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Brydon, Lavinia (2014) Navigations and Negotiations: Examining the (Post)Colonial Landscape of The Assam Garden. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 11 (2-3). pp. 172-188. ISSN 1743-4521.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2014.0202>

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Navigations and Negotiations:

Examining the (Post)Colonial Landscape of *The Assam Garden* (1985)

Lavinia Brydon

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to foreground the idea of the garden as a cinematic space predicated on its ability to accommodate movement, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Fuelled by Doreen Massey and Karen Lury's exchange in the 1999 Space/Place/City themed issue of *Screen*, especially Massey's assertion that investigations of the cinematic city should not be at the expense of other sites of interest, I use *The Assam Garden* (Mary McMurray, 1985) as a British case study to explore the garden's inherent mobility. Importantly, I consider this spatial quality in both aesthetic and ideological terms. Drawing inspiration from a variety of scholarship, including Martin Lefebvre's investigation of the cinematic landscape (2006) and Edward Said's theories of Orientalist discourse (1978), I thus question the Assam garden's function as setting, spectacle and social space and, in particular, whether it can transcend the initial meanings ascribed to it by the fixed male gaze of a colonial official. By connecting the garden specifically to the large-scale movements of colonial and postcolonial journeys I ultimately seek to persuade that this space is fundamentally cinematic and deserves further examination.

Keywords:

Gardens, mobility, (post)colonialism, landscape, spectacle, social space, gender, *The Assam Garden*

In 1999 the geographer Doreen Massey was invited by film and television scholar Karen Lury to participate in an informal discussion that introduced the Space/Place/City themed issue of *Screen*. Near the start of the exchange Massey, who had sealed her status as one of the most influential thinkers on space with the publication of ‘A Global Sense of Place’ (1994), acknowledges that the representation of cities are especially appealing to film scholars because cities provide ‘an intense form of (certain aspects of) spatiality’ (Lury and Massey 1999: 232) which film has the powerful ability to convey. However, she is quick to add that the resulting investigations, including Giuliana Bruno’s work on film as *flânerie* (1997), should not be at the exclusion of film’s other spaces. As Massey sees it, the mobility afforded by the city space can be observed elsewhere. A brief nod to other powerful forms of movement – namely imperialism and colonialism – adequately supports her claim. Moreover, her choice of examples both puts the city’s insular movements in sharp perspective and points to the raced nature of *flânerie* in that the exotica of the city that the *flâneur* enjoys is underpinned by the broader movements of global trade which go unacknowledged. Imperialism and colonialism are ‘massive mobilities’, Massey argues, which reach ‘beyond, way beyond, the city’s little worlds of *flânerie*’ (Lury and Massey 1999: 231). It is this succinct rationalisation of the city’s cinematic importance and the suggestion of its problematic masking of other important mobilities that leads me to investigate the distinctive (post)colonial landscape of *The Assam Garden* (1985).

By focusing on the Indian-styled garden of Mary McMurray’s debut film I join a growing number of film scholars interested in ‘the “non-urban” or “more than urban”’ (Fish 2007: 3) spaces of cinema, both in terms of their aesthetic and ideological potential. Indeed, it is my intention to use this case study as a means of emphasising the garden’s suitability as a cinematic

space more generally in that, as a landscape, it affords ‘aesthetic contemplation and spectacle’ (Lefebvre 2006: xviii), but, as a *lived* space, it shows and shapes the subjective experience of social relations. In its ability to accommodate and advance numerous movements, exemplified by the (post)colonial journeys seen in *The Assam Garden*, I consider the garden as inherently cinematic, a location which makes manifest Myrto Konstantarakos’ introductory assertion to her edited collection *Spaces of European Cinema* that ‘space is not merely the setting of stories’ (2001:1).

