



# A Discussion on Neo-Colonialism and Re-exoticization in India through Visual Texts

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## AN ABSTRACT

Edward Said's epoch-making discourse on Orientalism critiques the forms of representation employed by European culture regarding the identity of the Non-European culture- African, South American and Asian indigenous communities and tribes. However, Said does not take into account for the differences between colonialisms considering all colonialisms as a homogenous structure. Frantz Fanon, another significant Post-colonialist critic, however, recognises the parallels between the colonial masters and the elite of the postcolonial nations. He argues that the power struggles between the colonial masters and the native subject ends with political and geographic independence. But ironically, this soon re-emerges in a different form – the struggle for power between the elitist and the non-elitist in the postcolonial state. The upper class along with the intellectually privileged class who were educated in the colonial rule now acquire power and duplicate the unjust and exploitative colonial system in a politically independent nation, where the working class and minorities become the colonized subjects. In a post-colonial India, this power struggle manifests itself through caste difference. Through visual texts- cinema being the dominant one- there is found a reinforcement of caste system where the alien intruder is substituted by the Brahminical entity. In both pre and post-colonial India, Brahmins as a force were not limited to the sacred realm but they, also, wielded enormous power within the secular and political realm of society as well. The movie *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* tells the story of a sepoy named Mangal Pandey, who leads India's first war of Independence- the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The narrative is, thus, written and shown in the light of Brahmin consciousness, obliterating any non-Brahminical knowledge of the war making it a myth of the history. Moreover, the protagonist's display of machismo establishes the ultra-masculine identity of the nation. 2018 movie *Thugs of Hindostan* brings in focus the effects of colonial rule in India in

the forms of Mimicry and Carnavalesque. Thus, this paper attempts to delineate on how the reinforcement of caste-system and Brahminical values along with re-exoticization of nation's history is achieved through visual texts.

**KEYWORDS:** Re-exoticization, Brahminical Consciousness, Mimicry, Carnavalesque.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The nation is a collective that exists primarily in acts of imagination and thinking, a 'unity' that might be more fantasy than reality. This sense of collective unity is generated and sustained by symbolic forms such as songs, films, cultural practices like stories and history writing. Every nation, according to Professor Timothy Brennan, demands a narrative from where continuity, contiguity and commonality are invented, packaged and sold to the people. Thus, the nation is a myth that has a very strong hold over the people. A national identity is the consequence of such an enabling myth- it unites people under one umbrella term, provides them with a sustaining form/story and asks them to function together in the name of the nation.

Gyanendra Pandey, a renowned Indian Historian, proposes that too often is 'national identity' constructed by the majority, while the minorities remain on the fringes of the nation as outsiders even when they are on the inside. He further argues that India has invariably been an upper-caste Hindu India that did not include the experiences of the subalterns in its grand narratives. In post-colonial nations, certain categories of people, cultures and practices are validated and promoted as national, at the expense of others. This process of post-colonial subalterization suggests a postcolonial anxiety where the new elite act as the oppressive and exclusive as the colonial master.

Culture is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions and of other persons works not through



domination but by what Gramsci calls consent. It is hegemony or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, which gives Orientalism the durability to be practiced. The form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci called Hegemony. He argues that the dominant class cannot maintain control simply through the use of violence or force. Due to the expansion of civil rights (including the right to vote), and higher levels of educational achievement, rule must be based in consent. The intellectuals work coherently and persuasively to justify the domination of the ruling class. These ideologies are propagated through institutions such as the mass media, the church, school and family. However, precisely because this hegemonic account of political control entails consent, ideas cannot simply be imposed upon the subordinate classes. Orientalism was based on the idea of Europe as a collective nation identifying its natives against all the Non-Europeans thus establishing cultural hegemony. Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony however the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character.

