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## 5. Romance and Empire

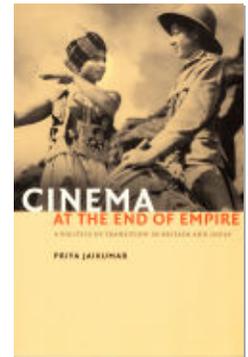
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(I take Romanticism to be the genesis of the modern, of the sensibility within which we are still living) in that modern art has typically felt itself to be constructed on, and over, the void, postulating meanings and symbolic systems which have no central justification because they are backed by no theology and no universally accepted code.

—Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*

Some people are born free, they can do what they like without concern for consequences. But you were not born free Harry, and nor was I. We were born into a tradition, a code which we must obey even if we do not believe. And we must obey it, because the pride and happiness of everyone surrounding us depends upon our obedience.

—Ethne Burroughs, *The Four Feathers* (1939)

## five \* ROMANCE AND EMPIRE

Imperial romance films of the 1930s are Scheherazadian tales told in the face of an abyss, creating grand narratives of legitimation for an empire and its sustaining vision while confronted with imminent dissolution. Northrop Frye has argued that just as the Bible may be considered the (Judeo-Christian) epic of the creator, romance is a “secular scripture” or the epic of the creature.<sup>1</sup> Without accepting Frye’s universalizing conclusion of romance as “the structural core of all fiction,”<sup>2</sup> we can still perceive its operation in late-imperial films that sacralize Britain by endowing significance to the very thing that was under threat of becoming ordinary, a mere nation among other nations.<sup>3</sup>

Imperial romances spin out secular equivalents of a theological universe. Men are driven to establish control over foreign lands in obedience to an unidentified higher command that is vaguely a composite of nation, lineage, honor, duty, and justice. Their enemies are not just plotting Afghans, violent African chiefs, or petty Indian rulers, but the abstract forces of sadism, greed, corruption, cowardice, perversion, and disorder. The colonized and their lands represent the white romantic protagonist’s “underworld,” materializing to test the (typically masculine) hero or to assist him in the real-

ization of his destiny. If colonial forces arrayed against the British Empire are suppressed by imperial realism, romance transforms them into myth.

A myth's fantastic elements and history's documentary solemnity appear to have little in common, but there is a refracted similitude. Freudian theorist Michel de Certeau situates historical writing in the context of Europe's encounter with the New World. No longer a mere chronicle of kings and invasions, the invention of historical writing depended on a secular notion of linear, forward-moving time and on scientific methods of description that identified the present as a causal product of a series of preceding events. Following de Certeau, this mode of narration facilitated (and was in turn validated by) Europe's assimilation of the New World as its primitive past. Historical writing, as part of the larger project of European enlightenment, demanded a differentiation between those who appeared to be progressing in time (the Self) from those who seemed to be stuck in it (the Other). Europe's modern historical consciousness was founded on a sense of transcendence and control: over the past, the irrational, the unknown, the newfound lands, the primitives, death, and all things placed outside the pale of knowledge and reason.<sup>4</sup> In this argument, then, history is a mythic rewriting of Europe as the technologically advanced, enlightened, masculine present, and of the New World as Europe's untamed, feminized, living past.

History's potentially mythifying impulses alert us *against* making easy distinctions between the registers of myth and history and present an argument for connecting myth to modern modes of description. Roland Barthes, on a more quotidian level, further expands the notion of myth by arguing at length that "the mythical is present everywhere sentences are turned, stories told (in all sense of the two expressions): from inner speech to conversation, from newspaper article to political sermon, from novel . . . to advertising image."<sup>5</sup> What makes British imperial romances fascinating in the context of this discussion is that they strain to combine popular representations of empire (myth as the *doxa* behind everyday practices of modern life, as elaborated by Barthes) while anointing those narratives with a sense of a sacred, higher cause (myth as the foundational story of a race or nation, as described by de Certeau) and endowing them with the referential weight of past events (myth as history reinterpreted).

Alexander Korda's film *The Drum*, for instance, looks like a Penny Dreadful and tells the romantic tale of a frontier adventure while making geographical and thematic references to British wars fought in Afghanistan during 1838 and 1878–1879. Similarly, *The Four Feathers* recalls the Crimean War

(1854–1856) and British campaigns in the Sudan under General Gordon and General Kitchener (1884–1885, 1896–1898) respectively. In this chapter as previously, I elaborate on imperial romance by using a paradigmatic film form to discuss its attitude toward the colonized and colonizing bodies, the colonial place, and the act of narration, beginning with the film's representational devices or the narrative and visual acts through which it transforms history into myth.

### *Imperial Description and Colonial Place*

*The Drum* depicts a fictional place called Tokot, bordering British India's frontier province of Afghanistan. A swift summary of events relating to the two Afghan wars will situate the film's myth in relation to the territory's historical significance. Afghanistan was a notoriously difficult terrain for the British government (an observation repeated in reports on the U.S. war in the same region in 2002). In 1820 the East India Company entered into a peace treaty with the ruling Muslim emirs of Sind, India, because they feared a Russian invasion through the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan and the Sind further south.<sup>6</sup> During this period, Dost Mohammed, the new ruler (or khan) of Afghanistan, ousted the previously Anglo-friendly Shah Shuja. Making the customary move of gaining politico-economic control over a territory by participating in domestic conflict, Sir William Macnaghten of the East India Company offered military assistance to Shah Shuja and marched a British Indian army of occupation to the area. The cost of maintaining a British residency and an army in the mountainous regions consumed surplus income generated from Indian and Afghan treasuries, and a combination of the expense and the onslaught of an Afghan winter destroyed Macnaghten's armies. Dost Mohammed returned to his throne after a British war that had expended twenty-thousand lives and over fifteen-million pounds sterling. To recover the cost, the British invaded the fertile peasant community in the Sind, in contravention to their treaty, and posted Charles Napier as Sind's first British governor.

The second Afghan war was equally ill conceived. During Dost Mohammed's reign, the British followed a "butcher and bolt" policy to intimidate the independent Pathan tribes of the region. After Dost Mohammed's death, directions from the Tory home government under Benjamin Disraeli led to increased British presence in Afghanistan. By 1878, under British India's Viceroy Lytton, a British army occupied Kabul and Kandahar and Major Louis Cavagnari, the British political resident of Kabul, dominated puppet-king



11. Tokot's "verile and magnificent spectacle" in *The Drum*. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

Yakub Khan. On 12 September 1879, the Pathans assassinated Cavagnari and his army in their residency, resulting in a massive retaliation by the British army. Atrocities committed during this rampage and the expenses of a war that was longer and more wasteful than predicted resulted in the replacement of Lytton by Lord Ripon, the end of Disraeli's government, and a cessation of Britain's adventurist policy in the northwest provinces.<sup>7</sup>

So the frontier province of Afghanistan served as a good metaphor for the Raj's vulnerabilities. In *The Drum* that contentious territory becomes a symbol of the threats to the British Empire and of imperial valor in the face of danger.<sup>8</sup> Though set in its contemporary period of 1938, *The Drum's* plot evokes both prior Afghan wars. The film's British protagonist, Captain Carruthers (Roger Livesey), proposes to set up a protectorate in Tokot to prevent gun-running and insurgencies, planned by kingdoms extending from China to Afghanistan, against British India. Like the historical Louis Cavagnari, Carruthers establishes a residency in Tokot, promising peace in return for a subsidy for the region's ruler and his son, Prince Azim (Sabu). As soon as Carruthers leaves Tokot to get married, violence reigns in the new protector-

ate (much as in *Sanders*). Ghul Khan (Raymond Massey), the ruling Khan's brother, loathes the British and dreams of reviving a pan-Islamic empire. He murders his brother and attempts to kill his nephew, Prince Azim, who flees to Peshawar with his faithful servant Wafadar (Roy Emerton). Fratricidal Ghul then requests that Carruthers return to Tokot and deceitfully endorses the old treaty while setting a trap to slaughter the British regiment on the last day of Moharram. Though young Prince Azim, British ally Muhammad Khan (Amid Taftazani), and loyal servant Zarullah (Lawrence Bascomb) put themselves in danger's way to warn Carruthers, eventually it is the British governor's army from Peshawar that intercedes to save the day, restoring Tokot's British residency and Prince Azim's crown.