The understanding of the garden as an intensely mobile space with connections to the grand and persuasive movements of colonialism goes against its current appeal as a sanctuary: a means of escaping, rather than engaging, with the wider world. This preference for the garden as a refuge or retreat, a space of subtle and small-scale movements, has certainly been addressed in numerous British films of the last few decades, perhaps most notably in Andrea Arnold’s *Red Road* (2006) and in the work of Mike Leigh. Yet, I need only point to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew to convince that the garden’s movements can extend far beyond the physical or perceived borders that help define this particular space (for a comprehensive definition see Hunt 2000) and are historically tied to the immense mobilities of imperial and colonial acts. Moreover these gardens in South West London not only provide a clear example of how British gardens may reflect the movements prevalent to nineteenth century colonialism but, also, their reconfiguration in a postcolonial world. From its once central position within a global network of gardens serving the interests of the British Empire by staffing botanic expeditions and advising on the translocation of plants, Kew is now successfully recast as a delightful tourist attraction and important heritage site, the latter confirmed by its inclusion on the UNESCO world heritage

list in 2003. Noting the garden's ability to function as a space of transition and transformation proves especially useful with regard to the landscape of *The Assam Garden*, opening up the question of whether it can progress from an exotic spectacle, shoring up a colonialist appropriation and revisionist view of British Empire, to a postcolonial site of hybridity, carving out a space of feminine understanding across ethnic and national divides.

The Assam Garden is a modest drama, which charts the friendship of a lonely and easily irritated former memsahib, Helen Graham (Deborah Kerr), and her quietly perceptive Indian neighbour, Ruxmani Lal (Madhur Jaffrey), over the course of one summer. Instrumental to the development of their, initially difficult, relationship is the garden created by Helen's recently deceased husband. Regardless of the very different climate of England's South-West counties, the former colonial tea planter laid out the garden according to the designs of those found on the Indian subcontinent, replete with banana trees, rhododendrons and magnolias. Helen does not take much pleasure in the exotic flora that her late husband favoured but, on his death, feels obliged to realise his long held ambition to have the garden featured in *Great British Gardens* magazine. It is during one afternoon of watering and weeding that she meets Ruxmani, an immigrant who lives in a nearby development. During their brief exchange, it transpires that Ruxmani entered the garden as it provides a shortcut to the village where she is seeking medical help for her ill husband. While Helen is displeased with Ruxmani's presumptions that the garden doubles as a public footpath, she agrees to phone a doctor on her behalf. On leaving, Ruxmani comments on the garden's Indian style and wistfully refers to her birth country's beauty. Thus, it comes as little surprise that when she returns a few days later to thank Helen, she offers to help cultivate this outdoor space. With both women now engrossed in gardening chores, the

similarities between the former coloniser and colonised begin to emerge. This includes their respective uneasy adjustment to Britain in the 1980s and, concordantly, a shared nostalgia for India of the 1940s. For Helen and Ruxmani, traversing the space of the Assam garden becomes a navigation and negotiation of past and present; of a colonial and postcolonial world.

Despite being Kerr's final film, a successful six week run at a West End theatre on its release and favourable reviews - 'one of the most remarkable post-war debuts in British Cinema' (1985: 32), according to Bill Baxter in *Films and Filming - The Assam Garden* has prompted little scholarly interest. This may, in part, be explained by Mary McMurray's unfulfilled potential as a feature film director and, likewise, the subsequent career path of the screenwriter, Elisabeth Bond, who now works as a visual artist. But it is certainly fuelled by the film's limited availability. Initially screened on Channel Four in 1987 and shown again in 2010 as part of a Kerr retrospective at the British Film Institute, Southbank, *The Assam Garden* has yet to be released commercially on either DVD or VHS format. Yet, its thoughtful consideration of Britain's colonial history and legacy ensures that it cannot be easily dismissed or ignored by those interested in British film culture. As Amy Sargeant observes in her overview of films made in the 1980s with similar thematic content, *The Assam Garden* is noteworthy due to its 'non-celebratory treatment of Empire' (2005: 300).

The Assam Garden's careful, conscientious approach to the question of British Empire is signalled by the subdued opening sequence. This charts the grieving widow's silent car journey from the levelled, green English countryside that contains the cemetery in which her husband is buried, through the sloping roads of an old English village, to her arrival at the dense, tangled

vegetation of the Indian-styled garden that surrounds her home. It is an economical introduction to the film's protagonist; it serves to subtly recall the journey she made decades earlier as the wife of a colonial tea planter whilst also communicating her present sense of numbed loss. Indeed, the selective shots that comprise this sequence make clear that *The Assam Garden's* central concern is Helen's ability to deal with endings. That this extends beyond the death of a husband to include the demise of the British Empire is ascertained once the garden comes into view.

