessing's treatment of her more vulnerable characters may be ruthlessly harsh, her novel is nevertheless devastatingly honest in its condemnation of white society, which, as personified by Slatter, it views as being almost completely irredeemable. From this standpoint, I argue, Lessing mirrors Frantz Fanon in directing her criticism towards 'those individuals and those social forces which strove to perpetuate inequality and subjection.'¹⁵

¹⁵Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* ([1959] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). See G.M. Carstairs's foreword, p. 8.

The Grass is Singing is set in Southern Rhodesia during the Second World War, yet the only reference in the novel to that war occurs when Moses enquires if it will soon be over, a conflict that to the self-absorbed Mary Turner is only a rumour, 'something taking place in another world.'¹⁶ Lessing is not concerned with world affairs; her focus is the closed world of Southern Rhodesia and therefore outside influences are never allowed to intrude upon the narrative. As noted by JanMohamed, the action of the novel takes place during the period when the indigenous people of Africa 'are subjugated by colonialist material practices' such as 'policies of population transfers, gerrymandering of borders, and forced production,' a period during which the European colonizers 'exercise direct and continuous bureaucratic control and military coercion of the natives.'¹⁷ In addition, JanMohamed argues that the nature of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, one defined by practices that with varying degrees of success sought to destroy indigenous cultural systems — as had happened in Ireland and India — led in turn to the production of pathological colonial societies and moreover, that these societies then existed in a state of perpetual crisis.¹⁸ Spatially, *The Grass is Singing* is located within what Mary Louise Pratt terms a 'contact zone,' a space in which people otherwise separated by the colonizer/colonized divide of necessity come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relationships. As Pratt indicates, and as we have discussed in Bowen's and Godden's novels, these relationships are

¹⁶*TGIS*, p. 155.

¹⁷JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory', p. 61. These practices were already in place when the Taylers moved to Africa. Lessing's father farmed 30,000 acres of land from which Africans had been displaced and forced onto reserves. Such land grabbing was made legal by the Land Husbandry Act of 1951, which limited traditional cattle grazing practices and provided for the downsizing of African herds. The Act also prohibited farming by Africans without a permit and imposed compulsory labour on unemployed rural Africans. It also allowed white officials to dictate patterns of cultivation and crop growing much like the methods employed by Charles Pool in *BWTN*. All this resulted in the depletion of herds, a reduction in arable land and the enforced uprooting of entire villages.

¹⁸JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory', p. 61.

usually negative, involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and direct or indirect conflict.¹⁹ Given this sense of imperial angst, an important aspect of the novel to be explored is its treatment of the relationship between white settler society as encapsulated by its white protagonists, and the native Africans, as represented by the figure of Moses.

The novel opens with a newspaper cutting reporting the discovery of the body of a white woman, Mary Turner, who has been murdered by her black servant, Moses. Having identified the victim and her killer, the narrator then provides the reader with details of the circumstances surrounding the murder, together with an overview of the settler society in which the event had taken place. The subsequent chapters are related in a realist mode and provide a chronological flashback from Mary's childhood up to the day of the crime. The narrator relates how Mary's ability to form any semblance of a close relationship had been severely compromised by her dysfunctional and emotionally deprived childhood. However, with the deaths of her siblings and parents, Mary had been released from all emotional attachments and until she was thirty years old had lived a comfortable, if somewhat sterile, life in the city, her days bounded by her lodgings, her secretarial job, the local tennis club, and an obsession with Hollywood films.

In a scene that marks the first turning point in the novel, shortly after her thirtieth birthday, Mary accidentally overhears a group of her friends critically discussing her immature appearance and her frigid and asexual personality. This episode is important because it signals the beginning of Mary's mental instability. As the narrator comments:

¹⁹Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 38-85.

It is terrible to destroy a person's picture of himself in the interests of truth or some other abstraction. How can one know he will be able to create another to enable him to go on living? Mary's picture of herself was destroyed and she was not fitted to recreate herself.²⁰

Stung by the women's negative comments, and feeling compelled to prove them wrong, Mary begins a desperate search for a husband. Following a disastrous encounter in which she runs away from the advances of an older man, a widower, she meets and quickly marries Dick Turner, and moves with him to his remote farm in the African bush.

The climate and physical environment of the veld have a negative impact on Mary's psychological and physical well-being; accustomed to the comforts of the city, the all-pervading heat and dryness of the countryside prove extremely challenging to her and she cannot come to terms with either the veld or its people. In contrast, Dick is deeply committed to the land, which he loves. However, Dick is an incompetent farmer who quickly reminds his horrified wife of her despised and ineffectual father, who had also been a failure. Mary's growing disquiet is further aggravated by her husband's disastrous investments in a series of projects that, one after the other, fail. When, in desperation, Dick forces her to run a store for the farmhands, she takes fright and runs back to her old life only to find that life in the city has moved on in her absence. Finding herself thoroughly rejected by her former colleagues, Mary has no alternative but to return to the farm. When Dick contracts malaria soon afterwards, she takes control of his affairs but in her efforts to bring some sense of order and efficiency to her husband's haphazard farming practices, Mary reacts with unwarranted violence when she perceives that one of the farmhands is giving her 'cheek.' The incident in which she uses a whip to strike the farmhand

²⁰*TGIS*, p. 43.

across the face marks the second turning point in the novel, as from this moment on Mary descends further and further into a state of paranoia and psychosis. She now risks being overcome by all her demons, past and present.

The catalyst that leads to Mary's ultimate breakdown is provided by the arrival of a new houseboy, Moses, the worker whom she had whipped two years previously. When Dick suffers a second bout of malaria, Mary becomes dependent on Moses for support and soon an intimate relationship develops between them. This situation lasts until the Turners' nearest neighbour, Slatter, visits the farm and, seeing the danger in such a transgressive rapport, urges Dick to get rid of Moses. However, by this time, Dick's failures have propelled him into a deep state of depressive apathy and he is unable either to deal with Moses or to prevent Slatter from taking advantage of the situation by bullying him into selling the farm. The new temporary manager, Tony Marston, witnesses a moment of intimacy between Mary and Moses, and with Mary's tacit consent, he orders the black man to leave the property. Understanding that Moses will kill her for this betrayal, the following morning Mary stands on her verandah to await the African's arrival. Her intuition proves to be accurate and having murdered her, Moses confesses to the crime in the full knowledge that his fate is a foregone conclusion. As the police sergeant in charge remarks: 'The case will be a matter of form, of course.'²¹

II

Until she had overheard her friends' devastatingly cruel observations, Mary had believed that her place in society was secure and she had never once

²¹*TGIS*, p. 24.

contemplated forfeiting her independence by becoming a wife and mother. Mary's father had been a drunk and her mother had reacted to this with a lifetime of consuming bitterness, so that although Mary had never consciously explored the dynamics of her dysfunctional childhood, she had made every effort to avoid the life endured by her mother:

When Mary thought of 'home' she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at her children's funerals — anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock. Mary liked other people's children but shuddered at the thought of having any of her own. She felt sentimental at weddings, but she felt a profound distaste for sex; there had been little privacy in her home and there were things she did not care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago.²²

Mary had taken pains to shape her own life to a different pattern. 'If she had been left alone,' the narrator remarks, 'she would have gone on, in her own way, enjoying herself thoroughly, until people found one day that she had turned imperceptibly into one of those women who have become old without ever having been middle-aged: a little withered, a little acid, hard as nails, sentimentally kind-hearted, and addicted to religion or small dogs.'²³ With her self-image totally undermined 'because some gossiping women had said she ought to get married,' Mary's inability to recover her sense of 'self' as an independent and unattached young woman precipitates her descent into paranoia and madness.²⁴

Mary's hasty marriage to Dick, which relocates her from her comfortable urban life to a remote farm at the boundaries of white civilization, accelerates her disintegration by propelling her into a situation for which she is socially and culturally ill-prepared. Before her marriage, Mary had tried to 'get close to nature'

²²*TGIS*, p. 39.

²³*TGIS*, pp. 38-39.

²⁴*TGIS*, p. 44.

but her knowledge of the veld is limited to civilized picnics with friends at the periphery of the town.²⁵ Arriving at the farm late at night with Dick, she is terrified by the sudden nocturnal animal cries and by the gothic appearance of her unfamiliar surroundings:

A cold breath blew out of the trees and down in the vlei beyond them hung a cold white vapour ... innumerable little noises rose from the bush, as if colonies of strange creatures had become still and watchful ... then a strange bird called, a wild nocturnal sound, and she turned and ran back, suddenly terrified, as if a hostile breath had blown upon her, from another world, from the trees.²⁶

Mary's terror intensifies when she sees the marriage bed and understands that the moment has come to consummate her union with Dick. However, as a young girl Mary had witnessed her parents copulating and owing to that unresolved trauma she is now unable to make the transition from her childhood perception of the marital act as violent and fearful to a more caring union, one in which she will feel safe and protected.²⁷ But Dick fails to take mastery over Mary from the start; on approaching his new bride, he finds that the sexual dysfunction she had first displayed in her reaction to the widower's advances has caused her to literally turn her back to him. Since she is unable to meet him on sexually equal terms, Mary only permits her husband to approach her when he does so with 'timid adoration.' Her reaction to her initiation is a mixture of relief and misplaced maternalism:

It was not so bad, she thought, when it was all over: not as bad as *that*. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. She was able maternally to bestow the gift of herself on this humble stranger, and remain untouched.²⁸

²⁵TGIS, p. 51.

²⁶TGIS, p. 52.

²⁷See Young, pp. 6-9.

²⁸TGIS, p. 55.

As she becomes increasingly trapped in her reluctant wifely role, Mary can no longer make the pattern of her life fit her expectations and the home that ought to be her refuge quickly becomes her prison. When she becomes increasingly uncomfortable due to the heat generated by the farmhouse's corrugated iron roof, Dick's refusal to install a ceiling leads to a build-up in tension between the couple, one that finally erupts when Mary insists on taking a cool daily bath. Dick's suggestion that she reuse the water brings forth an angry tirade about the filthy condition of the bathtub. Although it is permanently oxidized, Mary sets the houseboy to scrubbing it in an endlessly repeated task that fails to produce the desired effect. This stained bath has an important symbolic value. While on one level it becomes the manifestation of all that Mary hates about life in the African veld, on another deeper level, its resistance to change may also be representative of a wider series of African resistances to her will, a potential danger that, deep down, Mary recognizes. Although based on her ingrained belief that she has a God-given right to complete control over her household, the frustration that manifests itself in aggression and rage towards her servants is also symptomatic of Mary's intense feelings of fear towards black people:

Her mother's servants she had been forbidden to talk to ... she was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa has been brought up to be. In her childhood she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive, lowered, but matter-of-fact voice she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her.²⁹

Although Dick initially tries to involve her in the running of the farm, Mary is so paranoid with thoughts of what the servants might be getting up to behind her back that after an initial inspection of the land, she refuses to accompany him again.³⁰ As Sara Mills observes, such paranoia, displayed in the watchful and nervy vigilance

²⁹*TGIS*, pp. 58-59.

³⁰*TGIS*, p. 69.

that is required to deal with servants, illustrates the precariousness of colonial authority.³¹ This sense of instability is common to the other texts I examine. For example, as we have seen in Godden's *Black Narcissus*, the nuns' convent represents a colonial stratum superimposed on a palatial harem, suggesting that the Europeans are a recent intrusion, an artificial layer of foreign culture imposing itself on a very ancient and dissimilar civilization. The ramshackle house to which Dick brings Mary is also an imposition on an ancient land, lacking deep roots in the land or long ancestral claim to it. Thrown up with his own hands, Dick's farmhouse is without either a historical or a family provenance and is therefore suggestive of an unstable society, one that also feels itself recent, dingy and ramshackle. Therefore, the house's capacity for retaining heat is symbolic of Mary's ability to hold onto, and magnify, her anger at her new situation. In a manner that recalls Charles Pool's distressed home in Godden's *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, the Turner house never becomes a proper or secure family home. Despite her best efforts, Mary can neither feminize nor control the house; eventually it slips entirely from her charge and into Moses's care.

As matters deteriorate, Mary, who is accustomed to managing her own affairs diligently, watches helplessly as Dick spends a great deal of time and money on various get-rich-quick projects. However, just as she cannot change the appearance of the bath, neither can Mary influence Dick's delusional risk-taking. As his successive ventures fail, his decision to open a store for the farmworkers leads to disastrous consequences. The sole function of these farm shops was to exploit the workers; as Dick admits to Mary: 'Everyone knew that kaffir stores made a pile of

³¹See Sara Mills, *Discourse of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writings and Colonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

money ... they were goldmines of profit.’³² Unlike these isolated farm stores, the town stores represented the point of connection between the ‘new world’ of Africa and the ‘old world’ of Europe, where the settlers gathered to collect their mail and weeks-old newspapers from ‘home.’ The narrator indicates that the settlers have no overriding desire to live in Europe — “‘South Africa gets into you,” these self-exiled people would say, ruefully’ — but also makes clear that they still looked to it as their homeland.³³ The narrator reinforces the important symbolism of these gathering places by explaining that ‘for thousands of people up and down South Africa, the store was the background to their childhood.’³⁴ As Memmi explains, all colonizers organize their daily habits by importing and imposing the way of life of their home country. It is from this source that ‘they draw their administrative, political and cultural inspiration, and on which their eyes are constantly fixed.’ Yet, as Memmi also points out, while the settlers may well become nostalgic for the ‘old country,’ their dreams of returning are soon checked by the realization that this would involve the loss of their privileged colonial settler status.³⁵ However, the real significance of the store lies in its ability to reinforce a feeling of alienated solidarity among the settlers, a sense of an exiled community under constant threat from numerically superior natives.

The local store had certainly been the centre of Mary’s early life, but for different reasons. Thus, the store that Dick builds invokes long-repressed memories of her troubled childhood:

She could not explain to Dick how that store smell made her remember the way she had stood, as a very small girl,

³²*TGIS*, p. 92. A relatively benign term for black people until the late nineteenth century, as racial tensions increased in Southern Africa, the term ‘Kaffir’ became one of racist abuse.

³³*TGIS*, p. 32.

³⁴*TGIS*, pp. 31-32.

³⁵Memmi, pp. 48-49.

looking fearfully up at the rows of bottles on the shelves, wondering which of them her father would handle that night; the way her mother had taken coins out of his pockets at nights, when he had fallen asleep in a chair snoring, mouth open, legs sprawling ...³⁶

Mary had believed that by obliterating her past she would make of herself a *tabula rasa*; that her newly found independence would provide her with the opportunity to create a new persona unperturbed by the past. She is aghast that such a terrible reminder of her childhood should follow her to her new home, but she can only articulate her rage in racist insults by refusing to sell 'kaffir truck to stinking kaffirs.'³⁷ Her resentment is reinforced by the repulsion she feels at the sight of the black women nursing their babies outside the store:

If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She hated the exposed fleshiness of them ... Above all she hated the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see; there was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil. 'Their babies hanging on to them like leeches,' she said to herself shuddering, for she thought with horror of suckling a child. The idea of a child's lips on her breasts made her feel quite sick; at the thought of it she would involuntarily clasp her hands over her breasts, as if protecting them from a violation.³⁸

Mary interprets breastfeeding as a contamination; it is an invasion of the body that reminds her of her sexuality and the biological urges which she has fought so hard to suppress.³⁹ Mary's self-image had been carefully constructed to protect her from her society's expectation that every white woman should assist in the process of colonization by getting married and bearing children; indeed, the novel does not even provide Mary with a surname until her marriage to Dick grants her an identity befitting a colonial white woman. As Gillian Whitlock points out, Mary graphically

³⁶*TGIS*, pp. 93-94.

³⁷*TGIS*, p. 94.

³⁸*TGIS*, pp. 94-95.

³⁹See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2-3.

undercuts the image of the white settler woman as a domestic angel and an agent of sexual order, one typically characterized by her supposedly 'natural' traits of self-sacrifice, self-regulation and extreme virtue.⁴⁰ In Gilbert and Gubar's terms, Mary's rejection of maternity is a rejection of the ultimate maternal role assigned to women by a patriarchal society.⁴¹ Moreover, her accelerating descent into paranoia signals the anger she has suppressed at her loss of independence and the rage brought on by her friends' cruel comments that had coerced her into marriage and a world of colonial respectability. Conversely, in Kristevan terms, the abject mixture of horror and fascination that Mary experiences as she turns her gaze on the nursing mothers cannot mask the jealousy she feels at such an overt display of maternalism, or the guilt that she feels at this lack of nature within herself.⁴²

Mary's psychology is so malformed that she believes her life is split into discrete components that she can suppress or recall at will. She had been happy as a single woman and now, unable to face the new terror forced upon her by her memories of the store, she takes to daydreaming about her earlier single life. Recalling Clodagh's reveries of her childhood in Ireland in *Black Narcissus*, Mary is similarly transported back to a time when she had been young and carefree. Hoping to forge a new future for herself by revisiting her past, Mary's decision to leave Dick is formed when she comes across a newspaper advertisement placed by her former employer for a shorthand typist. She returns to the city, but her ego is once again shattered when she discovers that she is no longer welcome in the only environment in which she had ever felt truly happy. When Mary returns to the farm, the empty store is soon overtaken by the bush, but the 'savage sun' that eventually overwhelms

⁴⁰Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 201.

⁴¹ See Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 64, 83-86.

⁴²Kristeva, pp. 2-3.

the Turner house suggests the innate hostility of the local environment to settler habitation that has been already noted in *The Last September*, *Black Narcissus* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides*.

For some time following her return, Mary becomes completely enervated. The narrator comments that perhaps Mary ‘might have died quite soon, as her mother had done, after a brief illness, simply because she did not want particularly to live’:

It was an effort for her to do anything at all. It seemed as if the trip into town had drained her reserves of strength and left her with just enough each day to do what had to be done, but nothing more. This was the beginning of an inner disintegration in her. It began with this numbness, as if she could no longer feel or fight.⁴³

But as winter approaches and temperatures cool, Mary walks the land once more with Dick and they suspend hostilities to take mutual pleasure in a rare appearance of frost. For the shortest period of time there is even a possibility that the couple might arrive at some sort of mutual compromise:

They were moving gently towards a new relation; they were more truly together than they had ever been. But then it was that he became ill; and the new tenderness between them, which might have grown into something strong enough to save them both, was not yet strong enough to survive this fresh trouble.⁴⁴

The ‘fresh trouble’ occurs when Dick becomes seriously ill with malaria. The illness that debilitates him testifies to his inability to master the African landscape, and may be read as a trope for the crisis of imperial masculinity that, although taking different forms, has been already observed in the male characters of Bowen’s and Godden’s fiction. In contrast to the manly heroic figures of classical imperial adventure fiction, or even to the self-thwarted pioneers of progress such as Godden’s Charles Pool,

⁴³*TGIS*, p. 102.

⁴⁴*TGIS*, p. 106.

Dick is a twentieth-century anti-hero, a sickly hollow man who can manage neither his wife nor his farm nor, indeed, make a fortune. He ought to be a Charles Pool figure, who represents the energy of the colonial farmer taming the wilderness, but Lessing's Dick is a romantic fool, who is inept on the land and powerless in the face of Mary's burgeoning rage.

Gender roles are irrevocably reversed when Dick becomes totally dependent upon Mary to see to the running of the farm, which had been abandoned by the workers when he became ill. When she enters the native compound to order the men back to work, Mary is horrified by the haphazard living conditions she finds there:

They [the huts] looked like natural growths from the ground ... It was as though a giant black hand had reached down from the sky, picked up a handful of sticks and grass, and dropped them magically on the earth in the form of huts ... Between the huts were irregular patches of ill-cultivated mealies, and pumpkin vines trailed everywhere through plants and bushes and up over the walls and roofs, with the big amber-coloured pumpkins scattered among the leaves.⁴⁵

However, the narrative makes clear that rather than being the intrusion that the farmhouse is, the characteristic huts that the workers build for themselves have taken on the natural appearance of the landscape. Mary's unnatural 'queer appearance' among the organic wholeness of the huts and vegetation points to her presence as a stain on the land; moreover, it foreshadows Moses's later decision to eradicate the pollution caused by her downfall by killing her. When his mission is accomplished, Moses will await his pursuers by leaning against a tree on an ant-heap, thus blending in with the veld where, unlike Mary, he naturally belongs.⁴⁶

⁴⁵*TGIS*, p. 109.

⁴⁶*TGIS*, p. 206.

