Chapter 3
In Search of Rumer Godden’s India
Gayathri Prabhu

The two years in the United Kingdom had gone by in a blink. On the flight back to India, I pressed against the little cabin window to look at the amber light washing over the Himalayas. Traveling with me, somewhere in the darkness of that big plane and within the clutter of my suitcase, was Rumer Godden, or rather her many books set in India. I could not help thinking she’d like that, returning home with me. India was her land too, long before I was born; and though she was equally at home in Sussex where she lived for many years, her novels show repeatedly where her heart and soul lay—deep within an ancient culture that had been adopted by her parents but which she had truly grown into.

Rumer Godden writes about her first trip to England in 1914 when she was only seven, when she missed “the feel of the sunbaked Indian dust between sandals and bare toes; that and the smell” (The River 1991, vii). She carried these memories of the smell, of flowers, of open drains and urine, of coconut and mustard oils, “a smell redolent of the sun, more alive and vivid than anything in the West, to us the smell of India” (River 1991, vii). I knew exactly what she meant as soon as my plane landed into the heart of an Indian summer. My heart exploded with sensations, old and new, so searing that I could barely contain the words from tippling over. All the words that I could not muster for the wonderment of a new country wanted to flood out at the experience of the old, of being where I belonged, being home.

Godden absorbed India as only a committed artist could, pouring out her love for it in words and imagery. Yet old colonial prejudices make their appearances in her fiction, blighting that understanding—Indians as lazy, as cruel to animals, as living only for themselves. At times, this binarism emerges as conflict, at other times it settles into resignation, all the more unsettling if one believes that few writers of European lineage have written novels with the kind of empathy and appreciation for the subtleties and complexities of Indian social life as Rumer Godden has. What, then, were the limits to her empathy? I say “limits” not to plant boundaries around an immutable colonial being, but as personal experiences that are transitory, fluid and constantly “becoming.” This essay will explore these shifting lines of empathy within Godden’s recorded experience of India, in her autobiographies and in her fiction. The Godden I read in India, in Britain, and back in India again, increasingly seemed less a charming, middlebrow figure than an incisive author working presciently with issues that increasingly preoccupy us. As a female artist, she creates work that negotiates the representation of gender
in India in surprising ways, and as a product of Empire, Godden also gives us early representations of a globalized world, showing us how complex and layered “popular” fiction can be.¹

Belonging and Trespassing in Someone Else’s Country

At the start of the twentieth century, India was perceived as the most critical component of the British Empire, and despite the 1909 Minto Morley Reforms, extending the range of Indian participation in governance, “British rule in India was authoritarian” (Louis 7).² Although Godden could not apprehend it for years, growing up in a Far Eastern province—now in Bangladesh—rather removed from the political hub of events, she was raised amidst privileges only enjoyed by masters and rulers. She and her sisters “never felt like foreigners, not India’s own; we felt at home, safely held in her large warm embrace, content as we were never to be content in our own country” (Two Under the Indian Sun 1966, 9). This early sense of acceptance, of being treated as a child of India, is significant to our understanding of Godden’s identification with the land and culture in her writings because as they grew older “life inevitably thickened, became hazed and alloyed” (Two 1966, 11). Both empathy and points of departure thereby became embedded within the same protected childhood space.

Godden’s mentor and teacher, Mona Swann saw the conflict between her British identity and Indian upbringing much before anyone else, including Godden herself, pointing out the “veneer of imperialism” in her outlook (A Time to Dance 1987, 47).³ Even the simplest establishment for a British family in India included extensive luxuries, catered by an army of domestic help.⁴ The British usually

¹ Phyllis Lassner studies how British women writers between the two world wars “from their divergent but overlapping positions as settlers, exiles, and anticolonial activists, […] confronted not only how imperialism was self-destructive, but how its ideology of racial supremacy could be transformed into a threat not to Britain’s global power alone, but to humankind itself” (Colonial Strangers 1).

² William Roger Louis comments on the two sides of the British empire, the “enlightened” despotism in Asia and the evolving representative government in Australia, with India having little prospect of self-governance before 1914 despite the constitutional adjustment (5-8).

³ Mona Swann met the Godden girls in 1923 when Rumer was 15 years old and then studied for six years with Swann. Swann appraises her prodigious student as being “mature too in her awareness of and compassion for deprived humanity […] immature however, in […] intolerance of ordinariness in people or situations; a veneer of imperialism from her childhood upbringing in India” (Godden, Time 1987, 47). See Mary Grover’s essay at Chapter 1 for Godden’s relationship with Swann.