In addition to the film's plot, which incorporates details from both Afghan wars, Captain Carruthers makes an explicit reference to historical events during his second trip to Tokot.

CARRUTHERS: Do you remember Sir Louis Cavagnari? He was British resident in Kabul.

MAJOR: Yes, when was that?

CARRUTHERS: About sixty years ago.

MAJOR: A bit before my time! He was massacred with all his escorts, wasn't he?

CARRUTHERS: He walked into a trap with his eyes open. And so did Gordon.

MAJOR: Yes, but he got out of a good many tight corners before he was cut down in Khartoum.

CARRUTHERS: Exactly, and as a result of that, Kitchener conquered Sudan and we've had peace there for two generations. A not unusual preliminary to our establishing law and order is the murder of one of our representatives.

Whereas *Sanders* makes references to the real by using footage and recordings from Nigeria at some unspecified time of British occupation, *The Drum* and *The Four Feathers* are particular in their historical periodization. Like *The Four Feathers*, which inserts its narrative into Kitchener's campaign in Sudan and attributes the campaign's victory in no small part to the film's fictional protagonist, *The Drum* identifies Carruthers as a successor to the historical Cavagnari and Gordon. Here fiction is legitimated by its employment within historical memory, not by an embeddedness in documentary footage. The retrospective projection of Carruthers as one in a line of residents creates

a tradition of British colonial presence linked to king and empire, though exclusive privileges of trading and governance in India belonged to the commercial East India Company until the late 1800s. In the film's account, Carruthers is merely channeling his predecessors who sacrificed themselves for the greater cause of peace and legality. Actual historical facts and figures intervene to locate the fiction, while fiction inflates each fact into an abstraction. Abetting the rhetorical inflations of dialogue are the film's camera angles, color, and music, which raise each cinematic image to the level of a spectacle that interrupts our relationship with the referential real. If Sanders encouraged an illusion of transparency between image and world, *The Drum* excites our vision by exaggerating reality.

Brightly hued illustrations reminiscent of British pulp fiction from the 1800s frame *The Drum's* opening credits, recalling military adventure tales printed in the popular magazine *Boy's Own Paper*. An acknowledgement to the Indian ruler the mehtar of Chitral for his permission to film in the territory is followed by visual sequences that identify the film as a Kiplingesque narrative about the "Great Game" of empire, involving espionage and fraternal military societies. Accompanied by music swelling to the tune of "Rule Britannia" and dramatic drumming, the familiar spinning globe stops at an area marked as the Northwest Frontier, between India and Afghanistan, then dissolves as long pans take us to a "Tribal Territory" where snipers with machine guns shoot at Indian soldiers of the British army. The scene cuts to (a much older) Sanders talking to His Excellency the British Governor of India.<sup>9</sup> The men discuss Carruthers, who suspects an infiltration of ammunition into the Northwest of India. On cue, the scene cuts to Carruthers in disguise as a native, speaking a kind of artificial, antiquated English that connotes native-speak in imperial films. Presumably proving his Eastern credentials, Carruthers begs for food, curses, heckles, and passes unnoticed among the Pathans who inhabit the area. Under cover, he is slipped a piece of bread with an encrypted message about gun trading. Throughout the sequence, chaotic street sounds mix with the claps and chorus of male Pathan singers.

The then new technology of Technicolor photography redefines and enhances the colonial location. Most of the exterior shots of *The Drum* were filmed in Wales, with some footage from Chitral. In reality, Chitral was under significant government surveillance. Several British government files from the late 1920s and early 1930s indicate that the British were extremely suspicious of the possibility of colonial resistance in Chitral.<sup>10</sup> Though there does not appear to be conclusive evidence, the British India government was in-

formed of anonymous letters in Gurmukhi (the Sikh script) to His Highness the Mehtar, “urging him to murder all the British in Chitral.”<sup>11</sup> The government issued secret warnings to the mehtar, asking him to “not meddle in Afghan affairs.”<sup>12</sup> The files were confidential at the time, but such concerns must have been widely known, as they found their way into a commercial narrative set in the same location. Rather than exploiting the film’s immediate proximity to Chitral, Korda’s film exploits cinematic artifice by replicating the location in studio sets (designed by Vincent Korda, Alexander and Zoltan’s brother) shot in color (by George Perinal).

Against the norm of black-and-white film, early Technicolor technology brought a new dimension of signification that was exploited by animated shorts, musicals, and historical films, all of which delved into the realm of fantasy.<sup>13</sup> In *The Drum* color has the effect of overlaying a sense of exoticism, otherworldliness, and adventure to the narrative, as appreciated by several film critics of the time. According to the British journal *The New Statesman and Nation*, *The Drum* was “the first film to make one really grateful for colour.”<sup>14</sup> A “real money-spinner,” it was, in the words of the British *Film Weekly*, “a virile and magnificent spectacle, an outstanding achievement.”<sup>15</sup> The American *Motion Picture Herald* hailed it as a “spectacle melodrama.”<sup>16</sup> On its re-release in 1944 it was again celebrated for its photography “in brilliant Technicolor, fashioned in circumstances that pay exciting, breathtaking tribute to British rule in India.”<sup>17</sup> *The Cinema* called it an “army melodrama” providing “popular entertainment for all classes.” The film was said to have “colorful material developed on spectacular lines with glorious mountain scenery, artistic interiors, teeming bazaars, barrack squares, panorama of marching men, parades and martial music, culminating in a thrilling massacre sequence.”<sup>18</sup>

Prior to *The Drum*’s release as well, film critics commented on the aptness of Technicolor technology for films with colonial themes. A 1937 essay that discussed the subject of “Filming Eastern Subjects in Colour” commented, “The two-dimensional monochromatic cinema is unsuitable to subjects of an Eastern character. The ‘gorgeousness’ of the East, the popular idea of lavish splendour with which the average Western mind associates, say, India, is an association indissolubly bound up with colour. . . . With the evolution of a successful and practical colour system, however, a very different case presents itself. Something of the ‘unreality’ of the East is then available for the Westerner.”<sup>19</sup>

Orientalism finds luxurious scope in Technicolor. The journal quoted above imagines an India that resists monochromes, revealing something of

the “average Western mind” that links the place with unreal splendor. Color translates the colonial place in a manner commensurate with its marvelousness, preserving the fantastic aspect of India for a Western audience. Yet as a translation, Technicolor “produces strategies of containment” by fixing the colonial place within a familiar referential network of fantasy, domesticating India and rendering it legible.<sup>20</sup> The drama of articulation at play here, wherein color becomes the perfect medium that can both allude to and contain India’s excess, presents itself in every dimension of *The Drum*.

