Sister Acts:

Nuns in Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus* and at the Loreto Convents in India

Introduction

The novel *Black Narcissus*, which was an instant success on publication in 1939 and was quickly adapted into a major film released in 1947, was inspired by Rumer Godden's visit years earlier, when she was eighteen, to an isolated village near Cherrapunji in the Khasi Hills of what is now known as Northeast India.[1] There she discovered a cross-shaped headstone marked with the name of a 'Sister' and dates indicating that the nun 'was only twenty-three' when she died. Later, 'as the evil of Nazidom spread over the world', and Godden despaired over her children's fate and that of the world's Jews, she felt that she was rescued by writing *Black Narcissus*.[2] The book is named after Black Narcissus, the strong perfume worn by one of the characters, the young General Dilip Rai. It opens up a vista onto European Catholic nuns in colonial India, one of the few works highlighting their presence.[3] This essay puts Godden's fictional portrayal of sisters in conversation with the records of

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[1] Rumer Godden, *A Time to Dance, No Time to Weep* (New York: Beech Tree Books, William Morrow, 1987), p. 129.

[2] Godden, *A Time to Dance*, p. 130; Phyllis Lassner, *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of the British Empire* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p. 75.

[3] Scholarship on nuns in India has been very limited. Tim Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820–1932* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 271–96 is the only book to give significant attention to the Loreto convents. Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 43–74 also contains some discussion of Loreto in India. Deirdre Raftery, *Teresa Ball and Loreto Education: Convents and the Colonial World, 1794–1875* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2022) discusses the spread of Loreto into the colonial world, including India. Apart from these books, the only sources on Loreto in India are contained the documents produced by Loreto itself.

real-world nuns from the Loreto in order to locate these women religious within the colonial experience and foreground their unique position.

Written just a decade before India's Independence, *Black Narcissus* is the story of a group of Anglo-Catholic nuns from the Order of the Servants of Mary who establish the Convent of St Faith with a school for children, a lace school for teaching needlework to girls, a clinic and a dispensary, in a Himalayan outpost called Mopu near the colonial hill station of Darjeeling. The nuns convert a palace loaned to them by a scion of a nearby princely state (although unnamed, it seems to be modelled on Nepal), General Toda Rai, whose father, General Ranajit Rai, had used the building to house his harem. The characters, the order and Mopu are all fictional. Headed by the Anglo-Irish Sister Superior Clodagh, the nuns – Sisters Philippa, Briony, Blanche (known as Honey) and Ruth – arrive seeking to tame the people and place of the Himalayas, bringing Christianity, or at least the associated morals and values, along with Western education and medicine. However, as they come into contact with the general's British agent Mr Dean, with the old caretaker of the palace Angu Ayah, with a local girl named Kanchi, with the general's young nephew and eventual heir General Dilip Rai, with the holy man who is, in fact, the general's uncle (previously known as General Krishna Rai), with the children whose parents send them to the school (after being paid to do so), and with the villagers, coolies and workers of the nearby tea garden and factory, these nuns find that they are unable to contain the rebellious energies of the hills. Each nun experiences a different set of struggles catalysed by the Indian surroundings. Sister Clodagh is reminded of a failed romance in Ireland; Sister Philippa becomes obsessed with her flower garden at the expense of her chores and faith; Sister Briony battles ill health; Sister Honey is blamed for the death of a baby to whom she had given medicine. Meanwhile, Sister Ruth is troubled by obsessive sexual desire for Mr Dean and jealousy of Sister Clodagh. Her feelings

lead to a tragic chain of events whereby Sister Ruth attempts to push Sister Clodagh off a cliff and instead falls herself, precipitating the retreat of the mission.

While there is some scholarship on Godden's novel, the most popular account of the experiences of nuns in colonial India, startlingly little work considers the position of real-world nuns, who are often just alluded to while being collapsed within the general category of missionaries. This omission is surprising given the distinct makeup of sisterhoods, as organised all-women's Catholic communities, which defy easy comparisons with, for example, lay Protestant female missionaries, and the significant presence that Catholic girls's schools have had and still have in India. By putting Godden's novel into conversation with the records of one of the key players in the female Catholic monastic presence in India, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM), better known as Loreto, which opened its doors in Kolkata in 1842, comparing and contrasting the fictional nuns with the real-world order while putting both in historical context, we reveal how a novel that seems to take an anti-colonial stance through its portrayal of Anglo-Catholic nuns, in fact, also reproduces many of the tropes used to justify the British occupation of India, which, unsurprisingly, often go hand-in-hand with anti-feminist ones. At the same time, we demonstrate that while the Loreto community was certainly engaged in colonialist ideology (before and after Independence), it was also embedded in the conflicting agendas of the Catholic Church and a feminist mission to educate young women. This meant that the experience of the Loreto nuns manifested quite differently from that of the nuns in Godden's novel even as there were parallels, the divergences indicating that neither the colonial enterprise nor experience was as homogenous as Godden, herself an old India hand, seems to have thought.

Whereas Godden's nuns reflect the British colonial agenda in the main, rendered a metaphor for intrusive British presence in a timeless, unchanging land, Loreto nuns variously enact a more global Catholic missionary agenda and a feminist pedagogical imperative. Moreover, while Godden's nuns only stay in Mopu for a year before decamping, Loreto's foundation, perhaps because of this confluence of competing ideologies, remains in India to this day. Together these works – the novel and the historical archive – reveal the complex and significant presence of Catholic women religious in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century India and the ways in which such women occupy the fault lines of competing discourses rather than sitting neatly on one side. By excavating this history of European nuns in India, this essay intervenes in South Asian colonial, feminist, and religious studies while also entering into conversations about the intersections of feminism and race.[4]

Catholic Colonial Feminisms, Religious Orientalism and the Indian Landscape

[4] The classic work concerned with the intersection of gender and empire, Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), emphasises the imperial framework in the development of organised Victorian feminism, the British women's movement, which involved the othering and stereotyping of Indian women and projecting British women's emancipation as the key to theirs. More recent work includes Dörte Lerp and Ulrike Lindner, eds, *New Perspectives on the History of Gender and Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) and Philippa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Scholarship on gender and race, such as Kum-Kum Bhavnani, ed., *Feminism and 'Race'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), however, is often primarily focused on the United States. Scholarship on Godden's novel is quite robust, but has not until now contained any discussion of real-life nuns in India. Moreover, many of these studies read Godden's work as countering the orientalism that we find to be still very much at the heart of the novel. Key studies of the novel include Alaknanda Bagchi, '*Of Nuns and Palaces: Rumer Godden's "Black Narcissus"*', *Christianity and Literature* (1995), pp. 53–66; and Phyllis Lassner, *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of the British Empire* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 75–83.