⁴ “The number of servants would have been puzzling to anyone who did not know Indian ways; we took them for granted” (Two 1966, 31). Margaret MacMillan describes a Raj household as a “‘miniature empire’ where the woman […] had many of the same

socialized among themselves and were kept at a respectable distance by the local populace, those coming in closer contact offering unquestioned servitude. It was inevitable that the Godden girls would grow up feeling as though they were royalty: the big house, the ponies, the muslin dresses and the many people at their service, “the difference between us and the milking thousands of Indians around us, all added up to a princess quality that would have dismayed Mam if she had ever seen it; but Mam, in her simplicity, did not see it; in fact all our elders seemed curiously blind […]” (Two 1966, 30). Rumer Godden is more understanding towards her parents than her sister Jon, who thinks they were cruel for letting the children suffer the illusion that they would move in court circles back in England, and explains, “they were not cruel, simply myopic […] our way of life in India was customary” (Two 1966, 30-31). This exclusivity and myopia turns starker against the ideals of simplicity ingrained in their family’s Quaker background. Jon and Rumer were determined to see these contradictions as making their lives more interesting: “It would have been better for us […] if we had been brought up […] in the simplicity of our Hingley Quaker forbears perhaps, or the austerity of [those] who had refused to own slaves. ‘Better,’ said Jon, ‘but not nearly as interesting’” (Two 1966, 32).

Like Godden, young Harriet in The River is a budding writer living with her large family by the jute works. “Being European in India, the flavour of Harriet’s home was naturally different from most, it was not entirely European, it was not entirely Indian; it was a mixture of both” (River 1991, 55-56). Twenty years after The River’s publication, in their joint autobiography, the Godden sisters echo that lost world in similar words: “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” (Two 1966, 45).³ Despite this happiness, Harriet thinks “regretfully,” that she “never found out what it meant” (River 1991, 111).

One only has to read The River and Two Under the Indian Sun in tandem to see how closely Godden sewed together life and fiction; and how the people around her would be transformed into fictional characters in later years. “The Indians we knew best were of course our own servants […] each brought a trail of other differences, differences of place, custom, religion, even of skin” (Two 1966, 32). The domestic staff in The River is directly inspired by the Godden household: “Nan was a Catholic; Abdullah, the old butler, was a Mohammedan, and so was Gaffura his assistant; Maila, the bearer was a Buddhist from the State of Sikkim; problems as the men on their larger stage. How was she to rule her subjects? How was she to keep India under control?” (142).

⁵ Lassner examines this hybrid identity, not as each disappearing into the other, but as “a haunting and therefore anxiety-ridden shaping force” (Colonial Strangers 13). The “uneasy hybrid” invades Godden’s fictional colonial homes, but “dissolves the foundational idea of a politically or culturally viable British India” (Lassner, Colonial Strangers 70).
the gardeners were Hindu Brahmins, Heaven Born; the sweeper and the Ayah were Hindu Untouchables, and Ram Prasad Singh, the gateman, the children’s friend, was of the separate sect of Sikh” (River 1991, 5). It was like having a veritable tableau of Indian socio-religious life in close proximity, easily accessible and acceptable, but not able to be experienced from within, thereby causing the early framework of Godden’s relations with Indians to emerge and blur at the same time. Godden uses this diversity in depicting British establishments in other novels as well, including The Peacock Spring (1975) and Coromandel Sea Change (1991), where the protagonist, Auntie Sanni, a Eurasian whose staff at Patna Hall comprises people of different faiths, becomes a nodal point for this diversity: “Nobody knew what Auntie Sanni believed; perhaps all religions met in her as they met peaceably in Patna Hall” (Coromandel, 2, 4).