The double hermeneutic of a surplus (of beauty, thrills, threat, and danger) and its containment is visible at the level of visual, aural, and narrative representation. Myths about British heroism cannot be constructed without voicing every anxiety about its dissipation. To transform the site of colonization into a fantastic theater of primeval conflict between good and evil, the film exaggerates the East beyond proportion. Dramatic sounds cue the presence of colonial locations and persons, amplifying their visual strangeness with an equally distinctive aurality: Ghul Khan’s murmurs of an Islamic takeover intrude into the sounds of a British band; drumbeats emanate from a richly hued Tokot; gunshots herald Prince Azim on horseback. Sarah Street notes that sounds in *The Drum* are “used to signify the conflicting narrative themes which are to follow: native culture vs. British identity; Indian use of military technology vs. British policing of the Raj.”<sup>21</sup> In addition to underscoring the oppositions, sounds enhance the threat of violence swamping the British: most memorably, when Ghul Khan’s men fling Zarullah’s chopped head through the resident’s window, interrupting Mrs. Marjorie Carruthers (Valerie Hobson) at her piano singing “A Penny for Your Thoughts.” In the visual and aural conflicts between Christianity and Britain versus Islam and India, the latter begin to inch closer, suffusing British sounds and spaces, dwarfing them with danger.

Yet even as the colony acquires an overwhelming presence, its threat is delivered to viewers in well-worn forms. To this end, imperial romance films repeat key tropes from earlier traditions of literary romanticism. Saree Makdisi, Rajani Sudan, and others have carefully shown the interconnections between British imperialism, nationalism, and the literary romanticism of the 1700s and 1800s.<sup>22</sup> There was a historical concomitance between the emergence of a romantic imagination and Britain’s modernization through its ever-expanding imperial realm of industry, which fed the need to create inviolable, mythic, internal dominions (as in the works of Wordsworth, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Austen). In fact, imperial romantic adventure films also



12. White protagonists besieged by black bodies in the Khalifa's prison in *The Four Feathers*. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

bear a resemblance to Gothic romance novels of the eighteenth century, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Consider the following structure of the Gothic narrative as identified by Northrop Frye and Peter Brooks, famously repeated in Germany's 1930s expressionist films and in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series from 1937, 1954, and 1955.<sup>23</sup> The Gothic narrative begins with a decline in the protagonists' status. This may be a descent into a world of darkness, cruelty and labyrinthine plots, or a break in a protagonist's consciousness. The descent induces a change of identity (or a double identity with only the demonic double involved in the descent), and devices for escaping from this world often involve a sacrifice, magical helpers, and talismanic objects that restore memory and rightful status. The descent and ascent are polarized, and resolutions typically entail a strongly expressive and affective articulation of occult and antagonistic forces.

In imperial romances like *The Drum* and *The Four Feathers* protagonists enter a chaotic colonial realm. They are assisted by people of lesser rank (subordinates, native allies) or guided by talismans (the drumbeat in *The Drum*; the Senghali mark and the shaming feathers in *The Four Feathers*) during their submergence in danger or false consciousness. The colonial land and its people

expand to fill the antinomies of the Western protagonists while also providing them fortuitous assistance in fulfilling imperial destinies. Thus, the expressive devices of imperial romances—such as their use of color, music, and *mise-en-scène*; their concatenation of dramatic action; their use of characters as symbols—send mixed cues. The form’s hyperarticulation of opposing forces through exaggerated signifiers of the colonial place and powerful antagonistic people make imperial romances a fulfillment of the empire’s reactionary fears about the colony. At the same time, such dangers allow romantic heroes to prove their allegiance to higher codes of nation and empire, elevating colonial history into a form of reassuring myth. The imperial romance’s ambiguity lies in the protagonist’s submergence in a period of difficulty, when both equal and opposing forces confront each other. In these times of crisis, a melodramatic “desire to express all,” to act out all anxieties associated with the dissolution of empire surfaces, giving romances a potentially problematic relationship to the dominantly imperialist ideology of their narrative.<sup>24</sup> Just as film melodramas serve an “ideological function in working through certain contradictions to the surface and re-presenting them in an aesthetic form,” imperial romances call out all elements that threaten empire before affecting artistic reconciliations.<sup>25</sup>

White male protagonists of imperial romances appear to be governed by the logic of melodrama when they articulate their anguish at colonial expeditions. But a fiction’s *terrain* of action remains as important as its narrative mechanisms. Weighing the family and domestic space against a Western frontier or an urban jungle that are coded masculine, Laura Mulvey points out that whereas “the Western and the gangster film celebrate the ups and downs endured by men of action, the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, like the tragedies of Euripides, probing pent-up emotion, bitterness and disillusion well known to women, act as a corrective [to the overvaluation of men in patriarchy].”<sup>26</sup> Korda’s imperial romances overvalue men to the point of physically evacuating “female protagonists and women’s concerns” from their topography.<sup>27</sup> (Set in a warring province of Afghanistan, *The Drum* has no more than one British female who serves as a foil to the masculine narrative.) In this respect, imperial romances appear to share greater genre affinities with the Hollywood western.

In making and unmaking these genre analogies, I call less for transposing theories (of the melodrama, the western, and the empire film) and contexts (of Hollywood and Britain) than for comprehending national, racial, and patriarchal representations that deploy key qualities of melodramas and

westerns simultaneously. British imperial films resolutely disassociate the work of empire from the new British bourgeoisie, using the aristocracy as their class-surrogate to “deal generously with [white] male fantasy” of the wild, wild east.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the aristocrats are vicarious figures for imagining imperial collapse. British empire films of the 1930s and 1940s include dark visions of thwarted, suffering, hysterical, sacrificial, and almost effeminized white, masculine bodies. The social significance of such masculine melodramas to British society in the 1930s is illuminated by existing theorizations of Hollywood and British “women’s films” of the 1940s and 1950s, because the foreign frontier of colonial place functions ideologically and symbolically for the white male in much the same way as does the domestic sphere of family for the white female. The colony for the empire film’s male, like home for a melodrama’s female, represents an inhospitable terrain of denied desires, as well as a possible location for resuscitating self-worth to compensate for a lack of social and material power. The colonial place is accentuated as a symbolic playground for the Englishman’s passion, temptation, choice, victimization, transgression, and triumph during a period of declining political control.

Film theorists have noted abundant affinities in the mythmaking function of British imperial cinema and the Hollywood western.<sup>29</sup> First, British India’s northwest frontier province of Afghanistan or the camps and forts of British residencies in Africa are much like the imagined territories of the American West, because in these locations a wide cast of characters come into contact with each other, and their racial types, vocations, lifestyles, and values create symbolic conflicts resolved within the narrative. Second, both westerns and imperial films typically celebrate a racist and nationalist version of history. Social prejudice against ethnic white immigrants during the late 1800s made the American Northeast considerably less amenable to racially inflected nationalist mythmaking when compared to the Southwest.<sup>30</sup> Like the American West, colonial territories offered spectacular and dangerous locations for the portrayal of British heroism during late empire. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam contrast Hollywood westerns to U.S. films about the American Revolution to show commercial cinema’s disproportionate representation of America’s western expansion.<sup>31</sup> They note the genre’s propensity for a “condensed spatiotemporality,” by which they mean the genre’s obsessive return to specific historical events, which raises those events to iconic status and transmutes them into historical trauma.<sup>32</sup> In this aspect as well, British empire narratives overlap with Hollywood westerns.