The significance of the Assam garden as a space that not only contributes to the 'dynamics of the narrative' but also serves to 'play an important part in the development of a variety of considerations, both ideological and artistic' (Konstantarakos 2001: 1) is marked by a sudden switch in camera angle during the opening sequence. While the camera remains with Helen almost exclusively throughout her car journey, offering point of view shots and close ups that make palpable her sadness, towards the end of the route it moves from the car's interior to grant a spectacular view of her house and the large garden that adjoins it. With an assortment of dark green foliage rising majestically in the foreground, the garden presents a strikingly different image of landscape to that of the cleared and settled countryside of England (see Hoskins 2013) from which Helen's journey originated. At this moment the garden strongly resonates with Martin Lefebvre's discussion of cinematic landscapes, specifically 'the "intentional" landscape', in that its visual construction leads the spectator to contemplate the exterior space in and of itself rather than as a background to narrative events' (2006: 19-59). However, the garden's position within the sequence also raises the question of whether it *belongs* within England's countryside, suggesting the possibility of a '*lived* space that we possess—or would like to possess' (Lefebvre

2006: xviii). Indeed, its contrast to the English rural landscape serves to engage the viewer in much the same way that India's vast and varied geography intrigued early colonial explorers and, later, those who benefitted from their exploits such as Helen's late husband. Nestled amidst a familiar English landscape, the Assam garden presents a quiet oasis of fascinating otherness.

The exotic splendour of the Indian landscape must have proved equally exciting to many colonial wives. As Anne McClintock points out, films such as Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985) 'peddle neocolonial nostalgia for an era when European women in brisk white shirts and safari green supposedly found freedom in empire: running coffee plantations, killing lions and zipping about the colonial skies in aeroplanes' (1995: 15). However, *The Assam Garden* makes clear, through Helen's numerous references to India's unbearable heat and poor sanitation, that this did not include her. She was never the willing tourist, enthusiastically accompanying her husband in his foreign travels, in thrall to the idea of otherness, the romance of the foreign. This alternative position also emphasises the film's interest in gender as an essential component of the colonial experience, including how the binary oppositions between West and East discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* adhere to and, thus, advance a 'peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world' (2003: 207). Moreover, *The Assam Garden* can be seen to support Said's argument that the 'male power-fantasy' (ibid.) of Orientalism desires 'fixity', that is to have an indisputable, unwavering and controllable definition of the 'Other'. In his words:

the male conception of the world, in its effect upon the practising Orientalist, tends to be static, frozen, fixed eternally. The very possibility of development, transformation, human movements—in the deepest sense of the word—is denied the Orient and the

Oriental. As a known and ultimately an immobilised and unproductive quality, they come to be identified with a bad sort of eternity (ibid.: 208).

The first indication of this thematic concern occurs shortly after Helen enters her house for the first time in the film. As the widow comes to stand by a photograph of her late husband, Arthur (Iain Cuthbertson), McMurray shifts the audience's attention to the Indian objects and photographs that decorate this English country home. Presented in a series of close-ups, these include a photograph of colonial architecture; a Kirpan, the ceremonial dagger worn by baptised Sikhs and a marble box adorned with an Indian figure. That they indicate 'static male Orientalism' is underlined by the fact that the photograph of Helen's late husband, in profile, precedes the series and is positioned on the screen's left side, allowing the first item to literally appear before his eyes in the form of a dissolve. These objects are initially positioned, then, as the prized (in both senses of the word) possessions of a colonial official.

Yet, as the sequence progresses it also suggests the possibility of a more fluid, feminine conception of the world. This is achieved by, firstly, the camera's increasing distance from Arthur's colonial point of view; secondly, the use of dissolves to introduce the objects and, thirdly their location within the domestic space. The objects that represented Arthur's view of India become, with his demise, dislocated from his colonial gaze and its associated meanings. Indeed, seen through Helen's point of view, these objects now stand as much for Arthur's life in a postcolonial Britain as they did his previous life in colonial India. The emerging disparity between the objects and the powerful, immobilizing colonial gaze once bestowed upon them is enhanced by the subtle transitions that McMurray uses during the sequence. An indication of

time passing, the dissolves situate Arthur's colonialist perspective firmly in the past. Finally, positioning the Indian objects amongst the non-India items of the home - such as a trophy that lies beneath the photograph of colonial architecture - reduces their distinctiveness. They are not overly stylised to display difference, nor are they isolated from the objects of the Western world. The objects we encounter in this home are framed as the heterogeneous detritus of a life, rather than the fixed symbols of a culture. As such, the sequence offers an early hint that the film seeks to dilute, if not complete dispel, the historical binary oppositions between West and East. *The Assam Garden* is thus driven by a feminine desire for postcolonial 'fluidity', rather than colonial 'fixity'.