As a little girl, Godden was once chastised by her father and ordered to apologize to their gardener Govind who complained about her mocking his religious chants: “When you are in someone else’s country you will respect what they respect—and not trespass” (Two 1966, 83). Someone else’s country, not hers—at some level, it did not matter how much at home she felt—and the word “trespass” was suddenly staring her in the face. The gravity of the situation and her shame is obvious when Godden unpacks the word with care: “Do something hurtful to someone else or something of theirs” (Two 1966, 83). As Godden’s British characters come closer to Indian homes, they are often overcome by the gravity and enormity of the moment. Emily Pool in Breakfast with the Nikolides hesitates outside the Das house and then walks in gingerly “as if she were treading on unfamiliar ground” (Breakfast 1942, 261). In Coromandel Sea Change, when Mary is invited into a temple, she is unsure if the experience is open to her: “Even I, an outsider?” she wonders and is reassured by her Indian companion, “There are no outsiders here. Go in” (Coromandel 151). This openness suggests the possibility of spaces within the India experience, where there is no concept of “outsiders” and hence no danger of trespassing.

Writing That Last Hour of Childhood

The multiple meanings of outsider are addressed in Godden’s earlier novel, Breakfast with the Nikolides (1942). Here, Emily Pool, a young willful British girl, struggles with her relationship with her mother and finds fleeting but sublime camaraderie with Anil Banerjee, an Indian poet. In some ways they are both misfits in the societies they inhabit. Anil is a Brahmin whose father thinks so highly of his purity that even a shadow in the street could defile him. Away from his family, Anil participates in gatherings for social reform and thinks nothing of sharing a meal with people from other castes, despite his vow to his parents that confirms the wickedness of eating meat or even tasting an egg. Emily’s parents are at odds with each other, her mother with “peculiar, distorted, almost diseased idea of the Indian, of his life and his religion, particularly if he were a Hindu” and her father so involved with his farm that it was as if “he was pushing the whole of India before him” (Breakfast 1985, 120, 5). Emily, who was born and feels at home in India, is frightened of her mother taking her away again.

Under the cover of a fateful night, Anil and Emily bridge that gap in each other’s lives as sometimes only strangers can. Anil escorts Emily safely back home, but Emily’s mother, Louise, accuses him of taking advantage of her daughter and implies sexual misconduct. Soon rumors of Anil’s humiliation by the Englishwoman spark unrest in the local college that rumbles into a noisy strike. The brief rapport and compassion between Anil and Emily turns into a catalyst for a chaotic confrontation of the races. Godden handles it all with admirable perspicacity, revealing how naïve it would be to expect anything but misunderstanding in the face of such deep social chasms. The college students are confused about what exactly transpired between Anil and Louise, but they lose no time in making a mocking effigy of Emily while heroizing Anil. Emily, who feels India in her bones, is turned into a colonial caricature, an oppressor, while Anil has created a weak imitation of the freedom struggle by the colonized. The crowd is confronted by Emily’s father, Charles, who shouts impotently to silence them, “and into that hush climbed not Charles, not authority, but the young veterinary surgeon Dr. Narayan Das,” who announces his friend Anil’s death (Breakfast 1985, 284). The struggle for justice here by the Indian students is revealed to be as shallow and illusory as the authority of the Englishman.

Running critically parallel to the story of Emily’s parents is that of the veterinarian Narayan Das and his wife Shila. The two marriages, one British and the other Indian, become “a broken but illuminating mirror of the other’s domestic space and its spillover into colonial politics and relations” (Lassner, Colonial Strangers 89). How had Godden, a white woman raised within the insular life of British India, found the raw material or, more importantly, the courage to walk behind the walls of a traditional Bengali home in her fiction and nudge out such delicate and sensitive, albeit fairly prototypical characters, like the poet student Anil, the Anil-adoring Narayan, and Narayan’s pregnant wife Shila? How did she know how Shila the Bengali housewife, who spends most of her time at home, experiences the outside world?

Shila saw the bazaar through Tarala’s basket; everything that was important to her in the bazaar was in it [...] “What have you brought, Tarala?” [...] Neither Shila nor Tarala would look at one another. At last Shila spoke. “Was there—no mutton?”

“No, Ma, none.”

“Tarala—did you look?”

6 Lassner analyzes these “polymorphous and interdependent colonial relationships, within British India, that are entrapped and liberated by world war. For Godden, colonizing conditions extend across cultural, gendered, geopolitical, and domestic spheres” (Colonial Strangers 88).
How delightful and subversive is this exchange of words between mistress and maid, capturing the nuances of a traditional Bengali household—the power equations and unhappy interdependency emerging over the master’s desires. Shila struggles with her husband’s progressive ideas that stem from a Western education and his lack of faith in religion and rituals. Her wifely duties therefore include complying with her husband’s preference for mutton in defiance of their dietary traditions. All that Narayan’s education seems to have done for Shila is to make her feel inadequate, not “clever enough for him” (Breakfast 1985, 77). How does one belong or conform without conforming? It is a dilemma that the British wife in the novel must resolve too. The archetypal domestic scene turns into a space for close identification and revisiting perceptions of identity and culture.

