How does the colonial approach to reading create meaning in the *Black Narcissus* extract?

This extract from *Black Narcissus* occurs early in the film, showing the locals’ first visit to the Convent to receive education and medical care. While this should show the nuns to be beneficial to Mopu, they seem largely unprepared for the challenge and thus incompetent as agents of the British Empire. Rather than showing the strength and power of imperialism, this extract highlights the flaws in the newly established St. Faith’s and thus serves as a critique of colonialism by foreshadowing the failure of the Convent.

Arguably the most obvious failure of St. Faith’s opening in the extract is that the nuns seem incapable of helping all the natives who have arrived at the palace. This is made explicit by Ruth’s dialogue as she reiterates that the nuns have nothing unpacked, there are too many locals compared to the nuns and they simply cannot understand their foreign language. Due to Ruth’s erratically shrill enunciation (perhaps foreshadowing her mental instability) and the use of a canted shot (see Figure 1), one could argue that Powell and Pressburger are attempting to highlight the disarray the nuns are feeling by increasing the tension and immediacy of their problem, suggesting that the nuns’ first endeavour in Mopu is already a failure. Supporting my view, Priya Jaikumar writes that imperial fiction uses ‘militant male officers […] in a pliant colony […] to emphasise the validity of the imperial mission [whereas] female missionaries in a resistant land are the subjects [of] imperial vulnerability’.1 She supports her view by stating that the only reason the locals are seeking aid from the nuns is a bribery from a masculine figure: the General.2 Her view is certainly a strong one as the full narrative seems to reinforce the view that a male figure (the General or Mr. Dean) is needed for Clodagh’s mission to possibly succeed.

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2 Jaikumar, p.63.
However, this idea could also link to the view that the British cannot control Mopu on their own as they must have a character associated with the East, at least tangentially, to help them. Either way, the nuns’ mission is portrayed as unlikely to succeed quite early in the narrative as their goals are unobtainable without help and the nuns themselves seem to lack the qualifications to make a positive difference. By showing weakness rather than strength, Powell and Pressburger seem to be foreboding the failure of Clodagh’s mission rather than praising it, offering a strong critique to imperialistic ideals.

![Image of Sister Honey](image)

**Figure 1: Canted shot of Ruth voicing her concerns regarding the natives in *Black Narcissus.***

In fact, the only nun to interact with the ailed villagers during the extract is Sister Honey who does nothing more than make a theatrical gesture, using powder to turn clear water violet. This action seems trivial and inconsequential, however, as the locals fail to get the water after her display, proving that it has no actual medical value. The *mise-en-scene* adds to the absurdity of Honey’s show as she is performing this event in front of two painted eroticized females, clearly a remnant from the old ‘house of women’ that makes a return later in the film during Clodagh and Ruth’s conflict regarding the latter’s resignation from the order. Despite the strong visual juxtaposition between the nun and a painted prostitute, it seems that Powell and Pressburger are
drawing a parallel between the previous residents performing sexual acts to please the locals and Sister Honey performing illusionary tricks to appease the crowd. Indeed, Ian Christie has argued that the failures of the nuns later in the film are equally due to their own psychological conflicts and the metaphoric ‘ghosts of the windswept Palace of Mopu’.\(^3\) As this extract occurs so early in the film it seems unlikely that the nuns are already being influenced by their environment, yet Christie’s argument certainly links the nuns’ actions to the previous women’s clearly sexualized and libertine behavior. While Honey’s chemical trick can hardly be described as sexual, her satisfied smile and the way the locales desperately reach for the water held above their head (see Figure 2) certainly suggests a condescending performance rather than the giving of medical aid that the natives actually need. By drawing distinct parallels between a nun’s actions and the role of prostitutes, one could argue that Powell and Pressburger are using absurdity to mock the nuns by showing their attempt at aid to be comically trivial. Rather than the Empire’s interactions to the colony being portrayed as necessary or in any way beneficial, Sister Honey’s actions may actually serve as a critique to the imperial mission – especially as the locals are bribed to attend in the first place.

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Figure 2: Sister Honey entertaining the natives while standing in front of an erotic mural in *Black Narcissus*.