III

JanMohamed writes that colonial literature is ‘an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of civilization, a world that has not yet been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology.’ This world is therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately as evil. Motivated by his desire to conquer and dominate, the imperialist ‘configures the colonial realm as a confrontation based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production.’⁴⁷ Accordingly, such conditions produce two types of colonial literature, the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘symbolic.’ In the ‘imaginary’ text, the characters live according to the dictates of the Manichean allegory. This is a ‘closed’ text, one that refuses to admit the possibility of syncretism between ‘self’ and ‘other.’ By contrast, the ‘symbolic’ text is an ‘open’ one, a text in which the potential for a rapprochement between colonizer and colonized is evident, as is seen in the more hopeful closing lines of Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Godden’s *Breakfast with the Nikolides* and Alan Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948).⁴⁸ *The Grass is Singing*, however, belongs in the ‘imaginary’ sphere.

Mary lives in her own ‘imaginary’ text and Lessing displays the nature of her deeply ingrained racism through the narrative’s almost total preoccupation with her particular psychology. Mary certainly regards the African people as evil ‘other’, but at the same time the evidence of Dick’s incompetence that she observes in her own life suggests an awareness at some level that in her poverty she is not too far removed from the Africans, whom, as we have seen from her description of the

⁴⁷JanMohamed, ‘Manichean Allegory’, p. 64.

⁴⁸JanMohamed, ‘Manichean Allegory’, p. 65; Fishburn, p. 5.

African babies, she equates with animals. Taking on Dick's patriarchal authority not only forces her out of her lethargy, it also provides her with the power to abuse the despised farm workers:

She hated it when they spoke to each other in dialects she did not understand ... she hated their half-naked, thick-muscled black bodies stooping in the mindless rhythm of their work. She hated their sullenness, their averted eyes when they spoke to her, their veiled insolence: and she hated more than anything, with a violent physical repulsion, the heavy smell that came from them, a hot, sour animal smell ... 'How they stink'.⁴⁹

Despite her disgust, Mary's awareness of the workers' masculinity signals a stirring of sexual desire akin to Sister Ruth's response to Dean's rugged male odours in *Black Narcissus*. However, Mary's inability to acknowledge this awakening manifests itself in spiteful fury towards the men, who sullenly refuse to treat her with the respect that she feels is her due, both as a white woman and as their employer. Unable to understand their native dialects, Mary nonetheless reacts with fury when Moses speaks to her in English. As the narrator explains:

... most white people think it is 'cheek' if a native speaks English ... This man was shrugging and smiling and turning his eyes up to heaven as if protesting that she had forbidden him to speak his own language, and then hers [*sic*] ... That lazy insolence stung her into an inarticulate rage.⁵⁰

Mary's ungovernable rage culminates in a physical attack on the workman when she perceives, correctly, that he is mocking her.⁵¹ The sjambok, or hide whip, with which she strikes him finds its counterpart in Godden's fiction, in Charles Pool's axe. Both instruments symbolize the naked violence on which colonial society was founded and on which it continued to depend. Striking Moses across the face draws blood, a

⁴⁹*TGIS*, p. 115.

⁵⁰*TGIS*, p. 119.

⁵¹This sense of being mocked recalls the villagers' reaction to the presence of the nuns in *Black Narcissus*.

vicious act that nonetheless ensures that Mary has to acknowledge the black man as a human being, and this marks the beginning of their destructive personal relationship.

Although Mary is terrified that Moses might strike back, this reaction pales into insignificance at the rage she feels at his right to report her to the police: 'It made her furious to think that this black animal had the right to complain against her, against the behaviour of a white woman.'⁵² She has no fear of legal consequences, since a white woman is unlikely to face punishment for striking a black man, and in any case her husband is 'hardly likely to make life easy for a native who had complained of his wife.'⁵³ Mary's anger, like that of most settlers at the time, the narrator observes, is directed at those officials — the sentimentalists and theoreticians — who 'interfered with the natural right of a white farmer to treat his labour as he pleased.'⁵⁴ Mary feels empowered by her action, which she relishes as a victory, and for some time it sustains her conviction that she can control the native workers as she can the farmyard dogs.

However, this sense of power is soon dispelled, because in refusing to examine the psychological implications of her past life, Mary ensures that she is destined to repeat her parents' mistakes. Soon the gap that had formed between the utopian myths of colonialism and the dystopian experiences of her family is inevitably replicated and reinforced in Mary's behaviour. She comes to recognize that despite her efforts to leave her poverty-stricken childhood behind her, she has failed utterly to do so; that from the moment she stepped over Dick's threshold she had been unconsciously reliving her mother's hopelessly oppressed and unhappy life. When a last-ditch attempt by Dick to become solvent fails, Mary's realization

⁵²*TGIS*, p. 120.

⁵³*TGIS*, p. 120

⁵⁴*TGIS*, p. 120.

that she will never get off the farm sends her once again into a deep depression. She now spends her days in a stupefied daze, sitting immobile hour after hour on the shabby settee and, for the first time, she gains an insight into her mother's suffering:

She began to feel, slowly, that it was not in this house she was sitting, with her husband, but back with her mother, watching her endlessly contrive and patch and mend ... possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead ... Mary, with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable ... her formerly pleasant but formless face was setting into lines of endurance ... her lips were becoming thin and tight ...⁵⁵

Mary despises Dick for his inadequacies as she had despised her parents. The narrator suggests that all this can be changed and that all Mary needs is 'a man stronger than herself,' that if Dick 'had taken the ascendancy over her, she would have loved him.' When eventually she asks him if they can have a child and he refuses, Mary's plea comes not from any maternal instinct, but from her terrible human isolation. Mary pictures a daughter, not a son, but her distaste for breastfeeding ensures that she elides her imagined daughter's babyhood, which she sees as 'a stage she would have to get through as quickly as possible.'⁵⁶ Mary imagines an older child, a girl who will be a surrogate companion in place of Dick. Ironically, given her unhappy relationship with her parents, what Mary subconsciously longs for is a return to her own childhood:

She saw herself, that barelegged, bareheaded, silent child, wandering in and out of the chicken-coop house — close to her mother, wrung simultaneously by love and pity for her, and by hatred for her father; and she imagined her own child, a small daughter, comforting her as she had comforted her mother.⁵⁷

⁵⁵*TGIS*, pp. 54-55, 90.

⁵⁶*TGIS*, p. 135.

⁵⁷*TGIS*, p. 135.

What Mary gets is far more threatening to her psychological well-being than a mirror-image of her unhappy childhood. Owing to her increasingly aggressive behaviour, Mary's houseboys have left one by one. Unaware of their shared history and two years after she had whipped him, Dick sends Moses to her as a houseboy. Trapped within the confines of the overheated house, Mary soon becomes obsessed with the proximity of the black man:

The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her. She had given him white shorts and shirts to wear in the house ... They were too small for him ... his muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split. He appeared even taller and broader than he was because of the littleness of the house.⁵⁸

Mary soon overcomes her disgust at the sight of Moses's black skin. Her horror of the human body, aroused so intensely by the sight of the native men and women, gradually turns to fascination when she finds herself in close proximity to this magnificently built 'great hulk of a man.'⁵⁹ In a scene charged with sexual tension, Mary finds herself mesmerized by the sight of Moses's body as he bathes. Although it takes place outdoors, such an intensely personal incident in a public space — one in which the 'exotic other' is displayed as an object of desire — arouses in Mary a yearning that has its origins in her first encounter with the black man. However, lacking the emotional tools to deal with her newly-awakened sexuality, her lascivious gaze at Moses's body is again displaced into fury when the black man has the effrontery to stare back.⁶⁰ For although 'a white person may look at a native, who

⁵⁸*TGIS*, p. 142.

⁵⁹*TGIS*, p. 119.

⁶⁰Freud distinguishes between 'scopophilia' — delight in looking at the beauty of the sexual object — and voyeurism (such as Mary directs at the African women), which he connects either to disgust at the sexual object, or where, instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, the 'look' supplants it. See Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), p. 251.

is no better than a dog,' it was 'cheek' for Moses to reciprocate her look.⁶¹ With the memory of the lash between them, this second encounter unnerves Mary to the point that she has to resist the impulse to strike Moses again: 'Remembering that thick black neck with the lather frothing whitely on it, the powerful back stooping over the bucket, was like a goad to her.'⁶² Since it was a crime for Moses to even look at Mary in a manner that could be construed as sexual, the narrator brings the reader's attention to the implications of the scene:

What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip.⁶³

This repeated reference to the insubordinate return of the white gaze and the growing insolence of the indigenous people signals Lessing's awareness of increasing tensions in Southern Rhodesia on the issue of racial separation. Although nationalist aspirations are never overtly referred to in the novel, they nonetheless shadow the novel's plotline throughout in such low-key but charged details.

Mary's short time in charge of the farm had invigorated her by reinstating the youthful sense of independence she had enjoyed before her marriage. With Dick's recovery, she has too much time on her hands, time that she spends obsessing over Moses. The knowledge of him 'alone in the house with her lay like a weight at the back of her mind,' until she finds herself talking aloud in imagined scenes in

⁶¹*TGIS*, p. 143. It is interesting to note that sexuality was not a part of nationalist discourse. Black activists Kenyatta, Nkrumah, Lumumba and Cabral write at length about identity and culture but not about sexual conduct; this was solely a concern of the colonists. See Jock McCulloch, *Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia 1902-1935* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 6.

⁶²*TGIS*, p. 144.

⁶³*TGIS*, p. 144.

which she constantly berates him.⁶⁴ When Moses has enough of her ill-treatment and tells Mary that he wishes to leave, the thought of Dick's anger leads to her tearful collapse and she begs him to stay, a loss of control that not only destabilizes the colonizer/colonized dichotomy, but is also in sharp contrast to Moses's quiet dignity as he gently calms her down.⁶⁵ This inversion of dynamics between the white female and the black male further complicates gender relationships in the novel. From this point on, Moses not only assumes the role of a surrogate husband in place of the emasculated Dick, he also takes on the dual role of wife and mother to the white woman. Lessing foregrounds Moses's masculinity and sexual potency in order to highlight the degeneration of the white male from his role as frontier hero to the weak and emasculated shadow of a man that Dick has become. Moses takes full ascendancy over Mary and because he is the strong male that she longs for, he arouses in her the sexual response that should be due to her spouse.

Moses's appeal for Mary does not lie in the colour of his skin, but in his sheer maleness, an attribute sadly lacking in Dick. Being touched by a black man may call Mary's status as sovereign settler into question, but her increasingly strong attraction to Moses opens up the possibility that her racist discourse might yield to a more open dialogue between the races. However, Mary's consciousness is too heavily invested in settler ideology to allow for such an event. Nonetheless, as the sense of independence that had sustained her before her marriage crumbles, she soon succumbs to Moses's powerful presence. Aware of their growing mutual attraction, the pair are reluctant to sanction this by touching each other's flesh:

He put out his hand reluctantly, loathe to touch her, the sacrosanct white woman ... It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black

⁶⁴*TGIS*, pp. 144-148.

⁶⁵*TGIS*, pp. 150-151.

man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native ... she felt her head beginning to swim and her bones going soft.⁶⁶

The language of 'swimming' and 'softening' here is deliberately ambiguous, suggesting as it does either a loss of definition and identity that is threatening to the white woman, or a kind of sexual melting that might be too pleasurable to resist. Mary's inability to cope with the change in dynamics is reflected in disturbing dreams in which Moses stands over her 'powerful and commanding, yet kind, but forcing her into a position where she had to touch him.'⁶⁷ At a loss as to how to deal with this new relationship, Mary feels totally out of kilter when Moses forces her to treat him as a human being in the domestic space that is their 'contact zone.' Although their odd relationship has its origins in the violence of colonialism that sanctioned Mary's lashing out at Moses, as he gradually takes over the running of the household the mistress-servant relationship becomes so intimate that Moses is emboldened to initiate conversations about worldly affairs.

Given this change, it is not surprising that when Dick suffers a relapse of malaria, Moses offers to sit with him while an exhausted Mary gets some sleep. However, due to her horror of the encroaching bush and her awareness of her vulnerability in the veld, Mary is unable to get any rest:

She had never become used to the bush, never felt at home in it ... often in the night she woke and thought of the small brick house, like a frail shell that might crush inwards under the presence of the hostile bush. Often she thought how, if they left this place, one wet fermenting season would swallow the small cleared space, and send the young trees thrusting up from the floor ... so that in a few months there would be nothing left but heaps of rubble about the trunks of trees.⁶⁸

⁶⁶*TGIS*, p. 151.

⁶⁷*TGIS*, p. 156.

⁶⁸*TGIS*, p. 160.

The disintegration of the farm and the ultimate abandonment of the house that Mary envisions symbolize the wider collapse of colonial settler power and the end of the empire that sustained it. Mary's psychological state is conditioned by these fears. She is overcome with an overwhelming, irrational terror, one that contains a strong suggestion of the sexual titillation experienced by Lois at the sight of the Irish nationalist in the shrubbery at Bowen's Danielstown: 'He [Moses] was there, just through the thin wall, so close that if it had not been there his back would have been six inches from her face! Vividly she pictured the broad muscular back, and shuddered.'⁶⁹ However, in colonial society, the possibility of fear is something that should never be acknowledged in the presence of the colonized so that when Moses asks her outright if she is afraid of him, Mary fumes inwardly at her instinctively vehement denial.⁷⁰

The threat that Mary perceives in Moses at this point in the text does not relate to the possibility of his taking revenge for her earlier whipping, but to her resurfacing sexuality, the horror of which has its origins in her unhappy childhood. What Mary recognizes in the black man are the desired masculine attributes of a caring father and a strong lover, traits she has failed to find in either of the significant men in her life. Whether Moses is aware of his sexual potency and his power over Mary is not made explicit in the novel, but it is obvious to the reader that the nature of the relationship between them is sexual; the context of Mary's dreams makes clear that it is only a matter of time before their relationship is consummated. Moreover, Moses's growing familiarity, 'half-insolent, domineering', indicates that he is very well aware of his effect on Mary.⁷¹ The terrible irony is that Moses's

⁶⁹*TGIS*, p. 161.

⁷⁰*TGIS*, pp. 165-166.

⁷¹*TGIS*, p. 167.

control over Mary becomes just as confining as that of her father and it is in this sense that the two men are subliminally brought together as agents of her destruction. Mary's dream, in which Moses stands over her 'powerful and commanding ... forcing her into a position where she had to touch him,' places him in the same position of power as the father who had abused her:⁷²

she smelt the sickly odour of beer, and through it she smelt too — her head held down in the thick stuff of his trousers — the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him.⁷³

The imagery of this passage is darkly disturbing. Mary's childhood terror of her drunken father is associatively linked to 'her head held down in the thick stuff of his trousers,' a scenario that suggests forced fellatio.

In normal psychological development, children learn how to negotiate their oedipal complex successfully.⁷⁴ However, unlike Emily in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, who eventually accomplishes this journey, when Mary's father breaks the taboo against incest he ensures that his daughter will never achieve the psychological maturity enjoyed by Emily. It is this 'lack,' this sense of 'everything wrong' as she will later tell Marston, that enables Moses to step into the vacuum left by Mary's emotional deprivation. While Mary cannot be blamed for her tormented psychology, her inability to negotiate the oedipal complex had led to a total breakdown in her relationship with her parents, a rift that she had been unable to repair. Her failure in this respect had resulted in her emotional growth being stunted, with the unfortunate consequence that she had grown up expecting fairy-tale or magical solutions to life's problems; hence her speedy marriage to Dick, whom she had mistakenly hoped

⁷²*TGIS*, p. 156.

⁷³*TGIS*, p. 165.

⁷⁴See Young, p. 4.

would become her knight in shining armour.⁷⁵ With her expectations of a happy marriage dashed, Moses promises Mary the fairy-tale ending of sexual fulfilment denied to her by her husband. In Hegelian terms, Mary, who has failed to gain full recognition by her peers in any aspect of her life, looks for this recognition to Moses, her servant. However, only in her subconscious can Mary permit herself to acknowledge that her desire for the recognition and sexual favour of the black man is just as transgressive as her father's incestuous sexual conduct towards her. Thus, both Mary and her father break absolute taboos in settler society.

Lessing's suggestive treatment of the discourse on inter-racial relationships serves to reinforce the huge sense of taboo attached to such behaviour. Mary's desire for Moses is symbolically fulfilled when she dreams that Dick has died, and furthermore, that Moses has been responsible for his death. The forbidden nature of her longing results in a conflation of her hated father and despised husband with that of her would-be lover:

... the native had opened the window again, and had caused Dick's death through chill. Dick looked ugly. He was dead ... and she felt only relief and exultation ... she knew the native had silently awakened and was watching her ... he approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father who was threatening her. They advanced together, one person, and she could smell, not the native smell, but the unwashed smell of her father ... It was the voice of the African she heard. He was comforting her because of Dick's death, consoling her protectively; but at the same time it was her father menacing and horrible, who touched her in desire.⁷⁶

Although the novel deals with this matter in a circumspect fashion, recalling her father's unpleasant bodily odours links this passage not only to Mary's fascination with the physicality of Moses but also to her symbolically 'dead' husband as well as the ideal of motherhood embodied in the breastfeeding women at the store. What

⁷⁵See Young, p. 6.

⁷⁶TGIS, p. 165.

Mary's subconscious cannot reconcile is her attraction towards the black man with her need to take revenge, not alone on Dick, whom she scornfully dismisses, but also on the father who molested her and the mother who neglected her by failing to protect her from his abuse. She resolves this dilemma by entering into a sexual relationship with Moses because in rejecting this imperial racial taboo she also finally rejects her parents' residual power over her.

The fact that Mary turns from white father and white husband towards the black African male represents a powerfully transgressive moment in *The Grass is Singing*. By undermining the power of the dominant white male to control the sexual conduct of either the black male or the white female, the narrative suggests that the hegemonic era of white supremacy in colonial Southern Rhodesia may be nearing an end. At the same time, Moses's growing power over Mary hints at the emergence of Black Nationalist power and with it a new political and libidinal economy. But even as Lessing's novel suggests this transformation, it also seems to fear it, to quail before it. Mary, after all, seems merely to accept a transfer of sexual subordination from white male to black male. In each instance, she seems equally powerless because at the end of the narrative Moses's supremacy over her is complete: Mary is hopelessly subordinate to the black man even to the point of consenting to her murder at his hands. From the sense of terror invoked by the novel, it would seem that a transfer from colonial settler to Black Nationalist supremacy may be equally deathly for the white woman.

IV

Six years after Mary had run away and more than one year since his last visit, Charlie Slatter arrives at the farmhouse. Curious to see how the Turners have fared, he is horrified by Mary's ravaged appearance and by the state of the rundown furniture, which he finds covered in ugly blue material 'so much associated with "kaffir-truck" that it shocked Charlie to see it in a white man's house.'⁷⁷ Observing that Mary has reverted to dressing in the inappropriately youthful manner of her past, he is horrified by her parody of flirtatious behaviour and by the display of 'conscious power' evident in Moses's insolent familiarity with her.⁷⁸ Recognizing the possibility of a sexual relationship, Slatter is appalled at the blurring of racial roles evident in their interaction. Although he has an ulterior personal motive, Slatter's sense of urgency when he bullies Dick into selling the farm is also a means of avoiding the danger implicit in such a violation of colonial taboos. His insistence that the Turners take a holiday is a cynical move that has more to do with permanently getting rid of the danger he perceives than a neighbourly concern for their welfare. As Fishburn succinctly puts it: 'The Turners, it is implied, can go away and take their contagion with them.'⁷⁹

The narrator explains that Slatter's offer to keep Dick on as farm manager is not a charitable one, but rather an instinctive act of self-preservation and a determination that the farming community must stick together at all costs. In his dealings with Dick, Slatter is 'fighting to prevent another recruit to the growing army

⁷⁷*TGIS*, p. 176.

⁷⁸*TGIS*, p. 177.