The film's interest in the female's negotiation between the colonial and postcolonial perspective is more acutely observed once Helen enters the garden, the most obvious manifestation of her late husband's need to know and contain the 'Other'. This Indian-styled environment follows in the tradition of the earliest gardens of the Near East, which sought to confirm their owners' worth by displaying the treasures seen and, subsequently, seized whilst abroad. Moreover, in creating the Assam garden, Arthur appears to have controlled and condensed a landscape that is frequently described as overwhelmingly vast (Said 1994: 241-248), supporting and strengthening his position as a hero. Sue Thornham explains, with reference to Gillian Rose's work (1993), that heroes 'establish their wholeness through their penetration and conquest of space and landscape' (2012: 128). Thus the consequences of Helen becoming active within the garden, moving from the traditional female domain of the home into this exotic realm, is to disrupt or reduce this function of the landscape. The original fixed meanings it held

as the product and purpose of a male Western authority are loosened and an opportunity opens up for the making of other meanings, the telling of different stories.

Of course, Arthur's wish to have the Assam garden brought to the public's attention via a specialist magazine suggests the difficulties in quickly or completely dismissing the bias of a male perspective that forever celebrates, rather than critiques, colonial enterprise. For him, the garden was an achievement, demonstrating the Westerner's mastery of unfamiliar Indian flora that reflects and, arguably, continues the 'geographical violence' inflicted upon India (Said 1994: 271). Moreover, in his desire to communicate the unique topography of the Indian subcontinent to the readers of *Great British Gardens*, Arthur reduces the Assam Garden to a product with a fixed price. As W.J.T. Mitchell argues, various practices (for instance, the business of real estate and package tours) make landscape a marketable commodity. Though its symbolic value is theoretically limitless, landscape expresses itself in a specific price: an object to be purchased, consumed and even brought home in the form of souvenir images (1994: 15).

Although Arthur's exotic treasures are only being *prepared* for public display within the film's fictional world, they are already *on display* for the film's audience, suggesting that film, like photography, is a fetishistic practice that promotes landscape as a marketable commodity. Deep focus and high angle shots dominate the garden scenes, offering the spectator aesthetically-pleasing views of the tropical flora, sensuous landscapes and explorations which are repeatedly prioritised over narrative progression or character insights. Seemingly devoid of narrative purpose such shots drew criticism from American magazine, *Variety* whose reviewer notes that

‘(t)he film also is spoiled by Mary McMurray’s direction... Random camera movements are often poorly motivated and compositions are frequently artless (Anon 1988: n.p.).

However, McMurray’s preference for shots which journey through and best display the luxuriant garden, rather than follow the characters’ actions, also suggests a feminine aesthetic. Freed from eventhood (Lefebvre 2006: 22) - in this instance the characteristically male activities of colonial expeditions and enterprise - the landscape can start to be seen differently. It is increasingly able to accommodate the alternative modes of knowledge and social structures put forward by its two female occupants, recalling Thornham’s discussion of landscapes and female authorship and subjectivity in *What If I Had Been The Hero?* (2012: 125-153).

The concern to present an alternative cinematic landscape helps explain McMurray’s decision to depict Helen’s first foray into the garden as a meandering journey. It refuses narrative cinema’s traditional prioritisation of the male gaze which frames and fixes the female form (Mulvey 1975) including, in this context, the feminised landscape of the Orient (Said 2003) and, instead, introduces the audience to the haptic pleasures of female movement. Thus the camera tracks Helen closely as she crosses the lawn that lies immediately outside the house, but ceases its pursuit once the more exotic elements of the garden’s design come into view. Indeed, Helen is allowed to completely disappear from the frame as the camera self-consciously peers over untamed shrubbery to grant a high angle shot of the extraordinary garden that extends below. Moments later, the small figure of Helen comes into view at the bottom right of the screen, her inconsequentiality marked by her size and, correspondingly, the ease with which she disappears amongst the magnificent foliage of the Assam garden. The subsequent cut to a medium close up

temporarily restores her narrative centrality but, as she ventures further into the garden, she again wanders from sight. The audience is now left to contemplate the large leaves of a banana tree that fill the screen. This carefully composed sequence makes manifest Laura Marks' assertion that 'although cinema is an audio-visual medium, synaesthesia, as well as haptic visuality, enables the viewer to experience cinema as multi-sensory' (2000: 22-23). Here, the camera's fluid movements and selective close-ups work with the garden's mobilities so that the audience, like Helen, can both observe and *absorb* the site's multi-sensory delights.