This comparative interpretation of parallel domestic relations gains further weight by placing it in the context of middlebrow women’s novels written in the mid-twentieth century when, as Nicola Humble notes, home was constructed as a text with ideological import and placed in relation to a simultaneously anxious outside world to create a unique dualism (108-109). Godden was writing about British society in India between the wars, but the drama is set not on the battlefield or any institutionalized political space, but within interpersonal racial relationships and often within domestic spaces.7 Her characters live in the shadow of global violence and local uncertainty, struggling as much to relate to their inner selves as they are to a crumbling outer world. When Anil and Emily sit together in the dark, Anil holds her and mutters comforting words she cannot understand, not rejecting her hope to see her dog’s ghost but offering his own faith, a Hindu ritual to help the dog’s soul rest in peace. This negotiation between realism and fantasy, a convention of mid-twentieth-century middlebrow writing, produced “a third space—between retreating from or returning to lived experience” (Dowson 13). This space reflects “a yet unrealized subjectivity [that] allows both writer and reader an alternative state of consciousness in which to both indulge and scrutinize their desires” (Dowson 13). Asserting her own mixed cultural perspective, Godden interweaves the desires, voices, and perspectives of both Indian and British characters. With analytical effect, she deploys their personal and racial identities, often within domestic situations, to offset an ambivalent political climate that turns to confrontation out of a need to protect what they each perceive to be in their best interests.

Understandings and Misunderstandings

Nearing to relate to the socio-cultural heritage of the natives was an elementary premise of British imperialism in India.8 But for the British born and raised in India, the country was a vibrant entity in its own right. In all her writings on India, Godden explains various Indian customs astutely and precisely; the functioning of the Indian caste system, the innumerable gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, the mythological stories behind religious festivals. And yet it is not uncommon to come across sweeping statements in her fictions that echo back to presumptions made by the colonizers, which failed to accommodate the concept of life in Indian philosophies. “The Indian lives to and for himself and his family, his sense of social service and citizenship is small” (Breakfast 1985, 7). Attached to this comparison of native culture with European ideals of social consciousness, was that of apathy, “the thoughtless cruelty of most Indians to animals, a cruelty that reaches from high to low, that runs through high days and ordinary days [...] native, thoughtless cruelty” (Breakfast 1985, 67-68). This view completely ignores the unique position of ecosystem in Indian philosophy, the concept of vasudhaiv kutumbakam—every entity and living organism as part of one large extended family system.9 Why was the Indian way of life perceived as crueler than any other? It is too glaring an oversight by a writer so sensitive and deserves to be considered further. It can perhaps be better understood by revisiting Godden’s transition from the idyllic childhood to awareness of herself as a participant in the imperial process.

Writing about India, Godden is also writing about her own nation and national identity, for, as Sara Suleri maintains, “To tell the history of another is to be pressed against the limits of one’s own—thus culture learns that terror has a local habitation and a name” (2). While the colonial narrator needs to identify the cultural distinctiveness of the colonized, she inevitably knows that this encounter is self-referential. Godden often writes about the different living patterns that emerged from living in a sun-baked country but applies it to British families, not

7 Humble’s analysis continues: “The middlebrow women’s novel echoes the contemporary sense of a domestic sphere in a state of flux. In many novels the home is foregrounded as an emblem of difficult and disturbing change.” The novel’s “metaphoric identifications between women and their homes” relates to a materialistic analysis of the condition of the nation” (111).

8 Ranajit Guha argues that “this British idiom of Improvement” was an effort “to relate nonagonistically to the ruled” (30) and points out how it motivated the promotion of Western education, patronage for Indian art and literature, and efforts by Christian missionaries to ameliorate the lives of lower castes and tribal populations.

9 Roger Gottlieb explains: “Because there exists a cosmic connection between the micro and the macro, there exists a harmonizing balance between the planet and the plants, animals, human beings and birds [...] This mantra also denotes a deep bond between Mother Earth and human beings” (164, 167).
students, in those days all young men, no girls, and irrepressibly impudent and merry. Soon I was accepted” (Time 1987, 69-70). She went riding as part of her work “with different eyes” (Time 1987, 69-70). Suddenly, the strictures of the domestic arena had opened into an expansive India that dwelt in spaces thus far unfamiliar.