⁷⁹Fishburn, p. 7.

of poor whites'.⁸⁰ Impoverished farmers such as the Turners cannot be allowed to sink too low because to do so represents a corresponding lowering of the racial barrier. What causes Slatter to berate Dick is the danger that the Turners' liminal social status will place them on a par with the black population, and this must be avoided at all costs:

He spoke as if there could be no question of a refusal; he had been shocked out of self-interest. It was not even pity for Dick that moved him. He was obeying the dictate of the first law of white South Africa, which is: 'Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are.' The strongest emotion of a strongly organized society spoke in his voice.⁸¹

Slatter's anger towards the Turners is compounded by his racist and patriarchal determination that white men should never be taken advantage of by either black men or white women. In his worldview, the reader is told, white civilization should 'never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it.'⁸² Slatter's fear is that one single inter-racial incident will lead to the hitherto unshakeable truths of white settler society falling apart. Fishburn argues that 'if Mary is visibly no better — in her appearance and behaviour — than the undifferentiated natives against whom Slatter defines himself, his own identity as superior white male is threatened.' In other words, she claims: 'if Mary can look in the mirror of native and see the common humanity they share, the possibility exists that Slatter can see in the same mirror the humanity he too shares with the native.'⁸³ But like Charles Pool in Godden's text, Slatter is intent on pushing the whole of Africa before him. His reasons for doing so

⁸⁰*TGIS*, p. 181.

⁸¹*TGIS*, pp. 178-9.

⁸²*TGIS*, p. 26.

⁸³Fishburn, p. 5.

may be different to Charles's, and he may well have a strong inkling that there is something bigger at stake than the local matter of the Turner situation, but Slatter's raw capitalist ambition precludes any sense of a shared humanity with Africans.

Lessing is devastatingly ironic in her attitude to the new manager, Tony Marston, who also monitors the relationship between Mary and Moses with a keen interest. Newly arrived from England, Marston naively believes that he has a grasp on the dynamics of the situation in Southern Rhodesia. He has 'read enough about psychology to understand the sexual aspect of the colour bar, one of whose foundations is the jealousy of the white man for the superior sexual potency of the native.'⁸⁴ Despite his liberal views, Marston is still shocked when a doctor he meets on his voyage to Africa tells him that 'he would be surprized to know the number of white women who had relations with black men.' Marston had not quite believed him, feeling that such a relationship 'would be rather like having a relation with an animal.'⁸⁵ His ideas on the system of apartheid are put to the test when he accidentally comes upon the moment of intimacy between Moses and Mary:

She was in a garish pink petticoat ... Beside her stood Moses, and, as Tony watched, she stood up and held out her arms while the native slipped her dress over them from behind ... Moses was buttoning up the dress ... the attitude of the native was of an indulgent uxoriousness.⁸⁶

Unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes, Marston can only adopt an attitude of false joviality, hiding his confusion by choosing to compare the scene to an Empress of Russia, 'who thought so little of her slaves, as human beings, that she used to undress naked in front of them.'⁸⁷ His presence provokes Mary into a fearful, cunning evasiveness, but Moses reacts by staring back at him insolently. Mary's

⁸⁴*TGIS*, p. 186.

⁸⁵*TGIS*, p. 186.

⁸⁶*TGIS*, p. 185.

⁸⁷*TGIS*, p. 186.

relief when Marston angrily orders Moses to leave is palpable: 'He's gone,' she cried, 'he's gone, he's gone!'⁸⁸ She claims not to understand how the relationship has progressed to such a state; she 'didn't mean it to happen.' However, her initially relieved reaction to Moses's departure soon gives way to a tearful outburst to Marston that his arrival had ruined everything.⁸⁹

Turning on Marston for dismissing Moses is an admission by Mary of the black man's part in her reawakened sexuality but her desire for recognition operates at a more subliminal level than his. Subconsciously needing something herself, Mary has intuited an answering want in Moses; his awareness of her as a sexual being is a recognition that had been denied to her by her friends all those years ago: 'They said I was not like that, not like that, not like that,' she whispers.⁹⁰ In sexual terms, as her psychological 'other,' Moses's sexual potency is that aspect of Mary's persona that she has hidden since childhood and he is all that she longs to be: 'I have been ill for years,' she tells Marston: 'Not *ill*, you understand. Everything wrong, somewhere.'⁹¹ This sense of discomfort is exactly the problem faced by the nuns of *Black Narcissus* in the Himalayan Mountains, and indeed by Adela Quested in the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*. What we are given to understand is that the motif of sexual repression embedded in these novels is a metaphor for the problem that lies at the very heart of colonialism, of 'everything wrong, somewhere.' Mary's 'madness,' like that of Sister Ruth, is merely symptomatic of an entire libidinal system warped into craziness by the racial rigidities of the colonial system.

Moses's growing sense of 'self,' first in evidence when he initially stands up to Mary, is negated by the news that she is leaving him. His anger at this betrayal

⁸⁸*TGIS*, p. 188.

⁸⁹*TGIS*, p. 188.

⁹⁰*TGIS*, p. 187.

⁹¹*TGIS*, p. 201. Original emphasis.

is perhaps understandable. The period of transition between JanMohamed's 'dominant' phase of colonialism and the 'hegemonic' is symbolized by Moses's mission education and his promotion from farm labourer to the domestic intimacy of the white household.⁹² Yet at a deeper level, Moses's need for equality is even greater than Mary's hunger for sexual fulfilment. It is their deep-seated psychological need to be mutually recognized, not as polarized opposites but as equal human beings with reciprocal needs, that casts Mary and Moses together in such a tragically destructive relationship. The tragedy for Moses is that notwithstanding his mission education, the recognition that he has demanded, and received, from Mary, is a status that will always be denied to him by the political status quo. In the end, it is Mary's reassertion of her whiteness when confronted by Marston that fuels Moses's terrible need for vengeance.

As had happened to the nuns in *Black Narcissus*, Mary eventually finds herself overpowered, not only by the landscape, but also by the cultural and political situation in which she finds herself so that her death, like Ruth's, can be understood in terms of suicide. Just as the desire-crazed sister had become psychologically alienated from her vocational vows, Mary has become so alienated from her marriage vows that she too enters into the sphere of the 'oceanic.' Her feeling of calm on the morning following Marston's discovery of her relationship with Moses stems from an acute sense of the inevitable: 'She knew it: she felt transparent, clairvoyant, containing all things.'⁹³ Even the bush seems to know that she is going to die: 'Already, before she was even dead, the bush was conquering the farm,

⁹²JanMohamed makes a distinction between the 'dominant' phase and the 'hegemonic,' or neo-colonialist era, when newly independent countries take on western forms of parliamentary government.

⁹³*TGIS*, p. 191.

sending its outriders to cover the good red soil with plants and grass.’⁹⁴ Mary also understands that the farmhouse Dick has forced upon the land is destined for oblivion and will soon be swallowed up by the unforgiving bush:

When she was gone, she thought, this house would be destroyed. It would be killed by the bush, which had always hated it, had always stood around it silently, waiting for the moment when it could advance and cover it, for ever, so that nothing remained. She could see the house, empty, its furnishings rotting. First would come the rats ... they would swarm up over the furniture and the walls ... And then the beetles: great, black, armoured beetles would crawl in from the veld ... at night the rain would drum down on the roof ... and the grass would spring up in the space of empty ground ... and the bushes would follow ... the shoulders of trees would press against the brick, until at last it leaned and crumbled and fell ... the bush would cover the subsiding mass, and there would be nothing left.⁹⁵

Mary stumbles to the derelict store, only to see Moses standing there in the dark: ‘There it was, the ugly store. There it was at her death, even as it had been all her life ... There he was, there in front of her, standing behind the counter as if he were serving goods.’ Mary remains lucid enough to see the irony implicit in Moses’s presence: ‘Of course: where else could he wait, but in the hated store?’⁹⁶ Thus the store functions in the novel not only as the background to Mary’s childhood but also to monitor the progress of her unhappy marriage, as well as to act as the site for her ultimate breakdown.⁹⁷

Mary hopes that Marston might save her, but she experiences with him the same sense of disconnection from human contact that had always epitomized her life on the farm. Recognizing that she can no more lean on him than she can on her husband — ‘It seemed to her ... that she had lived through all this before’— Mary at

⁹⁴*TGIS*, p. 198.

⁹⁵*TGIS*, pp. 195-196.

⁹⁶*TGIS*, p. 200.

⁹⁷ See Myrtle Hooper, ‘Madness and the Store: Representations of Madness in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* and Daphne Rooke’s *A Grove of Fever Trees*’, *Current Writing*, 8.1 (1996), pp. 61-74: 63.

last surrenders her fairytale illusions of a knight in shining armour. Finally acknowledging that she can no longer rely on another human being to save her, she comes to understand that she must 'walk out her road alone' by taking full responsibility for her own life and approaching death:

That was the lesson she had to learn. If she had learned it, long ago, she would not be standing here now, having been betrayed for the second time by her weak reliance on a human being who should not be expected to take the responsibility for her.⁹⁸

There is no going back, either for Mary or for Moses. With his 'black wedge of hand inserted between her jaws,' Moses brings down his weapon, a 'long curving shape' and punishes the white woman who had betrayed him by metaphorically raping her: 'And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming ... the brain at last gave way, collapsing in a ruin of horror.'⁹⁹ The violence of the phallic symbolism employed here by Lessing is perhaps too obviously intended as a warning to white people, feeding into all-pervading fears of the mythical 'black peril' and how the African people might one day respond to their subjugation. The suggestion is that unless the political system is drastically amended, the colonized might turn the tables on their colonizers by taking on board Fanon's principle that violence towards their oppressors is both inevitable and permissible.¹⁰⁰ But if Moses is Mary's 'dark other,' then her terror of him at the end of the novel, the fact that she is not allowed to survive their relationship, suggests a reluctance on Lessing's part to totally discard

⁹⁸*TGIS*, pp. 200-201.

⁹⁹*TGIS*, pp. 204-205.

¹⁰⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] London: Penguin, 2001). From the 1940s, there were increased attacks on the rights of black people in colonial Africa. In South Africa in 1944, leaders Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo formed a youth league with ideas based on African nationalism. Gathering support from Africans, 'Coloureds' and Indians, its members became involved in a series of strikes, boycotts and acts of civil disobedience. The league was adopted by the African National Congress (ANC), which encouraged further campaigns against apartheid. This unrest soon spread to Southern Rhodesia where there were growing protests over the treatment of black people and the land question.

the fear of integration engendered by colonial ideology.¹⁰¹ This sense of angst is perhaps understandable on Lessing's part; as a communist, her left-wing views led her to look askance at nationalist aspirations. Nadine Gordimer confirms that the communist party, to which Lessing belonged, did indeed feel ill at ease with Black Africa. In her introduction to his text, Gordimer cites Memmi, who stated that for the Leftists of his generation, 'the word "nationalism" still evokes a reaction of suspicion, if not hostility.'¹⁰² Lessing herself acknowledges this. In a letter to John Whitehorn she wrote:

G says that my dislike of extreme nationalism is due to bourg. [sic] prejudice and is a hangover from an age of liberalism that is dead. If so, so much the worse for everyone.¹⁰³

Lessing typifies the dilemma of communists in colonial Africa, who on the one hand recognize the need for political change, yet on the other hand display an equal fear of both right-wing white nationalists and (in colonial terms) barely-civilized emerging black nationalists, as represented in the figure of Moses. The Native District Commissioner explains the latter's refusal to run away:

The laws [of Lobengula] were strict: everyone knew what they could or could not do. If someone did an unforgivable thing ... he would submit fatalistically to punishment, which was likely to be impalement over an ant-heap on a stake ... 'I have done wrong, and I know it ... therefore let me be punished.'¹⁰⁴

For the people of the district, Moses confirms his colonial role as savage 'other' when he murders Mary. This odd couple, who have in common not only their anger but also their vulnerability, must be eliminated in order to protect the myth of white

¹⁰¹ See Bertelsen, p. 654.

¹⁰² Memmi, p. 37.

¹⁰³ University of East Anglia, *Doris Lessing Papers: Whitehorn Letters 1944-1949*, Letter 025 (April, 1945). John Whitehorn was one of two lovers from the RAF that Lessing had met in Salisbury. 'G' is Lessing's husband, Godfrey.

¹⁰⁴ *TGIS*, p. 13. Lobengula Khumalo was king of the Ndebele tribe of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, 1868-1894.

superiority. With their demise, what the text seems to suggest is that owing to the prevailing political situation, the promise of a new synthesis between the black and white populations has been explored but closed off; this is evidenced by the settlers' cold reaction to the tragedy. As Fishburn notes, Moses's act reinstates the absolute power of the colonizers' 'imaginary' discourse, the efficiency of which succeeds in negating the assertion of his dignity and his sense of self-worth. If Mary's destiny is death as punishment for her transgression, then according to the dictates of the Manichean allegory, Moses commits murder because he is pre-ordained to do so, and death too is his destiny.¹⁰⁵ However, not even Lessing, or the otherwise omniscient narrator, can speak for the silent black man. As Sarah de Mul points out, while *The Grass is Singing* is highly conscious of the oppressive function of silence and isolation in the life of Mary, Moses is portrayed as being psychologically blank. Stripped of any speech of his own, he is discussed only in relation to Mary, never as a person in his own right.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, deprived of human selfhood, Moses has no voice in the novel apart from his stereotypical role as representative of the colonizers' belief that 'blood will out' and that given half a chance, the dreaded 'black peril' will thief, rape, and even resort to murder. However, because the reader is not allowed access to his thoughts or motives, Moses's reasons for murdering Mary remain ambiguous:

What thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say. For, when he had gone perhaps a couple of hundred yards through the soaking bush he stopped, turned aside, and leaned against an ant-heap. And there he would remain until his pursuers, in their turn, came to find him.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵Fishburn, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶Sarah de Mul, 'Doris Lessing, Feminism and the Representation of Zimbabwe', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 16.1 (2009), pp 33-51: 36-37.

¹⁰⁷*TGIS*, p. 206.

Yet the reader is made aware that Moses could have escaped: 'He could have run to the hills and hidden for a while. Or he could have slipped over the border to Portuguese territory.'¹⁰⁸ His decision to stay by the ant-heap does not carry the same negative connotations implied in Mary's vigil on the verandah, for Moses's choice is not an act of suicide. Rather, we can read his apparent passivity as a conscious act of defiance, one that bears witness to the growing resistance to colonial rule all across the British Empire. Denied recognition as an equal, or even as a human being, what Moses appears to do is to reject his colonial status by reclaiming his African identity and by asserting his sense of 'self' through adherence to the ancestral laws of Lobengula and his inherited ancient tribal rituals.

In line with post-Darwinian science, nineteenth century imperial ideology established and elevated the white 'rational' male as the norm against which all other species should be measured. Because women's brains were believed to be smaller than men's, and indigenous people were deemed to originate from more than one species in any case, both women and black people were understood to be inferior to the white male. Once these Darwinian ideas of racial and female inferiority became fixed, issues of race and gender then became analogous, to the point where 'savagery' and 'femininity' became yoked together as lesser forms of humanity. Therefore, so the rhetoric surrounding the issue went, sexual union between black men and white women was a potentially destructive force, one that would inevitably lead to the total degeneration of the entire white race. Nowhere in the British Empire was this paranoia more entrenched than in colonial Africa.

In Southern Rhodesia, the Immorality Suppression Ordinance of 1903 addressed the issue of miscegenation by prohibiting white women from having

¹⁰⁸*TGIS*, pp. 12-13.

sexual relations with black men.¹⁰⁹ The Act also introduced the death penalty for rape, attempted rape or indecent assault by black males on white women. Because of fears of this mythical ‘black peril,’ it was widely accepted that the trials of accused black men would be marked by a complete absence of justice.¹¹⁰ As Jock McCulloch remarks: ‘It is significant that in the history of Southern Rhodesia no white man was executed for rape.’¹¹¹ The ordinance was extended in 1916 to make solicitation or any kind of enticement — by words, writing, sign or suggestion — of black men by white women a crime, with a penalty of two years imprisonment for the woman. White Rhodesian women’s groups repeatedly called for equal legislation prohibiting sexual intercourse between white males and black females, but to no avail. Therefore, racial proscriptions were, in effect, asymmetrical along lines of race and gender — an asymmetry made explicit in the anti-miscegenation legislation, which suggests that ‘black peril’ rhetoric was as much about gender conflict within white society as about racial conflict between settlers and Africans.¹¹²

Following Mary’s murder and the discovery of Moses by the anthheap, the thought of a sexual involvement is too abhorrent for Slatter and Denham to acknowledge and they refuse even to discuss this possibility. Because they both suspect, but cannot openly admit to the likelihood of miscegenation, they refuse to listen to Marston’s theory as to why the murder took place. His suggestion that the tangled situation at the farmhouse is not about facts — is not that ‘black and white’ — is deeply ironic, given that the system of racial separation as played out in the

¹⁰⁹In South Africa, the 1927 Immorality Act prohibited all inter-racial sex. The penalty for breaking this law involved a prison term of five years.

¹¹⁰See Jock McCulloch, *Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia 1902-1935* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.

¹¹¹McCulloch, p. 5.

¹¹²Lucy Bland, ‘White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War,’ *Gender and History*, 17.1 (April, 2005), pp. 29-61: 31. See also Dane Kennedy, *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 177, 242.

relationship between Moses and Mary is all about ‘black and white;’ balanced as the couple are on either side of this divide. As Fishburn observes, by apparently conforming to the stereotype in a way that leads to his own death, Moses ‘effectively eliminates a greater threat to the uneasy stability of the neurotic colonial society — the threat of the wayward white woman.’¹¹³ Moreover, the system that the colonizers have put in place is so pervasive that the settlers do not even have to carry out their own dirty work and can rely on the black man to do it for them:

People all over the country ... felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have.¹¹⁴

The settlers certainly view Moses’s murderous act as an attack on white society, but they place the blame firmly on Mary’s shoulders. Because she fails to fulfil her assigned function as domestic goddess, this anti-heroine stands condemned by the colonial order the settlers feel was her bounden duty to uphold. Her death evokes no sympathy other than that displayed by Marston as he attempts to rationalize events:

The more one thinks about it, the more extraordinary the case becomes. Not the murder itself; but the way people felt about it, the way they pitied Dick Turner with a fine fierce indignation against Mary, as if she were something unpleasant and unclean, and it served her right to get murdered. But they did not ask questions.¹¹⁵

Dick too has his suspicions; unable to come to terms with the loss of his farm, he too descends into madness, a direct result of his sense of failure, both as a farmer and as a husband. In Southern Rhodesia, the term ‘poor whites’ was reserved for the Boer community with their ‘droves’ of children. Slatter’s Afrikaans assistant, for example, has thirteen children who ‘run round like puppies, in rags, and they live on pumpkin

¹¹³Fishburn, p. 4.

¹¹⁴*TGIS*, p. 9; Fishburn, p. 2.

¹¹⁵*TGIS*, p. 11.

and mealiemeal like kaffirs ... all the Turners needed were a drove of children to make them poor whites.’¹¹⁶ While applying this term to the Turners would be ‘letting the side down’, from the settlers’ perspective Dick and Mary are contemptible precisely because they have let the side down.¹¹⁷ Therefore, Slatter must reinforce the boundaries breached by Mary. His determination that this ‘very bad business’ be kept quiet led to a ‘silent, unconscious agreement’ among the settlers that the affair should be handled in accordance with ‘that *esprit de corps* which is the first rule of South African society,’ the code essential to maintaining the power structure of apartheid.¹¹⁸ This unwritten rule entails a spirit of white solidarity in which the settlers maintain a rigid control, not alone over the natives, but also, as Slatter implies, over their women.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains that although the Turners have been the subject of local gossip for many years, Slatter did not need to warn the settlers to refrain from discussing the murder. Following the unwritten code of white Southern Rhodesia that denied the possibility of a sexual relationship between a white woman and a black man, by tacit agreement the matter was not spoken of among the farming community. If anyone happened to remark that the entire affair was ‘a bad business’ others would become guarded and simply reply that it was indeed ‘a very bad business’.¹¹⁹ Still, while some settlers merely glanced at the paragraph reporting Mary’s death, others, more alert to the underlying danger, hid it away for future reference. As the narrator remarks: ‘Many must have snipped out the paragraph, put it among old letters, or between the pages of a book, keeping

¹¹⁶*TGIS*, pp.11, 134.

¹¹⁷*TGIS*, pp. 9-11.

¹¹⁸*TGIS*, p 11. Original emphasis.

