



# Deconstructing the Orient in *Black Narcissus* (1947)

by Himani Someshwar

## Orienting Paradise: Western Projections of the East

### **Black Narcissus (1947)**

Director:  
Emeric Pressburger, Michael  
Powell

Runtime:  
101min

Country:  
United Kingdom

Language:  
English

#### **AWARDS**

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY  
BEST ART DIRECTION  
**Academy Awards 1948**

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY  
**Golden Globes 1948**

In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, cultural critic Edward Said described the titular concept as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” 1947’s *Black Narcissus*, directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, presents a visceral experience inside the mind of the Orientalist. Based on English author Rumer Godden’s 1939 fictional novel of the same name, *Black Narcissus* was adapted for the screen by Powell and Pressburger, who brought Britain’s fantastically ignorant perspective of India to theaters a mere three months before India’s independence from Britain.

In *Orientalism*, Said cites the academic Joseph Fourier: “To save an event from oblivion is in the Orientalist’s mind the equivalent of turning the Orient into a theater for his representations of the Orient.” In *Black Narcissus*, the colonizer’s ‘theater’ lies atop the peaks of the Himalayan mountain range, where the temperate climate ushers a group of Anglican nuns to descend into the depths of Occidental barbarism. More compelling, however, is the intertwined relationship between the narrative told in the film and that of real-time colonialism.

German-born Alfred Junge was awarded Best Production Design by the Academy in 1948 for his creation and execution of the fictional Palace of Mopu, where *Black Narcissus* takes place. While Junge did display immense artistic skill in hand painting backdrops and envisioning elaborate set designs, the entire production of the film cannot be looked at through a purely ‘artistic’ lens. Through his work, Junge brought an imagined Orient to life, all while sitting inside a studio in Pinewood, England. Junge, thus, spoke in place of the Orient.

Curating a devilish, studio-lit red sunrise in place of an organic Himalayan one is one of many contrivances used to emphasize the alien quality of the Oriental environment. After finding herself covered in itchy red spots, a Sister exclaims, “There must be something in the water here that’s very unhealthy.” The fact that she first blames her surroundings speaks to her condescension, as she is wholly ignorant of the fact that Himalayan water is extremely pure. Said states



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that Orientalism only exists when the Orientalist places themselves 'exterior' to the Orient, writing that there is a "hegemony of European ideas about the Orient" which "[reiterates] European superiority over Oriental backwardness." Indeed, in assuming Himalayan water to be dirty, the Sister has first assumed herself to be 'clean.'

The palace itself represents the white colonizer, who alone braves the tempestuous and flirtatious Orient. The audience is swept away by the wind's howls, which continue through the entirety of the film, guiding the nuns into bottomless 'savagery'. The Orient's haunting 'force of nature'—a figment of the colonizer's imagination—becomes a reality in Junge's studio, where multiple man-made fans intensify the audience's visual and sonic experience. Inside the palace, the walls are decorated with paintings of dancing nude brown women to create a juxtaposition with the rigid quality of the English nuns who presently walk the halls. The existing palace promotes an invented historical narrative that details it as having been built to house the women of an Indian general. The audience is thus urged to associate the palace's electrifying and erotic past with its current state of affairs. Moreover, the palace is representative of an ancient Oriental glory that has since been reduced to pathetic remnants.

At the end of the film, after studying under the Sisters, the Indian Young General (Sabu) concludes, "I'm going to give up being clever and famous. I'm going to be exactly like my ancestors. They were warriors and princes..." Said writes that the Orientalist believes that only they can "restore a region from its present barbarism to its former classical greatness." The danger in telling a tale of a romanticized Orient is that it dehumanizes the real place and its people. The Orient, as imagined by Powell, Pressburger, and Junge, effectively silences the perspective and livelihood of the film's colonized people on a multitude of levels.

In *Black Narcissus*, the audience witnesses a form of sadomasochism in watching the colonizer play the role of the colonized. English actress May Hallat finds liberation in playing her character, Angu Ayah; as a white woman living in 20<sup>th</sup> century English society, Hallat would have been subject to a code of conduct deemed respectable by the West. However, when Hallat's teeth are blackened and her hair braided and tangled for the film, she comes to personify the 'free spirit' of Ayah who is referred to as "a dirty old bird." As Ayah, Hallat can screech at birds, physically beat other women, and cackle grotesquely

without fear of being subjected to English civilized standards. At the other end of the spectrum lies Kanchi, played by a green-eyed Jean Simmons. Where Ayah is dehumanized, Kanchi is hypersexualized. Though a young girl, she is objectified and lusted after by colonizers (Sisters alike) who deem her immoral. These two brownface portrayals are telling of the demeaning way in which colonized subjects—specifically, colonized women—are regarded.

In *Black Narcissus*, mannerisms such as the ‘Indian head shake’ are extracted and used inorganically by colonizers performing brownface. Such mockery aims to evoke familiarity and hysteria among British audience members. What’s more, pleasure at the cost of the colonized does not cease to exist when a colonized person is doing the performing. In the case of the Young General, played by Sabu, the colonizers (Powell and Pressburger) use the colonized as a puppet to preach British racial propaganda unto audiences. Even positive traits such as being well-dressed become sources of mockery for the Sisters, who label him “Black Narcissus” behind his back, the name being a combination of the Young General’s dark skin tone and his so-called ‘peacock-like’ vanity.

*Black Narcissus* is a colonizer’s fever dream. Viewers find themselves inside the mind of the Orientalist who simultaneously rejects and lusts after the ‘uncivilized’. Recently adapted into a BBC and FX short series in 2020, the original *Black Narcissus* has continued to remain relevant for more than seven decades because of its ability to find shelter in an audience whose vague and condescending notion of the Other is confirmed onscreen.

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\*This version has been edited for length.