



RESEARCH PAPER

Marginalization of the Indians in Bollywood Motion Picture 'Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India'

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: February 07, 2022 Accepted: May 09, 2022 Online: May 11, 2022 Keywords: Binary Pairs, Colonization, Marginalization, Orientalism *Corresponding Author imran.pk756@gmail.com	This study is based on the scenic analysis of Bollywood motion picture 'Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India'. The study attempts to highlight the historical instances of marginality of people of India and to unearth the aspects of oppression and exploitation at the hands of the British colonizers. Employing some relevant assumptions from Edward Said's phenomenal work 'Orientalism', the researchers have weaved a framework to conduct an in-depth analysis of marginality of the Indians as depicted in the film under study. The study inks towards the oppressive strategies of the non-natives (colonizers) to keep the natives (colonized) subjugated and weak thereby augmenting their cultural, social and psychological oppression. It also suggests that the binary of the strong/weak, rational/irrational, civilized/barbaric and decent/indecent is so hardwired that it is mighty hard to deconstruct. This research is likely to give a new angle to this text thereby enriching its scope and understanding.

Introduction

Bollywood motion picture 'Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India' was released in 2001. The film was written and directed by Ashutosh Gowariker and was produced by Aamir Khan. The movie is made in the backdrop of historical epoch of colonization when the British Raj held its sway over India. It depicts social milieu where the Indian natives are literally ousted from the mainstream society and living on the margins physically as well as psychologically. 'Lagaan' is a Hindi word used for 'extortion' or 'tax' imposed by the powerful feudals and usually the labour of the workers working in the fields is exploited as the income they generate for themselves is not aligned with how much they labour. The movie is about the struggle of the colonized (Indians) to free themselves from the clutches of coloniality represented by the British Raj in the Subcontinent. The primary characters are a different group of villagers who are unhappy because they have been told that this year they must pay double tax (Lagaan). There has been no rain and they are in fear of starving. When storm clouds approach the village in a great armada, the people break into the obligatory Bollywood song and dance, and the clouds pass by. When a group of village men go to the British commander to protest the tax, they are challenged by the arrogant officer to beat the British in a game of Cricket and the tax will be forgiven for three years. This seemingly is tantamount to a straightforward refusal of any relaxation in taxes because the British commander is well aware of the fact that the Indian peasants are incapable of playing cricket, let alone beating their masters. To the dismay of his fellow workers, a bold young man named Bhuvan accepts the challenge. The commander's sister seems impressed as she

furtively tries to help the villagers learn the game of cricket before they are toggged up for the final 'fight'. The preparations start and Bhuvan is warned again of the grave consequences in case of losing the game. Nothing can quell this highly spirited man. The commander is also called to the headquarters where he warned that if his team loses the game he will be forced to pay the tax money out of his own pocket. The white lady is drawn to Bhuvan and his team with the passage of time. Bhuvan meanwhile is unaware of the Memsahib's love and relieves the jealousy of his girlfriend by declaring himself to her. They sing a long romantic duet in counterpoint to the Memsahib's song. The film presents various episodes attached with the central narrative particularly those related to a traitor in the camp of the natives and colonizers' unfair maneuvering that fills people with hatred against the oppressor. It goes on for several days and makes a long movie. Before the last day, the People sing along and reverent song to the Lord of the Universe, their Savior, the God of Peace beseeching His favour in the next day's effort. Finally the long-awaited day comes and a great crowd gathers on the hillside for witnessing the big match. In the movie, Bhuvan represents the subcontinent people and Captain Russel represents the European people.