¹¹⁹*TGIS*, p. 9.

it perhaps as an omen or a warning, glancing at the yellowing piece of paper with closed, secretive faces.’¹²⁰

Marston, the reader is informed, ‘had not been long enough in the country’ to understand Slatter’s fears for white society.¹²¹ The narrator makes it quite clear that, like all new arrivals in South Africa, this washed up young liberal will not be able to stand up against the society he is joining. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the novel’s failure to indict Slatter fully. Although the latter ‘believed in farming with the sjambok’ and is described as ‘a crude, brutal, ruthless man’ who has ‘killed a native in a fit of temper,’ the narrator also describes Slatter as ‘a kindhearted man, in his own way.’¹²² Allowing for a level of irony here, what the novel appears to suggest is that in their attempts to conquer the unforgiving bush, otherwise sane and rational people such as Marston and Slatter are themselves transformed. Placing these men alongside each other is Lessing’s way of pointing up how far Southern Rhodesia has moved away from the ideals of enlightenment thought, to the detriment of all:

It did not take them long to change ... A few months, and these sensitive, decent young men had coarsened to suit the hard, arid, sun-drenched country ... they had grown a new manner to match their thickened sunburnt limbs and toughened bodies.¹²³

Unable to make sense of the tragic events, Marston capitulates; he too turns a blind eye and does not confront Slatter with the truth. Once he understands that Moses’s trial will be a political farce in which he is powerless to intervene, Pilate-like, he disowns the entire affair. When we last hear of him, Marston is in the city, sitting behind an office desk performing the very mundane tasks he had come to Africa to

¹²⁰*TGIS*, p. 9.

¹²¹*TGIS*, p. 16.

¹²²*TGIS*, p. 14.

¹²³*TGIS*, p. 18.

escape. To the people of the farming district 'he was the young man from England who hadn't the guts to stand more than a few weeks of farming.'¹²⁴ In the end, Marston's dream of Africa proves to be just as abortive as that of Dick Turner, or indeed, that of Lessing's parents.

V

Lessing's status as a writer within Southern Rhodesia's highly patriarchal society is complicated by her left-wing politics. In light of her strong communist views when she wrote *The Grass is Singing*, on a manifest level the text may be read as one that explores the age-old conflict between the state and the individual. In *The Grass is Singing*, the individual, weaker characters — represented by the Turners and Moses — are dispatched while the collective, as exemplified by Slatter, triumphs. However, Lessing does not endorse such a neat solution to the problems of colonial racial segregation. Having eliminated the 'mad' white female, the white settlers would also like to dismiss the 'savage' black male from their consciousness, but Lessing refuses to allow the settler community to appropriate the story of Africa in the manner of writers such as Blixen and Huxley. Despite his calm acceptance of his fate, Moses does not allow himself to be excluded from his own history. In opting to remain by the antheap, just like the rebel in the mill of *The Last September* and the mountain villagers of *Black Narcissus*, Moses reclaims both his selfhood and his inalienable right to call his native land his own. As Eve Bertelsen writes, it is clear from the narrator's explicit social and political statements in the text that *The Grass is Singing* offers an implied criticism of any form of racial blindness regarding the

¹²⁴TGIS, p. 30.

humanity of black people.¹²⁵ The rain that falls as Mary dies may not be a cleansing rain inasmuch as it signals her terrible death, but when Moses washes this rain from the weapon with which he has killed her, it at least indicates that the circle of violence with which their relationship began is now closed. Therefore, although the radical element of *The Grass is Singing* embodied in the crossing of racial boundaries is closed down by the system of apartheid as represented by Slatter and the farming community, the novel at least opens up the question of alternative modes of living in Southern Rhodesia at the time Lessing wrote her novel.

As I have read it in this chapter, *The Grass is Singing* is a deeply self-divided novel in which transgressive and conservative impulses are unevenly combined. This self-division in the novel stems, in this reading, from Lessing's conflicted subject position as colonial settler, communist critic of colonialism, and white woman. In many respects, *The Grass is Singing* is a much more overtly political novel than those of Bowen or Godden discussed in earlier chapters. In it, Lessing deals openly with issues of 'poor white' misery, sexual and gender frustration, and racial hatred and revenge in a grimly realistic fashion we simply do not find in Bowen or Godden. Whether we attribute this more direct treatment of colonial violence to the later historical moment in which *The Grass is Singing* appeared or to Lessing's politicization due to her communist sympathies, the fact remains that Lessing's novel offers a vision of colonial society that is stripped of both the genteel glamour of Bowen's world and of the high-minded idealism of Godden's.

As we have seen, the most transgressive dimension of *The Grass is Singing* is the way in which it positions both the oppressed and violated white female subject

¹²⁵ Bertelsen, p. 655.

and the violated African male as deviants who must come to look to each other for the mutual recognition otherwise refused them by the social order. Yet although Mary's and Moses's fugitive desires bring them together for a time, there is never anything sentimental or romantic in their bonding. Lessing does not allow her readers either to forget Mary's deeply racist personal formation or to overlook the dangers implied by Moses's masculine domination over her. Transgressive though their desires for each other may be, their romance does not allow the reader to indulge the wish-fantasy of some utopian reconciliation: the violence of colonial settler history, the novel suggests, will not so easily be overcome.

The novel's depiction of Moses as murderer may be ascribed either to Lessing's fears as a progressive woman that to exchange Dick for Moses – or colonial settler for Black African domination – may be only to risk one form of subordination for another. Or, as mentioned earlier, it may stem from Lessing's white communism and the fears of 'the settler who refuses,' to use Memmi's terms, that the nationalisms of dominant and dominated peoples are ultimately equally loathsome and regressive. Even so, the fact that the novel concludes thus – with the white woman passively accepting her death by a black man, and a black man stoically accepting punishment for his crime – suggests a kind of fatalism and inert passivity that ultimately seems to allow *The Grass is Singing's* more radical impulses to be smothered. The title of Lessing's novel is, of course, taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Lessing's narrative certainly exudes the same sense of thwarted and neurotic desire and static sterility that pervades Eliot's modernist classic. But perhaps Lessing has also assimilated into her novel the sense of political impasse we find in Eliot: in both cases a society has lost its way but can find no redemption, no way beyond its life-sapping crisis. Thus, although Lessing's novel is

certainly more aggressively political than Bowen's, the same sense of being doomed to sit waiting for some final catastrophe concludes both *The Grass is Singing* and *The Last September*. Mary waits for Moses to kill her, Moses waits patiently for the law to kill him, just as Lois awaits the final, apparently inevitable, incineration of Danielstown.

What is absent from *The Grass is Singing* and *The Last September* alike, and indeed from Godden's novels also, is any sense that in struggling to free herself from the gender traps of white settler society, the female protagonist can enter into any meaningful political relationship with either men or women on the other side of the colonial divide. Thus, Lois is sexually excited by the sight of the republican volunteer, but the relationship is fleeting and not developed. Lessing pushes the relationship further in some ways, but since Moses is not a politicized figure, and since he seems to represent a will to dominate Mary also, that relationship slips from being potentially productive to being murderously perverse. In both cases, positive political development seems not to be imaginable; cooperation between oppressed white settler woman and oppressed colonial subject is thus tantalizingly glimpsed but then withdrawn. In the last chapter, I shall examine whether Nadine Gordimer's first novel manages to push beyond this point.

Chapter Five

Writing into the Truth:

The Limits of Liberalism in Nadine Gordimer's

THE LYING DAYS

I

As the process of decolonization throughout Africa gained momentum in the twentieth century, South Africa was unique in legally enforcing and officially applying the informal policy of racial segregation already in place throughout the colonized world. In his analysis of the apartheid era, A.J. Christopher reminds us that in South Africa the privileged political and economic position of the white population was maintained through the ruthless implementation of an elaborate series of laws which were constantly amended and extended to remove any possible loopholes.¹ Instituted at a time when the old European empires were beginning to be wound down in the rest of the world, the apartheid system made South Africa a notoriously racial state. It affected the African population most immediately and severely, but it posed dilemmas of a different order for white South African liberal dissidents also. Nadine Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days* has been repeatedly read by critics in terms of this historical context.²

Kolawole Ogungbesan places the novel in its historical moment and reads it as a work immersed in the social and political problems posed by the post-war rise to power of the Nationalist Party. For Ogungbesan the question 'Where are you going?' that is asked of the young protagonist Helen Shaw lies at the heart of the novel and is a

¹Much of this legislation, such as the Natives Land Act (1913), the Native Trust and Land Act (1936) and the Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923) was in place before the National Party's accession to power in 1948, but was thereafter rigorously enforced and amended to serve new purposes. The Party justified its policies with reference to the existence of similar laws in thirty of the United States of America. See A.J. Christopher, *The Atlas of Apartheid* (London and New York: Routledge: 1994), p. 3.

²Gordimer's title is from *The Coming of Wisdom with Time*, by W.B. Yeats:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth.

question asked of both the little girl and South Africa as each takes a new direction: Helen as she begins her struggle towards autonomy and a sense of self, the country as it descends into even further repression and racism. Ogungbesan's analysis recognizes that as Helen grows up she becomes increasingly caught up in a pattern of forces outside her control, but that she lacks the psychological maturity that will enable her to maintain her integrity in the face of these forces.³

Stephen Clingman's analysis of *The Lying Days* is similar to Ogungbesan's insofar as he also takes a new historicist approach that places the novel in its contemporary setting. Given that *The Lying Days* is set in a mining town, Clingman criticizes Gordimer for failing to refer to the significant mine-workers' strike of 1946, which was one of the first major acts of rebellion by the African population against the political system in South Africa.⁴ Clingman also notes that even as Gordimer critiques her society, her ingrained racism at this early point in her career ensures that she takes on board some of that society's bigoted assumptions without question.⁵ As we shall see, there are some instances in *The Lying Days* when racist terms are applied to the African population without any sense of irony on either Gordimer's or her narrator's part.

In contrast to these analyses, John Cooke approaches *The Lying Days* from a psychological point of view by drawing an analogy between Helen's desire to escape from an oedipal dependence on her mother and her eventual decision to leave the

³Kolawole Ogungbesan, 'The Way Out Of Africa: Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days*', *Theoria*, 49 (1977), pp. 45-59. See also Judith Newman, 'An Analysis of *The Lying Days* by Nadine Gordimer', *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 160 (2002), pp. 81-82.

⁴In 1946, a four-day strike was called by the African Mineworkers Union on the Witwatersrand. Twelve men were killed, the strike leaders were arrested and over one thousand miners were injured. See South African History Online (SAHO), <http://www.sahistory.org.za/20th-century-south-africa/1946-african-mine-workers-strike>.

⁵Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* ([1986] London: Bloomsbury, 1993), pp. 25-28.

problems of South Africa behind her. Cooke draws on the trope of the landscape to explore Helen's attempt to repress the reality of South Africa as she travels by train to the city. In one of the novel's subtle ironies, Helen hides behind her reading of nineteenth-century realist fiction in order to avoid the reality of what is happening all around her. When she must finally acknowledge its presence, Helen describes the landscape in dystopian terms; it is nothing more than a dump for the debris from the local goldmine and the city's suburbs. For Cooke, Helen's one-sided perspective signifies her continued failure to access the world of Black Africa.⁶ Abdul R. JanMohamed reads *The Lying Days* from a political perspective, as a novel that dramatizes the struggle between liberal bourgeois values and the horrors of apartheid. He praises Gordimer's ability to avoid the Manichean allegory by writing 'symbolic' fiction' in which she rigorously examines the 'imaginary' mechanisms of a colonialist mentality. JanMohamed's essay is also significant for highlighting Gordimer's insistence that reconciliation between the races is impossible within the power relations of colonial society.⁷

Since apartheid has drawn to a close the attention paid to *The Lying Days* has reflected further interest in the novel as a post-colonial window on the last days of an English-identified colonial culture as it yielded to a more aggressively racist and exploitative political class.⁸ Writing in the same year that apartheid ended, Kathrin Wagner offers a revisionist reading of *The Lying Days*, suggesting that Gordimer's novel is not a critique of apartheid, but rather that it 'encodes at subtextual level the

⁶John Cooke, 'African Landscapes: The World of Nadine Gordimer', *World Literature Today*, 52. 4 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 533-538. See also Newman, pp. 83-84.

⁷JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory', pp. 66, 82.

⁸See Newman, p. 65.

mental perspectives and mindsets that underlie the prejudices she overtly rejects.’⁹ Wagner maintains that in common with Gordimer’s later novels, *The Lying Days* portrays cultural and ethnic stereotypes of a conservative settler nature that are at odds with the author’s avowed liberalism. However, Judith Newman responds to this by accusing Wagner of ‘measuring Gordimer against some impossibly pure ideal of uncontaminated literary purity,’ adding that what Wagner says of Gordimer is true ‘only as far as it is true of all novelists who have lived through interesting times and kept on writing.’ Nevertheless, as Newman notes, Wagner’s reading points to the subtlety with which Gordimer demonstrates her awareness that fascism and anti-Semitism originate from one source.¹⁰ As we shall see, as images of the ‘other,’ the African girl, Mary Seswayo, and the young Jewish man, Joel Aaron, will prove to be related influences on Helen’s decision to try to overcome her inherited conservative settler prejudices.

These are all significant essays on the early Gordimer’s work, but they share in common a critical failure to examine the gendered aspects of Helen’s life or the extent to which her journey towards selfhood is influenced by her personal relationships and by her sexual experiences, even if these are somewhat sordid on occasion. Furthermore, the essays underplay the extent to which protagonists such as Mary and Joel serve as foils to Helen. In failing to note how her interactions with these characters complicate her individual story, these critics also ignore the extent to which issues of gender, race and ethnic background affect the progress of her psychological journey.¹¹ The essays are also remarkable for their critical failure to note the part played in Helen’s formation by

⁹Kathrin Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁰See Newman, p. 77.

¹¹See Newman, p. 84.

her experience of the township riots and the unwillingness of her liberal friends to acknowledge the manner in which the uneven formation of South African society reflects the workings of apartheid.

However, since the novel is set against this background, this chapter explores Helen's progress towards maturation within the political context of South Africa. It will also focus on the means by which the narrative lays bare the insidious ways in which apartheid infiltrated every aspect of life in South Africa, socially, culturally and politically. Unlike *The Last September* and *The Grass is Singing*, novels in which politics are kept in the background and resistance figures are portrayed either in terms of gothic shadows that fall across the heroine's world or as silent victims without a voice in the narrative, in *The Lying Days* politics are treated in a much more open and critical fashion. Black nationalists may not have any significant presence in the novel, but as the narrative progresses Helen is not only forced to confront an African character who challenges and critiques her in turn, but she is also compelled to compare her own privileged situation to the reality of the poverty, exploitation and extreme violence to which her growing sense of liberalism has no adequate response. Thus, while *The Lying Days* is focalized through the consciousness of a white woman, my reading uncovers the manner in which Gordimer subjects that protagonist's liberal viewpoint to such a searching critique that the reader is forced to concede its inadequacy as a political response to oppression. Moreover, as a settler female Helen is locked into the political system and while it appears that there is no feasible alternative available to her, by the end of the novel the need for an alternative mode of living in South Africa becomes all too apparent.

Since *The Lying Days* is structured in such a way that it reflects the politics of the era within the context of a female *bildungsroman*, I also read *The Lying Days* as a novel that interrogates the system of apartheid through an analogical approach, one that juxtaposes Helen's *bildung* with the country's deepening sense of crisis as its rulers struggle to hold onto power in the face of an increasingly radical Black Consciousness movement.¹² Traditionally, the classic *bildungsroman*, a genre defined by Mikhael Bakhtin as one that deals with the emergence of a young man's 'self' in the process of 'becoming,' is male-orientated, commonly offering narratives of young men who must sow their wild oats or behave in some wayward fashion before settling down and conforming to societal expectations.¹³ However, when applied to the emergence of the 'self' in a young woman, the genre generally allows female protagonists less scope for error and rebellion than the young man and imposes greater expectations for societal conformity on women. One of the more curious narrative features that *The Lying Days* has in common with the Godden and Lessing narratives examined earlier is the way in which it inverts these ideas.

In Freudian oedipal theory, in order to gain adult selfhood, the son must reject attachment to his mother, while the daughter derives her sense of self, not from rejecting her mother, but from emulating her as a role model and by unconsciously absorbing the nurturing function embodied in the maternal figure. However, in a similar vein to Emily Pool in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* and Mary Turner in *The Grass is Singing*, Helen expends considerable time and energy in an almost fanatical rejection of her mother

¹²The Black Consciousness Movement did not emerge as a formal anti-apartheid force until the mid 1960s. See Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 212, 225, 230.

¹³See Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism' in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), pp. 10-59: 19.

while the male characters, Ludi Koch and Joel Aaron, appear to maintain their psychic balance by sustaining warm and loving relationships with their respective mothers within a close family environment. Helen will certainly succeed in sowing her wild oats, but her maturation process takes the form of an outward journey, one that will take her away from South Africa and the distorted values embodied in her society. Whether Helen succeeds in throwing off the prejudices of settler society and whether her eventual decision to deal with the evils of apartheid by taking flight is an act of abandonment, or a decision necessary for her psychological well-being and survival, will be discussed in the light of her interactions with the people she encounters on her voyage of self-discovery.

As *The Lying Days* opens, pre-adolescent Helen Shaw is enjoying a monumental sulk directed against her mother, whose afternoon she is determined to spoil by refusing to accompany her parents to their weekly game of tennis. Helen's father, she informs the reader, has little authority over her and refrains from interfering in her quarrels with her mother because, as he puts it, 'digestion is impaired by emotion.'¹⁴ Mr. Shaw is a hypochondriac who has used a stomach ulcer as an excuse not to join South Africa's volunteer army, but as narrator, his daughter suggests that he is faking. To Helen, her father is a 'creature,' a figurehead treated with benevolence because he is the family breadwinner, but not respected as a patriarchal figure of authority. In a manner that recalls the emasculated Sir Richard Naylor in *The Last September* and Dick Turner in *The Grass is Singing*, this enfeebled male cedes all authority to his wife; it is Mrs. Shaw, not her husband, who makes all the important decisions in the household. As

¹⁴TLD, pp. 14, 191.

Helen recalls: 'In the end, no authority could speak above hers.'¹⁵ As Mrs. Shaw takes on the patriarchal role she displays all the negativity associated with the implementation of colonial ideology, and since it is this influence and authority that Helen hopes to overcome, her stubbornly defiant attitude is aimed directly at her mother. Helen relishes her moment of power in full knowledge of Mrs. Shaw's unspoken fear at leaving her daughter home alone, but the reason for this anxiety is obvious even to the small girl. Exactly as in Mary Turner's childhood, the maxim is 'so sternly upheld and generally accepted that it would occur to no child to ask why: a little girl must not be left alone because there were native boys about.'¹⁶ But for Helen the local Africans form the background to her life; she sees them as benevolent and harmless figures who, as she remembers, passed before her 'almost as remote if not as interesting as animals in a zoo.'¹⁷ Gordimer points to the emptiness of the unspoken threat posed by black males when Mrs. Shaw refuses to indulge her daughter's tantrum and sets off without her.

As with Emily in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, when Helen sets off for the native concession stores alone she is acting in direct opposition to her mother's express command that she keep to her own kind and away from such 'filthy kaffir stores' where she might 'breathe in heaven knows what dirt and disease.'¹⁸ Notwithstanding her familiarity with the African workers, Helen has internalized the colonial assumption that white females are constantly at risk of being sexually assaulted by black men, and it is in this awareness that she experiences a frisson of anticipation on entering the world of the African community. Holding her buttocks stiffly together and barely able to suppress a

¹⁵TLD, p. 191

¹⁶TLD, p. 14. The term 'boy' was applied to male adults. Helen later describes a black policeman as a fat, light-coloured police boy; 'picannin' was the term used for children.

¹⁷TLD, p. 161.

¹⁸TLD, p. 18.

squeal of excitement, Helen ignores the small white boy walking conspicuously through the stores as she tries to take in her new surroundings.¹⁹

The Shaws have protected their daughter from the dominant political discourse of South Africa by cocooning her in a sterile Anglophile world of fences and hedges, a colonial mimic world in which white people live only with reference to the ‘homeland,’ England.²⁰ Thanks to Mr. Shaw’s position as Mine Secretary, his family lives in a row of large houses ‘set well back from the road with a tall row of pines screening their long narrow gardens.’²¹ Mrs. Shaw’s table is set in the English fashion, with a willow-patterned tea service and an embroidered tablecloth.²² However, unlike Emily Pool, who has at least travelled through Europe, Helen has never ventured beyond the confines of her home; her only knowledge of a world beyond the goldmining town of Atherton lies in the books that her mother borrows from the local library. But, just as Gordimer does in her accounts of her own career, Helen continually reiterates her awareness that her reading bears no relationship to her real life. She dismisses the wonderland of fairy tales because, as she says, ‘the sedate walk of two genteel infant Tories through an English park was other world enough for me’:

Stories of children living the ordinary domestic adventures of the upper-middle-class English family ... were weird and exotic enough. Nannies in uniform, governesses and ponies, nurseries and playrooms and snow fights — all these commonplaces of European childhood were as unknown and therefore as immediately enviable as the life of princesses in legendary castles to the English children for whom the books were written. I had never read a book in which I myself was recognizable.²³

¹⁹*TLD*, p. 20.