In many ways, the histories of Loreto and the fictional Order of the Servants of Mary seem to run parallel. Indeed, the dedication to Mary in the names of both the real and fictional orders raises the possibility of the latter being modelled on the former, especially since Loreto was well established in India by the time Godden conceived of the novel. Both were British-based foundations. Although Loreto more immediately came from Ireland, it traces its lineage back to Mary Ward (1585–1645), a recusant Catholic born in Yorkshire who founded schools for Catholic girls across Europe. The Servants of Mary has its headquarters in Canstead, Sussex. In both cases, the nuns sought to replicate their home foundations in India, something that is physically embodied in the attempts of the Indian branch of the Servants of Mary to copy their chapel from Canstead. Both orders were primarily devoted to the schooling of children and girls and to providing medical care to local populations. In their efforts to establish outposts in India, both the fictional and real-world nuns sought to reproduce what they were used to at home, which often othered Indian students and imposed racialist and colonialist ideologies.

The Loreto Convent schools, for their part, promoted an ideal of white femininity, a drive that was anticipated by Ward herself. In her plan for the institute, Ward exhorted students to 'curb passions, restrict inordinate desires, obey parents, turn away from the levity of girls [and] observe virginal maturity'.[5] In the schools in India, this orientation towards feminine perfection resulted in an othering of Indian and Eurasian (the term Eurasian used then as Anglo-Indian was later, to describe people of mixed European and Indian heritage) pupils. The nuns judged their students to possess the wrong accent and embody what they called heathen immorality. Proud of an aim to remove the girls's Indianness, Mother Mary Colmcille, who wrote a history of the order published in 1968, wrote that the Darjeeling

[5] Bar Convent Archives: B18, *Schola Beatae Mariae* (1612), item 54.

convent was known for ‘really good elocution, without a trace of che-che accent’.[6] Loreto’s third mother superior, Gonzaga Joynt, similarly displayed racist attitudes, writing that the Eurasian ‘type’ ‘seldom produces a strong body or a generous soul’.[7] Describing the work of the Daughters of St Anne, a sub-order of Loreto concerned with teaching underprivileged Indian girls, Joynt wrote: ‘They are very edifying, pious, docile, laborious & an immense help in teaching and forming our little savages’.[8]

Thus, Loreto’s pedagogical system, holding up a vision of Western femininity, served as an impetus for removing all traces of Indian girls’s heritage. The desire to transform Indian girls into models of obedient femininity is visually encapsulated in a photograph from 1962 of the Loreto convent school in Calcutta.[9] Here girls sit in neat rows in uniforms writing mechanically with their heads kept down studiously. This photograph, intended to promote the school, foregrounds orderliness and obedience of former colonial subjects. Recent attendees of the school still recall the emphasis on docile ladylike behaviour. One recent graduate remembers that ‘sitting with our legs crossed, speaking softly and politely, refraining from interacting with boys were some of the things that were expected of us’.[10]

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[6] Mary Colmcille, *First the Blade* (Kolkata: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968), p. 122–23.

[7] Loreto Archives, Dublin (LAD): Gonzaga Joynt to Gonzaga Barry, 7 September 1891, Loreto India Box 18A/18.

[8] Loreto Archives, Ballarat: Gonzaga Joynt to Gonzaga Barry, 17 February 1899, Box H205.3. Cited in Allender, *Learning Femininity*, p. 288.

[9] This photograph is available on the Loreto House website: https://www.loretohousekolkata.com/archives.aspx (accessed 23/08/22).

[10] Interview with Shatakshi Whorra, 21 October 2021. Many thanks to Shatakshi for providing this interview.

The relationship between Godden's nuns and the young Indian woman Kanchi parallels Loreto's attitude. When Mr Dean brings her to the nuns to place her under their care, Sister Clodagh thinks to herself that Kanchi is 'like a basket of fruit … piled high and luscious and ready to eat. Though she looked shyly down, there was something steady and unabashed about her; the fruit was there to be eaten, she did not mean to let it rot'.[11] Objectifying the young woman, Sister Clodagh portrays her as ripe for the taking, made for consumption by men. At the same time, she is shown as shrewd and calculating. Her hand is 'warm and reluctant and unexpectedly hard' when Sister Clodagh takes it.[12] Mr Dean's account that the girl has been making 'an absolute nuisance' of herself and needs to be 'cloistered for a few months' to make her more desirable for an arranged marriage echoes the perception within Loreto that Indian girls needed to be tamed, even redeemed.[13] Indeed, the Loreto convent in Ranchi used to take in two classes of girls, including the 'marriage class' comprising those girls who came only for three to five months just prior to marriage to prepare for it.[14] The portrayal of Kanchi as the novel progresses is largely unflattering. The narrator states that: 'There were only two things in the world that Kanchi cared about, and one of them was herself'.[15] Mr Dean calls her soul 'trash' and describes her as a 'thieving, self-serving, shallow little opportunist'.[16] While she initially seems to settle in well, going to school and helping Ayah and Sister Briony with housework, she soon begins to play 'a game of cat and

[11] Rumer Godden, *Black Narcissus* (1939; repr. London: Virago Press, 2020), p. 79.

[12] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 80.

[13] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 79.

[14] Colmcille, *First the Blade*, p. 176. CHECK

[15] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 94.

[16] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 97.

mouse' with Dilip, a romance that solidifies the stereotype of the hypersexual and unruly Indian woman.[17]

In connection to their portrayals of young Indian women as in need of taming and reforming, Loreto and Godden's novel share an interest in conversion guised in seeming disinterest. This is understandable given the fine line missionaries, in general, had to tread with regard to conversion. It remained a paramount goal for them; but missions were officially allowed into India by the East India Company only with the charters of 1813 and 1833 after considerable opposition, while Loreto was invited to India specifically to start a Catholic girls's school. Fear of conversion prevented mission schools from finding success initially, in the early nineteenth century, and the Uprising of 1857 fuelled wariness – even as it reinforced the belief that Indians were in need to control and civilising. Sister Honey gets highly excited when Kanchi begins learning the catechism and expresses a desire to convert to Christianity. Although Sister Clodagh is more sceptical, she is prepared to entertain her. Later, Mr Dean warns Sister Clodagh against any attempt to convert Dilip: 'You don't need me to tell you you must keep him off religion. That boy can never be converted to Christianity'.[18] Her response is icy: 'We're not in the habit of trying to convert our pupils'. Technically, the Loreto order too would have disavowed any such agenda, but their records are replete with celebrations of conversion, much as Sister Honey cannot help but rejoice at the prospect of Kanchi becoming a Christian.