It is perhaps this effort on Godden’s part to open the isolation of her colonial upbringing, to reach deep into the Indian countryside, which gives her writing its unique texture. Over the years she did not turn her back on the privileges of being British in India, “but becoming more and more of a misfit in that—does it have to be called ‘Raj’?—way of life. ‘Raj’ was another word we did not know, but I lived it for two years because I did not know what else to do” (Time 1987, 59). This uneasiness with the Raj way of life explains why many of the Godden protagonists—Harriet in The River, Emily in Breakfast with the Nikolides, Una in The Peacock Spring, Teresa in Kingfishers Catch Fire (1953)—are on the cusp of childhood and adulthood, as they are between British and Indian ways of living, their transitory state making it possible for them to carve out an identity and empathy that the adults lacked. And Godden always made it a point to stress that it helped if the characters were born in India or spent their early years there: “If you are born in a place does a little of it get into your bones? Yes. I think it does” (Breakfast 1985, 51). Within this liminal space incubates the quest for an alternative understanding of what foreign could mean for the British in colonial India. The grand stage of the Empire could just as simply be turned into a children’s playground.

However, grown Englishmen and women who came to India, hardened in their ways, did not find it so easy.12 Louise in Breakfast with the Nikolides is one such woman, for unlike her daughter Emily, she sees a different India in the color and noise of its communal life. “There is nothing but filth and squalor and misery in the bazaar. I hate to go there. I hate the children to go there” (Breakfast 1985, 84). For Louise, “an Indian was not a person” and could never be considered company (Breakfast 1985, 118). Louise’s husband, Charles Pool, fashioned somewhat on Godden’s own father, who had sweated out enough Indian summers to be assimilated, did not agree, “because I believe that India is one of the new countries; like China and like Russia it is so old that it is beginning to be new. I am of the country now, I am not an exile, I am not even an alien” (Breakfast 1985, 24). The affection for the land is so strong that the colonial master is no longer an alien, nor in exile from the parent country, but becomes one with the experience itself.

10 To laze and conserve energy was considered sensible for British families during hot weather, especially for the women who would not think of being without their stays, stockings, petticoats, starched dresses with high necks and sleeves, even in the summer (Two 1966, 90-91). Godden is critical of this impractical clothing which, like their English lifestyles, became as restrictive and oppressive as the Indian summer.

11 Godden later changed her mind about Forster: “his truth was biased and, too, ignorant of the best and valuable role of the British in India but, at that time the shock was complete” (Time 1987, 670). This rhetoric of Britain’s “valuable role in India” was another common justification of colonial rule, and many British did believe they were emancipators, operating in the best interest of India and its people.

12 Margaret MacMillan explains: “their creed was that they were all going Home in the end. It meant, however, that they could not develop close friendships and they could not cultivate family ties. Rumer Godden [...] thought that the impermanence of their society had a bad effect on them all. She compared Europeans in India to ‘cut flowers; that is why most of them wither and grow sterile, they cannot live without their roots, and so few of them take root’” (44).
Occasionally, a transition into the local world offers itself to visitors with good intentions. In *Black Narcissus* (1939), Sister Clodagh who “was still in the stage when the faces of people looked all alike” is able to chip into the barrier separating cultures (*BN* 1994, 37). As the story continues, she soon “could not remember when it was that she began to think of them as people; not as natives, persons apart, but as people like themselves, and she was beginning to see with their eyes” (*BN* 1994, 75). For Godden, to see through the eyes of the Other, an exchange of gaze possible with time and experience, involves creating constant resistance against the imperial norms and restrictions of British India.

Even if Godden had not known the word “Raj” as a child, she would come to know it only too well after marrying a stockbroker and setting up house in Calcutta where the local British society was much more uncompromising in its exclusivity. Godden had already ruffled their feathers by starting a dancing school and made it worse in the eyes of her social peers by including Eurasians among her students. Godden is sympathetic to Eurasians, and their “difficulty of existing in a never-never-land between two cultures” (Greenberger 184). She saw that Eurasians often found themselves ostracized by the British for not being white enough and by the Indians for not being Indian enough. These boundaries created new exploratory grounds for the dilemma of identity, of feeling isolation both from England and India. Godden kept her distance from the dissenters, though her husband was equally a “cheerful philistine as were his friends who lived as though they were still in Britain” (*Time* 1987, 97).