²⁰*TLD*, p. 17.

²¹*TLD*, p. 27.

²²*TLD*, p. 28.

²³*TLD*, pp. 20-21.

Neither does Helen feel empathy with English or American realist fiction because it is inconceivable to her that her own staid and respectable father could be a drunkard like those depicted in such novels. Helen remarks that even later, when her reading progressed to Pepys and Smollett, Hemingway and Lawrence, '[I]n nothing that I read could I find anything that approximated to my own life; to our life on a gold mine in South Africa.'²⁴

Gazing at the exotic objects in the store windows, Helen relates this disparity to the gap between her parents' Eurocentric worldview and the reality of life in an African context. To Helen, the native location suggests an exotic and unfamiliar 'other' space, one that highlights the discrepancy between the prosperity of the white settlers and the poverty of the black workers, but that will also prove instrumental in helping to prepare Helen for the day when she will leave the confines of the mining town for good. Enthralled by the dusty lions' tails, wizened seeds, flaking grey roots, strange animal teeth and peeled snakeskins — a 'scavenged collection of tooth and claw and skin' that reminds the reader of Bowen's more sedately organized imperial objects in ante-room of *The Last September* — Helen immediately experiences an almost overwhelming sensation of alienation, of reaching across boundaries of difference and discovering that she does not know how to react to this strange environment.²⁵ Unable to assimilate this assault on her senses, this first glimpse of a world outside her own cocoon suffuses Helen with a keen sense of the uncanny. The young girl has caught a glimpse of a culture previously unknown to her, the culture of Black South Africa. It is interesting that in retrospect, the older Helen associates her youthful reaction with the beginning of

²⁴TLD, p. 96.

²⁵See Susan Pearsall, 'Where The Banalities Are Enacted: The Everyday in Gordimer's Novels', *Research in African Literature*, 31.3 (Spring, 2000), pp. 95-118: 110.

the colonial imagination: ‘the identification of the unattainable distant with the beautiful, the substitution of “overseas” for “fairyland.”’²⁶ However, although simultaneously fascinated and repelled by this new encounter, her initial excitement at her foray into the world of black Africa ends in a sense of disgust even stronger than that experienced by either Louise Pool in the Indian marketplace or Mary Turner when she strides into the farm workers’ compound:

Even though it was winter there were flies here ...and above the gusts of strong sweet putrescence enveloping suddenly from the eating house, the smoke of burned mealies and the rotten sweetness of discarded oranges squashed everywhere underfoot, there was the high, strong, nostril-burning smell of stale urine. It had eaten the grass of the veld away, it had soured the earth with a crude animal foulness ... my lip twisted up in distaste ... I felt suddenly that I wanted to bat at my clothes and brush myself down and feel over my hair in case something had settled on me — some horrible dirt, something alive, perhaps.²⁷

The bravado Helen had displayed in defying her mother dissipates at the sight of a black man urinating close by her. The ‘sudden press of knowledge, hot and unwanted’ that she experiences signals the beginning of her sexual awakening by reminding her of the perceived danger posed by the African and also awakens in her an awareness that she is an intruder on his territory.²⁸ Helen is still too young to experience the stirrings of a liberal consciousness, for although she understands that according to the dictates of settler society the man is her inferior, she has yet to grasp the full implications of the gap between his status as a colonized subject and her own status as his colonialist superior. Nonetheless, the encounter forces her to recognize the man’s humanity and also brings home to her at some level, however dormant for now, an awareness of the gulf between his life and her own. Feeling thoroughly alienated, Helen quickly retreats to the

²⁶*TLD*, p. 21.

²⁷*TLD*, p. 23.

²⁸*TLD*, p. 24.

familiarity of the white enclave, where she joins her parents at their tennis party, helping with the refreshments and performing mundane tasks much like those performed by Lois Farquar at Danielstown.²⁹ For Helen, the privileged tennis players are in stark contrast to the African men at the stores who ‘lay on the burned grass, rolled in their blankets, face down, as if they were dead in the sun.’³⁰ She now stays close by her mother, joining in the adult banter and becoming, in effect, a club mascot. It is only later when she reflects on her childhood that a more mature Helen can ruefully remark: ‘I was quite one of them.’³¹

II

The Shaws spend their lives in what Hannah Arendt terms a ‘state of banality,’ defined by Maurice Blanchot as our everyday habits: ‘what we are first of all, and most often: at work, at leisure, awake, asleep, in the street, in private existence.’³² In other words, for most people, ‘everyday’ is ordinary life and the Shaw home is a prime site in which these banalities are enacted.³³ The family live in a quasi-fascist state in which absolute power demands absolute compliance, an ideology that succeeds by convincing the population that their behaviour in support of the state is normal, and therefore unquestioning.

²⁹*TLD*, p. 25.

³⁰*TLD*, pp. 19, 24.

³¹*TLD*, p. 25.

³²Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* ([1963] New York: Penguin, 1994), and Maurice Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech’, trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987), pp. 12-20: 12, quoted in Pearsall, p. 103.

³³Pearsall, p. 101.

As she grows up, Helen lives an uneventful life, internalizing the ideology of apartheid and conforming to societal expectations by behaving in the manner expected of the daughter of a typical colonial white family. Her adolescence is marked only by the dances and parties she attends when World War Two brings uniformed soldiers to the town. Meanwhile, her mother's life is 'pegged out to street collections and galas and dances and cake sales and meetings of this committee and that.'³⁴ In the world of the Shaws, as in that of *The Last September*, nobody recognizes the incongruity of holding tennis tournaments, polite tea parties and cake sales while men are literally dying beneath their feet. When the mine hooter sounds outside its normal time it comes 'like the cry of a beast in distress', signalling an underground accident:

For there were very seldom any serious accidents, and few of those that did happen involved white men. Natives were sometimes trapped ... and had to be dug out, dead or alive ... When a white man was killed, the papers recorded the tragedy, giving his name and occupation and details of the family he left. If no white man was affected, there was an item: 'Fatal Fall of Hanging ... Two natives were killed, and three others escaped with minor injuries.'³⁵

Despite Gordimer's ironical stance, this passage suggests that at this point in her life, black people are useful to Helen only insofar as they begin to play a role in her process of maturation.³⁶

As in all colonies, the threat of violence was ever-present in South Africa, but the success of apartheid rested on aesthetics as well as on physical action or political negotiation. Under the rules of apartheid, an individual's destiny hinged on the criteria of racial purity and physical appearance; in other words, on the colour of one's skin. As

³⁴*TLD*, p. 40.

³⁵*TLD*, p. 32.

³⁶See Robert Green, 'From *The Lying Days* to *July's People*: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 14. 4 (Spring, 1988), pp. 543-563: 546.

Pearsall notes, the aestheticized politics of apartheid contribute to a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle for the white settlers only, one that chooses its own comfort over justice for the black population, providing the settlers with a stable identity that is maintained and reinforced by family ties and therefore available for the State's ideological conditioning.³⁷ In other words, the everyday habits of settler society present a prime site of social control in apartheid South Africa. In her representation of the Shaw family, Gordimer goes further than any of the authors in this study in explicitly equating everyday living with ideological conditioning when she states:

The weird ordering of the collective life, in South Africa, has slipped its special contact lens into the corner of whites; we actually *see* blacks differently ... for apartheid is above all a habit; the unnatural seems natural — a far from banal illustration of Hannah Arendt's banality of evil.³⁸

It suits the Shaws to buy into the banality of apartheid and its practice is particularly enacted through the family's daily interaction with the domestic help.³⁹ Housemaid Anna has been with the family for fifteen years and like most black servants, lives in a type of small hut at the bottom of the back garden, 'a little one-eyed room,' as Helen calls it.⁴⁰ Mrs. Shaw's social interaction with Anna consists of one-sided grumbles about her own grievances and she shows no real interest in Anna's life outside her role as servant. In fact, the sameness of life in the Shaw household is always marked by racial difference. Anna is presented as a figure of fun, comically drinking her tea not from a proper cup but from an old jam tin, and is ridiculed by Helen and her mother when she dresses in her Sunday best.⁴¹ The office clerk, Paul, who began working in the mine at

³⁷See Pearsall, p. 95.

³⁸*EG*, pp. 265-266. Original emphasis.

³⁹See Pearsall, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁰*TLD*, p. 26.

⁴¹*TLD*, pp. 28, 162.

the same time as Helen's father, must also work in the Shaws' garden when 'requested' to do so. Mr. Shaw's career advances, but Paul is not allowed to mature; he remains a messenger, a 'boy', and there is no possibility of upward mobility for him. Therefore, he has no option but to bow to his exploitation by the Shaws. Paul has sent his two sons away in order to keep them from growing up in the black township because, as Mrs. Shaw condescendingly tells him, life in the township is 'the beginning of loafers and no-goods' and, the narrative implies, a life spent underground in the mines.⁴² To Mrs. Shaw, Paul is 'one of the old kind ... a good old thing' but she is insensitive to the irony implicit in discussing family life with a man who cannot raise his own children. In a patriarchal tribal system, Paul's inability to support his own children is a humiliation for him. The Shaws are insensitive to this and their occasional gift of old toys to his children does more to alleviate their own guilt than to help Paul or his family in any serious way. But it is precisely Paul's dilemma that allows Gordimer to highlight both the futility of token acts of charity and the connection between colonial ideology and the pattern of everyday life. *The Lying Days* portrays apartheid as a familiar evil passed down by cultural practices from generation to generation until such practices become largely unconscious. Furthermore, Gordimer suggests that the inability or unwillingness to notice this process of acculturation is perhaps the ultimate tyranny.⁴³ Thus, in this early novel, as Pearsall observes, as an obvious site of the 'everyday' the Shaw family becomes the locus for Gordimer's examination of the various tyrannies that support South Africa's social and political interactions.

⁴²TLD, p. 33.

⁴³Pearsall, p. 102.

Arendt raises the question of whether evil is a fundamentally radical concept or simply a function of thoughtlessness; that is, whether it incorporates a tendency for otherwise ordinary people to conform to mass opinion without critically considering the consequences of the choices they make. The apparently harmless strike that takes place in Atherton one Sunday morning is notable for the unthinking racism with which a young neighbour gives Helen the news: 'Man, there's a whole lotta niggers round Ockerts', all over the garden and in the street and everywhere. Just a lot of munts from the Compound.'⁴⁴ Mrs Ockert complains of the miners: 'As soon as *they're* anywhere around you can be sure they'll bring millions of flies.'⁴⁵ Nobody questions such overt racism or thinks it incongruous that they enjoy fresh food even as the hungry miners attempt to negotiate their inadequate daily food ration. Helen's father refuses to even acknowledge the miners' legitimate complaint:

This business of changing the boys' diet — it always does lead to trouble ... I've seen it time and time again. If you'd been giving them boiled rags for years and you changed it to chicken suddenly, they'd be up in arms asking for the rag back again ... all this to-do over mealie-pap.⁴⁶

The strike is quickly and easily resolved, but colonial complacency ensures that the settlers do not question its implications for possible further unrest: 'A storm in a porridge pot,' laughs Mr. Shaw, 'a storm in a porridge pot.'⁴⁷

Helen joins her young neighbour in enjoying the spectacle of the miners' discomfort and because of her internalized racism, she sees them not as human beings but as benign animals, squatting like frogs or slowly swinging their heads to swat at

⁴⁴TLD, p. 35.

⁴⁵TLD, p. 38. Original emphasis.

⁴⁶TLD, p. 38.

⁴⁷TLD, p. 38.

flies, like cattle.⁴⁸ Helen has been raised on tales of an earlier strike by white miners, one in which guns had been fired.⁴⁹ Because no shots have been fired on this occasion, she mimics her father in refusing to believe that an actual strike has taken place over such a trivial matter as porridge: 'But it wasn't a strike, was it ... *That* couldn't be a strike?'⁵⁰ Helen has already gorged herself at the Ockerts' house, but without a thought for the miners' hunger she turns her thoughts to food and home, which, like Bowen's Danielstown, is a magnet to her dependence.

As she grows up, Helen is expected to conform to her parents' middle-class lifestyle. Overwhelmed by her powerful mother, her adolescence is spent in the whirl of social activities and charity work expected of a mine official's daughter. Helen's life becomes so intertwined with her mother's that on looking back, she can comment that the only difference between them at the time was that of age.⁵¹ It is understood that Helen will complete a secretarial course before taking up employment until the time comes for her to be married, preferably to a local boy. As she cynically remarks:

Weddings were the appearance of dear little girls dressed up to strew rose petals, rather than matings ... if and by the time marriage resulted, [the boy] was already inculcated in the kind of life the girl's family had led and which, without question, he would be expected to lead with her, trooping off as ants go to set up another ant heap exactly like the one they have left.⁵²

In Helen's opinion, the narrow outlook displayed by her parents and the people of Atherton enfeeble life rather than enhance it.

⁴⁸*TLD*, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁹In The Rand Rebellion of 1922 more than two hundred people were killed when white mineworkers went on strike over pay conditions and against an increase in the number of black workers. Their slogan: 'Workers of the World, Unite and Fight for a White South Africa' is deeply ironic given that the strike leaders were members of the newly-formed Communist Party of South Africa. This strike almost brought the country to a standstill before being crushed by the authorities. See *South Africa History Online*, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/rand-rebellion-1922>.

⁵⁰*TLD*, p. 39. Original emphasis.

⁵¹*TLD*, p. 39.

⁵²*TLD*, pp. 136, 181.

As a teenager, when she visits her mother's friend at the coast, Helen finds in Alice Koch an idealized surrogate mother, one whose warm personality is the very antithesis of the aloofness evident in her own mother's demeanour. Mrs. Koch displays her emotions in a manner that would be deemed unseemly in the Shaw household where 'tears were embarrassments swallowed back, stalked out of the room, love was private.'⁵³ Except for birthdays, the Shaws have ceased all open displays of affection, but when Helen visits the local store with Mrs. Koch, she finds herself basking in an atmosphere of amiable chat with the shopkeeper, and feels none of the sense of displacement she had experienced as a child in the mine stores. The implication is that despite the passage of time Helen has not yet matured sufficiently to cross the 'colour bar' and still only feels at ease among white people.

Mrs. Koch's son, Ludi, is attracted to Helen, but unlike her, he has no wish to leave his mother's house, nor has he any interest in 'getting on' in life. Ludi once worked on the mines and is scornful of Helen's small-town background; he does not want 'the nice little job or the nice little family or the dreary little town or the petty little people' and is content to live with his mother on a monthly pittance. 'All I want is the war to end so that I can get back here,' he tells Helen:

That life on the Mine is the narrowest, most mechanical, unrewarding existence you could think of in any nightmare ... grinning and bowing all the way up to the godly Manager on top, and being grinned and bowed at by everyone below you — not that there ever was anyone below me, except the blacks and it's no privilege to sit on them since anyone can ... you live by courtesy of the Mine, for the Mine in the Mine.⁵⁴

On leave from the army, Ludi is depicted as an anti-hero who, like Helen's father, hopes to shirk his military responsibility. Elated when a collapsed bridge prevents him from

⁵³*TLD*, p. 51.

⁵⁴*TLD*, pp. 56-58.

returning to active duty, he prefers to spend his time fishing or making half-hearted attempts to organize his mother's chicken farm. Helen is at first appalled by this lack of ambition, which goes entirely against her parents' strong work ethic and the capitalist ethos of her hometown. Nonetheless, Ludi's undermining remarks set up an internal conflict during which she begins to question her parents' conservative values:

A struggle was set up in me; dimly I felt that the man acted according to some other law I did not know and yet at the same time the law of my mother, the law of the people among whom I lived and by which I myself was beginning to live, made him outcast, a waster, a loafer, ambitionless.⁵⁵

As the days pass, Helen falls under the spell of Ludi's indolent life and the couple spend their time either lying on the beach or frolicking in the sea like children.⁵⁶ Distanced from the claustrophobic world of Atherton, Helen can allow herself to be receptive to the open seascape, which is in stark contrast to the anti-pastoral ugliness of the mine. However, Gordimer's narrative serves to undercut any notion of the Kochs' life as utopian. Helen may well depict the farm as a rural idyll, but there are signs that all is not well, for the farm has not prospered. In fact, the entire situation is suggestive of decline and decay. Like Mary Turner's poultry, the chickens at the Koch place are either dead or dying while the coops are so neglected that they are on the point of disintegration.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Ludi has much in common with Hugo Montmorency of Bowen's novel, for like Hugo, he is quite clearly impotent. The promise of a sexual relationship with Helen does not progress beyond erotic foreplay until Ludi eventually confesses that he has only occasionally slept with women. He represses his lack of masculinity by transferring blame for his impotency onto his sexual partner: 'It happens about once a

⁵⁵*TLD*, p. 57.

⁵⁶*TLD*, pp. 57-61.

⁵⁷*TLD*, p. 61.

year, with me. One feels — and then afterwards ... I'm disgusted with the woman. Meaningless, really.'⁵⁸ Ludi sanitizes sex; when he discovers a pullover knitted for him by a previous girlfriend, his reaction is to talk about the insecticide he uses to mothproof it. When Helen invites him to approach her sexually, Ludi is unable to consummate the relationship and his rejection of her is explicit: 'I can't,' he tells her, 'it's impossible ... it's physically impossible.'⁵⁹ The motif of the decaying farm and that of Ludi's impotence — his inability to regenerate — are symptomatic of a doomed society, one that can no longer reproduce itself.

Ludi's impotence is linked to his striking oedipal complex; his distaste for sex is so marked that the reader must question whether he is able to sustain a relationship with any woman other than his mother, who is, he tells Helen, 'such an extraordinary person, so absolutely right to live with.'⁶⁰ True to form, Ludi's relationship with Helen flounders on every level, he never gets to visit her in Atherton as he had promised and he is so indifferent to her feelings that he writes to her care of the mine rather than to her home. Helen becomes keenly aware that Ludi will never exhibit the same concern for her that he displays towards Mrs. Koch, for Ludi is obsessed with his mother; he sees in Alice 'the heart of the young woman which had stayed, like a plant taken from the climate of its growth, static.'⁶¹ Such a sentiment, however well intended, has negative connotations that recall the reference to withering Europeans and cut flowers in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*. Judith Newman has suggested that Gordimer's Mrs. Koch resembles D.H. Lawrence's Mrs. Morel in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) but that she lacks the

⁵⁸TLD, p. 83.

⁵⁹TLD, pp. 81-82.

⁶⁰TLD, p. 93.

⁶¹TLD, p. 55.

possessiveness displayed by Mrs. Morel in her oedipal relationship with her son, Paul.⁶² However, Mrs. Koch is not blameless in her son's dependency; her control over Ludi is simply more subtle than Mrs. Morel's is. Ludi is twenty-seven at the time of Helen's visit. By allowing him to continue to live with her after the war, by smothering him and keeping him in a state of emotional dependency, Mrs. Koch facilitates her son's withdrawal from the wider world. She thus becomes complicit in Ludi's failure to equip himself with the skills necessary to negotiate life in a South African context. When we last hear of him, Ludi is running a conventional small store for the settler community, much like the one portrayed in *The Grass is Singing*.⁶³

Helen's stay by the coast has matured her. Her relationship with Ludi may not have been consummated but it has opened her eyes to the possibility of a fulfilling sexual relationship and a life beyond the mine. Back home in Atherton, she feels alien and out of kilter with her old world, as evidenced by an outing to the local swimming pool, where her deeply tanned legs mark her out as 'a stranger bearing the distinguishing marks of another land.' When a young male invites her to 'Come away to the lagoon with me, Tondelayo!', the significance of this is lost on Helen, who has not seen the film *White Cargo* and does not understand what is, in colonial terms, an implied racist insult, suggesting that she is a sultry black *femme fatale*.⁶⁴ But the changes that her visit to the coast has wrought in Helen are more than skin-deep and it is only when she goes shopping with her mother that she understands the extent of the psychological changes that have taken place within her:

⁶²See Newman, p. 102. Ludi's admiration for his mother echoes that of Lawrence, who describes his own mother as a clever, ironical, delicately moulded woman. According to Lawrence's wife Frieda, at their first meeting they discussed the oedipal complex in depth.

⁶³*TLD*, p. 137.

⁶⁴*TLD*, p. 89. Set in Africa, *White Cargo* (1932) stars Hedy Lamarr as Tondelayo, a stereotypical sexually rapacious black woman.