The American western is convincingly argued to possess an ambiguity in replaying threats to the film's protagonist, and as metonym, to its nation. Critics note instabilities at the heart of the western, as a genre that defines national identity through explorations of its outer limits.<sup>33</sup> This structure of instability points to a historical link between the film genres of the western and the melodrama. Arguably, the generic forms of literary melodramas emerged in relation to the Anglo-European world's long passage from community-based feudalism to modern, capitalist, market-based individualism. As aesthetic expressions of America and Europe's internal redefinition during the expansion of capitalism, melodramas and westerns display narrative tropes of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, which itself harks back to an early period of revolutionary social change after the collapse of church and state following the French Revolution.<sup>34</sup> In twentieth-century Hollywood productions, both bourgeois forms once again offer an artistic matrix to rehearse new crises of social reorganization in America. As film critics note, in Hollywood westerns (most obviously in films like *Rio Bravo*, Hawks, 1959; *The Professionals*, Brooks, 1966; and *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah, 1969), the contradictory valuation of mercenary figures negotiates capitalism's rationalization of economic practices.<sup>35</sup> In Hollywood's melodramas (like *Stella Dallas*, Vidor, 1937; *All that Heaven Allows*, Sirk, 1955; and *Written on the Wind*, Sirk, 1956), familial and sexual conflicts serve as a receptor and descriptor of the desires, fantasies, and fears unleashed by a restructuring domestic sphere.<sup>36</sup>

This characterization of the two genres greatly simplifies them, but it allows two broad hypotheses: first, that film westerns and melodramas are critical aesthetic terrains for comprehending cultural and social change; and second, that these terrains are gendered by the societies from which they emerge, typically, through the western's underlying prioritization of a public display of action and a masculine textual address, as opposed to melodrama's preoccupation with private spheres of family, psyche, and emotion and use of feminine spectatorial address. Sexual difference is central to the narrative and visual economy of British imperial romances whose mechanisms of social signification overlap with these two divergently gendered genres. The cultural function of imperial romances can be clarified by the apparent conflict produced by its combination of two distinct textual and generic appeals.

In this sense, I am not repeating Rick Altman's important observations about the intrinsically contaminated nature of all film genres or the strategic genre-mixing of studios (to produce a "Western melodrama" or "Western comedy") but pointing to shared mechanisms of social signification across

the western and the melodrama that come together, in revealing ways, in an imperial romance.<sup>37</sup> In other words, at question is not how an empire film borrows from westerns and melodramas, but how a certain mode of imperial cinema uses the generic qualities of a melodrama and a western to mimic the romance of loss, submergence, endangerment, and victory, rehearsing a centrally modernist response to the shock of denuded sacrality. This is partly my investment in calling the form “imperial romance”: it retains a sensitivity to shared ideational substructures in cultural narratives and aesthetic forms from periods of radical social transition, but also permits historical specificity.

Masculinity and femininity are cognate mechanisms in the assertion of racial and national identities.<sup>38</sup> The melodrama of *The Drum* or *The Four Feathers*, which justifies the British Empire by erasing women and representing homosocial interactions between men who fight, endure, and sacrifice for each other, is a product of the same imperial patriarchy that exploits the melodramatic potential of female sacrificial figures to probe the collapse of colonial structures in *Black Narcissus*. In one sense, the women’s physical erasure from masculine romances appears to reinforce an imperial patriarchy. At the same time, though, the resulting all-male sexual address of imperial romance creates a strong sense of impossibility or fatality that clings to the personal relationships laboring to redeem empire.

Witness the first twenty minutes of *The Drum*. The film offers a barrage of scenes demonstrating alliances between Afghan and British men, here including a Scottish regiment of working-class, white subalterns. As the film’s entire cast of cross-race, cross-class “allies” are introduced, they reiterate the value of friendship in a manner that does not engage with the debate of freedom versus foreign rule, but displaces it onto a drama of personal loyalties. The final referent for their alliances, the British Raj, has a conspicuous absence of rational arguments in its favor. The vacuum is filled by the emotionalism of male friendships. As with most bourgeois fictional forms, the political manifests itself at the level of personal relationships in imperial novels and films, so that the colonial acceptance or rejection of British characters enact fantasies of reconciliation between Britain’s imperial past and the postcolony’s national future.

Modernist imperial fictions do not permit such reconciliations. E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* ends with a thwarted relationship between two men, the Indian Muslim Aziz and the Englishman Fielding. Aziz says to Fielding, “‘We shall drive every blasted Englishman into the sea, and then’ — he



13. A coalition of allies in *The Drum*. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

rode against him furiously—‘and then,’ he concluded half kissing him, ‘you and I shall be friends.’ ‘Why can’t we be friends now?’ said the other, holding him affectionately. ‘It’s what I want. It’s what you want.’ But the horses didn’t want it—they swerved apart; the earth didn’t want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single-file.”<sup>39</sup> The recalcitrance of the colonial place against all attempts at relational reconciliations between two races, most vivid in the modernist mode, is present in a different shape and form within the imperial romance. Initially, the negation of relationships that is so insistent in imperial modernism (the horses don’t want it, the earth doesn’t want it) seems absent in an imperial romance. But as the film unfolds, indications of the impossibility of (relational/political) reconciliations bring the romance close to modernist narratives. These interruptions come explicitly from powerful and vocal anti-imperial antagonists (like Ghul Khan) and, more subtly, from the powerlessness of native allies (like Azim).

Stylistic indications that intimacies between Azim and Holder, or Azim and Carruthers (like Aziz and Fielding in Forster’s novel) lack a future begin to associate imperialism with a yearning, an essentially unquenchable desire for a rapprochement between colonizer and colonized. Films like *The Drum* or *The Four Feathers* gesture toward relationships which lie at the limits of

the unthinkable, such as the intensely personal and potentially erotic interactions between men, and the voyeuristic display of Sabu (a young male Indian actor) for the film's presumptively white male audience. Implicit prohibitions against and transgressions of such portrayals offer a new optic on the power play between colonizer and colonized. Voluntary alliances between (colonizing and colonized) men in imperial romances create homosocial and homoerotic relations as an alternative bond against the threat of colonial revolution. The potential of such alliances both to validate and to threaten the identity of a heterosexual, white, and aristocratic England propels the ambiguous erotics of romance.<sup>40</sup> And the ambiguities of such relational negotiations can be linked to contemporary strains and shifts in Britain's politics, particularly to its need for a broad coalitional base of colonial and working-class allies, its desire for strong, redemptive images of white masculinity, and its acknowledgement of national vulnerability.