There was, too, the political ferment; the fight for independence was growing and, with it, terrorism especially among the young [...] Yet I could not help sympathizing with them. Who would not want, I thought to be free? “Idiots. They’re far better off under the British,” said Laurence and his friends. (*Time* 1987, 100)

Godden’s and her husband’s sentiments have very little in common except their historical moment. In Godden’s novels of this period, when Indian demands for independence could be perceived by the British as a freedom struggle, as random acts of terrorism, or as idiotic self-harm, these divergent voices become tools to question the motives of Empire.

Anil Krishna Banerjee in *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, Ravi Bhattacharya in *The Peacock Spring*, and Krishnan Bhanj in *Coromandel Sea Change* are

---

13 Greenberger points out that attacks on the institution of the Raj by those like Forster and Orwell were motivated not by what the system was doing to the Indians, but by what the situation of forcibly ruling aliens was doing to the British (84). The basic need was seen as one for personal friendships rather than political reform (190). He refers to the period between 1935 and 1960 as The Era of Melancholy—“Now faced with a new India the British found that they could not remain there. At the same time they did not want to go back to England” (180).

14 Lawrence James writes, “Indian political consciousness was the direct result of an educational revolution in India which had been under way since 1860” (344). Indians’ English education served the sprawling administrative machinery in the subcontinent but proved to be a double-edged sword. It led to Indians seeking reform of *saty* and child marriage, but also to mollify British policy. Indian voluntary associations, formed on British lines, discussed India’s right to self-governance. Aldous Huxley, in India in 1925, observed that the only Indian the British in India objected to as a class was the Western-educated. “The educated Indian is the Englishman’s rival and would-be supplanter [...] no man loves another who threatens to deprive him of his privileges and powers” (97).

15 Lassner sees Narayan Das as “not so much Other or hybrid, as ‘in-between’ colonial and postcolonial” (*Colonial Strangers* 90).
Indian bride starts to come apart, until she appears neither Indian nor British but a grotesque parody.

Did Godden believe, then, that it was impossible for the two cultures to find peace in each other at the level of intimate, enduring relationships? Perhaps the answer lies within Kingfishers Catch Fire (1953), a novel drawn out of a traumatic experience that compelled Godden to leave India with her children, returning thereafter only for short visits.

**Fighting a War in the Midst of Another**

In 1942, as Europe was caught up in war, Godden was waging her own private battle—paying off her husband’s debts with her savings and then retreating to Kashmir with her children in an attempt to live frugally. Compared to Europe, India felt safe, but the war “precipitated an ultimate crisis for British rule [...]. It also imposed huge strains on India resources, the economy, and the administrative resources” (Brown 435). In the same year, the All India Congress Committee launched the Quit India Movement, promising to support the Allies if Britain gave India her freedom after the war. For those like the Goddens, who had made their home within someone else’s homeland, this clearly indicated that their way of life was fast fading.16

In Kingfishers Catch Fire, newly widowed 35-year-old Sophie Barrington Ward (Godden’s age in 1942) decides to live in Kashmir with her two children Teresa and Moo. Sophie, “careless and indifferent,” is full of grand plans and adventures while her thoughtful daughter Teresa is the barometer of sanity in their little household (Kingfishers 1955, 6). Sophie has a deep passion for India, sometimes to the exclusion of other British families in situations similar to hers:

Sophie had always kept away from what Teresa called “proper people”. Sophie specialized in friends who were not of her own kind. Srinagar had a large European community who were hospitable and friendly, but, “When I go to a country I like to meet the people of that country,” Sophie had said and she refused to join the Club. “I can meet Lady Anderson and Mrs. Robinson anywhere!” said Sophie, and was coldly ungrateful for their kindness. (Kingfishers 1955, 25, author’s italics)