The British colonizers had the chief agenda of boosting economic growth and generating financial revenue by exploiting the colonized especially the peasants working as tenants. According to Scatter (2010), the movie 'Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India' is an elaborate commentary on how the British Raj imposes tax or Lagaan on those who are serving him. The people of the sub-continent were reluctant to pay the tax because they could not afford it. The British Raj used different tactics in order to impose their culture on the people of the sub-continent. It is in this very context that they make a stipulation of playing cricket match. They are dead sure that the subdued Indian lot will not be able to win it. The movie, in a way, is characteristic of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. The acceptance of challenge to play a cricket match against an adept opposition can be read as a desperate attempt to be freed from the tyrannical rule of the British masters. Tharoor (2015) exposes the colonial underhand methods through which the British Raj sucked the blood of the colonized. They took raw material from the subcontinent and used them to their benefits. He calls it an unforgettable history where immense damage was done by colonialism. "Thirty five million Indian died a totally unnecessary death in British created the system" (Tharoor, 2017). British came to the subcontinent and in two hundred years of plunder and devastations it pushed it in the quagmire of backwardness and economic bankruptcy. Roger Ebert (2002) was a film critic of the Chicago Sun-Times. He won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished criticism. He opines that watching this film, we feel familiarity with the characters and the show-down, but the setting and the production style is fresh and exciting. The story takes place at the height of the Raj, England's government of occupation in India. Captain Russell administers 'lagaaan', which is the annual tax the farmers must pay to their maharajah, and he to the British. It is a time of drought and hunger, and the farmers cannot pay. Maharaja serves as a kind of link between the British and the Indian farmers. Despite the fact that he is from the land of India, the Raja mainly serves the interests of the British colonizers. The film lends itself to diverse criticism for its rich texture. This study, however, mainly focuses on how the Indians are compelled to live along the margins and in what ways they are ousted from the mainstream society.

Theoretical Framework

Orientalism, for Said, is not purely an academic field. It is a kind of discourse that propagates expectant ways of seeing the east (p. 2-3). Elaborating on power/knowledge node by Foucault, Said also refers to it as a corporate institution that advances ways of controlling the east through constructing knowledge about it (p.3). East as it is materialized in the Western mind, culture and politics is the result of the Western system of representation rather than some eastern reality (p. 22). And representations, recognizes

Said, are only representations (p. 21) as language is always immersed in ideology, culture and political setting of "representor" (p. 273). Said's concerns are representation, more representation and their place within discourse. Orientalists' representations, for Said, belong to a discursive domain that is configured for them not only by subject matter but also by shared tradition and history. Thus the representation of the East is meaningful by being consistent with stereotypes that were customary within the discourse of Orientalism (1978, p. 273). In construing Orientalists' texts, Said notices that writers are incapable of liberating themselves from constraints that Orientalism puts on them (p. 43). Therefore, throughout the ages, Orientalists have produced certain regular characteristics of the East in their works. Said asserts that the East was conceived in Western imagination through the lenses of stereotype - a term coined by Lippmann. Stereotypes are images in the head. They are also processes whereby the mind squeezes the complexity of the world into a small and understandable form (Lippmann, 1922, p. 3-7). Said (1978) argues, perhaps on the same principle that stereotype renders non-Western world graspable to the west (p. 61, 66). Orientalists use several discursive techniques to construct mental images of Orientals: generalizations, descriptions, use of copula 'is', typecast characterization etc. Said has discussed the type characterization of 'Oriental' (p. 230) in detail. A type usually has a specific character that offers the onlooker an epithet (p. 119). Western scholars always describe non-Western people in generalized terms. The geographical difference leads to the construction of types, such as "the Asiatic and the African" (p. 120). People from the colonized spaces in general have been reduced to stereotypes through the operations of colonial discourse. The binary structure gained firm grounds due to this discourse and the non-westerns were usually labelled as less intelligent, more violent and nowhere near the Westerners with respect to decency and manners. This internalization renders them as weak and consistently in need for education and reformation. Given that, the British took up the project of educating the colonized lot and in the guise of educating them in their own ways they took hold of the human, natural and material resources of the land and established themselves as masters.

Material and Methods

With respect to its nature, this study is descriptive and follows an interpretive paradigm. The purpose of this research is to carry out scenic analysis of the film under study. Dialogues, worldviews of different characters and relevant actions and events will be analyzed to see in what ways the Indians are socially and politically marginalized. Various incidents related to the oppression and exploitation of the Indian workers will be highlighted in the light of the theoretical framework developed for this study. Dialogues and incidents in accordance with the research objectives will be culled from the film to provide textual evidence to support or substantiate the main argument. The research deals with words, phrases and linguistic expressions and is qualitative in nature. The theoretical framework for the study is illustrated in the following lines.

Results and Discussion

Colonialism has many shades and diverse trickle-down effects, the notable among them is the physical and psychological marginalization of the colonized. The powerful countries use dominance or hegemony or both in order to take hold of the foreign lands; subdue the natives; usurp the natural and human resources of native territories and thus play havoc with their culture and economy. The colonizers feel themselves entitled to the colonized lands and the natives are pushed to the wall to the extent that they are incapable of raising resistant voices. In the initial part of the movie, a British officer is shown hunting and a local Indian trying to save the deer. This has metaphorical implications. The officer being representative of colonialism is bent on destroying native property to gratify his lust

for power. On the other hand, the local denizen is desperately trying to save the property. But the officer stands triumphant not only because he gets the target but also because he succeeds in teaching the protector a lesson.