#### *Imperial and Colonial Identity*

Imperial realism's constructed coincidence between the film's central character and its hierarchy of meanings, as in the consonance in *Sanders* between the protagonist's subjectivity and the film's intertitles, comes untethered in the romance of empire. Imperial romances enhance the *fantasy* of spectacular identification—always a fantasy in that there is no guarantee of its exact approximation with textual mechanisms—because the visually seductive, extranarrative dimensions of shots dilute the “I” of the fictional protagonist and of the filmic narrator. As an absolute overlap between the protagonist's subjectivity and the film's diegesis weakens, characters accrue a symbolic and structural significance within a crosscurrent of other elements in the film. Consequently, though the romantic protagonist is symbolically central to the imperial narrative, unlike realist texts he is only a node within the film's network of meanings rather than its central structuring principle. To invoke Elsaesser's remark about melodrama, romances “have a mythmaking function, insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualised experience.”<sup>41</sup>

In *The Drum* the protagonist's story serves less as a focus than as a frame for the film's multiple characters. The hero's significance is further complicated by the star status of the film's actors, particularly Sabu.<sup>42</sup> In a trade journal in 1938 *The Drum* is advertised as “Sabu in Technicolor,” and he is said to “play



14. From a mahout to an international child star: Sabu in the publicity for *Jungle Book*. Courtesy usc Cinema-Television Library.

the lead.”<sup>43</sup> The Indian actor Sabu’s own rags-to-riches life reads like a fantasy tale: the orphaned son of a mahout (elephant caretaker) in the service of the maharaja of Mysore, he went on to become an international child star. Flaherty’s and Korda’s film crew discovered Sabu while shooting for a film that was to become *The Elephant Boy*. In *The Drum* Sabu (a.k.a. Sabu Dastagir and Selar Sheik Sabu) plays the role of native ally Prince Azim.<sup>44</sup> After achieving renown for his role in *The Elephant Boy*, Sabu worked with Korda on *The Drum*, *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940), and *The Jungle Book* (1942) with similar success. He eventually migrated to Hollywood and fought on behalf of the allied powers in World War II, also becoming something of a gay icon in the United States. When the British journal *Kinematograph Weekly* described *The Drum*, it listed Sabu, Raymond Massey, and Valerie Hobson as the film’s stars, with Roger Livesey getting a mention in the journal only after the film’s reissue in 1944, subsequent to Livesey’s fame with Powell’s and Pressburger’s *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943).<sup>45</sup> (A recent online source notes that A. E. W. Mason wrote *The Drum* specifically for Korda, as a vehicle for Sabu after his success in *The Elephant Boy*.)<sup>46</sup>

Livesey's lesser-star status at the time of *The Drum*'s release coincides with his cinematic character's greater susceptibility to the colonial place and its people. Carruthers is influenced and externally altered by the foreign territory and inhabitants. The land impinges on his body and psyche. Romantic protagonists adopt disguises at great risk to their selves, unlike Sanders, who barely stops smoking his pipe to deal with Nigerian unrest. The romance hero's visual subservience and narrative vulnerability is enhanced by a nostalgic sense of home that permeates the film, a sensibility accentuated by England's distance from the frontier colony. Typically represented by the Englishwoman but also by the English garden, manor, piano, and port, the ideals of domestic peace and stability are both a comforting dream and an endangered vision, threatened by the frontier.

Arguing that the story of exile lies at the heart European civilization, John Durham Peters traces a thematic link from biblical narratives to literary and philosophical romanticism. Quoting Novalis, a German romanticist, Peters notes that the two sides of romanticism are homesickness and being at home everywhere, a perpetual nomadism and exile characterized by a yearning for all that is ideal and perfect, symbolized by the home, the nation, the absent element.<sup>47</sup> In imperial romances, colonial travel reproduces a conservative relationship to one's nation, romanticizing it as a beacon of beatific virtues. *The Drum*'s use of sound further enhances oppositions between the frontier's danger and the comfort of upper-class British domesticity, indicating the place's hostile intrusion into the idea of a British home. The film's treatment of Ghul Khan provides one of the most interesting expressions of colonial intrusions into the British residency, in no small part because of Raymond Massey's performance. He steals every scene he is in and states facts that official Britain must refute. When Carruthers returns to Tokot with a large military escort, for instance, Ghul storms into the British residency on horseback to say, "Are these troops your escort, Your Highness. Or are they an army of occupation?" Ghul Khan's eloquent verbosity far surpasses other men, though the film and film journals of the time equate eloquence with Eastern treachery. Britain's *Picturegoer Weekly* approvingly notes that Mohammed Khan, a Muslim ally with an English education in *The Drum*, has dispensed with "Oriental preamble."<sup>48</sup>

The film presents Ghul Khan as too suave for the wholesome British, but the result is that he frequently overshadows others with his charm. Observe the following scene, which takes place in the British residency of Tokot. The English appear huddled, making the best of being at Ghul Khan's mercy. *The Drum* perfectly captures the isolation of the British in a location like Afghani-

stan. While scenes of the office and the ballroom at the Governor's headquarters in Peshawar are expansive, the English look cramped and beleaguered at their Tokot Residency. Into such a setting, Ghul Khan enters with complete self-assurance, flaunts his difference, singles out Marjorie, and flatters her to immoderation.

GHUL KHAN (bowing): In our country we have many orchards . . . the most lovely of all is now in the British regiment.

MARJORIE CARRUTHERS: What a lovely speech. Why can't you say things like that, Major?

MAJOR: Oh . . . well . . . I never could, you know . . .

GHUL KHAN: The western world, madame, refuses to learn our scant virtues, the chief of which is the grateful admiration of beauty.

Ghul, the antithesis of the silent native, is a composite of many enemies of the British Empire and of British imperial narratives. He is an educated native who uses his education to muddle the "inside/outside" categories of imperialism by demonstrating great ease in English social situations even while undermining them.<sup>49</sup> As a character, he is Hitlerian in his ambitions, making him an immediately recognizable figure in 1938. He tells his priests, "Victories are not gained by an ignorant rabble led by a fanatic mullah. They are won by an army marching to one man's order, fighting to one man's plan." Whereas the mullah gazes into a bowl of clear water to prophesy the future, Ghul turns to strategic planning and military cartography. But for all his propagation of rationalist methods, he is also openly an Islamic traditionalist.

Two sequences highlight the multiple terrors that Ghul's particular combination of traditionalism and conversance with modernity holds for the British residents. British ally Mohammed Khan and Carruthers plan a clandestine meeting in which Mohammed Khan hopes to tell Carruthers about Ghul's conspiracy to slaughter him and his troops. Ghul intercepts these plans, kidnaps Mohammed Khan, and takes his place at the secret rendezvous. To everyone's alarm, he returns with Carruthers to the British residency. The people at the residency are flocked around a fireplace.

GHUL KHAN (walking in): What a peaceful scene. An English island in our alien snows. The fire and the whiskey.

MARJORIE CARRUTHERS: A whiskey and soda?

GHUL KHAN: I wonder if Mohammed Khan would have had one. Still, why



15. Ghul Khan plans to revive a pan-Islamic empire in *The Drum*. Courtesy usc Cinema-Television Library.

not? With his English education and sympathies. Our religion forbids it, but that wouldn't disturb Mohammed Khan. That is, if he were in good health.

The second sequence, striking a similarly sinister tone, occurs when Ghul plans to ambush Carruthers. Carruthers is seated at Ghul's palace on the last day of Moharram, and they watch a woman dance.

GHUL KHAN: Why is it that when I was in London and Paris, the ballroom dancing always impressed me as something unspeakably vulgar and barbaric.

CARRUTHERS: Perhaps because Your Highness feels that women should never dance *with* men.

GHUL KHAN: Only for men.

CARRUTHERS: You think if they dance together, the man loses a great deal of his dignity.

GHUL KHAN: And the woman something of her chastity.

CARRUTHERS: We believe in the equality of rights.

GHUL KHAN: Equality of rights? Have you ever heard of a lamb persuading

the tiger to live in peace with him, and respect this equality of rights?  
Has the musket equal rights with the machine gun?