My understanding of McMurray's decision to unashamedly indulge in the garden's sumptuous scenery via Helen's wanderings undoubtedly emphasises the film's progressive possibilities. However, it must be acknowledged that at this point their fulfilment is not assured. Helen's first walk in the garden lacks direction, conveying initial 'misgivings about her ability to carry on' (Goodman 1986: 18) and, accordingly, allows Arthur's restrictive vision of the garden as an appropriated colonialist landscape to linger. This permits the Assam garden to be read in more conservative terms, ones that engage with Andrew Higson's observations regarding the heritage films that frequented British film production in the 1980s (2006: 91-109). The first spectacular shots of Helen walking amongst foreign plants certainly show 'a greater concern for characters, place, atmosphere and milieu than for dramatic, goal-directed action' (ibid.: 99) that Higson identifies in dramas, such as Merchant-Ivory's *A Room with a View* (1986). In doing so, *The Assam Garden* problematically allows fixed ideas about the past to remain inscribed on the Indian-styled landscape, even as it suggests the possibility of other meanings being forged in the present. Through high-angle shots that indulge the opulent splendour of Indian plants, Britain's colonial past can become the 'object of a public gaze' (ibid.) and, accordingly, bury the

landscape's transformative quality. To appropriate Higson's words, it becomes a frozen excess of sorts, 'not functional, not something to be used but something to be admired' (ibid.).

In this way, *The Assam Garden*'s seductive setting can prompt nostalgic impulses akin to those experienced whilst watching the 1980s heritage films. The garden's striking design captured and complemented by the dazzling high angle shots enthralls the audience, arguably encouraging a basic emotional attachment to the colonial impulses which made it possible. An early flashback sequence also seems to serve, even heighten, this blinkered nostalgia as it shows the stroke that caused Arthur's death occurred while (and possibly because) he dutifully tended to the garden. The implication, here, is that a death arising from colonial pursuits is dignified. Mitchell helpfully explains the audience's problematic embrace of the garden's colonial roots: 'Like imperialism itself, landscape is an object of nostalgia in a postcolonial and postmodern era, reflecting a time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny in an unbounded "prospect" of endless appropriation and conquest' (1994: 20).

From this appraisal, it is also tempting to suggest that the garden's splendour makes McMurray's film culpable of what Salman Rushdie perceives to be the decade's 'Raj revisionism', which served as the 'artistic counterpart to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain,' (1984: 130). The garden's exoticism certainly has the capacity to propagate a number of dubious notions about history, chiefly: 'The fantasy that the British Empire represented something "noble" or "great" about Britain; that it was in spite all its flaws and meanness and bigotries, fundamentally glamorous' (ibid.: 141). Yet, McMurray employs numerous tactics to ensure that the audience's affectionate recollection of British rule in India, if

experienced, is short lived. These depend on foregrounding the garden's inherent mobility and, thus, its ability to progress its meaning; it is presented as a landscape to be both looked at and *moved* through.

Notably, the movements prompted and developed by the Assam garden do not revolve around a large cast. They centre upon just two people: Helen 'the image of old insolence' (Powell 1985: 51) and Ruxmani 'apparently subservient but effectively manipulative' (Goodman 1986: 18), though there are brief appearances by a boy looking for a shortcut into the village, a nameless council official implementing a hosepipe ban and, towards the end of the film, the representative from *Great British Gardens*. It is the close attention given to the spatial navigations of these two women that helps *The Assam Garden* eschew any charge of 'Raj revisionism'. Initially challenging, often disorientating and sometimes painful, Helen and Ruxmani's garden walks efficiently foreground the social tensions and negotiations of a postcolonial Britain.