All this pleasant, familiar activity came to me as it might come to someone who has been ill, and is filled with the strangeness of standing upright in the sun again. When we stopped to talk to people, I had the smile that invalids summon.⁶⁵

Helen is no longer content to live her mother's life. She ignores Ludi's scornful jibe — 'getting on, the bright ambitious daughter of the Mine Secretary' — and decides to carve her own future by enrolling in the university.⁶⁶

III

On her daily commute to the city, Helen's sense of adventure is tempered by the knowledge that the ugly urban landscape she passes through once held the body of a murdered black man who had lain among the weeds for an entire day before being discovered.⁶⁷ In Arendt's terms, the nameless and faceless body in the ditch is a strong signifier for the banality of evil, and thus the anti-pastoral landscape points up the instability of the colonizers' hold on the land. The black body, silenced in death and effaced by the weeds, is not only a deliberate link through which Gordimer destabilizes the sense of security that Helen experiences in her everyday and mundane habits, it is also a symbol for the ghostly black miners whose hidden labour underground provides her with the financial means to attend university. Nevertheless, these lives are deemed so worthless, and their violent deaths so commonplace, that they do not arouse any interest on the part of the white community.⁶⁸

⁶⁵TLD, p. 86.

⁶⁶TLD, p. 91.

⁶⁷TLD, p. 101.

⁶⁸Gordimer pursues this motif in *Six Feet of the Country* (1956) and *The Conservationist* (1974).

On the train, Joel Aaron introduces himself as the small boy that Helen had seen at the native stores all those years ago. They become close friends but Helen's liberal consciousness has not developed enough to accept Joel as an equal. Even though he is white, Joel is Jewish and in a political system where ethnic differences are almost as symbolically charged as those of race, Helen condescendingly informs Joel that it suits her to like him, even though he is a Jew, but she does not allow the friendship to develop into a sexual relationship. When she is invited to Joel's home, she instantly 'others' his mother in racist terms, describing Mrs. Aaron as having the 'incredibly small-hipped, thickened body of Jewish women from certain parts of Europe, the swollen doll's body ... beneath arches of fine, mauvish, shadowy skin, her lids remained level, half-shuttered.'⁶⁹ Moreover, Helen associates Joel's parents with the African strikers of her childhood, belittling them as 'bewildered, ignorant, embarrassing, blinking like moles brought up into the unaccustomed light of Joel's world of books and music.'⁷⁰ She mistakenly assumes that because Joel's mother speaks with a heavy accent that she is an embarrassment to him and is taken aback when she perceives that he is neither ashamed of her nor of her Jewish customs. The narrative subtly points to the similarity between the matriarchal authority of Mrs. Aaron and Helen's mother with reference to an old family photograph in which the female is featured more prominently than the male:

A pair of stern, stupid eyes looked out from the smoky beard of an old photograph; the face of a foolish man in the guise of a patriarch. But next to him the high bosom, the high nose that seemed to tighten the whole face, slant the black eyes, came with real presence through a print that seemed to have evaporated from the paper: a woman presided over the room.⁷¹

⁶⁹ *TLD*, p. 115.

⁷⁰ *TLD*, p. 127.

⁷¹ *TLD*, p. 113.

Helen even has the arrogance to smile patronizingly at Mrs. Aaron 'as if to excuse her to herself,' but it is she who is embarrassed when Joel's mother, who 'did not feel the need to be forgiven' in her own home, unflinchingly stares back.⁷²

Helen is as yet too inexperienced to understand the irony implicit in her racist attitude, for it is Joel who supplants Ludi's influence in her life. Whereas Ludi had broadened her horizons in sexual terms, it is Joel who opens her mind to culture by taking her to concerts and art galleries and who guides her through her increasingly stormy relationship with her mother. In the end indeed, it is Joel who equips Helen with the knowledge that will lead her towards a sense of an autonomous self. Nevertheless, her embarrassment at her condescending attitude towards the Aarons does not transcend her unconscious sense of ethnic difference and she recoils from Mrs. Aaron's Jewish food with distaste, even disgust. Steeling herself to eat rollmop herrings and sardines, Helen thinks with longing of the ham and tomato sandwiches that her own mother prepares. This yearning for ham in a Jewish household is doubly insulting, for Mrs. Aaron's food is symbolic of ancient Hebrew customs, a tradition that is much older than the colonial version of English culture imposed on South Africa by Helen's parents and their peers. Furthermore, introducing Jewish culture as an exotic opposite to the Eurocentric world of the Shaws should present Helen with an alternative perspective on life, but Joel's home encompasses a world just as complacent and cocooned as that of the mine, thus ensuring that the Aarons have more in common with Helen's family than she might care to think. Joel's parents are also complicit with the operation of apartheid and openly display admiration for those upwardly mobile young Jews who, unlike Ludi, are 'getting on' in their careers. For all their traditions, the Aarons have bought into

⁷²*TLD*, p. 115.

white South Africa and cannot afford to challenge its fascist policies. Convinced that the economy will collapse without their commercial input, the Aarons ignore the racist politics of apartheid and move to a bungalow in suburbia.⁷³

Helen's alternative experiences make her aware of the disparity between the life her parents wish her to lead and the future she sees for herself. She constantly complains of their failings to Joel, but he points out to her the need to accept her parents as they are, as he accepts his:

Making them over would be getting rid of them as they are. Well, you can't do it. You can't do it by going to live somewhere else, either. You can't even do it by never seeing them again for the rest of your life ... Accept them as they are, even if you yourself choose to live differently.⁷⁴

Mrs. Shaw is openly dismayed to think that Joel could be her daughter's boyfriend and accuses Helen of preferring to 'run about with the son of a Jew from the native stores, someone brought up among all the dirt and the kaffirs ... than anyone decently brought up by people of our own standing.'⁷⁵ Mr. Shaw's racism is less overt but he also 'others' Joel by unconsciously subjecting him to anti-Semitic jargon, questioning him about 'your people' and 'the customs of your people,' offensive queries that Joel courteously answers by pretending to take Mr. Shaw's patronage for real interest.⁷⁶ Yet the mere fact that they have invited a Jewish boy into their home means that the Shaws are at least prepared, however disdainfully, to acknowledge the possibility of a union between Helen and Joel. In their world, a son-in-law with an Afrikaans name would be disappointing but tolerated, while marriage to a Jew, although frowned upon, would elicit the 'awe and sympathy with which people regard aberration.' It is

⁷³See Newman, p. 24.

⁷⁴*TLD*, p. 126.

⁷⁵*TLD*, p. 192.

⁷⁶*TLD*, p. 120.

incomprehensible to the Shaws that their daughter should have a relationship with either an African man or, for that matter, a friendship with an African woman; this is another rule of settler society so unconscionable that it does not even need to be articulated.⁷⁷

Helen transgresses this maxim when she meets the black student, Mary Seswayo. She firsts encounters Mary as a mirrored reflection in the women's cloakroom at the university, a liminal space that as Helen records, is 'the one place in Johannesburg and one of the few places in all South Africa where a black girl could wash her hands in the same place as a white girl.'⁷⁸ Fanon's assertion in *Black Skin, White Masks* that subjugated people are mirrors through which colonizers define themselves finds a resonance in Helen's reaction to Mary, in whose face she sees mirrored her own hunger for knowledge:⁷⁹ 'What I saw on her face now was what was on my own,' she recalls.⁸⁰ Helen understands this first meeting as 'a meeting of inherited enemies in the dark in which they mistake one another for friends.' She describes the initial tension between them in terms typical of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic:

Getting to know Mary Seswayo was like gently coaxing a little shy animal to edge forward to your hand. There was ... something of a collector's suppressed eagerness in the trembling bait I held out to her from time to time; and we were afraid of each other, she of the lion-mask of white mastery that she saw superimposed on my face, I of the mouse-mask of black submission with which I obscured hers.⁸¹

The possibility of a friendship between the two girls is stymied from the start, for as we have seen with Narayan in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, not even education can bridge the gap between the colonizer and the colonized. Mary and Helen have internalized

⁷⁷ *TLD*, p. 245

⁷⁸ *TLD*, p. 105.

⁷⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] London: Pluto, 2008).

⁸⁰ *TLD*, p. 105.

⁸¹ *TLD*, p. 127.

racism so thoroughly that on leaving the washroom they each feel it entirely natural that Mary should hold the door while Helen, unmindful, passes through first. As Pearsall comments, as a simple illustration of apartheid's effects on everyday life this seemingly innocuous incident not only powerfully underlines the indoctrination that supports the tyranny of the apartheid system, it also demonstrates Gordimer's awareness that the operation of ideology is so sinister that it extends deeply into the trivial and unconscious acts of everyday existence.⁸²

The description of the polarity between the two students lays bare the power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as expounded by Memmi and Fanon. Unlike Helen, whose privileged status ensures that she has no problem entering university half way through the academic year, Mary has struggled hard to get to university, as black students were only allowed to enter white universities when they could not be accommodated elsewhere. In South Africa, separate education was designed not only to reinforce segregation, but also to direct all non-white students to the unskilled labour market. In 1953, the minister in charge of education plainly stated that the education of black children should be separate to whites and specific to the needs of the black community. As the minister made clear, its purpose was not for the creation of 'expectations in life which circumstances in South Africa did not allow to be fulfilled':

There is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it [*sic*] cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in

⁸²Pearsall, pp. 101-102.

accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live.⁸³

Mary's problem is that in common with all colonized women she is twice oppressed. Living within a patriarchal tribal system that is itself struggling against the patriarchy of apartheid, she must not only cope with her subjugated status within this society, but must also learn to struggle against the condescension bestowed upon her by white students such as Helen.⁸⁴

Since public services for Africans were either inadequate or non-existent, Helen and her new boyfriend, Charles, offer to drive Mary to her lodgings in Mariastad, a black location some distance from the university.⁸⁵ With electricity and running water only available intermittently, Mary's pride does not allow her to invite anyone into her overcrowded shack, and since she is denied access to Mary's life, Helen can only imagine the conditions in which she lives.⁸⁶ Helen is appalled by what she sees in the township; she compares the emaciated children to flies, to be brushed away as easily as the irritating flies during the miners' token strike of her childhood:

Children ... skittering over the road, running alongside the car in a fluttering pennant of rags. When there are so many of them, they lose human value; you could have put out your arm and brushed them off, back into the road ... the children were naked beneath one garment cast off by a grown-up; streaming noses and grey bellies to show that under the old army jacket there was something alive instead of a cross of sticks to frighten birds.⁸⁷

⁸³Henrik Verwoerd, Minister for Native Affairs; Prime Minister 1958-1966, quoted in Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2004), pp. 48-51. See also Christopher, p. 150.

⁸⁴For contemporary accounts of African women's struggles against apartheid, see Hilda Bernstein, *For Their Triumphs And For Their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa* (London: International Defence & Aid Fund, 1975).

⁸⁵For details of public transport for Africans, see Christopher, p. 150.

⁸⁶Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 200-201.

⁸⁷*TLD*, pp. 173, 176.

Watching Mary collect cold water from a communal tap brings home to Helen the disparity between her own comfortable lifestyle and the stark conditions that she witnesses in Mariastad:

So in how many other commonplaces that I take for granted in my own life shall I be wrong in **hers**? The thousand differences in the way she is compelled to dress, wash, eat — they piled up between us and I could scarcely see her ... I was conscious of a kind of helplessness as if it were taking me away, further and further away, not only in distance. The car that at night must occupy a garage as big as these houses. The house Mary lives in. The bench she can't sit on, the water that must be fetched from the tap in the street, the physical closeness of her life to the lives of others; these differences in the everyday living out of our lives ... I thought of her eyes into which I seemed not to have looked hard enough.⁸⁸

As she had done as a child, the ugliness and horror of what she has witnessed elicits in Helen a mixture of titillation and guilt that she can only suppress by indulging in a display of vulgar gluttony, this time compounded by meaningless and unfulfilling sexual activity with Charles.⁸⁹ Helen will later blame her middle-class background for this propensity to over-indulge when faced with an unpleasant truth: 'How the mine fed one to extinction, truly to extinction — all the blood comfortably deflected from one's doubting brain to one's satisfied stomach.'⁹⁰

Helen does not allow herself to consummate her relationship with Charles, and like Ludi, the young doctor proves to be merely a stepping-stone on her road to autonomy. Helen believes that by indulging in all intimacies short of the sexual act itself, she has not offended against the moral code of colonial ideology — the unwritten rule that young women should remain 'pure' until marriage. Rather, Helen believes that

⁸⁸*TLD*, pp. 175-176. For a more positive account of township life from an African perspective, see Es'kia Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* ([1959] London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

⁸⁹*TLD*, p. 178.

⁹⁰*TLD*, p. 313.

she has allowed herself the freedom of expression necessary to a sense of her natural 'self,' the result of which is an enjoyable feeling of freedom and independence.⁹¹ Consequently, as with Ludi, her relationship with Charles also fails to fulfil its initial promise. To her parents' disappointment, the narrating Helen tells us, 'Charles, like the hope of a sail, passed.'⁹²

However, Helen cannot entirely expunge her guilt at her excessive reaction to the poverty of the black township and tries to alleviate it somewhat by offering Mary a place to study. Without any regard for her parents' feelings, she believes that her plan is so simple and practical that it gives her the 'particular satisfaction of an easy solution which has been over-looked.'⁹³ Because Mary is African, yet not a servant, what Helen has in mind is a liminal space, a lean-to storage room between the main house and Anna's hut at the end of the garden. But this proposal runs directly contrary to familial and social patterns and Helen's father blocks this violation of colonial ideology by presenting Helen with a book on psychoanalysis, *The Subconscious You*, which he opens at a chapter titled: 'How you think with your blood: The problem of prejudice'.⁹⁴ As already indicated, Mr. Shaw is incapable of engaging in argument or debate with his family. Drawing Helen's attention to the chapter is clearly a covert warning against allowing the African girl to penetrate white space. 'Thinking with your blood' has negative connotations so that, as symbolized by the space into which Helen tries to slot her — 'a place for things that had no place' — the message that Mr. Shaw appears to convey is that Mary's presence in the Shaw household brings with it the threat of

⁹¹*TLD*, p. 183.

⁹²*TLD*, pp. 178, 183.

⁹³*TLD*, p. 197.

⁹⁴*TLD*, p. 190. The title appears to be fictitious.

contamination associated with the African population, a threat that Helen attempts to neutralize by reassuring her mother that Mary is 'as clean as a white person.'⁹⁵ However, Mrs. Shaw rejects Helen's proposal outright, thus precipitating a furious quarrel between mother and daughter that serves to widen the growing gulf between them.⁹⁶

Helen has not learned from her experience of offending Mrs. Aaron and tells Mary of her mother's reaction. To her utter astonishment, Mary is infuriated by her plan and is neither grateful to Helen nor humiliated by Mrs. Shaw's refusal. In fact, as Helen admits, she had never seen her so confident.⁹⁷ Mary refuses to be patronized and strongly rebukes Helen for the presumption with which she tries to play 'lady bountiful.' Mary has a more insightful understanding of the racial dilemma than Helen can ever hope to gain; she understands that if she and Helen are not equal under the law then it is impossible for them to communicate clearly about the matter:

The fact that I'm good enough doesn't mean that she's got to want me. If I were a white girl she could say no, if she felt like it. But because I'm black she's got to say yes. Don't you see, if I am good enough, I'm good enough not to go where I'm not wanted? ... You want to give a nice plump person to practising cannibals and tell them they mustn't eat him because it's like eating themselves. But they're used to eating people. They haven't had their ideas of diet changed yet, like you have.⁹⁸

Since Mary has no desire to be 'othered,' she refuses to co-operate with Helen's well-meaning but futile benevolence and Helen's optimistic hope that personal interaction can overcome racial ideology shatters in the face of her logic. Moreover, Joel accuses Helen of using Mary not only as a goad to her mother but also as a trophy black friend

⁹⁵*TLD*, p. 187

⁹⁶*TLD*, pp. 188-189.

⁹⁷*TLD*, p. 202.

⁹⁸*TLD*, p. 203.

to prove her new but abstract liberalism. That Joel has a valid point is evidenced by Helen's innate sense of superiority when she smiles indulgently at Mary in the belief that her cannibal analogy is part of a Bantu folk tale.⁹⁹ Helen fails to understand the subtlety with which Mary juxtaposes the myth of black savagery with the inference that the practice of apartheid proves that it is the settlers who in fact display barbaric tendencies. The tentative bond between the pair is broken because it flouts the dictates of strict imperial ideology; that is, the clear understanding that in a white household black people are servants, never guests. Mary understands this, as does Mrs. Shaw. For Mary to stay as a guest would be 'unnatural:' 'I would be forced on them,' Mary remonstrates with Helen. 'And the native girl who works for you? — How was she to speak to me?' she asks: 'Call me 'Miss' like you? Bring me tea?'¹⁰⁰ Therefore, even as Helen's intellectual horizons expand sufficiently to encompass the idea of the 'other' as a human being like herself, the difference between their cultures and skin colour cannot transcend either the friends' shared gender or their mutual love of learning. The tension evident in the Shaws' reluctance to accept Mary at any level is a reflection of the tension engendered by the apartheid system and thus the breakdown in the friendship between Helen and Mary not only becomes a metaphor for the deep fissures in South African society, it also points up the link between the domestic sphere and the wider political situation.

⁹⁹There is no sense of irony in the use of the term 'Bantu.' Although four hundred groups of Africans spoke a Bantu language, as the Black Consciousness movement began to use 'Black' or 'African', the former term became associated with apartheid as all-encompassing and pejorative. Helen explains 'African' as 'an acquired word, preferred by non-Europeans and liberals not only because it was a more accurate designation, but rather because it was as yet clean of the degrading contexts in which the other had been dyed more deeply than with colour [but] in the unselfconscious privacy of my thoughts I still used the old inherited word.' *TLD*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁰*TLD*, p. 203.

Helen leaves home in anger and frustration at her mother's inflexible attitude and comes to believe that her path to an autonomous self is to be found through living a free-spirited, libidinous life among the new bohemian friends that she meets in the city. This is not to say that Helen becomes promiscuous but merely that she enjoys expressing her new-found freedom openly, free from the repressive gaze of her parents and Atherton society. Moving in with Joel's friends, the Marcuses, Helen finds herself living with an unconventional liberal, but impoverished, socialist family. The Marcuses have a 'mixed' marriage; John is Jewish while Jenny is Protestant. The easy-going atmosphere in their small flat fascinates Helen, who, given the racism and repression in her own home, is amazed that Jenny openly breastfeeds her baby and that the difference in ethnicity is not a cause of tension between the couple. Nonetheless, as Kathrin Wagner points out, in *The Lying Days* we find the beginnings in Gordimer's fiction of a critique of the passivity, self-deception and egocentricity that the author attributes to white people who consider themselves to be liberals but where frequently an initial idealism is reduced to an obsession with trivialities which easily slides into a form of hypocrisy.¹⁰¹ For instance, John, who will not allow his wife to indulge her fetish for hats because 'only bourgeois women wear hats,' and who is affronted when Helen buys a pair of fashionable American shoes, has no problem enjoying the expensive food and alcohol that Helen supplies from her father's generous allowance and her part-time earnings.¹⁰² Moreover, when Helen finds Jenny surreptitiously trying on a pretty hat, she realizes that her new friend's anti-capitalist stance, like her husband's, is superficial. Her respect evaporates when the couple 'get on,' proving their ultimate complicity with

¹⁰¹Wagner, p. 15.

¹⁰²*TLD*, pp. 212-213.

apartheid by moving to a conventional bungalow in a suburb they had previously derided as being 'too bourgeois.' The Marcuses thus join the Aarons in becoming part of what Gordimer refers to as 'the great mass of white people who may not be active supporters of the policy of apartheid but who live in a kind of indifference ... who just want to see the status quo maintained.'¹⁰³ When Jenny abandons both her career and her token liberalism, Helen is appalled that this woman, whom she had thought to be the very antithesis of the Atherton housewives, the first woman she had ever known to retain an identity apart from her husband's, now merely apes John's opinions rather than voice her own. Jenny becomes the embodiment of all that Helen had hoped to escape and is now the stereotypical self-divided woman described by Gilbert and Gubar in their portrayals of nineteenth-century heroines. Jenny survives by suppressing her rage while 'preserving her radical views in suburban moth-balls.'¹⁰⁴ At the same time, Helen's disparaging observation proves to be ironic in view of her own continued dependence on her father and her eventual capitulation to Paul Clark's patriarchal demands upon her integrity.