The Loreto nuns seem to have taken particular pride in an incident that is recorded in the annals of Loreto, Calcutta, when a 'dancing girl' converts to Christianity and is thus

[17] Godden, *Black Narcissus,* p. 134.

[18] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 108.

redeemed, echoing the interest in Kanchi's prospective conversion and the whole notion of the redemptive power of Christianity and the convent for wayward Indian women:

> We have also another example of the power of Divine grace in one of our present Catechists formerly a [Muslim]. She belonged to the class of dancing girls held in contempt … on account of their profession. This girl being in one of the public hospitals overheard a conversation between a Catholic lady and a woman whom the former was endeavouring to bring to the convent. The girl being pleased with the idea asked the lady to take her also to the nuns expressing at the same time a wish to become a [Christian]. After her baptism she came to us and as she is well instructed in religion and of great piety. We employ her in catechizing our little native protegees and find her most zealous in accomplishing her work. [19]

This instance of conversion suggests that Christianity and indeed the convent might have offered some Indian women, especially those of the marginalized or depressed classes, an alternative way of life, even a career path. There is a hint of more complex motivations to conversion than straightforward piety even in Kanchi's initial willingness to stay in the convent – although of course, in keeping with her characterisation, it is given a negative, self-serving, connotation. She takes to the convent to recover her reputation after pursuing Mr Dean and avail of the good food. Another suggestion of the material advantages of conversion appears in the Loreto records where four Indian girls, whose fathers had converted to Lutheranism, in turn, took to Catholicism and founded the Daughters of St Anne.[20] In the process, they turned down numerous marriage proposals: 'If they could not be

[19] LAD: IND/03, Annals of Loreto, Calcutta, 1841–66, p. 51.

[20] LAD: IND/22, The Congregation of 'Daughters of St Anne', 1897–1928, 1–4.

nuns, they said, they would remain with the nuns all their lives and help them by teaching in the school.'[21] They were eventually admitted as postulants. This account seems to vaguely to reflect Ward's own battle to preserve her faith in the face of marriage proposals and suggests that for some women at least conversion and attaching themselves to convents offered a way out of the traditional path for women.

There is naturally a difference in the degree of religiosity portrayed in the novel and the historical record. Godden was, after all, a secular novelist (she would convert to Catholicism in the 1950s long after she had written the book) invested in depicting the inner lives of her characters. Meanwhile, the Loreto nuns were producing public documents for the consumption of their superiors and so had a vested interest in emphasising their religiosity. This desire to impress is apparent in one instance from the convent and orphanage in Entally, Calcutta, as the annalist writes about a 'pagan' child who was drawn to Christianity:

> [A] little girl was given up to us by her pagan parents … after a time the pagan mother repented of giving her to us, carried her off to a native village. For several days the child was locked up, deprived of food and subjected to abuse and ill-treatment to induce her to abandon Christianity. Her constancy remained unshaken. She sang the hymns we have taught her, and said her prayers in spite of starvation and blows [until the mother finally sent her back.][22]

In another instance, this one from the convent in Shillong, a little orphan of eight takes to Christianity.

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[21] LAD: IND/22, The Congregation of 'Daughters of St Anne', 1.

[22] LAD: IND/01, History of Loreto Convent and Orphanage, Entally, Calcutta 1842–c. 1916, 1861, p. 13.

> Her father's pagan relations took charge of her and of her three sisters. Scarcely were her little legs strong enough when she used to toddle to the missionary's house, play about and return home towards evening, always made happy by some little gift such as a fruit from the Father. As the little girl grew up she came regularly to school and followed the catechumens to Church on Sundays.[23]

She would insist 'I also want to become a child of God and go to Heaven'.[24] She was beaten by her relatives for her faith but it was unshakeable and she was eventually baptized. Stories like this one are plentiful and, for every year of the annals, the number of conversions is noted. Such accounts of children abused for their fervent devotion to their faith recall the stories of early Christian martyrs, integrating the Indian landscape into a timeless story of Christian devotion.

Meanwhile, in Godden's novel, Mopu, and, by extension, the Indian landscape, too is appropriated, in this case, portrayed as a primeval, timeless land – indeed, the sisters attempt to take over a remote Himalayan corner, whereas, in real life, colonial hill stations, established as European enclaves in India, were a popular choice with nuns and they ventured into outposts mainly in the plains. A conversation between Sister Adela, who comes to Mopu (and into the story) after the original group of sisters has arrived, and Dilip is telling:

> 'I suppose you are a Christian,' she said, 'or you wouldn't be here.' 'I'm not a Christian out loud,' said Dilip. 'My Uncle wouldn't let me change my religion.' 'The

[23] LAD: IND/15, Account of the Foundation of Loreto Convent, St Mary's Hill, Shillong, Assam, 1909, p. 10.

[24] LAD: IND/15, Account of the Foundation of Loreto Convent, St Mary's Hill, p. 11.

> religion of this country is a form of Hinduism or else a low form of Buddhism that is, in reality Animism,' pronounced Sister Adela. 'Is it?' asked Dilip interested. 'How do you spell that? What is it?' 'It's a form of Pantheism,' said Sister Adela contemptuously … 'Saying that God is in everything, animate and inanimate; in the trees and stones and streams.' 'That sounds very beautiful,' he said thoughtfully, 'but it certainly isn't true.' … 'Because … we can conquer trees and streams and stones; we can cut down the forest and dam the stream and break up the stones, but we can't conquer God. Now, He … might very well be in the mountain. We call it Kanchenjunga and we believe that God is there. No one can conquer that mountain and they never will … You have to be very strong to live close to God or a mountain, or you'll turn a little mad.'[25]

Dilip's perspective here is portrayed as a corrective to Sister Adela's contemptuous colonial views yet it also reproduces an orientalist stereotype about the unconquerable nature of the Indian landscape. Even if trees can be cut down, for example, God's presence remains embedded in the land. There is a sense here that no matter what the colonisers do, little will change, which given the devastation that British occupation in fact wrought on the subcontinent would have been far from true. In this sense, Godden's novel is both aligned with and divergent from Loreto. In the Loreto records, the sense of timelessness is that of the Christian story; in Godden's novel, it is that of God's presence in the Indian landscape. Both are orientalist points of view but one is more embedded in a broader missionary project and the other in a specifically British colonial perspective.