Without doubt *The Assam Garden*'s interest in movements that emphasise the labour required to produce landscape is an important marker of its progressive aims. After the lavish introduction to the garden's visual splendour the audience are quickly made aware that the strange and striking Indian plants are not necessarily synonymous with glamour. Instead, their presence within the unsuitable English soil and exposure to the disobliging English climate means that they require the constant attention of Helen who dutifully moves across the estate weeding, watering, digging, draining, pruning and mowing. In this way, the film reminds the audience that landscapes are always sites of production (work) before they are sites of exhibition

(pleasure); as Henri Lefebvre suggests of space more generally, they are ‘*produced* before being *read*’ (1991: 143). That these gardening pursuits result in Helen’s unglamorous wardrobe of old jumpers, heavy gum boots and faded gardening gloves, also bolsters the film’s feminist credentials, foregrounding as it does the physical and mental strength of the normally marginalised colonial wife as well as the female star who portrays her.¹

Landscape as the product of social relations and struggles is best revealed when, one afternoon, Helen falls on the slippery steps of the garden’s top lawn and is knocked unconscious. Awaiting Ruxmani’s rescue, the image of a bruised English woman sprawled awkwardly on the grass stands in complete contrast to the image of a relaxed Arthur standing in the original Assam garden, shown in flashback moments earlier. In this framed moment of the imperial age, the gardening efforts of the British tea planter in India are exposed to be nothing more than a leisurely walk, whilst four accompanying female servants assume the laborious task of scouring the lawns for weeds on bended knees. In juxtaposing Helen’s gardening difficulties and injuries with this image of domination and servitude, McMurray expertly brings the hidden social and gendered relations of landscape into sharp relief and, specifically, exposes the falsity of any image which represents the British Empire as something “‘noble’ or “‘great” [...] fundamentally glamorous’ (Rushdie 1984: 141).

Indeed, support for *The Assam Garden*’s colonial gaze further dissipates once its fluid camerawork and unusual camera angles are compared to other Western films about (Britain’s) imperial quests in the East, which notably include Kerr’s previous films *Black Narcissus* (1947)

and *The King and I* (1956). In Ella Shohat's discussion of the graphological tropes of such films, she notes that the camera tends to assume the position of the Western protagonist at all times:

Reproducing Western historiography, First World cinema narrates European penetration into Third World through the figure of the "discoverer." [...] In most Western films about the colonies (such as *Bird of Paradise* (1932), *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The King and I* (1956), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and even Buñuel's *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1954)) we accompany, quite literally, the explorer's perspective [...] heroic status is attributed to the voyager (often a male scientist) come to master a new land and its treasures, the value of which the "primitive" residents had been unaware. (1997: 27)

As detailed previously, the first shots of the Assam garden do not subscribe to this pattern. The 'foreign' land in this film is first presented from a detached high angle shot, refusing to prioritise any perspective that can be attributed to the Western explorer including that of Helen, who has yet to free herself completely from her husband's position. Paradoxically then, the camera's initial objectivity forms part of the film's strategies to disturb the '*positional* superiority' (Said 2003: 7) that is at the heart of Orientalism. In other words, the presentation of the garden as an exotic spectacle overlaps with an assessment, and reassessment, of its social function and, in doing so, opens up the possibility of relationships between West and East in which the Westerner does not always have 'the relative upper hand' (ibid.).

A further shift from, or resistance to, the traditional Western focalization of foreign landscape occurs once Ruxmani enters the garden, though this is not evident in her initial exchange with Helen where both women serve the established opposition between superior colonial 'Self' and inferior colonised 'Other'. Although the elderly Indian woman only ventures into Helen's private land in a bid to find medical assistance for her husband, she immediately and unquestionably assumes guilt when the unfriendly widow confronts her. From this subservient position, Ruxmani now pleads with Helen to use the telephone, adding that it would be preferable if Helen actually put in the request for a doctor. Concerned about the possible negative reaction to her broken English accent and its impact on the request, Ruxmani's simple appeal neatly lays out the difficulties of being an immigrant in a foreign land and, by extension, the difficulties in challenging the power relations which have long deemed colonised peoples as backward, lazy or ignorant. Here, she knowingly but unwillingly pays tribute to the subjective truth suggested by Marx that Said uses to open his discussion on Orientalism: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented' (2003: xxvii).