Ghul Khan comments on the British as if *they* were the exotic ones. Clearly, in overruling gender equality, Ghul represents the conservative boor. Women, only recently acknowledged as an electorate in Britain, were a safe community for the film to present as an example of British egalitarianism. Nevertheless, Ghul's secondary argument that only those in equivalent positions of power can determine equal rights carries a historical resonance. In the late 1930s, during World War II, Indian nationalists opposed both fascism and imperialism, and consented to support the British only if guaranteed democracy and independence in their homeland. In a film riddled with social hierarchies and spatial polarizations, Ghul's statements sound suspiciously like an Indian nationalist's refusal to discuss imperial Britain's talk of partnership when one side continued to define the terms.

Placed in a context in which it stands for the regressive, conservative position, a legitimate comment about inequality is thus invalidated—a strategy that is not unusual in imperial texts. In *The Four Feathers*, for instance, the film's protagonist Harry Faversham (John Clements) hands in his resignation to the North Surrey Regiment on the eve of the regiment's departure to Khartoum, where they are to assist Kitchener in his fight against the Khalifa. Faversham is disgusted at "the futility of this idiotic Egyptian adventure. The madness of it all. The ghastly waste of time that we can never have again." He goes on to raise economic and moral objections against the invasion: "I believe in our happiness. I believe in the work to be done here to save an estate that's near to ruin. To save all those people who've been neglected by my family because they preferred glory in India, glory in Africa, glory in China." Here Faversham sounds exactly like those who had criticized imperialism in Britain for over two decades. Listen to J. A. Hobson's economic argument against imperialism: "A nation may either, following the example of Denmark or Switzerland, put brains into agriculture, develop a finely varied system of public education . . . or it may, like Great Britain, neglect its agriculture, allowing its lands to go out of cultivation and its population to grow up in towns, fall behind other nations in its methods of education . . . in order that it may squander its pecuniary and military resources in forcing bad markets and finding speculative fields of investment in distant corners of the earth, adding millions of square miles and of unassimilable population to the area of the Empire."<sup>50</sup>

Faversham touches a nerve in Britain's domestic debates about empire,

but two factors negate his arguments. Faversham later confesses that he was deluded in placing his duty to home above his duty to “a crowd of African peasants.” His criticism of the war was merely a cover for cowardice, and it is this awful truth that he must atone for in the remainder of the film. The film’s timing also nullifies his position. Whatever the fictional referent, in 1938 all arguments for and against war were in large part aimed at Britain’s policies toward Nazi Germany. Until 1938, Neville Chamberlain’s government followed a policy of appeasement with Hitler, and there was great indecision about the value of direct aggression. *The Drum* would have been released just when the tide was turning in favor of war, when pacifism appeared to be a coward’s route. Grafting this context onto empire gives imperialism the weight of moral righteousness; Ghul is repeatedly presented as regressive in order to recuperate progressiveness for the empire. *The Drum* justifies British distrust of educated Muslims, of Indian political reformists who sought to invent indigenous forms of secular modernity, and of Hitlerian authoritarianism by combining caricatures of all these categories in Ghul Khan. Similarly, *The Four Feathers* vilifies anti-imperialism by making Harry Faversham’s internal weakness, his doubt and fear of war, the film’s key antagonistic element.

At the same time, Harry Faversham and Ghul Khan are their narrative’s central acknowledgments of difference. As a character, Ghul marks the presence of insurmountable difference in Britain’s empire. If he says more in defense of self-determination than Mofalaba ever did, Prince Azim—like Bosambo in *Sanders* but more poignantly—remains mutely involved in situations that reveal his secondary status. Early in the film, Azim attempts to show off his stature by staging an elaborate charade, ordering his own men to shoot at Carruthers and the British troops so that he may save them. Carruthers, like Sanders, sees through Azim’s game instantly. In a conversation that is the moral equivalent of Sanders’s reprimand to Bosambo (“Is that not a lie, man?”), Carruthers makes Azim promise that he will not indulge in such wasteful make-believe and will always tell the truth.<sup>51</sup> Much later, when Azim gets wind of Ghul Khan’s conspiracy to kill Carruthers, the dethroned prince rushes to inform the British forces at Peshawar. In a farcical set of scenes that serve no immediate plot-related function other than to emphasize the rungs of a diplomatic ladder and the exaggerated ceremony at each rung, Azim undergoes repeated frustration as he attempts to warn the British governor of Ghul Khan’s plan, only to find that no one in the British army believes him.

As Azim meets a British army sergeant stationed in Peshawar, then the

colonel, and finally the governor, the contrast between the little half-naked boy and the formally dressed officers gets more exaggerated. These sets of scenes are “excessive” within the film’s narrative, as they stand out in their iterations (each officer of each tier behaves the same way and says the same thing). The film legitimizes the governor’s misgivings by making the native emissary so young, but the governor’s reluctance is based on a mistrust of Azim’s intentions and a belief that he could not be selfless or truthful. Such elements, including the attempt at humor with each repetition, mark the narrative’s difficulty in accepting the native informant’s credibility without compromising its fundamental position of mistrust against native characters. Indians in this film may be narratively and visually significant, but they are finally impotent. Despite Azim’s closeness to Carruthers at the interpersonal level, he must acknowledge that the British officials “did not believe me.”

An imperial romance’s mythmaking confronts narrative impasses because the dramatic conflict of the film is markedly between two contradictory principles governing the British nation—its imperialism and its liberalism. The empire’s enemies and allies (here, Ghul Khan and Prince Azim) are focal points of a symbolic nexus through which oppositions between the promised inclusions and actual exclusions of empire are represented and imperfectly reconciled. Most often the narrative relevance of these imagined characters is limited to the role they play in accommodating conflicting ideologies. Thus, Ghul Khan’s death removes an inconvenient reminder that imperialism cannot coexist with assertions of complete colonial independence, and Azim’s reinstatement affirms that empire and colonial nationhood can coexist only when colonial subjects accept their role as recipients of imperial charity. That Carruthers believes Azim in a way that the British governor and his staff cannot, however, signals discrepancies within the imperial system. We are briefly aware that cooperation between Carruthers and Azim does not extend beyond them, because Azim’s word carries no weight with the British State. Azim’s impotence identifies a problem in the reconciliation of empire with reciprocity, when their fundamentally fallacious equation is not evenly sustainable by an imperial text.

### *Erotics of Imperial Romance*

Sabu’s eroticization by the camera adds another crosscurrent of signification to his character Azim’s imperial function. Ella Shohat points out that homoeroticism “can simultaneously permeate homophobic colonialist texts,” par-

tially as a byproduct of the erasure of women that permits intimate all-male relationships.<sup>52</sup> At this tantalizing point, Shohat shifts her attention away from the possible pressure such homoerotic deviations might place on a colonial film's politics, focusing instead on colonial cinema's fulfillment of heterosexual fantasies. She argues that in a film like *The Sheik* (Famous Players-Lasky, 1921), the dark male body represents the white masculine id, giving the white male license to see his repressed passions and desires expressed in exotic locations. Examining the same film and figure, Miriam Hansen provides a different reading of desire. She notes that Rudolph Valentino is simultaneously responsive to female fantasies (given that his fan discourse was marked by female desire and sexual difference) and to traditional patriarchy (because Valentino, as the object of desire, fulfils fantasies of female subjugation and abuse). Hansen argues for a more complicated notion of spectatorial identification in cases where women are aligned with the desiring look and desired men are endowed a liminal sexuality. In this instance, Valentino controls and dominates the virginal female, but he is also feminized and dominated by the film's vamp figure, and his excessive, self-destructive romanticism weakens his heterosexual, masculinist coding.<sup>53</sup> As Hansen shows, the spectatorial sadomasochistic rituals unleashed in films set in "other" lands reveal not dominant sexual binaries of men desiring women or women desiring men, but a more ambiguous "deep blue sea of polymorphous perversity."<sup>54</sup>

The male worlds of *The Drum* and *The Four Feathers* offer few opportunities for a "straight" coupling between the desiring look and the object of desire, so that the brown male body is eroticized (in *The Drum*) and the white male body victimized (in *The Four Feathers*) without any corresponding reevaluation of a female gaze. While such a predominantly masculine address in the film does not preclude complex spectatorial involvements, it does make the erotics of male imagery conditional on an adoption of the feminine as part of masculine role-play alongside a marginalization of the real female. Following the all-male textual/sexual politics of imperial films, Sabu's beautified dark body as Azim in *The Drum* and Captain Carruthers, Harry Faversham, and John Durrance's vulnerable or tortured white bodies in *The Four Feathers* make interesting studies in contrast.