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[25] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, pp. 175–76.

Loreto and *Black Narcissus* thus mutually partake in orientalist tropes, but while Godden's nuns seem fairly consistently to be in line with the goals of empire, the real-life order did not always align so neatly. As established, the fictional nuns' relationship with the Indian landscape evokes many conventional tropes of British imperial interaction with India, which can be seen in light of Godden's position as a secular memsahib in British India. Her nuns never discuss their own place within the larger imperial framework, but their exit at the end of the novel seems to be a figure for the impending exit of the British. 'Nothing of us will be left but the empty buildings and the bhût [or ghost] from the grave [of Sister Ruth]', says Sister Clodagh to Ayah and then the general in a statement that seems to assimilate the nuns with the colonial presence in the subcontinent.[26] The Loreto nuns were both less ephemeral, so to speak, and less consistently tied to the colonial state. Given that Loreto was an Irish order, the male relatives of many Loreto women religious would have been fighting against the British in Ireland during the early twentieth century. Kate O'Malley's work demonstrates that leaders of the national movement in India saw events in Ireland as reflective of their own fight for independence from the British.[27] There were thus cross-cultural links between Indians and the Irish as peoples mutually oppressed by Britain. Although there is not much textual evidence of the Loreto sisters's opinions on empire in the early days of the order (and being othered as Irish women by their British counterparts did not prevent them from othering Indian women), one might imagine that their Irish background would have rendered easy identification with the aims of an empire that had begun by colonising their own people difficult.

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[26] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 251.

[27] Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919–64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 53–89

Later on in Loreto's history, Sister Maeve Hughes's book *Epic Women: East and West* (1994) reinforces this suggestion of an alliance between the Indians and the Irish by making parallels between women in medieval Irish literature and ancient Indian epics, bypassing the British mainland altogether. This book is from the 1990s, but it seems likely that it continues an approach present in the early days of Loreto. Indeed, Loreto educated a number of Indian women who became freedom fighters such as Basanti Devi (1880–1974). Godden evokes a similar Indian-Irish affinity in her representation of Sister Clodagh. Although she seems to draw from the ranks of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry and, arguably, has the superior attitude of the ruling class, Mopu reminds her of Ireland and she is overcome with memories of growing up there. It is quite possible that the wildness of Mopu, the carefree, careless manner of the people remind her of her childhood home in Ireland. After all, the British tended to perceive the Irish in much the same way as Indians: wild and uncultivated.

Another striking difference between Godden's novel and the historical record is that the Loreto institute had a decidedly more feminist bent than the Servants of Mary. To begin with, Loreto had a long history of feminist engagement. This order was, after all, the product of a vision from God that Ward received in the seventeenth century to 'take the same of the society', referring to the Society of Jesus. Ward understood this vision as an imperative to found a female apostolate, a community of women who would be active in the world rather than enclosed in a cloister, something that had never existed before. Gathering around her a community of female companions, she established a network of schools across Europe, which were devoted to the education of Catholic girls and to the pursuit of the English Catholic cause. These schools not only defied the religion of Ward's homeland but also transgressed the mandate, which had been strengthened by the Council of Trent (1545–63), that Catholic women religious be enclosed. Ward and her followers were dubbed the 'galloping nuns' for

their refusal to stay put within a cloister, and the Vatican reacted by suppressing the institute in 1631, with Pope Urban VIII's signing of the *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis.* Ward's foundations were subsequently dissolved, and their founder was imprisoned in the Angerkloster in Munich. Most of them were forced to leave the houses Ward had founded and either return to secular life or join other religious orders. Ward spent the remainder of her life under house arrest in Rome moving between various spas in Europe due to her ill health before returning to Yorkshire where she died on 30 January 1645. The early history of what became Loreto then was one of feminist struggle against male ecclesiastical authority.

Despite its immediate failure, Ward's legacy was significant for women's participation in the Church. The Bar Convent in York, which was founded by Ward, survived as the only convent in England between the dissolution and Catholic emancipation. In the nineteenth century, Frances Teresa Ball (1794–1861), a native Dubliner, who was sent as a girl to study at the Bar Convent, founded a new house of the institute in Ireland in Rathfarnham House on the outskirts of Dublin. She called this new convent Loreto House, a reference to Ward's devotion to the shrine to the Virgin Mary in Loreto, Italy. It was this Irish offshoot of Ward's mission that came to India in the nineteenth century shortly after the repeal of discrimination against Catholics in 1829 in a chain of events that was largely propelled by women. Loreto came to India at the behest of a committee of Irish, Portuguese, Armenian and Dutch women, called the Ladies of the Nun Committee, who raised money to start a Catholic school for girls in Calcutta. These women sent Dr Bakhaus, the military chaplain of Hazaribagh, to persuade Ball to send a group of Irish nuns to India. After a gruelling four-month trip around Cape Good Hope, the nuns arrived on 30 December 1841 to some fanfare.

In Godden's novel, Sister Clodagh makes it clear quite early on, in her first meeting with Mr Dean, that theirs too is not a 'contemplative order' that lives in meditation and solitude. 'We're very busy people. Remember that here we are to open a hospital and dispensary and a school, for children and girls', she tells him.[28] But that is where the similarity ends, and the nuns themselves seem to be divested of any agency with which they started their mission. General Toda Rai invites them, Father Roberts, the nuns's supervisor, catalyses the mission, and then they are entirely dependent on Mr Dean when they arrive in Mopu. It worries Father Roberts that he cannot go with them at the first instance. When Sister Clodagh attempts to dissuade his fears, he replies crossly: "Yes, but you don't understand … You are going into primitive country, almost completely isolated …'[29]

The Loreto sisters had to contend with various male authorities in significantly more political ways than Godden's nuns. The latter too have their trials in this regard: Mr Dean is often far from supportive, if not downright discouraging, and they have to take on Dilip, a young-adult male pupil. But they seem only to be under the authority of Father Roberts, who largely supports them. He may have been modelled on the Jesuits that the Loreto sisters particularly sought the help of, ironically, the very order which had inspired Ward but which had wanted little to do with her in the seventeenth century.[30] St Xavier's School in Calcutta, founded by the Belgium Jesuits in 1860, is about a kilometre from the main Loreto convent, and so this alliance was strengthened by proximity. It was the Jesuits who supplied priests to administer

[28] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 33.