Helen had been furious with Joel's suggestion that her future lay within the confines of a conventional marriage. Recalling Mary Turner's reaction to her domestic imprisonment, the idea of domesticity and motherhood terrifies Helen as 'a suction towards the life of the Mine, a horror of cosy atrophy beckoning.'¹⁰⁵ However, her previously scathing attack on the uniform way of life in Atherton will fall flat when she becomes aware that her new, supposedly liberal friends also live according to their own

¹⁰³Nadine Gordimer, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 29. Hereafter referred to as *Conversations* in the footnotes.

¹⁰⁴*TLD*, p. 314.

¹⁰⁵*TLD*, p. 242.

strict code. Helen herself now dresses in the bohemian 'peasant' style of these new friends until the day when, as she mocks the Atherton women's identical taste in fashion, she realizes that her own attire is also a uniform that any one of the Marcuses' friends might be wearing.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, having thought to escape her mother's confined life, Helen's incipient feminism will break down when she discovers that her rebellion against patriarchal mores is as futile as that of the miners she had witnessed as a child and that all she has achieved by moving to the city is a shift in location.¹⁰⁷

Helen meets and falls deeply in love with Paul at the Marcus's flat. Repelled by the excesses of imperial capitalism, Paul has rejected his wealthy background as heir to a feudal-type dynasty in Rhodesia. Because he can speak two African languages fluently, Paul has forged a career as a housing officer in the Department of Native Affairs, taking on the impossible task of providing living accommodation for twenty thousand families in an area where there are only eleven hundred housing units. Paul despairs at the lack of a housing policy for Africans. 'a whole population, the entire black-skinned population on whose labour the city rested, forced to live in slums because there was nowhere else for them to live.'¹⁰⁸ No new houses have been built for Africans for seventeen years, with the result that the housing section proves to be merely 'a piece of office machinery which, nightmarlike, existed to administer something which literally did not exist.'¹⁰⁹ Paul is well aware that his efforts are futile; he knows that in helping to reconcile the poor to their condition, to a 'two-pound-ten a month pension and a delightful hessian shelter,' he is helping to perpetuate a political system

¹⁰⁶*TLD*, pp. 306-307.

¹⁰⁷*TLD*, p. 240, 246, 285, 314.

¹⁰⁸*TLD*, p. 239.

¹⁰⁹*TLD*, p. 293.

that can allow the rapid construction of a new apartment block for Europeans while he must spend his time 'taking to this gigantic artificial pauperdom the palliative measures designed by sociologists for the small percentage of a city's poor.'¹¹⁰ Therefore, when he falls ill and Helen moves in with him, the narrative implies that in common with the hypochondriac Mr. Shaw and the white children at the Atherton swimming pool who suffer from ringworm, Paul's sickness reflects a sick society.¹¹¹

As Paul's position indicates, his liberal paternalism towards Africans is complicit with the politics of apartheid that helps to perpetuate the misery of black people. However his paternalism also allows for a different form of discrimination. Helen has lied to her parents about the sexual nature of their relationship but Paul dismisses her anxiety that her mother will be angry at the deception, assuming that Helen is liberated enough to be indifferent to such moral censure. However, the promise of an understanding and sexually fulfilling relationship falls apart when Helen becomes aware that the autonomy she had anticipated in leaving home is in danger of being thwarted by Paul's traditional views on gender roles: 'What's addling your little brain now?' he mocks when she encounters difficulty with an essay assignment. When he scolds her because his dinner is late — 'Hell, Helen, you're becoming a rotten wife. You might have put some food on,' he complains — Helen sees clearly that living with Paul has its drawbacks and that in effect she has now become the housewife she so despises in Jenny Marcus, 'cooking a man's breakfast and keeping my mouth shut.'¹¹² Still, since Paul fully expects her to put his interests before her own, Helen soon capitulates, abandoning her own university ambitions to type his doctoral thesis, a task that she had

¹¹⁰*TLD*, p. 239.

¹¹¹*TLD*, p. 89.

¹¹²*TLD*, pp. 240, 285, 314.

vehemently refused when it was first suggested to her. When she takes a mundane secretarial position to be close to him, her regressive transformation from a would-be sexually liberated 'new woman' to a traditional lifestyle is complete. Neither do Helen's parents object to her dropping out of college; in line with settler society's expectations, her mother believes it is a foregone conclusion that she will marry Paul and settle in 'a nice little home.'¹¹³ But by facilitating her withdrawal, between them her parents and Paul succeed in keeping Helen intellectually stunted, thus ensuring that, like Ludi, she too will fail to acquire the skills necessary to survive in a future black Africa.

IV

Helen's new friends had laughingly resisted entering a newspaper competition to predict the result of the forthcoming 1948 elections, believing that the result would be a foregone conclusion in favour of Jan Smuts's United Party.¹¹⁴ With the exception of Paul's friend Laurie, who flippantly (and correctly) suggests that the United Party is dead, everybody thinks it inconceivable that the fascist National Party under Malan should come to power: 'You can't tell me people have forgotten the way the Nats cheered the Germans on during the war,' one of them remarks.¹¹⁵ However, Helen wryly comments: 'Laurie was our prophet and not our clown.'¹¹⁶ As J.M. Coetzee bluntly reminds us: 'A party with Nazi sympathizers in high positions was elected to office in 1948 and set about a programme of racial legislation whose precursor if not model was

¹¹³*TLD*, p. 246.

¹¹⁴Jan Smuts, Prime Minister of South Africa 1919-1924 and 1939-1948. Although an advocate of apartheid, Smuts had tried to move away from the stricter elements of segregationist laws and had set up the Fagan Commission in 1946 to look into the system.

¹¹⁵*TLD*, p. 235. Daniel François Malan, Prime Minister of South Africa, 1948-1954.

¹¹⁶*TLD*, p. 255.

the legislation of Nazi Germany.’¹¹⁷ On June 1st 1948, Malan arrived in Pretoria to a tumultuous welcome: ‘In the past,’ he said, ‘we felt like strangers in our own country, but today South Africa belongs to us once more. For the first time since Union, South Africa is our own. May God grant that it always remains our own.’¹¹⁸

Helen’s friends wait anxiously for disaster to befall them, bracing themselves for the dire consequences of simply being in political opposition.¹¹⁹ However, their usual sense of complacency is restored when nothing untoward happens immediately and they come to the conclusion that there are to be no major changes to their lives. As Helen comments:

When the impact on individual, personal lives is not immediate and actual, political change does not affect the real happiness or unhappiness of people’s lives ... If the change of government throws you into a concentration camp, then your preoccupation with politics will equal that you might normally have had with your wife’s fidelity or your own health. But if your job is the same, your freedom of movement is the same, the outward appearance of your surroundings is the same, the heaviness lies only upon the extension of yourself which belongs to the world of abstract ideas, which, although it influences them through practical expression of moral convictions, loses, again and again, to the overwhelming tug of the warm and instinctual.¹²⁰

Thus Gordimer puts into the mouth of her protagonist her own scathing attack on ‘armchair’ liberals, those who, like the Marcuses, refused to acknowledge that their

¹¹⁷J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 137. For the apartheid blueprint see Hermann Giliomee, ‘The Making of the Apartheid Plan, 1929-1948’, *Journal of South African Studies*, 29. 2 (June, 2003), pp. 373-392. Under the new legislation, African people were stripped of their citizenship and were forcibly removed to areas called ‘homelands’, or ‘bantustans’. Led by the African National Congress (ANC), this system of institutionalized apartheid met with growing resistance. In 1949, the youth wing of the ANC took control of the organization and began to instigate a radical black nationalist programme, insisting that apartheid could only be overcome through concerted mass action. In 1950, a programme of civil disobedience began that included public meetings, strikes and boycotts. All protests were met with increasing brute force, the banning of opposition movements and the imprisonment of anti-apartheid leaders.

¹¹⁸Quoted in Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 186.

¹¹⁹TLD, p. 255.

¹²⁰TLD, p. 255.

material well-being depended on apartheid in practice and who stood by and did nothing while Malan put his malign policies into practice. Helen is appalled at the scope of the malevolence, but notices that although her friends speak gloomily about the worsening situation she 'did not see in anyone's face the anxious concentration of concern' that would accompany the illness of a child or the ending of a love affair.¹²¹

What we were going to get was something much slower, surer, and more terrible: an apparent sameness in the conduct of our lives, nothing more to hurt us than hard words in Parliament and talk of the Republic [and] a mounting number of weary battles — *apartheid* in public transport and buildings, the ban on mixed marriages, the Suppression of Communism bill, the language ordinance separating Afrikaans and English-speaking children in schools, the removal of coloured voters from the common electoral roll and the setting aside of the Supreme Court judgment that made this act illegal.¹²²

Since her friendship with Mary has ended, Helen can only learn about Black Africa vicariously, through her relationship with Paul, who tells her that the Africans themselves are almost indifferent to the insidious changes underway. As the narrating Helen explains:

The Africans had, of course, more to fear from the Nationalists than anybody. But they themselves felt that they had had so little to hope for under the Smuts Government that all the change had done was to substitute a negative despair for a positive one: lack of hope, for fear. The leaders said in the phrases leaders use, Now [*sic*] the velvet glove is off the iron hand, that's all ... in Parliament cabinet ministers spoke of them as 'Kaffirs.' There was continual official talk about the preservation of the 'purity of white races of South Africa' ... The Africans had always been kept outcast; now they began to feel it, to feel themselves outcast in their very features and voices. In their bewildered or hostile or mocking eyes, there was the self-search for the sores the white man saw upon them.¹²³

¹²¹ *TLD*, p. 255-256.

¹²² *TLD*, p. 255. Original emphasis.

¹²³ *TLD*, pp. 257-258.

It is only very slowly, Helen tells us, that 'the moral climate of guilt and fear and oppression chilled through to the bone, almost as if the real climate of the elements had changed, the sun had turned away from South Africa, bringing about actual personality changes that affected even the most intimate conduct of their lives.'¹²⁴

When Gordimer stated in 1974 that 'there is no country in the western world where the daily enactment of the law reflects politics as intimately and blatantly as in South Africa,' she indicated that the rigidly defined power relations structuring her society manifested themselves even in minor circumstances.¹²⁵ When the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act was introduced in 1949, 'there was something shameful in the manner in which the police hunted up their prosecutions ... prying and spying upon what has always been the right of the poorest man to sleep in peace with his woman.'¹²⁶ One old couple have been together so long and have been so far distanced from the white world that they have not even heard of the marriage ban; Paul's mixed race colleague is convinced that his European-looking wife will be on the list; pranksters climb up to bedroom windows, terrifying couples by shining torches in their faces.¹²⁷ When car headlights unintentionally light up their bedroom, Helen suddenly realizes that even white couples will now come under the watchful eye of the apartheid regime. She pulls away from Paul, remembering an embarrassing incident when on an outing with Joel she had found a used condom on her shoe. On that occasion, she and Joel had been able to avoid each other's expression of revulsion. The only difference between the two incidents, Helen recalls, 'was that this time, unlike the real time ... we were not safe

¹²⁴*TLD*, p. 256.

¹²⁵ Lars Engle, 'The Political Uncanny: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2, 2 (1989), pp. 101-27: 105, also quoted in Pearsall, p. 95.

¹²⁶*TLD*, p. 258; this Act was one of many known as 'petty' apartheid.

¹²⁷*TLD*, p. 259.

from disgust.¹²⁸ In other words, Helen now understands the relationship between colonial ideology and the domestic sphere, and that from now on her every move would be under scrutiny: there would be little in her private life that would not be subject to an imposed authority from outside.

Even though he is a 'do-gooder,' Paul feels his responsibilities keenly, spending his nights and weekends poring over books on the methods of passive resistance employed by Gandhi and Nehru. However, his well-meaning efforts on behalf of black South Africans prove to be hopelessly inadequate and his liberalism becomes impotent in the face of the regime's intransigence. Unable to reconcile his own position as a government official with his sympathy for the resistance movement, and at the same time unable to accommodate his ideas on peaceful methods of resistance with the growing radicalism of his black friends, Paul grows close to despair. As the pressures on him mount, his relationship with Helen falls apart. The couple perform perfunctory sex, in silence and too often in a 'tacitly ignored collusion of guilt,' a desperate form of escapism that pushes Helen to the point where she is filled with self-loathing.¹²⁹ At the height of their affair they had withdrawn from their friends to be together; now, in order to postpone the inevitable end of their relationship, they spend less and less time alone, until finally Helen tells Paul that they will never be married.¹³⁰

It does not profit Paul to straddle both sides of the divide. On the one hand, he uses his ingenuity to sidestep bureaucracy in order to provide housing and sports facilities in the township, but since Malan's government lists as communists all those who oppose its policies, his political activities on behalf of Africans represent a grave

¹²⁸*TLD*, p. 261.

¹²⁹*TLD*, p. 293.

¹³⁰*TLD*, p. 304.

betrayal on his part, so much so that his position as a government official becomes untenable and he is in grave danger of dismissal.¹³¹ On the other hand, with the growth of the Black Consciousness movement, Paul's previously good relationship with the local black leadership disintegrates. In a move that signals the growing militancy of African resistance, his friend Siphon no longer welcomes Paul's patriarchal concern. Siphon now boycotts the township meetings and instigates a larger boycott of some recently acquired sports facilities. He now shares Mary Seswayo's contempt for the liberal illusion that relationships of mutual respect might be possible between black and white — an illusion, as noted by Wagner, that is encoded in the superficial relationship between Mrs. Shaw and her servants.¹³² What Siphon and Mary want is equality under the law; they demand an African future, not a European past.

Helen escapes the tensions of Johannesburg by visiting her parents but she deliberately ruins the reunion by revealing that she is living with Paul and, as always, she takes a perverse joy in her mother's outraged reaction. When Helen attempts a reconciliation, an uneasy peace is established, but Mrs. Shaw refuses to discuss the altered circumstances of their relationship:

It had all been so easy in such a matter-of-fact, flaccid way ... My mother, who never had the strength to give in, could always evade. She did it this time by creating an atmosphere of convalescence in the house, she treated my father and me, and even herself, as if we were all recovering, shaken, from an illness we did not speak about.¹³³

As she returns to the city on Sunday, Helen is astonished to find that what she has unthinkingly supposed to be football fans' rosettes are, in fact, 'Freedom Day' badges:

¹³¹See Pearsall, p. 18.

¹³²Wagner, p. 53.

¹³³*TLD*, p. 305.

Tomorrow something might get up on its feet that was being fed for such a moment every day. Nobody knew what it would be like, what it could do; this thing to the Africans a splendid creature of their own power, to the white men a monster of terror.¹³⁴

Helen wonders if 'this will be the day when the patient hands will come down in blows, when our mouths will be stopped for the things we have not said.'¹³⁵ Such thoughts bring to mind Mary Turner's death at the hands of Moses. Yet, just as Mary had frozen when confronted by Moses's vengeance, Helen cannot rouse herself to action; she feels nothing, 'neither fear nor apprehension nor curiosity at the nearness of this threat,' and justifies her lack of interest by the fact that nothing happens on Monday. In her lethargy, she comes to the conclusion that her mother is perhaps right to treat her as she does: 'I *am* like an invalid' she feels, 'between the illness and the cure.'¹³⁶

However, incensed by an accumulation of 'petty' apartheid practices, on May Day 1950, violence spreads throughout South Africa. Accompanied by Helen, Paul's friend Laurie sets out for the township to warn Paul against being seen with Fanyana, a black radical activist whom the police have been keeping under surveillance. Laurie's concern is that Paul will be arrested as 'an inciter of an inciter.'¹³⁷ Reliving her earlier childhood excitement when she ventured into the African quarter, Helen is titillated as she approaches the black area. Once more enjoying 'something of the pleasurable illusion of adventure,' she is aroused by the spectacle of rioting, even more so when a rioter is shot dead by the police:

[The police] came like a tidal wave churning through the crowd
... There were more shots, shots ... the man with the stones

¹³⁴TLD, p. 312.

¹³⁵TLD, p. 312.

¹³⁶TLD, p. 317. Original emphasis.

¹³⁷TLD, p. 321.

looked up ... then he fell ... I knew I had never seen anyone fall like that before.¹³⁸

Helen gazes at the unfolding brutality in almost subliminal horror: 'I was overwhelmed by an emotion,' she remembers, 'every bursting blood-vessel pushed full with my life.'¹³⁹

Although Paul continues to work for the government while still helping the African nationalists, he is shaken by the riots and begins to question the hours spent studying passive resistance and the efficacy of his liberal ideals until finally, unable to forgive the violence, he abandons belief in both. Paul astutely anticipates that in 'this incipient revolutionary movement, as in all others, the wrong people would die, the wrong people would be blamed.'¹⁴⁰ The death of Siphon in the riots reinforces in Paul the stark reality that the poverty he has tried to ease is inextricably tied up with the entire ideology of apartheid and that he, as a government official, is complicit with this oppression. Yet, for all its horror, in the wake of the riots Paul makes light of Helen's experience, talking about the event as 'Helen's adventure at the barricades.'¹⁴¹ Helen is not allowed to tell her own story; her voice is appropriated by Laurie, who repeats the incident so often that Helen feels as if she had never been there at all.

¹³⁸*TLD*, p. 326.

¹³⁹*TLD*, p. 325.

¹⁴⁰*TLD*, p. 329. Gordimer grew increasingly radical and has in common with Fanon the belief that when all else fails, violence is permissible. She would recall her involvement in the Delmas Treason Trial of 1985-1988 as one of the proudest moments in her life. Under cross-examination, when asked if she supported the military wing of the ANC, Gordimer answered in the affirmative: 'I myself am against violence, but I can see that in the circumstances that have been brought about in South Africa, a time had to come when there would be a military wing in a mass movement like the African National Congress.' See Delmas Records, doc. MI: 28, 805 (Historical Papers Library, University of the Witwatersrand), quoted in Newman, p. 16. Gordimer's ambiguous treatment of violence as a valid means of forcing change lies at the heart of her ambivalence towards those people who, like Siphon and Paul, and however clumsily, risk their lives for their beliefs. See Wagner, p. 18.

¹⁴¹*TLD*, pp. 327-328.

Despite her newly-found sexual liberation and growing sense of autonomy, Helen is disappointed to find herself positioned within a conventional female role that cannot transcend the barriers of a highly structured and rigidly enforced patriarchal society. Within the dynamics of this impasse, Gordimer succeeds in connecting the politics and violence of apartheid not only to the everyday banality of evil, but by extension to the oppression of the black population and also to Helen's silenced status as a subjugated white woman. Helen's 'self' cannot survive the confrontation with the reality of South Africa that she has held suspended in her subconscious since her first childhood visit to the concession stores, and here Gordimer points up the impossibility of her making the transition from a youthful sense of powerlessness and fear to an adult control of her world under apartheid. There are no irrational mad women in *The Lying Days* as described by Gilbert and Gubar and such as we find in Godden's and Lessing's texts. But Helen's rage at her powerlessness, which she represses in further silences, is just as painfully depicted as either Sister Ruth's or Mary Turner's. Unable to cope with the knowledge that she will always be subject to the conventions of apartheid society, Helen takes to her bed, her lethargy recalling the exhaustion of empire that is mirrored not only in Francie Montmorency's inertia, but also in Charles Pool's 'tired, naked eyes' and Mary Turner's fatal catatonic state. Helen describes her psychological withdrawal as the instinctively primal response of many other women who throughout the ages have reacted to situations beyond their control by keeping quite still and scarcely breathing, in an atavism that she attributes to her female lineage:

From somewhere a long way back, from the blood which ran narrowly and which I hated because it had survived and always would survive by so doing, by draining off the real torrents which bear along human lives into neat ditches of domestic and social habit — from this blood came the instinct to go quiet; shut

off the terrible expenditure of my main response; take, trancelike, into the daily performance of commonplace the bewilderment, the failure. Because this blood was not all of me, but only a kind of instinctive female atavism, this does not mean that I was resigned, that I accepted. Only that my hands took over the command of themselves, taking into the action of pressing peas out of a pod, or moving a pawn on the chessboard ... the fears, like an invasion of strangers, which now, never left me.¹⁴²

In a moment of epiphany, Helen finally realizes that in order to be really free in every sense of the word, she must cease being a passive party to the oppression of others. She also comes to understand that her life with Paul is not enough to sustain her and that only by acknowledging her complicity in the power process can she fully become her self. As she will later tell Joel:

In a way, it seems right that one shouldn't be happy in South Africa ... although you may come to a compromise with your own personal life, you can't compromise about the larger things ringed outside it. It's like ... having a picnic in a beautiful graveyard where the people are buried alive under your feet.¹⁴³

Helen is at last forced to recognize the impossibility of maintaining her integrity in the fractured society that is South Africa; the only answer, she feels, is to free herself from the oppressive gaze of apartheid, even though this involves leaving Paul and going to Europe.¹⁴⁴ As Gordimer will later put it: 'The liberal attitude has become meaningless. We have to accept that we cannot live decently in a rotten society.'¹⁴⁵

¹⁴²*TLD*, p. 296.