In *The Drum*'s imagery feminine desire does not solely actuate Sabu's glamorization. Narratively and visually, the Scottish drummer boy Bill Holder (Desmond Tester) provides the softer complement to Azim's story.<sup>55</sup> Over the course of the army's residency in Tokot, Holder and Azim become close



16. The friendship of a prince and a drummer-boy in *The Drum*. Courtesy USC Cinema-Television Library.

friends despite their differences in race and social position. Holder composes a drumbeat for Azim that the young prince uses as his secret code, and Azim wants to *be* Holder, a drummer boy in the Scottish regiment. But they trade tunes more easily than roles, because a brown prince cannot pass for a white drummer boy.

If, following Judith Butler's argument, gendered (*and* racialized) bodies have "no ontological status apart from various acts which constitute their realities"—an observation that is undeniably true of celluloid bodies—then the circumscriptions of Azim's corporeal reality can be sketched in the following ways.<sup>56</sup> His body can be fetishized in a British film that keeps him shirtless for half its playing time; it *cannot* become an anonymous white body, because it has less racial transferability than a Carruthers or Faversham who can "go native" at will; and it *can* get physically proximate to a working-class white body. The raced and classed valuation of each body permits them circumscribed ambits of social interaction and defines their visual potentialities. Sabu is legitimated as an object of voyeurism because his exoticism is easily commodified and feminized within an imperial film's image regime. Thus the most memorable glamour shot in this film is reserved not for Mrs.

Carruthers but for Azim, as he sits atop a wall under the moonlight with Holder. The intercut shots show Azim aglow in Holder's admiration ("You're a blinkin' marvel Azim!"; and at an earlier point: "Anything that's mine's yours."). The sequence is composed of medium and close-up shots in a film in which the woman is typically depicted via medium and long shots, giving greater intimacy to the Sabu-Holder relationship and a higher erotic charge to Sabu's image.

While the feminization of the native male body within an orientalist visual economy is commonplace, I place it among several maneuvers that collapse the distance between colonizer and colonized to grasp the film's tentative redefinition of imperial relationships. As Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty propose, ostensibly mainstream texts flirt with queerness, creating complex encounters between such texts and their readers and temporary interruptions to dominant, heterosexist ideologies.<sup>57</sup> I want to hold on here to both dynamics: the unusual proximity the film permits between two male bodies, and its persistently discriminatory visual treatment of the brown as opposed to the white male, which reinvests the image in dominant ideology.

Prem Chowdhry discusses the uproar in India over the film's obsessive focus on Sabu's dark skin, which was considered incongruous and not "authentic" in someone playing a member of the fair Pathan race.<sup>58</sup> In addition to marking his difference from the other characters, the film exploits Sabu's skin as beautiful. Like the female body, Sabu's body is attractive because filmic devices endow greater spectatorial investment in the image. He is softly lit, backlit, alternatively overdressed or semi-naked, frequently glistening. (It is hard to resist noting that in *Black Narcissus*, Sabu's character pleads earnestly with the nuns, "You don't need to count me as a man!") John Justin, Sabu's co-star from *The Thief of Baghdad*, remarked that the actor had a "wonderful smile, most beautiful body," something a male star could say only about a young male colleague of color without putting his own heterosexual masculinity in jeopardy.<sup>59</sup> To use the language of psychoanalysis, in Sabu's films and in the extracinematic universe supporting his filmic persona, the dark figure's difference is disavowed by fetishizing or overvaluing his beauty. Simultaneously, phobic recognitions of difference are transferred onto the finally eliminated body of Ghul Khan in the film. In visual terms, Sabu's feminization maintains him in a position of subjugation while admitting an erotic susceptibility of the camera and audience to his image. Thus historically, a commercialized pull of fascination with the native's image is concomitant with admissions of imperial vulnerability to subject lands and peoples.

Mechanisms of voyeurism acknowledge the viewer's obsessive desire for the object. In a consonant operation, imperial fear manifests itself in forms as spectacular as imperial desire, only this time touched by a masochistic rather than voyeuristic visual pleasure. At his lowest point, Carruthers is shot in the arm and faces the prospect of Ghul Khan locking him in a wooden cage and parading him "through all the mountain states so that the people may know how the English are to be feared."<sup>60</sup> The moment of humiliation brings to a climax all that Carruthers has endured through the film: physical threat, verbal violence, and psychological pressure. His possible public humiliation hints at a debasement that finds fulsome visualization in *The Four Feathers*.<sup>61</sup> In a tight-knit group of male friends who belong to the North Surrey Regiment of the British Army, Harry Faversham and John Durrance (Ralph Richardson) are both in love with Ethne Burroughs, who reciprocates Faversham's attentions. When the regiment is called on to help Kitchener's campaign in Sudan, Faversham succumbs to an old fear of combat that has gnawed at him since he was a child, fears made worse by his father, who speaks constantly of the Faversham reputation for bravery in battle. Upon his resignation from his regiment, Faversham receives four white feathers from his three friends and Ethne, as a mocking symbol of his cowardice. To redeem himself, Faversham goes to Khartoum as a native Senghali, the lowest of low Arabs, whose tongues were sliced by the Kalipha in punishment for their revolt against him.

Faversham voluntarily submits to being branded with a hot iron on his forehead in imitation of the Senghali mark. Enduring great agony and humiliation, he anonymously helps his friends who remain unaware of his presence. In his guise as a mute and marked Arab, Faversham also saves Durrance, now blind because of overexposure to the desert sun. The star-crossed romantic triangle continues in Britain when Ethne is about to wed a blind Durrance despite her love for Faversham, whom she believes to be dead. However, Faversham returns after playing a crucial part in Kitchener's capture of the Kalipha's fort, and Durrance silently leaves the country on the pretence that his incurable blindness can find treatment in Europe, making a noble sacrifice so that Ethne and Faversham may be reunited.