[29] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 27.

[30] Jesuits were opposed to Ward's society taking their name: in a letter to Papal Nuncio Antonio Albergati, Ward writes, 'they are unwilling that we use the same name or the same written form for our Rule'. Reproduced in Emmanuel Orchard, ed, *Till God Will: Mary Ward Through Her Writings* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 30.

the sacraments to Loreto in its early days, an essential feature for a convent that is not accounted for in the novel.[31] Loreto also had a relationship with a different order of teaching brothers, the Irish Christian Brothers. While these male orders provided Loreto with the kind of support and supervision that women's Catholic communities required, relations were not always agreeable. A note in the Irish Christian Brothers's records, for instance, reads, 'many nuns are disastrously stupid', written in correspondence addressed to the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin.[32] These relationships with male supervisors, therefore, prove far more contention at Loreto than in Godden's novel.

At times, Loreto nuns in India even openly sparred with their male superiors. Such battles included a time in the order's early years in Calcutta when the city's archbishop wanted the sisters to work in the local hospital, which they saw as a detraction from their pedagogical mission as well as hard, taxing labour. The archbishop threatened that he would not admit more nuns to profess unless the sisters pledged themselves to work in the hospital. In response, Mother Joseph, the superior general, put a complaint in writing and showed a copy to the archbishop before forwarding it to the Holy See. The archbishop reportedly begged Mother Joseph not to send the letter and promised to accord to her wishes about the hospital.[33] The sisters also petitioned for release from Vespers and from participation in the feasts of minor European saints, the given reason being that their increased pastoral duties made it difficult for them to gather as frequently.[34] They also petitioned to wear cooler

[31] Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 274.

[32] Dublin Diocesan Archives (DDA): Appended to the letter of Sister Mary, Rajputana Convent, 23/4/1913, Loreto Nuns, 1905–11, 'India', Box 347. Cited in Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 274.

[33] This story of battles over hospital work is contained in Colmcille, *First the Blade,* p. 45.

[34] DDA: Mother Mary Bonner to My Lord Archbishop, 5 September 5, 1906, Box 347. Cited in Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 274.

woollen habits in the summer in place of their heavier serge habits.[35] Loreto was increasingly able to negotiate such freedoms after Ward was officially rehabilitated by Rome in 1909, which meant that the order in India was able to affirm itself as a pontifical rather than diocesan. Thus, the Loreto nuns in real-life India did often successfully negotiate for women's rights to make decisions within the Catholic Church.

In comparison, Godden's nuns appear helpless, while the men who doubt them prove ultimately to be right. Once they are installed in Mopu, each one deteriorates, some devolving into negative stereotypes of feminine traits. The sister superior herself cannot stop thinking about Con, the man she loved in Ireland and longed to marry. Sister Philippa becomes obsessed with flowers and eventually asks to be transferred: 'I am a religious. I had forgotten that. I was putting my work before my religious life. I was losing sight of God in it. I was losing the spirit of the Order'.[36] Sister Honey is overly sentimental about the children. These nuns rather than engaging in theological and intellectual work seem to devolve into stereotypically lovelorn, frivolous or maternal women.

While all of Godden's nuns are deeply affected in some way or the other by the setting of Mopu and the palace as a space, the most dramatic fate is reserved for Sister Ruth, whose growing neurosis leads to her death and brings the story to its climax – hysteria and even madness as tropes being particularly associated with women, especially in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.[37] While specific evidence of Sigmund Freud's influence of Godden

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[35] DDA: Mother Mary Bonner to My Lord Archbishop. Cited in Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 274.

[36] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 160.

[37] Scholarship on hysteria, from the Greek word *hystera* meaning 'womb', the alleged medical condition given as a diagnosis to unruly women, is plentiful. While Freud's theories initially allowed for hysteria to also be present in men, all of his studies of hysteria were on women. He linked hysteria to a sexual event in childhood

is lacking, his ideas would have been available in her circles, and the character of Sister Ruth is certainly an echo of a tradition of psychoanalysis that disempowered and reduced women. Malevolent to begin with, Sister Ruth is portrayed as ill-equipped to cope with the repressive environment of a convent combined with the heightened one of Mopu. Right at the beginning, Sister Ruth's nervous temperament is apparent, as is the rivalry between her and Sister Clodagh foreshadowed, playing into the familiar trope that women cannot get along. As the nuns leave for Mopu on hill ponies, Sister Ruth is uncomfortable on horseback, screaming and fearful that her mount will bolt or kick. Meanwhile, Sister Clodagh 'sits her horse like a man', according to the grooms, with the ease of someone who knows how to ride.[38] Both the women are overconfident. Sister Ruth insists that the handleless wine cups in which the general's men serve the nuns tea on the way are made of jade rather than soapstone with the air of someone who always knows best. Mother Dorothea previously warns Sister Clodagh that Sister Ruth is a problem, badly in need of responsibility and importance. At the same time, she cautions Sister Clodagh to spare Sister Ruth some of her own importance: '[Sister Ruth] had come to them with a reputation for cleverness, but in the Order they had many teachers, some of them with high qualifications like Sister Clodagh herself, and Sister Ruth found that she was given only a junior teacher's work and she resented it'.[39] Since then, Sister Ruth had not been (mentally) 'well', and Mother Dorothea touts conventional colonial wisdom when she hopes that the cooler climate of Mopu will help Sister Ruth – orientalism and anti-feminism going hand in hand in this case. But her main reason for including Sister

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or to repressed sexual fantasies. See, for instance, Evelyn Ender, *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Andrew Scull, *The Disturbing History of Hysteria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[38] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 5.

[39] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 7.

Ruth in the mission is because she believes that being part of a smaller community would afford the young troubled nun that much-needed responsibility. She is sadly mistaken.