The Western imagery of the Oriental framework is limited, thus producing a kind of homogenous binary ontology. Non-western societies- or any other societies for that matter- often have their own binary setups dividing the people of their own worlds. Said is right to recognise how Orientalists have exercised their power in plotting, distorting and manufacturing the narratives of Occidents' history. In India, the origin of this hegemonic dynamics can be traced back to the implementation of Lord Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* where he strived to create a breed of native subjects who are "Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect". This breed of men, whom Homi Bhabha likes to address as "mimic men", later took the vacant position of the European masters and exercised the same hegemonic power where racial inequality was substituted by caste difference, which paved way for Neo-colonialism.

In Hindu mythology, it is commonly believed that Lord Brahma has created this universe. To give stability to the world, ancient rishis created

arrangements and systems within this world. The Varna or class system is a broad framework that applies, more or less, to the entire society whose reference is found in Yajur Veda. In the tales, four kinds of Varnas have been mentioned- the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra in a decreasing order of their importance in the social hierarchy. There is a fifth category of the "Untouchables" who are considered outside the Varna system and are considered at the bottom of the social hierarchy. According to the Upanishads, the Brahmins were born in the beginning, from the Brahma's mouth. The Kshatriyas, born from Brahma's arms, were for the protection of the Brahmin. The Vaish were believed to be born from his thighs and the Shudra from his feet. The Vaishyas were born for Kshatriyas. For their service, the Shudras were born. Bhagvat Gita also describes these classes. The division of the class is according to their qualities and actions. So it comes as no surprise when the elitist and educationist class of the hierarchy- the Brahmins - applied their very own binary setup in a post-independent India, thus distorting history and eventually leading to the establishment of a homogenous discourse. At all forefronts in India's history- academics, economics, politics, even warfare, we see the leaders or forerunners as Brahminical or upper caste entities. In the epistemological sphere of knowledge and recording history, the Subalterns- Dalits and Women become marginalised. They are used as narrative ploys to support the ultra machismo heroes either as sidekicks or concubines, thus vanishing in the thin air in the long run.

Within Structuralism and Semiotics, the film is treated as a text. Structuralism advocates pluralistic approaches while Semiotics considers signs as integral to human culture and social interaction. Signs, thus, become integral in the understanding to a wide range of fields- including films and theatre. Films, owing its rich origins to Drama, can also be defined as an imitation of human action, for which language becomes a core factor. In light of semiotics, language is built out of sign blocks where signs have connotations, denotations and cultural significance. The meanings attached with any sign come as a by-product of our culture, ideologies and surroundings. The film ceases to be seen as a text in isolation from others, but in terms of a plurality of possible relations to other texts (including material production processes). The meaning of the film is therefore fluid, being a result of the interaction of texts. Films do not provide only the intrinsic meanings of its structure appearances but also the deeper or hidden relations of it.



Denotation is the literal and direct meaning of a film. Connotation is the deep, suggestive and indirect meanings. Connotation involves the socio-political and cultural undertones of a film. The task is to expose the hidden meaning of the text and the grammatical structure that underpins it by determining the range of meaningful combinations of the significant cinematic elements. Any text-including films construct meaning through these signs. It is achieved through symbolic frame, setting, props, characters' name, their costume, colour patterns and so on.

The stories of history and mankind that we choose to narrate through visual media culture become hermeneutical subjects where misunderstanding is a precondition of understanding texts. Although one starts with pre-judgements in order to engage in interpreting, a text has the ability to transform one's preconceptions, for example, by resisting a reading that is being imposed upon it. Thus, one may move, through the activity of interpretation, to an engagement with the other, which is able to re-structure the interpreter's preconceptions, and thereby the basis of their understanding. Interpretation, therefore, is an unlimited, open-ended process. On filmmakers, thus, there lays an inevitable responsibility to rectify the age-old misinterpreted Orient culture and present accurate culturally, socio-politically and historically pictures.

#### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SEPOY MUTINY INDEPENDENCE WAR**

Dissatisfaction was widespread among the military rank and file under the British rule. There was great inequality in treatment between the Indian and the British counterparts in terms of ranks, salary and other benefits. The disparity and ill-treatment also manifested itself when the high ranks in the army were exclusively reserved for the Englishmen and the Indians were deliberately excluded from responsible positions. In addition to the disparity, what infuriated the Indian soldiers was the prohibition to wear religious marks while serving that amounted to interference in their personal affairs by the British. The immediate cause of the revolt was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle and the greased cartridge. Before loading the rifle, the sepoy had to bite off its top. It was rumoured to be made out of the fats of cows and pigs. This was objectionable to the Hindus and Muslims alike. Nationalists like V.D. Savarkar opine that the revolt was the first war of independence. However, the revolt had its own failures. The revolt failed to embrace all the sections of the society. Many of the

native rulers and the big zamindars refused to join the revolt against the British. They extended an active support to the British to suppress the revolt. Modern educated Indians were suspicious of the rebels as they feared the opposition would bring about social reforms. Thus the revolt became more Marxist and less nationalistic in its nature where the struggle was between and the soldier-peasant and the feudal bondage. Also, to the interest of the colonizers, the revolt created a big gap between the different religious communities especially between the Hindus and Muslims. Historian Ranjit Guha asserts that the Indian Nationalist Movement was divided internally and further argues that ideology played an important role in the movement's development. The inherent differences and divisiveness challenged the movement's solidarity, thus permeating and weakening the nationalist struggle. He proclaims that no sense of cohesion existed in the nationalist movement as the subaltern classes maintained values and beliefs that diverged significantly from the elites and the bourgeois of their society. Guha argues that the difference derived from the conditions of exploitation to which the subaltern classes were subjected to in the past. He also points out that the elite and subaltern mobilization schemes were different; with elites "more legalistic and constitutionalist" in their movements, while subalterns maintained a more violent and spontaneous stance in their reactions to political developments.

#### **NEO-COLONIALIST ANALYSIS OF MOVIE MANGAL-PANDEY: THE RISING**

Ketan Mehta's 2005 movie *Mangal-Pandey: The Rising* falls prey to historical inaccuracy and misrepresentation while narrating India's first war of Independence. A retelling of anti-imperialist revolts of 19<sup>th</sup> century India, the movie gets stuck with all the clichés- romance, melodrama, item numbers, and unnecessary musical production numbers. In reality, a sepoy named Mangal Pandey of the 34<sup>th</sup> regiment of Bengal Native Infantry stationed at Barrackpore led a failed rebellion against the British military leaders. The two alpha males- played by Aamir Khan and Toby Stephens- consume most of the screen time and display their masochist masculine identity through feats like rescuing a distressed widow from the illegal practice of Sati and a courtesan from being raped by a military officer. They also square off in a wrestling pit and sword-fight bringing the trending masculine nature of nation and warfare where the subalterns were never in the focus and were merely used as narrative ploys.



The representation of history in the movie through Mangal Pandey, a celebrated martyr, is problematic. When done a close reading of the film and its protagonist, it comes to light that this celebrated martyr happened to be elite, a Brahmin, who was put in stark contrast to characters of Caption Gordon- a white man, Bakht Khan- a Muslim sepoy from 19<sup>th</sup> regiment and Nainsukh- an untouchable. With his forehead bejewelled with red tilak against his swaying hair and broad chest, this character seems to enjoy a privileged position where he thinks he is entitled to act as the hero who was promised.

On innumerable occasions, he shows his strong contempt towards Nainsukh- an untouchable, thus fixing the notion of Varna system. He still believes in the age-old rigid social hierarchy. On an early morning, Mangal is shown returning after taking a bath when Nainsukh accidentally stumbles into him. This deeply infuriates Mangal where he pushes Nainsukh to the ground visually manifesting the Brahminical ego. In subsequent incident when Mangal is confronted with the reality of the cartridges greased with cow tallow and pig fat, he feels disgusted with himself. He rushes to Caption Gordon to deliver a seething speech where he expresses his fears of being ostracized mentioning how nobody is going to touch him, eat with him and primarily bury him after his death. In another scene, he is seen inquiring about the caste and family background of Heera, the courtesan, for whom he seems to develop feelings. These factors of our glorified historical hero are overlooked in an attempt to normalise the breeding and plaguing caste-system in both pre and post-independent India. From critical perspective, it is significant of the hegemony held by the elite educationists who gets the chance to represent our history, thus marginalising the subaltern voices in shaping our historiography. It brings the pattern of Neo-Colonialism in the social knit of power dynamics (merely with changed masters) where the subalterns are doubly marginalised- both in terms of race and caste.

