



INDO- BRITISH ENCOUNTER AS THE DOMINANT THEME IN RUMER GODDEN' S BLACK NARCISSUS, BREAKFAST WITH NIKOLIDES, AND KINGFISHER CATCH FIRE

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ABSTRACT

In this article dominant theme, in Rumer Godden's novels have floated in and out of fashion. The research in the article focus on the huge contribution of Rumer Godden's Black Narcissus, yet whatever tidal shifts have affected tastes in fiction, these distinctive, poised and unsentimental books have never lost a shred of their almost hypnotic appeal. The three early novels, Black Narcissus (1939), Breakfast with the Nikolides (1942) and Kingfishers Catch Fire (1953), along with The River (1946), reflect the themes and settings that are central to her works. Godden was a writer who constantly drew on her own life experiences, frugally mixing and recasting the elements to give them fresh significance, but always relating her work back to the people, places, human passions and frailties that she knew and understood best. Here, the place is northern India, the people are the pre-partition British and the Indians they governed, and the themes are sexual desire, treachery, and the conflict of cultures and the loss of innocence.

KEY WORDS: Rumer Godden's Black Narcissus, hypnotic Appeal, pre-partition British, theme.

Introduction

Margaret Rumer Godden was born in England in 1907, but while still a baby she was taken by her mother to rejoin her father in Assam. The Godden parents soon sent Rumer and her elder sister, Jon "home" again to boarding school, as did most of their contemporaries, but the first world war intervened and the girls happily returned to live with their parents and two younger sisters at Narayanganj, a small town on a tributary of the Brahmaputra river in East Bengal where their father was the manager of a steamship company.

Their eventful childhood in the big house on the riverbank, with its large garden, complex hierarchy of family servants, and with the town's hectic bazaar on their doorstep, was close to idyllic for all the Godden children, and they looked back on it with yearning. But even so, Rumer sensed that she did not quite belong – that necessary credential for a writer in the making. All her life she believed Jon to be the more talented writer, and she knew that she was the plainest of the four sisters.

At Narayanganj she was an outsider to the life of India and Indians that she observed with such clear-eyed fascination, and when in her adult years she chose to live elsewhere in India she did so mostly outside the narrow boundaries observed by British residents. In England she was set apart too, as much by her exotic upbringing and her struggle to bring up her two daughters after a difficult divorce from her "boxwallah" husband (the boxwallahs were travelling pedlar merchants who carried their wares in boxes), as by her beady cleverness and intense involvement in her work. The expression of exile from physical place and from the ease of conventional society is ever present in her books.

Black Narcissus is the story of a small group of idealistic English nuns who travel to set up a convent school community at Mopu, in the mountains to the north of Darjeeling. As in her other novels, the setting is described with sensuous but precise exactitude – a neglected palace with a scandalous history in a landscape of butterflies, blossom, forests and snowy peaks. The sisters' intentions are of the best, but, as the local agent of empire, the whisky-swilling Mr. Dean, predicts, their mission is a failure. The nuns' blithe confidence in their power to do well is undermined by the complexity of local conditions; they fail to understand or even investigate the rules that govern the people and they are correspondingly unbending in their own beliefs and traditions. Everyone they try to draw into their Christian sphere is more knowing, more corrupt, and better at calculating the odds than they are, from Mr. Dean and the young Indian prince Ling General Dilip Rai to the young student Kanchi.

Sister Clodagh, the leader of the mission, is authoritative and cool, but within she is troubled and questioning of her own capabilities. Clodagh's antithesis is Mr. Dean, a dissolute man who is nevertheless able to summon compassion and strength when these are required.

For all its convent setting, the novel thrums with sex, portrayed with a subtlety that seems only to intensify its power. The story is simple, but the narrative takes an unshakeable hold, building to a climax involving sexual obsession, insanity and tragic death, which, despite the gothic elements, is handled with masterful restraint. The final image of a lonely grave which the villagers will not pass by for fear of the bhūt, or spirit, that haunts it, is one that Godden took from a real burial place.

Breakfast with the Nikolides and Kingfishers Catch Fire both feature a young girl who is obliged by events to recognize and absorb into herself the consequences of adult shortcomings. Such children are recurrent figures in Godden's work; they are vulnerable, observant individuals who are deficient in charm but gifted with perception beyond their years. As the child Emily declares to Louise in Breakfast with the Nikolides, "I see you, Mother. I cannot help it."

Both Emily in Breakfast and Teresa in Kingfishers Catch Fire contain aspects of their creator as well as of her two daughters, but the writer and her experiences are most clearly discernible in their vivid, disconcerting mothers. Louise and Sophie, in their respective narratives, draw and hold the reader's attention like flames leaping in the dark.

The setting of Breakfast with the Nikolides is closely based on Narayanganj, with the bazaar lying "like a patch of plague" against its walls. The atmosphere is heavy with the unspoken; Emily's queasy stomach is an emblem of the churning beneath the sunny surfaces of the family house and gardens. The girl is caught in the sticky threads of her parents' passionate but unhappy marriage; there is further sexual tension close at hand between a young student, an Indian vet, and the vet's uneducated wife. Social and marital relationships are fragile, but they hold up until an incident with Emily's pet dog triggers the cataclysm.

Louise, Emily's mother, is imprisoned by her circumstances. She hates India – the squalor and brutality of the bazaar – but she is as trapped in the country as she is in her marriage. Her treatment of the family dog is an act of blazing revenge and repudiation of both. Godden adored her pet Pekinese, and dogs recur through the books – as does the perpetual threat in India of rabies.

Kingfisher's Catch Fire is the most autobiographical of the trio of books. The setting is Srinagar in Kashmir, where Godden lived with her daughters on far too little money after separating from her husband. Sophie Barrington-Ward is a widow, left in poverty after the death of her handsome but inept husband.

Full of headstrong enthusiasm and naive idealism, she takes a house in a remote village on the lake. Here she and her daughter and infant son live on next to nothing, exactly like their peasant neighbours. "We shall be poor and simple too," she said with shining eyes. "Peasants are simple and honest and kindly and quiet." Teresa bears witness to these declarations with a pucker of apprehension showing between her brows. She is a priggish child but, like Emily, she cannot help seeing her mother.

As with the nuns at Mopu, Sophie at Dilkush never stops to consider what she represents to the people who live at her gate. She believes she is poor, but to these villagers she is rich and profligate, and ripe for the cheating. Sophie does everything in her power to make the venture a success, but, between the harsh weather of the mountains and the cruel poverty of the village, her peasant idyll never becomes real. Everyone cheats her except the noble Nabir Dar, the caretaker of the house, and she does not appreciate his worth until it is too late.

Discord begins between the two tribes of the village, on Sophie's account. The family suffers, but Sophie clings on, willfully blind to the truth, until she is no longer able to discern the danger she and her children are in. From a languorous start steeped in the luscious beauty of the Kashmiri scenery, the narrative gathers pace

and pitches towards its climax: all of Sophie's illusions dissolve in a miasma of threat, sickness and confusion, while thanks to her neglect, Teresa is put in jeopardy.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the article has an absence of sentimentality that is almost forensic. Rumer Godden's novels are endless in its nature, the shocking events are explained and the ending provides a full stop – though even that has its tensions. *Black Narcissus* achieved acclaim for its pioneering technical mastery, with the cinematographer Jack Cardiff, shooting in vibrant colour, winning an Academy Award for Best Cinematography and a Golden Globe Award for Best Cinematography, and Alfred Junge winning an Academy Award for Best Art Direction. Rumer Godden underwent the same ordeal as Sophie Barrington-Ward, but the reality of the matter was less clear-cut.

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