The local residents, including Ayah and Mr Dean, see through Sister Ruth immediately and she becomes known for being snake-faced or snake-like in another misogynistic stereotype, evoking Eve in the garden this time. Although she is initially as enthralled by the setting as the rest of the nuns, she is unable to deal with the pressures of being in an isolated outpost most of all. She is overwhelmed when more than thirty children pour into the school suddenly before the sisters have had a chance to settle down in their new surroundings, and lashes out: 'But I don't know what to do with them. We have nothing unpacked; there're too many of them and they smell'.[40] By the end, she decides that she dislikes them all as much as Sister Honey likes them. She suffers from severe headaches initially and, susceptible to wild tempers since she was a little girl, surges of anger. The headaches subside eventually but then she becomes wan and thin, silent and high-strung. As she finally confesses to the man himself, she falls in love with Mr Dean at first sight and finds herself acutely aware of his masculine presence on his visits to the convent, practically stalking him on such occasions. She becomes jealous of the bouts of camaraderie between him and Sister Clodagh. Yet, her growing fixation on Mr Dean remain unacknowledged even to herself, manifesting as 'only a deep stirring, a warm and happy feeling that she had never known before', until Sister Clodagh notices it and confronts her.[41] It leads to a showdown when she accuses Sister Clodagh of harbouring feelings for him herself and so placing her under surveillance and bullying her. She is afraid that Sister Clodagh is trying to catch her out so she can send her away from Mopu and him.

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[40] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 48.

[41] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 133.

Already tormented by her obsession with Mr Dean, she has a visceral reaction to Dilip, her student at the school, as he himself becomes sexually aware of Kanchi and begins turning up at the convent in one resplendent jacket after the other, reeking of the Black Narcissus scent that he purchases from the Army and Navy Stores. For this reason, 'Afterwards in the Refectory, [Sister Ruth] told the others and said: '"That's what I'm going to call him. It's a beautiful name for him. He's so vain," she mocked, 'like a peacock, a fine black peacock. I'm going to call him Black Narcissus.'"[42] Even as she disparages Dilip along racist lines, Sister Ruth fetishises him, and she is thus simplistically portrayed in terms of sexual repression manifesting in hostility.

She becomes more and more paranoid, displaying another Freudian symptom attributed to hysterical women, watching over her shoulder and suspecting Sister Clodagh of poisoning her. She weeps theatrically during her showdown with the sister superior. She passionately defends Mr Dean's plans for a temple-like chapel in Mopu after Sister Clodagh rejects them. When Sister Clodagh patronises and reprimands her for this in Mr Dean's presence, she loses control and attempts to fling an alabaster paper weight at her. Sister Ruth's madness comes to a head during the tense period following the death of the child for which Sister Honey is held responsible by the villagers and they turn their backs on the nuns. One evening at dinner, Sister Honey bursts into tears, and Sister Ruth snaps. She brings her plate crashing down and accuses Sister Honey of actually wanting a child of her own and Sister Clodagh of having feelings for Mr Dean, which she believes are not reciprocated because it is her whom he likes. She then escapes the convent and goes looking for the man. She finds him and declares her feelings, much to his shock and horror. He rebuffs her and she disappears through the night. Sisters Clodagh and Briony organise a search into the night for her. And as Sister

[42] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 141.

Clodagh frantically looks for her, ‘She thought then that [Dilip] was to blame for it all; that if she had never seen him or let him in[to the school], this would not have happened. He was the beginning of it all, he had put these fantastic ideas into the Sisters’ heads and had made them think that anything could happen. ‘Look what you did to me,’ she thought. ‘If it hadn’t been for you and your people I should never have thought of Con. You bewitched us all and I wish I had never set eyes on you’.[43] She finally berates herself for not heeding Mr Dean’s advice to leave before disaster strikes.

Sister Ruth appears in the morning as Sister Clodagh is ringing the first Angelus standing on the horse block on the precipice overlooking the gulf below with only a railing separating them. She tries to push Sister Clodagh over the edge but, in the ensuing struggle, goes over the railing herself. As Sister Clodagh has ‘a vision of her mad wet face against the sky’, Sister Ruth falls to a gory death.[44] The bamboos below had been cut until their ends were like the tips of a sword. Sister Ruth is pierced through the heart by one of these, a death that evokes Christian martyrdom but also the piercing of the phallus. If that is not enough, Sister Clodagh feels born anew. The entire experience of Mopu culminating in the dreadful death of Sister Ruth has a sobering effect on her too, and she is left with ‘no pretences, no ambitions and no pride’.[45] She writes to Mother Dorothea with a factual, childlike account of the events leading up to Sister Ruth’s death. Mother Dorothea senses her transformation, commends her for it and gives the nuns permission to quit their post in Mopu.

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[43] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 232.

[44] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 236.

[45] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, pp. 238–39.

They leave just as the rains break. The Christian grave in which they bury Sister Ruth is overtaken by the local rituals performed by the people to appease the *bhut* that they believe her to have become. 'Little ripe sly Kanchi' becomes Dilip's concubine, and it is suggested that, in due course, Dilip would make a caste and class-appropriate marriage while reclaiming the palace for housing his harem as the local lord.[46] The Ayah shuts the door on the nuns and the servants move on. After their departure, things go back to the ways they always were: 'In the village they would be glad and their lives would close over them, and this time they would be undisturbed to sleep and eat and work a little in the tea and orange groves, to eat on feast days and laugh and quarrel and go to market, to marry and get children and, when their time came, to die.'[47] Thus, Godden affords the nuns as much complexity as she does the Indian lands or its peoples. Although Sister Ruth appears to have been predisposed to mental illness, it is her time in the unrestrained setting of Mopu and the sexualised environment of the palace that jars with her teaching as a nun and drives her to madness. As a whole, especially through Sister Ruth, the sisters become a metaphor for the doomed enterprise of colonisation, and this figurative function seems to precipitate an anti-feminist portrayal of them.

By contrast, there is little readily available in the Loreto archive to suggest that nuns in India were especially susceptible to the kind of distress experienced by Sister Ruth. Whereas there are references to the women falling ill – the most of which suggestive of mental affliction occurred when one sister took to her couch permanently and another briefly became delirious – and even dying in the reports, there are none related to mental illness – madness among

[46] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 257.