#### **MIMICRY AND CARNIVALESQUE ELEMENTS IN *THUGS OF HINDOSTAN***

Homi Bhabha asserts that colonial encounters are transactions: between the colonizer and the colonized. The Europeans in the colony constructs his identity only through a relationality based on difference. Building on Post-structuralism, Bhabha proposes that identities, even on the colonial context, are based on differential relations: the colonizer establishes his identity by positioning himself against and in opposition to the native.

Identity, therefore, is constantly shifting, limited and displaced for the colonized. Mimicry is the disciplined imitation of the white man by the native. Mimicry is sought through Western education, religion and structures where the native is trained to think and/or behave like the white man. As a result of this contrast, there is a split and a negotiation within colonial discourse where both mimicry and mockery take place.

Mikhail Bakhtin outlined the concept of the carnival to explore how power is subverted via a reading of the works of Rabelais. The carnival was laughter, the bodily, parody, the ugly, the grotesque and the so-called 'low'. The carnival is not sanctioned by the government or the institution. It resists such control, and is, therefore, politically subversive. Bodily functions are a part of the carnival because they do not find expression in official culture. Clowning, again, is not part of the official culture, is also a key element in the carnival. Clowning and the carnival both resist any academic discussion- they are rooted in the every-day life of the people. The carnival is the ultimate *other*. It is what escapes classification, theorization and control. The carnival is a useful mode of discussing popular or mass culture because it is essentially about the need to subvert and interrogate established/institutional authority over meaning.

In the 2018 Vijay Krishna Acharya movie *Thugs of Hindostan*, the elements of mimicry and Carnavalesque are to be observed. The film finds its origins in a secret society that, according to some, looted and terrorised travellers for centuries; though others say that the thugs turned to crime as retaliation to the injustices perpetrated against them of Hindostan. The movie deals with a pre-independence time when the East India company ruled and a fictional band of thugs led by Khudabaksh raging a war against them. The character of Aamir Khan named Firangi is hired by the East India Company to get rid of the rebellious thugs. The characters of Khudabaksh and Firangi are put in stark contrast where the former consolidates the concept of nationality and patriotism while the latter is portrayed as a man without conscience for whom only money matters not nationality and race. His whole character sketch is a result of colonialism and postcolonial subalterization. His name, his way of talking and dressing up is suggestive of how he is imitating his White masters because he is marginalised in his own society as a low-class hoodlum. He attempts to be the ultimate other by being grotesque and anti-hero type, thus subverting power dynamics. So, with a distorted identity, this hoodlum tries to seek power



with a reversal of role. The character of Suraiyaa, a conundrum to character of Firangi, becomes a victim of objectification; however, she turns out to be interesting in an attempt to subvert power by her not-so subversive relationship with Firangi. She openly discusses her sex life with him and in a further incidence slaps him, thus bringing a paradigm shift in romantic relationships.

The empire was always, primarily, a masculine adventure. Discovery, exploration and conquest and rule were acts and symbols of the European male's dominance of the world. This domination extended to both landscape and women and the themes such as the protection of the native woman by the ultra-macho European male became famous in the narratives of this field. However, in the movie *Thugs of Hindostan*, we come across with the character of Zafira, who is an equal and active part of the thugs' band. She breaks through the type of *abla naari* characterization, leaves behind her royal lineage and in a role reversal, becomes a rebellious thug from a princess- performing action sequences.

## II. CONCLUSION

Native complicity, caste conflict and class difference, better put under the umbrella term: Neo-colonial subalterization is unabashedly found in the visual media texts- films being the most famous one. They actively present stories of history and epistemology from a biased or privileged point of

view thus marginalising the voices of the subalterns. As a result, when these subalterns feel rejected for being truly native, they seek and subvert power through mimicry and role-reversal. Through movies *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* and *Thugs of Hindostan*, the nature of historical epics is analysed particularly in focus with Neo-Colonization.

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