Although Ruxmani's awareness of her subordinate position within the power structure established by colonial discourse may well contribute to its lasting authority, it also reveals a limit to this authority. Indeed, her proactive defence against the underlying negative assumptions about her status as an immigrant and her Indian 'otherness' is laced with subversive persuasions and possibilities. Her parting words to Helen after the telephone call make manifest this native resistance to colonial discourse. Looking at the garden she comments on the beauty of its Indian design, a design that Helen does not yet appreciate. In the simple lines, 'Your garden is Indian garden. India very nice country', Ruxmani reverses the traditional representation of the

Westerner as an admirer of foreign lands and the colonised native as the ignorant bystander, insensitive to their many attractions.

Ostensibly Ruxmani returns to the Assam garden days later in order to thank Helen for her help in acquiring a doctor. However, her eager questions regarding the garden's exotic design and her subsequent offer to help with its cultivation suggest that the immigrant seeks to be located synesthetically and synecdochically in her native India. By walking in the Assam garden, Ruxmani rightly anticipates an immediate and direct experience of her country of birth. From the shade of the larger plants to the smells of the colourful blooms, the Indian immigrant revels in bodily sensations that the English countryside has long denied her. There is even the brief promise the garden will provide a taste of India through its banana trees, though she is quickly informed that they have never borne fruit within the English soil. This small disappointment does not undermine the totality of Ruxmani's lived experience, which intimately and irrevocably links sense of place to sense of self. The indelible connection is explained in phenomenological terms by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who writes that the 'body is the fabric onto which all objects are woven and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of [...] comprehension' (1962: 273). With these words in mind, Ruxmani's later declaration concerning her garden visits, 'That's why I come here, for India. I like India' is effectively a statement concerning her desire to better understand and appreciate her own displaced body and fragmented identity.

Beyond (or because of) Ruxmani's synesthetic and synecdochic connections to India, her garden walks harbour deep rooted political implications. As Said's work shows, place is

always intensely political and the intersections between place and politics impact on identity in various ways. In his words: ‘Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings’ (1994: 6). Thus, in *The Assam Garden* Ruxmani’s traversal of the Indian style garden is both a means of recalling home and forms part of a culture of resistance, which aims to ‘reclaim, rename and reinhabit the land’ (ibid.: 273). As Said explains: ‘For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of the locality to the outside; its geographical identity must therefore be searched for and somehow restored (ibid.: 271).

Without doubt, these political aims are complicated by the early actions of Helen, who struggles to find an alternative role to that of ‘the colonising outsider’ (ibid.). Informing Ruxmani how to water the Indian plants, for example, allows the colonial belief that only Westerners really know the Orient to persist. Yet, the demands of the garden soon see the two women moving in unison, working together and, subsequently, developing a solid friendship. As the screenwriter, Elizabeth Bond, notes, ‘the garden as a creative environment, allows the two women to work side by side and for their roles to change and cross over and to interweave’ (2011: n.p.). In the course of this transition, the ‘geographical violence’ of colonial movements – the conquering and charting foreign lands – is thus recast to speak for the ferocity of effort required to (re)build an identity and relationships in a postcolonial world.

The clearest expression of the collapse in the traditional colonial dichotomy between Western authority and non-Western subservience and its replacement by a more flexible

arrangement occurs when Helen falls on the garden's steps. As discussed above, she is knocked unconscious by the fall and must await Ruxmani's rescue. The Indian immigrant duly arrives, helps to carry Helen indoors and proceeds to dress her wounds. In her new found position as carer, Ruxmani has assumed a role traditionally reserved for the Western woman exploring the non-Western world. As Shohat explains, in Western cinema colonial narratives typically contrast the male scientist hero with the 'feminine' actantial slot of educator or nurse (1997: 60, n. 21). In *The Assam Garden* Ruxmani's embodiment of this role resonates perhaps more powerfully due to Kerr's casting. In nursing Helen, Ruxmani puts in question the audience's memory of Kerr in her previous roles as the carer in *Black Narcissus* and *The King and I*, thus, encouraging a more ready acceptance of the postcolonial alternatives put forward by this film.

Appropriately, the sudden dissolution of the accepted feminine position of Western *carer* and non-Western *cared for* gives rise to a candid conversation between the two women, encompassing such difficult topics as the nature of marriage, the impossibility of having children as well as the problems of immigration and the fluidity of identity. Ruxmani confesses to Helen that she longs to return to India whereas her husband seems set on staying in his adopted country, arguing that he now considers himself an Englishman with a British passport. The admission crucially leads Helen to consider the similarities, rather than differences, between her and the Indian neighbour as she later admits that she too found life in her adopted country difficult whereas her husband wished to stay there. Importantly, this type of intimate exchange now continues through to the film's end, frequently located outside as the two women take rest from cultivating the garden. Both in these moments and during the shared gardening tasks, the sense of an equal partnership emerges. Indeed, this balanced friendship is reflected in and ultimately

responsible for the garden's success when it is appraised by the representative, Mr Philpott (Alec McCowen), from *Great British Gardens*.