[47] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, pp. 256–57.

nuns being presumably as uncommon as it was in general.[48] But there is a colonial record from 1900 of a 'lunatic' nun from Loreto, Lucknow.[49] Elisabeth Mac Erlean (perhaps Maclean), known in religion as Sister Mary Josepha, was reported by the superintendent, Office of Inspector General of Civil Hospitals N.W.P. Provinces and Oudh, to have been mentally ill for the past seven years and prone to violence in the last two. The authorities had been concerned that she might harm herself or the 'other inmates' of the convent if she had continued to stay there, and so she had been deported and admitted to a lunatic asylum in Belgium.

The short, official report contains no suggestion of or concern with the reasons for the sister's decline. Madness, in general, was not considered a good look for Europeans in India since the Company period, especially when it struck the poor or women of 'bad character' among them.[50] The colonial establishment considered deportation the best solution for the European insane in order to preserve the image of an infallible ruling class and to give them a chance to recover in a familiar, hence conducive, environment. But madness was also seen as a misfortune that could befall anyone – a nun of middle-class origins and as well as a prostitute of the working class. Mac Erlean was identified as a British subject, but her case was considered an unusual one, so much so that the provincial authorities felt the need to inform the Government of India, and the impression one gets is of it having been dealt with expeditiously, even thoughtfully. The lunatic asylum in Belgium 'was selected as affording all the advantages specially needed to the case', these being: 'Kind surveillance by a religious

[48] LAD: IND/31, Annals of Loreto House, Calcutta, First Epoch, 1840–42, p. 3.

[49] UP State Archives, Lucknow: Judicial Criminal, File No. 28B/1017, Box No. 1: Lunatic Elizabeth MacErlean (Maclean?).

[50] Although it is concerned with the Company period alone, see, in general, Waltraud Ernst, *Mad Tales from the Raj: Colonial Psychiatry in South Asia, 1800–58* (1991; repr. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2010).

sisterhood', 'moderate charges' and 'easy distance from Ireland', the headquarters of Loreto and presumably the sister's homeland. She had been conducted to the asylum by Mother Francis Paul O'Brien from Rathfarnham.

This rare account of a historical nun's madness could not be further from the derangement of Sister Ruth – only partly as a result of the difference in nature between a prosaic official report and a novel. Godden sets out to portray Sister Ruth as the racist nun who is bad and so goes mad. As Amanda Coe, the writer of the recent TV series adaption of *Black Narcissus*, observes in an edition of the book: 'It isn't accidental that the most overtly racist character is Sister Ruth, the troubled, 'snake-like' young nun whose inability to co-exist with the messages Mopu brings about her own desires – for sexy, damaged Mr Dean, for beautiful Dilip Rai, and possibly for Clodagh herself – tips her into madness … Whether in society or sexuality, a self that denies its shadow – its black narcissus – is doomed like Sister Ruth, to break down'.[51] And, in the process, Godden falls into a colonial trap, as well as anti-feminist one. The belief persisted among the British that the white race tended to physically and mentally degenerate in India, albeit over generations, and the experience of India included a climate and abstract dangers that could play havoc with the minds of vulnerable Europeans, especially women among them, and induce madness in the most extreme cases. This belief, surprisingly, seems to be more reflected in Godden's novel than in the records of Loreto's nuns.

Yet another area in which *Black Narcissus* produces more anti-feminist tropes than the historical archive is in that of girl's education. Since Sister Clodagh's declaration of intent to Mr Dean, which includes setting up a school for girls, the desire to educate girls is in fact downplayed. Mr Dean himself mocks those intentions when he says: 'You will be doing me a

[51] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. ix.

great favour when you begin to educate the local ladies, Sister'.[52] In the end, the school's main product seems to be Kanchi, who is far more interested in Dilip than studying. As opposed to the scant evidence of what Godden's nuns were actually teaching in Mopu, we have a clear idea of what the Loreto nuns sought to teach their pupils. Shortly after the Irish nuns arrived in Kolkata, a prospectus was put out as soon as 3 January 1842 announcing the offerings of 'writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, with the use of the globes, chronology, history, French, and plain and fancy needlework'.[53] Drawing and painting, music, including the harp, and dancing were extras. Fees for boarders were Rs 25 per month, and for day students, tiffin included, they were Rs 12. On 10 January 1842, Loreto House opened its doors to the first sixty pupils. Over the years, Loreto would spread throughout India, establishing both schools for middle-class girls (in the early days primarily Eurasian ones) as well as charity schools for girls from poorer families such as Loreto, Sealdah.

The Loreto schools were adamant in their promotion of women's education. While Loreto might have started out by offering ladylike arts such as needlework, it later became one of the first women's colleges in India to win access for its senior girls to the Calcutta University exams.[54] Its programme of education extended not only to the elite but also to girls from poor families. The high fees paid by middle-class Eurasian girls in schools in Darjeeling, Simla, Lucknow and Calcutta served to help poorer girls in outreach programmes aimed at basic literacy and numeracy.[55] These included the boarding school for orphans in Entally, where Mother Teresa worked in the 1940s. Indian girls from Loreto schools were expected to share some of their education with their own communities for one afternoon a week in accordance

[52] Godden, *Black Narcissus*, p. 34.

[53] Colmcille, *First the Blade*, p. 23.

[54] Allender, *Learning Femininity*, p. 284.

[55] Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 275.

with Ward's own philosophy.[56] In the early 1890s, Loreto received a bequest from two wealthy Eurasian women, the Misses Bruce, which carried the proviso that it be used to help educate poor Eurasian girls in Calcutta, thus serving to provide a kind of social mobility, if only for mixed-race girls.[57] Loreto even got around an English law that restricted school attendees to 25% Indian girls by promoting education as medical care and so was able to offer education to more girls of Indian descent than most other schools during the Raj.[58] Even today, Loreto maintains strong social-inclusion programmes such as the Barefoot Teachers Training Programme, which enables underprivileged women to become teachers.[59] Loreto thus advanced Indian's women's education in ways that the more casual efforts of Godden's nuns do not.

This emphasis on education is also reflected in the description of the local community of Asansol in Bengal in the Loreto record, which includes the following observations:

> they do not always appreciate the advantages of education for their girls and would prefer to have them helping in the house. Consequently there is a continual fight to get the girls to attend regularly … their truancy is applauded by their parents. We hope they will by degrees learn to value education for all the advantages it can bring them

[56] Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 289.