¹⁴³*TLD*, p. 358.

¹⁴⁴*TLD*, p. 333.

¹⁴⁵*Conversations*, p. 12.

Before she embarks, Helen meets up with Joel in Durban. His declaration of love for her brings home to Helen the irony that it is Joel, not Paul or her parents, who truly understands her, both her new-found idealism and her repressed Atherton 'self.' Helen realizes that in Joel is 'embodied all that I should put my arms about in leave-taking.'¹⁴⁶ However, any suggestion that a union between the couple might have resulted in a step forward in race relations is belied by their awareness that a sexual relationship between them was bound to be stunted, for as Joel points out:

The difference of nationality — between us — as it existed in the minds and emotions of our parents ... was a kind of unconscious taboo. Friendship was all right, it took place in the mind ... but touch, an embrace between you and me — emotional contact reaches back into the family It's very old, very deep, very senseless; and harder than you think to overcome.¹⁴⁷

Even as she leaves South Africa, Helen finds herself unable to break through the barrier of ethnic differences. As she bids Joel farewell, she abandons their friendship with the same sense of finality with which she had abandoned Mary Seswayo. Furthermore, Helen displays an equal disdain for his family as she had shown towards her own: 'Money is their civilization,' she tells him scornfully.¹⁴⁸

Helen does not identify herself as the author of her own story until she reveals that on their last night together, 'I talked to him [Joel] as I have never talked to any living being: as I have talked to this pen and this paper.'¹⁴⁹ Yet, even as she takes responsibility for her own narrative, and even though she has acquired many new

¹⁴⁶*TLD*, p. 360.

¹⁴⁷*TLD*, p. 360.

¹⁴⁸*TLD*, p. 352.

¹⁴⁹*TLD*, p. 357.

values, Helen's inability to truly 'see' herself ensures that she has not imbibed any of the tolerance advocated by Joel, who is leaving to fight for Israel in the Arab-Israeli War (1948-1949). It is yet another of Gordimer's subtle ironies that Joel, who has inspired Helen with his liberal values, and who is on the point of leaving behind him a colonial formation in which his ethnicity marks him out as inferior, will now become part of an army and a state whose overriding mission is the colonization of other ethnic peoples.

Robert Green reads *The Lying Days* as a novel that recalls Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. Green feels that Helen's choice of exile as freedom, together with her awareness that she can never escape her colonial background, recalls Stephen Dedalus's decision to 'go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.'¹⁵⁰ Yet, unlike the more positive endings of these novels, Green also sees Helen's flight as an act of abandonment, resignation and defeat, the quitting of a land that offers no foothold.¹⁵¹ Helen believes that she can only express her disgust at the political system by leaving, but in effect, her defection is a silent protest that achieves nothing. Gordimer's reason for not becoming a radical activist herself — 'I don't have the courage — still don't — to be a complete revolutionary ... to face the possibility of jail for life' — belies the stubborn bravery that made her remain in South Africa, despite the personal danger.

The narrative leaves open the question of whether Helen's departure heralds an ending or a new beginning for her. As Rita Felski comments: 'Self-knowledge creates a

¹⁵⁰Quoted in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland, eds. (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 1983), p. 7.

¹⁵¹Robert Green, 'From *The Lying Days* to *July's People*: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer', *Journal of Modern Literature* 14.4. (Spring, 1988), pp. 543-563: 546.

new basis for future negotiation between self and society, the outcome of which is projected beyond the bounds of the text.’¹⁵² Therefore, the question of how Helen will sustain her new sense of ‘self’ in the outside world is not answered in the novel, but in deferring it Gordimer at least allows Helen the scope to explore the question of her identity and the problems inherent in her status within apartheid. If only in the short term, she can achieve this in a free space beyond immediate political and social constraints; her search for an autonomous self can no longer be adequately examined with reference solely to a monolithic, oppressive social sphere that demands the polarities of either total conformism or destruction of the individual such as we have seen in Lessing’s *Mary Turner*.¹⁵³

In my reading, *The Lying Days* is a novel about the defeat of liberalism and the impossibility of living successfully in a society so riven by divisions that it becomes almost impossible to sustain a relationship with people on the other side of the ‘colour bar.’ This absolute breakdown in interaction between the colonizers and the colonized is indicated by the instability of the landscape, and is reinforced by the futility of any attempt at reconciliation while the power structure of colonialism remains intact. In *The Lying Days*, this breakdown is portrayed even more strongly since it is located within the political strictures of South Africa’s apartheid system. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I read the politics of liberalism within the framework of a female *bildungsroman*. The narrative demonstrates that personal growth cannot be attained when one is oppressively aware of the day-to-day realities of a totalitarian society and its functioning even within the routine activities of the domestic sphere. Within this

¹⁵²Rita Felski, ‘The Novel of Self-Discovery: A Necessary Fiction?’ *Southern Review*, 19. 2 (July, 1986), pp. 131-148: 136.

¹⁵³See Felski, p. 136.

context, Helen's inability to break out of the gender impasse is indicative of a failure to address the patriarchal and political power structures that cause fissures not only in the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized but even within white society itself. Therefore, if we read *The Lying Days* in terms of Bakhtin's idea of 'becoming', then Helen's journey must be viewed as a thwarted or delayed *bildung*. Still, the hope remains that as she leaves South Africa a wider worldview will enable Helen to forge a new identity for herself, and that during this process of 'becoming' she will finally purge herself of her racist prejudices, and return to a renewed country with a more open mind and a broader understanding of the meaning of true liberalism. Thus *The Lying Days* points to a more hopeful future for Helen than the bleak endings of *The Last September* and *The Grass is Singing*, or the more cautious endings of *Black Narcissus* and *Breakfast with the Nikolides* would allow for their female characters. Moreover, on the eve of her departure, Helen's hope that she will have something positive to return to in the future can be achieved if, as Gordimer advises the settlers who wish to remain in South Africa, she does so as an invited guest; as an immigrant to a new country. Helen must forget the colonial impulse to leadership and the handing out of paternalistic advice as she had attempted to do with Mary Seswayo, even if her advice is well-intentioned and backed by the experience and culture of western civilizations.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ In 1988, Gordimer wrote: 'Africa is going through a stage when it passionately prefers its own mistakes to successes (or mistakes) that are not its own.' *EG*, pp. 34-35.

CONCLUSION

As the title indicates, this thesis offers a comparative study of an important body of fiction written by women who were deeply immersed in their respective colonial formations, and who offer us a heightened sense of the anxieties inherent in a contracting and eventually collapsing British Empire. The novels that I have examined represent only a small cross-section of what is a much larger and immensely interesting, though still relatively neglected, archive of writings by women who lived in various outposts of the British Empire as that entity was slowly dismantled across the twentieth century. In each of the texts studied here, the sense of an ending of an empire that had once seemed majestic and invulnerable to native resistance weighs heavily. Thus, the novels in question are not written in the adventure or romantic modes of earlier nineteenth-century colonial fiction that had served to justify the imperialist project at a time when the British Empire could still command a sense of confidence and authority. Instead, these works convey an oppressive sense of terminal crisis and sometimes of near-apocalyptic doom. Telling the stories of female protagonists who struggle to sustain the imperial mission against the historical odds, or who struggle to extricate themselves from worlds that are already in the process of collapse, these novels are all studies in a dying colonialism as viewed from a woman's perspective.

As the various chapters of my study have shown, it would be easy to dismiss many of the novels in question as both politically and aesthetically conservative; the texts are largely, though not exclusively, written in relatively traditional realist modes and the perspective that they offer on the world is mainly an elite one. In other words, the narratives of Elizabeth Bowen, Rumer Godden, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer are largely concerned with the fates of the white elites in the various outposts

of empire and not with the new anti-imperial worlds emerging out of the ruins of that empire or out of the collapse of its various offshoots. As noted in the dissertation, the nationalist resistances to empire in Ireland, India or Africa rarely impinge in very direct ways in these novels. For the most part when reading them, the reader detects such resistances only out of the corner of the eye, somewhere in the margins of the narratives, with the focus always remaining on the colonizers' world and their exclusive consciousness. Thus the texts are not so much concerned with the encounter between colonizers and colonized, but with the dynamics operating among members of the colonizing group. Only in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* do we find any attempt to explore the psyche of the indigenous characters; even the significant township riot featured in *The Lying Days* is focalized through the consciousness of Helen Shaw, with the narrative emphasis resting on her narcissistic reaction to events, rather than on the fate of the rioters.

Nevertheless, while my study has acknowledged the conservative dimensions of this body of writing, I have attended too to the ways in which these women's narratives also expose the growing stresses and strains in the dominant worldview of the colonial societies. The thesis has shown that whereas the discourse of empire creates the myth that the colonial status quo is part of the natural order, the sense of instability in the novels reveals the faultlines of empire across vastly differing regions. Taking my cues from Gilbert and Gubar's classic study *The Madwoman in the Attic* and from various forms of postcolonial critical theory, I have argued that if we peel back the dominant narrative layers of the texts we can sometimes see more radical or subversive narratives underneath — narratives in which the women protagonists struggle against the

norms of their colonial worlds in an attempt to reach out beyond the narrow enclosures of the dominant society. It is my contention that we can trace the ambiguities of these novels to the social complexities of the female position in the late colonial moment. In one way, the collapse of the old colonial order threatens all colonial subjects, male and female alike, since that breakdown threatens to strip them of everything they once knew, and indeed, to expose them to all sorts of material and psychological dangers. However, since women were always a dominated section within the dominant order, the passing of the old world can offer them certain kinds of release as well; this demise can therefore be both terrifying and in some respects welcome at the same time.

Among the issues raised in the thesis is the manner in which gender, race and ethnic divisions influenced the role of European women in the colonies, how women writers in a male-centred colonial system both challenged and reinforced the power relationship between ruler and ruled, and how women negotiated living within the framework of colonialism itself. Therefore, I have examined the manner in which the authors deal with these contemporary ideological issues, while the method of close reading involved has uncovered the particular discursive features of the individual texts within the context of their respective social and political backgrounds. Another aim of the study has been to identify the note of authorial resistance conveyed in the texts and to juxtapose this with intimations of political resistance by colonized peoples. Teasing out the different textual strands and placing them alongside the narrative of a dying colonialism has allowed for an exploration of the tension between the dominant ideology's hitherto unwavering belief in the validity of a civilizing mission and the authors' increasingly faltering confidence in that mission. By identifying the common

themes that underlie their narratives and uncovering their latent content, the study has demonstrated that the authors I have considered provide access to colonial discourses and practices that subjected almost the entire globe to the will of a minority group of administrators and settlers. The comparative approach adopted here attempts to be sensitive to the specific circumstances of women within various outposts of the British Empire and not to offer some uniform version of late colonial women's experience. To this end, I have focused on the struggles of colonial women who are members of the ruling class, yet who are also precariously positioned as inferior within the structure of colonial ideology. I have demonstrated that even when we allow for substantive regional, cultural and other differences, these novels do have important elements in common, and that they can therefore mutually illuminate each other in useful ways.

In the course of my analysis, I examine the focus placed on the main protagonists' consciousness and the manner in which each author employs the form of the *bildungsroman* to explore the sense of alienation experienced by their female characters on their journey towards self-awareness. The inability of the female characters in the novels to master their own world could have a liberating effect insofar as these protagonists must now face new challenges. My readings show how the metaphor of the psychological journey provides an appropriate structure for the protagonists' growing awareness of the nature of their respective worlds and the contradictions within these worlds.

In the first chapter, I explored the Anglo-Irish world of *The Last September* through Elizabeth Bowen's portrayal of an empire living with the spectre of its own ruin. In this novel, Lois Farquar's hesitant transgressions as she attempts to come to

terms with a world outside her lived experience are echoed in the surfacing consciousness of the protagonists in each of the subsequent texts I explore. The irony for Lois, as it is for the characters of the other novels, is that despite the measure of self-awareness achieved, she nonetheless faces an uncertain future and the consequent loss of the secure identity she had previously possessed as a member of a privileged Ascendancy that felt itself to be part of a mighty empire. I have shown how Bowen portrayed this sense of insecurity through gothic images of metamorphosed houses and landscapes, and the ruinous conflagration that brought colonialism in Ireland to its eventual conclusion. Written nearly a decade after Irish independence had already been achieved, *The Last September* anticipates many of the key features and themes that will later mark the novels of Godden, Lessing and Gordimer. The crux of the novel is that Lois must struggle to define herself or even to find herself in a world that offers no firm footing, one in which all the familiar landmarks of ancestry and tradition are doomed to obliteration. In Bowen's story of Anglo-Ireland, the imperial centre can no longer hold and her novel offers a grimly humorous account of how the Ascendancy class struggles either to avert its eyes from such knowledge or to confront new realities in sometimes steely ways. The difficulty of finding oneself in a hostile world in which everything familiar is fast disappearing is one that the female protagonists of each novel will also have to confront. Therefore, in a similar vein to the other chapters, I explored this novel's complex sexual and gender thematics through Freud's study of human psychology, in particular through his examination of repression and the unconscious.

Chapter Two examined instances of tension in Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus* by focusing on its portrayal of a group of Anglican nuns who failed miserably

in their mission to bring enlightenment to the ‘uncivilized’ Orient. Part of this failure is attributed by Godden to the inability of the nuns to cope with their resurfacing strong sexuality, the repression of which exacted a heavy psychological toll on them. As their story is told in this narrative, the Himalayan Mountains exerted such a debilitating effect on the Western characters that the nuns’ mission was bound to fail. Because the remote world that they would transform is so vividly evoked and plays such a prominent role in the narrative, the thesis has shown how the dramatic depiction of the landscape in *Black Narcissus* functions to call the entire imperial project into question. In the end, just as Lois is shuffled off to France by the Naylor, so too must Sister Clodagh of *Black Narcissus* face the unknown. Clodagh, who had abandoned Ireland and a traditional family in favour of a sisterhood of nuns, may have achieved a measure of self-awareness in the Himalayas, but as she abandons the people of Mopu her sense of psychic liberation belies the fact that she too fails to achieve personal autonomy. For Clodagh cannot truly renew herself: she must remain under the authoritative gaze not only of her church and her religious Order, but also of the empire itself.

My third chapter on Godden’s *Breakfast with the Nikolides* also examined the endgame of colonialism in India and the dilemma faced by the colonizers as they were forced to relinquish power to their formerly colonized subjects. This novel, I argued, deals with the struggle of a young white girl to find her way in a European world shattered by war and in an India on the threshold of independence. At the conclusion of *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, the self-deluded Pool family, who believe they are essential to the future of India, will also face exile and an uncertain future.

In her portrayal of Emily Pool, Godden also examines the personal freedom of her young protagonist to form relationships across what Lessing terms 'the colour bar.' The tragedy for the young Emily is that even on the eve of Indian Independence her parents have failed to curtail her incipient racism. Consequently, Emily fails to complete the journey towards self-awareness that she had explored in her encounters with Anil and is in great danger of emulating her mother's internalized colonial ideology, thereby ensuring that, as also proves to be the case in Lessing's novel, the opportunity for a new rapport between colonizers and colonized is lost. Furthermore, the Pools' negligence in this matter ensures that Emily fails to acquire the psychological tools necessary to negotiate a postcolonial world. In this respect, the thesis has also stressed that Godden looks beyond white society to highlight the quest of India's indigenous population to rediscover a viable Indian cultural identity following a history of cultural mimicry of British models and mores.

The next chapter explored the tense situation in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* as a microcosm of the prevailing political situation in Southern Rhodesia at a time when people on both sides of the political divide were beginning to question the legitimacy of colonial rule in Africa. I explored this novel as an attempt to find some sort of resolution for the deep social and political tensions in post-war Southern Rhodesia. Godden's Louise Pool and Lessing's Mary Turner may not appear to have much in common, but this chapter highlighted the plight of Mary, a deeply troubled female colonizer who, like Louise, found it difficult to fit into settler expectations of what a white woman's role in the colonies should be. There is no escape route open to Mary, whose great hope of a happy-ever-after life on her husband's farm failed to live up to her expectations.

Colonial ideology demanded that settler women regulated their sexualities in the name of empire and any expression of sexual autonomy that did not fit this pattern was not tolerated. Mary refused to obey this fundamental dictum and so faced the ultimate punishment. Her desire for self-determination and her forbidden relationship with Moses proved to be too strong a challenge to the colonial system, whose code of behaviour proved to be too formidable and too deeply embedded in the settlers' psyche for her to survive her transgressive behaviour. Therefore, Mary was sacrificed in the interest of what was, in colonial terms, the common good.

In Gordimer's *The Lying Days*, Helen Shaw's destiny is perhaps more hopeful. Helen's story highlights her creator's belief that personal autonomy cannot be achieved within the double bind of familial ties and a rigidly patriarchal and white supremacist society. This final chapter focused on the struggle of the female protagonist who, on the brink of choosing her own future, had to struggle to free herself from the prevailing ideology of apartheid South Africa by simply walking away. Unlike the fate of the protagonists described above, Helen's defection from South Africa is a deliberate choice, a tentative exploration of the meaning of personal freedom and of articulating this as a right, an option that was not available to the indigenous population however. Yet the thesis has shown that although she gains her freedom in a manner that Mary Turner could never achieve, as she leaves South Africa Helen's acknowledgement of the obstacles to a union posed by the ethnic differences between her and Joel proves that she has not yet fully overcome her internalized colonial ideology. Furthermore, as narrator of her own story, the intense subjectivity she has displayed throughout the novel leaves Helen's perspective too unbalanced for the reader to be confident that she has resolved

these contradictions. Hence my stress on the political and ideological tensions and strains in this and in the other novels, which are often ambiguous in their combination of both conservative and transgressive narratives that are welded together in complex and sometimes unresolved ways.

The Lying Days also offers a rigorous critique of middle-class liberalism as a response to the challenges of late colonialism. This is the most overtly political novel I have studied and its distinction lies in the fact that it brings to the fore many of the ideological tensions that the other novels either repress in the end or else manage in ways that are more circumspect. Most importantly, *The Lying Days* demonstrates how the hierarchical structure that governs the mining town of Atherton is a microcosm of the wider world of apartheid. In a similar vein to Lassner, my study has revealed how the division of society based on race made life for the indigenous population of South Africa not too far removed from that endured in the Nazi concentration camps of World War Two.

The dissertation has also highlighted Gordimer's awareness that the road taken by South Africa's Nationalist Party was, inevitably, 'doom ridden.' In this respect, South Africa may well have been the first country to break with the British Empire, but as I have noted, the country remained colonized until it finally gained independence from white rule in 1994. The sense of crisis engendered by this state of affairs is well portrayed in *The Lying Days*. It is evidenced in the State's need for repressive laws to retain control, and is present in the narrator's references to various miners' strikes and township rebellions. It is apparent too in the imagery of a defiled and contaminated landscape, which recalls the poisoned land portrayed in *Breakfast with the Nikolides* or

the Rhodesian landscape that is brutalized by Slatter in *The Grass is Singing*. In *The Conservationist* (1974), Gordimer will also foretell the end of empire in the gothic imagery of the black man's body reclaiming his right to the land on behalf of the African people, while in *July's People* (1981), the total revolution hinted at in *The Lying Days* has come to pass.

As an important part of an archive of colonial settler women's writing that has not yet been fully recovered, this study provides a way of reading the chosen texts that makes explicit their authors' questioning of colonial ideological perspectives. Thus, I have argued, far from offering unambiguous endorsements of imperial ideology, the early fictions of Bowen, Godden, Lessing and Gordimer are telling commentaries on the price to be paid, materially and psychologically, by those colonialists who found themselves living with the spectre of a new order in the face of growing calls for freedom by nationalist activists. However, in situating the texts within the framework of an empire in crisis, I do not make a case for any inherent or intentional radicalism on the part of their authors in their early writing careers, but my study provides a way of reading their early texts that makes explicit the political potential of the writers' explorations of life in the context of twentieth-century colonialism and so leaves no doubt as to their place within the canon of end-of-empire fiction.

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