It is this streak of impracticality and romanticism that inspires Sophie to take up a little house in the hills and make it habitable. The caretaker, Nabin Dar, is a man with rustic charm through whom Sophie is connected to the village and its conflicting factions. Sophie’s intentions are certainly earnest, but the community she chooses to adopt has none of her choices: “If she had been asked what she did to make the house habitable, she would have said that she did the merest necessities, but to the village these preparations were fabulous” (Kingfishers 1955, 64). Sophie pities herself for having too little, but the villagers are dazzled with what she has. Sophie thinks nothing of picking an almond blossom, and Nabin Dar rebukes her for doing so knowingly: “The Memsahib doesn’t know what it is to be poor” (Kingfishers 1955, 104). Later, Sophie confesses to her Aunt Rose that she had been “very, very, very selfish” (Kingfishers 1955, 126). Again, in this cauldron of melting trust and suspicion, it is Sophie’s daughter Teresa who is able to look directly into the heart of the problem, young enough to stand outside this schism of cultures, even slipping through the gaps, while Sophie struggles to find a footing on her narrow stage of identity. Godden exposes how flawed such a scheme can be, this intrusion upon a tense balance of power within a native community and expecting to be accepted unconditionally, no different than the British position in India in the 1940s. Profet David, the trader Sophie deals with regularly, tells her not to grieve, that there is always a price to pay:

I told you you were like the Emperors. The Emperors suffered many things like this, poison, and glass and influential drugs, and their children were always suffering too [...] They had to expect it, because they were Emperor’s children [...] and the Emperors had to expect it too, because they were Emperors. (Kingfishers 1955, 234-35, author’s italics)

Seen in the context of the years leading to Indian independence in 1947 and immediately following, this evokes the fear, anxiety and resentment, rife not just among the Indians, but the British community as well.17 Sara Suleri challenges the preoccupation of postcolonial critics with Otherness, arguing “how the idioms of ignorance and terror construct a mutual narrative of complicity”18 (2). The imperial and subaltern had long been treading the same terrain. Naturally, their concerns about the new socio-political scenario are fused in the multiplicity of their histories and in the works of writers like Rumer Godden who engaged in creative portrayals of a critical time in India’s colonial history. This is dramatized compellingly in Black Narcissus when Mr Dean warns the nuns about the dangers of running a clinic for the local populace who are “primitive, like children” (BN 1994, 50) and insists, “scratch a savage mother and I’ll not answer for what you’ll find.” (BN 1994, 97). Later, when his prophecy is fulfilled and the village

---

16 Roderick Caveliero writes, “For all their sacrifices, the women of the Raj were often stigmatized as being the sap that undermined British resolution in India” (184). This common perception of British women in India weakening and craving to return to England was challenged by Godden in her novels.

17 “British men and women in India had slowly to adjust to the idea that independence must come, but many never reconciled themselves to what they saw as excessively rapid change [...] They were apprehensive at leaving a familiar way of life and adjusting to post-war Britain” (Suleri 229-32).

18 Suleri suggests that dismantling the distinction between domination and subordination, primarily a Eurocentric strategy, would serve the critical field better.
turns hostile over the death of a child treated by one of the nuns, even the servants working for them “changed into enemies” (BN 1994, 178). There is no one in the village when the nuns pack and prepare to leave. “It’s as if they had built a wall between us,” Sister Clodagh notes regretfully (BN 1994, 209). Good intentions on their own are unable to pierce this wall of dissonance between the two cultures, and Godden’s characters often reconcile to a sage acceptance of difference for the cause of coexistence.

Godden’s introduction to The River, written around the time of Indian independence, reflects, “Indians do not change; their clothes and customs are timeless” (River 1991, x). Phyllis Lassner argues convincingly about this timelessness being unlike the static Orient seen by colonial white writers, but as “subject to disruption and even resistance” (Colonial Strangers 72). In her 1966 autobiography Godden revisits this thought, “Even in the timelessness of India things change […] too much has intervened” (Two 1966, 9). The old world of colonial grandeur and security that the British knew in India disappears with the end of the war and in its place emerges a new nation, assertive and ready for self-governance.

How then do I, as a twenty-first-century novelist, relate and respond to the India that Godden knew and constructed in the twentieth century? I have not experienced the colonial quicksand as she had, being embedded instead in the postcolonial experience; yet spanning these different identities is a shared passion for a remarkable country and its resilient people. “Once you have felt the Indian dust, you will never be free of it” (Peacock 30). My concern is whether India is in danger of forgetting Godden, for that would be a considerable loss. As I hunt in vain for Godden books in the bookstores in India, I think of how much place mattered to her, mattered deeply. “Grief for a people is sharp, grief for a place is sharper and has a peculiar bitterness that can never be wiped away. It is the place I mourn most” (Two 1985, 121). Not surprisingly, it is also place that Godden celebrates the most.