The sobriety and forbearance that Durrance and Faversham demonstrate in their interpersonal relationships is belied by the hysteria and trauma manifested by their bodies in the desert and under the Kalipha's incarceration.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, sequences depicting white male suffering were excised from the version of the film screened in India, indicating a political awareness of the extent to which such sequences were also open to voyeuristic viewing. ("In

reels 8, 11, and 12, in prison scenes and also elsewhere, curtail drastically all parts showing white prisoners being dragged, jeered, whipped, kicked, fed and herded like cattle. Part of the scene showing a white native spitting in a trough containing food before allowing white prisoners to eat from it should be omitted entirely [107 and a half feet].”<sup>63</sup> Recalling Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinctions between the Medieval “grotesque” and the Renaissance body, the realist body of Sanders is closest to the isolated, complete physical entity of a Renaissance hero. Sanders’s fever and mosquito bites are neither spectacularly nor voyeuristically demonstrative of the body’s (potentially regenerative) degradations, as are Faversham’s scar and darkened skin or Durrance’s blind dementia.<sup>64</sup>

Connecting the male bodies in *The Drum* and *The Four Feathers* are their positions in a play between the stylized depiction of a breakdown of institutional orders (of empire, nation, and family) on the one hand, and the narratively expedited force of predestination on the other. To elaborate, familial heterosexual bonds are diminished in both films so that the drama is not one of vertical ties to the past and the nation, but of lateral connections to one’s male compatriots in a time of colonial crisis. In however limited a way, *The Drum*’s portrayal of intimacy between a prince and a drummer boy humanizes the relationship between an infantilized native and a marginal white subaltern. For a brief moment, past structures appear to offer little sustenance, the ties of tradition appear loosened, and relational inventions appear possible. In *The Four Feathers* Faversham liberates himself from the burdensome pressure of his family tradition and name after the death of his father by voluntarily seeking to protect his male friends. In *The Drum* an orphaned Azim risks everything to help Carruthers and befriends the low-ranking, stray, subaltern Holder, who in turn teaches him his signature drumbeat. Similarly, Carruthers is married to the frontier rather than his wife, deriving his identity more from his fellow military officers than from his family.

However, these apparently voluntary acts of friendship only vindicate that which the institutions of nationality, empire, family, and class prefigure. *The Four Feathers* ends in England with a reinstatement of Faversham as a man worthy of his family name, with Ethne by his side. *The Drum*, which presented cross-class and interracial alliances between Holder, Azim, and Carruthers, concludes as they return to their respective places in the social hierarchy. Fraternal relationships that may have held a potential to displace the class- and race-bound divisions of empire are exposed as exceptional and finite in scope: they are primarily permissible in frontier zones, they are most intense

in times of danger, and they facilitate a return to heterosexual, hierarchical, imperial normalcy.

Consolidating this romantic reinforcement of empire is the fact that the frontier, which inflicts the greatest degradation on the imperial male while also bringing him closer to his fellow men and native races, is rigorously contained by the fortuitous intervention of British bugles and troops. Physical suffering in colonies brings to surface suppressed truths: Faversham's fear of colonial excursions, Durrance's love for Ethne. They corporeally acknowledge psychic realities, manifesting unconscious expressions of distress in a way that is finally restorative of an imperial social status quo. The scar allows Faversham to redeem his masculinity and compensate for his initial emasculating wish to stay at home with the women. Durrance's blindness, almost an oedipal punishment for desiring beyond his reach, gives him a pretext for a noble sacrifice that reinstates the original, aristocratic couple to the narrative/social center.

With his act of sacrifice, Durrance comes closest to embodying the essence of melodrama. In his suffering, we witness the romance form's proximity to modernist imperial narratives, as the style introduces colonial forces that displace the visual and aural centrality of imperial protagonists and take a heavy toll on their bodies. The crucial difference is that the stylized performance of trauma alters the very mode of narration in modernism. Consequently, the modes of textual pleasure of a romance and modernist imperial film vary. In *The Drum* or *The Four Feathers* pleasure is embedded in seeing triumphant (colonizing and native) men who retrieve a valorous masculinity and assert their ascendancy after physical and psychic alterations. In modernism, the pleasure is in the sacrifice and the suffering.<sup>65</sup> This is partially a difference of degree: in the dialectics of an articulation of crisis and its finally conservative resolution, the latter is a stronger force in imperial romances. But the difference is also one of a gendered narration of history. In embracing the trauma of colonial withdrawal, imperial modernism more closely approximates the melodramatic mode because the crisis infuses and redefines aesthetic form. Not only are women more likely protagonists of imperial modernist films, but introspective, subjective, nonsingular, and perennially skeptical perspectives, coded as feminine and rigorously marginalized within realist and romance texts, become the defining template of modernist films, even when they are peopled by men. Destabilizing interrogations of the imperial perspective provide imperial modernism's very "sense of textualization."<sup>66</sup>

Men in imperial romances lack the rational, matter-of-fact conviction of a Sanders, a Rhodes, or a Clive who claims to know what is best for everyone. The argument of a romance, made more strongly by the visual, aural, and plot dynamics of a film than by psychologically motivated realist characters, is one of sentimentalism. Within this representative framework, women are typically circumscribed by a conservative imperialist ideology as they are assimilated into British domesticity and erased from colonial male fraternities. Only men, in limited ways, are permitted striations of significance in their symbolic role, because they are both the means through which imperial values are tested and the agents through whom empire is salvaged. In his often quoted statement of romantic nationalism, Ernest Renan said, "To forget and—I will venture to say—to get one's history wrong, are essential factors in the making of a nation; and thus the advance of historical studies is often a danger to nationality."<sup>67</sup> Postcolonial tabulations of colonial history threatened British nationalism, which responded by making empire generative of "a soul, a spiritual principle" of fraternal codes.<sup>68</sup> Romantic characters that risk everything to live by a creed seek the infinite within the infinitesimal.<sup>69</sup> They believe they are part of a *deus ex machina* and fall subservient to its roiling.

Prem Chowdhry's account of the Indian Muslim protests against *The Drum* points to the fact that such reassuring myths of empire were beleaguered. Resistance to *The Drum* came from within Britain as well. At the time of the film's release, some British scribes wrote about the film with great sarcasm, attacking its racist ideology and its clichéd use of generic imperial tropes. In the following film criticism published in England in 1939, the authors see no difference between *The Drum* and the sort of jingoistic fiction that characterized the previous century. "In this story of the North-West Frontier, every gesture, every gag, might have been lifted intact out of the *Boy's Own Weekly* of 1888. . . . The officers discuss the situation in great seriousness around a wall map. The problem is acute. Tokot is four days' march from where they are, will they be in time to suppress the revolt? (What about the Air Force? Sh! This is 1888.) . . . In keeping with the current conception of human rights in 1888, there is sadism, cynicism, and a contempt for human dignity packed tight into the picture. . . . [T]he officers bark at non-commissioned officers, and both grades talk to natives as if they were dogs."<sup>70</sup>

Despite its anachronisms, the fiction of *The Drum* works not by denying its present but by transforming social history into something cosmic. To take Prince Azim's example again, he is as much of a romantic figure as Carruthers

after he is orphaned and isolated. Faced with the British governor's lack of confidence in him, Azim gallops up the mountains to warn Carruthers with his signature drumbeat; he can do no more than rely on private codes of communicating danger. Carruthers is similarly helpless, as he must walk into a trap with his eyes open and await reinforcements. In *The Drum* plans go awry despite overwhelming good-will between British commissioners and Indian allies, and they are resolved by the work of anonymous agents of the imperial state, like the governor's troops and an unnamed British spy. Oppositional elements are expunged and the fantasy of a pliable colony restored not by individual characters as much as by the narrative, generic, mythic, and statist powers beyond them. Aesthetic elements of predestination—powerful as a negative impulse in the melodrama of imperial modernism where a resistant India or Africa work their hostile will on imperial agents—present themselves as a reparatory and politically conservative force in imperial romance. This gives the form aspects of a “heroic modernism,” in that an appeal to eternal myths saves the work of art from confronting a “formless universe of contingency.”<sup>71</sup>