[57] Allender, *Learning Femininity,* p. 273.

[58] LAD: Loreto Mission Letter, 1938, Loreto, India Box 53 and Mary Catherine Joseph to (?), 3 December 1937, India Box 106. Cited in Allender, *Learning Femininity*, p. 287

[59] See John Flatt, *Loreto Day School of Sealah* (lulu.com, 2006) for more about Loreto's social inclusion programmes.

in later life, a diminution of the wedding dowry being not the least of the gains, for every girl must have a dowry. Education is accepted in part payment'.[60]

Such observations contain the familiar orientalist view of Indian inferiority – the stereotype that Indian parents do not care about girls's education – but they also reveal a strong investment in giving girls access to education. Indeed, for all of the colonial state's civilising rhetoric about giving Indian women rights and providing them with education, it made little contribution to the founding of schools and colleges, while missionaries, in general, played a leading role.

The Loreto nuns' responses to India often couple self-interested information gathering with more feminist interests. Like missionaries anywhere else in India, nuns would have had to engage with local landscapes and related social, cultural, political, economic and legal structures as they spread and established centres in different parts. To that extent, missionaries contributed to the colonial project of knowledge production, especially since they were often the first to venture into remote and uncharted areas. There is a sense of this in Godden's novel as the sisters set out to learn the local language in Mopu and have to depend on Mr Dean and a boy called Joseph Anthony, the son of the 'Madrassi' cook of the general, who effectively serve as their local informants. On the one hand, the Loreto archive is surprisingly short on involved descriptions of the different Indian settings where the nuns went – the vivid sense of place and space which marks the novel is largely lacking, and, once again, the difference in genre is only part of the reason. On the other, unsurprisingly, the longest passage of this kind pertains to Northeast India, one of the main spheres of missionary activity, involving both Europeans and Americans, leading to largescale conversions.

[60] LAD: IND/10, Mission Letter, St Francis Xavier's Asansol, p. 16.

Having said that, it was in the matriarchal society of the Khasi tribe of what is now the Indian state of Meghalaya in the Northeast that the nuns took a special interest, quite possibly because it spoke to the women-centric nature of Loreto. In A Short Description of Assam (of which the region was then a part), pertaining specifically to the Khasi tribe, the sisters dropped the tone of othering that they otherwise often adopted to engage in anthropological observation. In this place, they noted:

> Their social organisation presents one of the most perfect examples still surviving of matriarchal institutions, carried out with a logic and thoroughness which, to those accustomed to regard the authority of the father as the foundation of society, are exceedingly remarkable. Not only is the mother the head and source and only bond of union in the family but also the owner of real property and through her alone is inheritance transmitted. The father has no kinship with his children who belong to their mother's clan; what he earns goes to his own matriarchal stock, and at his death goes to [crossed out] is deposited in the cremlech [?] of his mother's kin. Respecting ancestral land, the youngest daughter or youngest female descendant of the youngest female heir, is virtually heir to entailed property. It may perhaps be ascribed to the pre-eminence accorded by the khasis to the female sex, that successive censuses have shown that the women of this race considerably exceed the men in number …[61]

Although the description is prefaced by this line, 'The khases who have adopted Christianity are generally cleaner in person than non-Christians, the women dress much better and have an air of self-respect about them', the passage suggests a certain admiration for a society in which women wield power.[62] After all, this was what Loreto since its seventeenth-century

[61] LAD: IND/15, Account of the Foundation of Loreto Convent, St. Mary's Hill, pp.16–18.

[62] LAD: IND/15, Account of the Foundation of Loreto Convent, St. Mary's Hill, p. 15.

inception had aimed for. The historical feminist aims of this institution meant that Loreto had a more complex relationship with India than did the fictional nuns of Godden's novel. They did engage in the same othering, on racial and religious grounds, of their Indian pupils. Yet, they were also invested in advancing the education and rights of women. It is perhaps this complexity that enabled the Loreto sisterhood to outlast independence whereas Godden's nuns retreat in less than a year.

Conclusion

Scholarship has long tracked the role of white women in the oppression of women of colour. Theories of intersectionality, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw, have broadened the scope of feminism to examine the interlocking systems of oppression that triply marginalise, for example, Indian women during the colonial period.[63] Recent work, moreover, has shown how white women were often complicit in the oppression of women of colour both in the slave trade in the United States and in the colonial world.[64] While it is tempting to see British white

[63] The body of scholarship on intersectionality is too vast to cite here, but the foundational theorist who coined the term is Kimberlé Crenshaw. See, for instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989), 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp.1241–99.

[64] See, for example, the recent work of Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers in *They Were Her Property: White Women As Slave Owners In The American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), which shows that slave-owning women directly engaged in and benefited from the South's slave market. For references more particular to India, see Jawad Syed and Faiza Ali, 'The White Woman's Burden: from colonial "civilisation" to Third World "development"', *Third World Quarterly* 32(2) (2011), pp. 349–65; Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, eds, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1993). See note 4 of this article for more sources on gender and imperialism.

feminists as engaged in anti-colonial struggles, a closer look at the evidence suggests that this was not always the case. In this essay, we have seen how the author Rumer Godden cast India in an orientalist a light and how a quite radical order of nuns from Ireland often enforced regressive racist standards in India.

Studying nuns in particular sheds important light on the intersections of race, gender and imperialism, since these women, as Catholics living in a Protestant governing state and as women outside the marriage market, occupied a liminal role within the Raj. This liminal role is doubtless one of the reasons that there has been so little scholarship on women religious in colonial India; it is also a reason that they should be studied. While the nuns in Rumer Godden's novel prove to be fairly one-dimensional figures and largely uphold orientalist, colonialist and even anti-feminist stereotypes, the Loreto nuns prove far more complex. The very aims that in Mary Ward's time had proved so radical and expansive for women often became instruments of racism and intolerance towards local cultures in India. At the same time, the feminist drive of Ward's vision remained in the desire to educate young women and uphold their independence. The historical record, therefore, makes it difficult to typecast nuns nor to put them into neat boxes of 'regressive' and 'progressive'. This article makes a case for studying nuns in colonial India both to gain insight into the history of this particular group of women and to offer broader insight into the ways that gender and colonialism could operate as mutually constitutive discourses both reinforcing and undoing each other.