It is worth noting that the extract does not only show the missionaries attempts to help the locals as it also shows their desires to mould Mopu into a better convent, shown mainly through Sister Briony’s criticism towards the garden. Linking this to a colonial approach, Jaikumar writes that ‘the garden […] is a significant symbol in imperial cinema [because it can represent] the colony (as unkempt wilderness) or […] civilisation (as a tended field)’.[^4] Supporting this, Sister Briony’s comment that ‘the whole garden is so terribly overgrown’ suggests that it currently serves as a signifier of the colony yet Briony wants to convert it to a beacon of civilisation. This is made clear when a close up shot of her gardening book is used, showing produce like onions and tomatoes on the first page (see Figure 3) suggesting the intention to make the garden useful for the imperial missionaries. However, this is subverted as the camera lingers on the book to show the exotic sulpiglossis flower (see Figure 4) on the previous page, used only for its aesthetic qualities rather than any pragmatic reason. This strongly forebodes Sister Briony’s submission to Mopu’s temptation later in the film as she turns the garden into an exotic spectacle rather than a useful resource envisioned by Clodagh and shown through her map (see Figure 5). By showing a possible subversion of the imperial garden this early in the film, Powell and Pressburger seem to be undermining the imperial power expected of the missionaries’ interactions with Mopu. This is further supported by Sister Briony’s ambivalent comment stating ‘I don’t know where to begin’, already suggesting that she does not fully support the cause that Clodagh so vehemently wants to protect. Rather than the Eastern influence being inhibited through the garden, Sister Briony’s

[^4]: Jaikumar, p. 64.
cultivations has allowed it to surpass imperial repression and bloom confidently, much to the happiness of Joseph Anthony and the other children of Mopu.

Figure 3 and 4: Briony’s book showing produce on the left and flowers on the right in Black Narcissus.

Clodagh and Ruth’s dramatic rivalry is also foreshadowed in this extract as Ruth’s clear disgust for the locals is juxtaposed with Clodagh’s calm demeanour when trying to solve the problem. While the characters certainly look alike due to the casting of the physically similar Deborah Kerr (Clodagh) and Kathleen Byron (Ruth), it is clear that their personalities are largely antithetical to each other. For instance, Ruth is loud, shrill and holds racist views (‘[the locals] look very stupid to me’) whereas Clodagh is more calm and stoic in the face of problems. It even seems that the directors wanted to emphasise Clodagh and Ruth’s division as these characters are the only ones to have close up shots (see Figure 5) when discussing how the help all the natives, despite there being three other characters in the room. This is important for two reasons: it further emphasises the physical similarities between the pair to emphasise their foil-like nature and it forces the audience to focus on the subtle disputes developing between them, foreboding their contrast of ideology later in the film (see Figure 6). Their climactic conflicts originating from this extract certainly fits a melodramatic convention, as Martin Meisel writes that ‘most melodrama carries with it […] a vigorously marked binary pattern of cohesion’, that is a strong
distinction between two ideals that conflict in a melodramatic narrative.\(^5\) Ironically, the binary distinction in *Black Narcissus* occurs between the two major characters *within* the convent rather than out of it whereas one would expect Clodagh’s adversary to be a character of Eastern origin such as the excessively sexualised Kanchi. This has led critics like Sarah Street to comment that ‘the film represents a far more unstable vision on empire’, attributing that to the eight-year difference between when the novel and film released as well as Britain’s withdrawal from India.\(^6\) While critics like the aforementioned Christie attribute the nuns’ failure to the effects of ‘the windswept Palace of Mopu’, it seems just as likely that the imperial mission has failed due to the instability of the empire portrayed in the film.\(^7\) Hence Powell and Pressburger’s criticisms go far beyond Clodagh’s hubris and underestimation of Mopu, it directly attacks the empire that she so strongly tries to represent.

![Figure 6: Close up shots of Clodagh and Ruth in *Black Narcissus*.](image)

This extract is highly significant to the plot of *Black Narcissus* due to its subversion of previous imperial narratives, showing the missionaries’ goals as fundamentally unobtainable and arrogant in their approach. Rather than the film glorifying the success of British colonialization, it foreshadows the Empire’s failure early on to criticize the establishment of St. Faith’s. While

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7 Christie, p. 60.
Godden’s book may show the Empire as powerful and stable, Powell and Pressburger’s film condemns is strongly by portraying it as unstable and easily corruptible by Eastern influence.

**Word Count:** 1,623 excluding title, bibliography and figures.

**Bibliography**


**Filmography**

*Black Narcissus*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (Granada Ventures, 1947)

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