The scene in which Mr Philpott visits allows Helen to tentatively articulate her acceptance and appreciation of the garden's beauty and the many influences from which it is formed. Defensive of her new found gardening pleasures, she rebuffs potential criticism before the assessor has even stepped into the garden: 'If you're a purist you won't like it I'm afraid. We've stuff from all over'. From a theoretical perspective, Helen's admission of the garden's non-Indian (or specifically non-Assamese) elements is not simply a protective disclaimer; it is an admission of the multifaceted nature of all socially constructed space and, specifically, the transition of this once fixed colonial landscape into a postcolonial site of hybridity. It proves that Helen has finally relinquished all traces of the colonial 'Self' that sought to know, define and categorise. This collapse of the traditional colonial model is perhaps best evidenced by the final shots of the film where Helen stands alone in the garden, positioned as a figure *in* the landscape rather than an *outside* authority. Significantly, the camera moves further away from this scene in a series of medium long shots, a technique that not only refuses but also reverses the progressively tighter close-ups, which mark the traditional Western focalization of the non-Western landscape. Here, the garden becomes 'un-fixed'.

Arguably, it is the 'un-fixed' landscape at the end of *The Assam Garden* that secures and seals the friendship between Helen and Ruxmani. As the two women sit side by side in the garden that they have worked tirelessly to improve Ruxmani informs Helen that she has finally persuaded her husband to return to India, gently adding that Helen should think of her Indian

friend when working in the Indian garden. The word ‘friend’ is repeated in the card that Ruxmani leaves behind, laid on a garden chair awaiting Helen’s return from answering the doorbell. The carefully chosen term shows that the Indian woman has no doubt about the nature of her relationship with Helen, developed within and represented by the intensely fluid and flexible space of the garden. In contrast, it is the still ‘fixed’ landscape at the end of E.M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* that denies the British headmaster, Cyril Fielding, and the Indian physician, Aziz, their friendship. Foster’s characters are moving towards this outcome but are, as the landscape apparently metaphorically suggests, some way off: ‘the earth didn’t want it [...] “No, not yet” and the sky said, “No, not there.”’ (1995: 421). In the postcolonial world of McMurray’s film the Assam garden’s acceptance and facilitation of the friendship between an English woman and her Indian neighbour suggests that the Indian landscape now says, ‘Yes, yes now’ and ‘Yes, yes here’.

The Assam Garden’s ending thus perfectly demonstrates the transformative power that is made possible by the garden’s ability to accommodate numerous movements. Moreover, the close investigation of *mise-en-scène*, framing and editing demonstrates that the cinematic garden, with its intense expressions of colonial and postcolonial mobilities, operates as a paradoxical space of oppression and resistance. Notably, this ability to express the contradictions of the postcolonial process finds resonances across the gardens of British national cinema both in terms of an exotic design inscribed on the English landscape as seen in *The Assam Garden* but also in terms of the English-styled gardens that feature in British cinema’s representations of once colonised landscapes. One next step then could be to investigate how the paradigm works for the gardens of the Anglo-Irish families in heritage films such as *The Dawning* (1988), *Fools of*

Fortune (1990), *The Last September* (1999) and, even, the more recent *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006). The importance of this task cannot be underestimated. As this article has shown, the garden has a privileged relation to the forms, feelings and mobilities of cinema and, as such, communicates the process of (post)colonialism especially well. Furthermore, *The Assam Garden* reminds us of other facets of the garden's cinematic value: namely its articulation of the gendered aspects of creating and representing space, its provision of cinematic spectacle and its support or subversion of the star image. The film also confirms the need for British cinema scholars to consider how the garden serves as a site and source of multiple meanings and mobilities across other British films.

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Note

¹ For Kerr the part offered a rare opportunity to display her versatility as an actress: 'I wanted to look not least like me or the character I've played so many times. People always expect me to be the same – pretty – pretty, charming and gentle.... That is an awful reign put on you if you have a certain look' (Kerrigan 1986: 12).

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