The British Officer: "Finally, I got the damn creature!"

Ram Singh: Well done, sahib, good shot.

The British Officer: Thank you Ram Singh.

Ram Singh: Arrest him, Sir this dacoit was hiding in the bushes with this stone. He had been diverting the deer.

The British Officer: Now I understand why I missed five times. Next time I will shoot you will be my target." (Gowariker, 2001, 14:48)

In the wake of hunting the deer, an Indian Raja enquires about the hunting expedition to which the officer claims that the British are best hunters.

Raja: "How did your hunt go?"

The British Officer: "The British are the best when it comes to hunting." (Gowariker, 2001, 19:00)

This sentence carries deeper meanings. It consists of an overgeneralized claim that the British are best in hunting. They have the ability to occupy many parts of the world; colonize them and promote themselves as a leading nation. In addition, they are well equipped to carry out their plans and have the guts to take risks and initiatives for the sake of their own long term prosperity. "Hunting" also has metaphorical overtones. At surface, it merely refers to an act of killing deer, but at a deeper level, it is about the demolition of natural resources. It is about extracting the raw material from foreign lands and converting them into something more valuable thereby leaving the place and space as uninhabitable. The colonizers in different parts of the world have not been hesitant in mass killings for material gains and economic development. They had not paid any heed to humanitarianism or moral values but were totally driven by self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement. The colonizers used many colonized people as soldiers especially in case of the Great Britain. Many colonized soldiers were made to fight for their masters (colonizers) in the British army and fought many battles for the sake of British government and even lost their lives.

Another thing that deserves mention is the indifferent and somewhat ridiculing attitude of the colonizers towards the culture and faiths of the native lot. They usually do not care for the submerging local cultural values, nor do they cherish respect for the holiness of norms associated with others' faiths. There are several instances in the film which support this argument. In the pursuing line, I would quote one incident where a British captain forces an Indian to act what is contrary to his religious beliefs. He is asked to eat a kind of food which is prohibited by the Hindu faith.

Captain: "...Your work might be done but on one condition, there is one condition.

Raja: Condition? Yes, tell me.

Captain: Eat the food.

Raja: As I told you I am a vegetarian.

Captain: Just one piece of meat.

Raja: Captain Russel! I cannot betray my religion in order to my duty." (Gowariker, 2001, 21:00)

This shows the maltreatment of the Indians at the hands of the British. They are not respecting the colonized and their religious faiths. Rather they make fun of their beliefs. By ridiculing their faiths, they are, in fact strengthening the Occident/Orient binary whereby the Orient are considered stupid and irrational. Further, the Raja works as a lynchpin between the colonizers and the peasants. It is he who collects taxes from the workers for the British. He works for them yet they don't give regard to his feeling associated with his faith. Not to speak of the common farmers, even the Raja is not spared by the British colonizers.

Taxation remained the most viable and commonest colonial strategy for filling in the coffers of the colonizers. The latter exploited the poor workers, extracted maximum profit out of their labour, literally sucked their blood and imposed huge taxes to keep them oppressed. This resulted in labourers' inability to think apart from making both ends meet. Their whole focus remained on how to earn livelihood in order to survive. They could not think of launching protests or waging revolution against their exploiters. The latter are not concerned about the plight of the marginalized lot in colonized spaces. They are (mis)used in different political battlegrounds and are deliberately kept ignorant and uneducated so that they might not be able to fight for their rights. Franz Fanon (1961) in his book "Wretched of the Earth" highlights the same dilemma that political ruling class is not cognizant of the issues being faced by general masses. The masses are merely used as pawns in the tussle between ruling government and opposition. Fanon talks about injustices prevailing in newly decolonized states due to accumulation of power within a small elite political circle. Only they enjoy the advantages of political and economic liberation whereas masses continue to serve the indigenous masters after exit of colonial masters. In this film, too, the colonizers seem to compel the colonized people to pay huge taxes. They demand tax as they want and taxation was an intolerable burden on the colonized peoples. Without realizing the worse economic condition of the downtrodden Indian lot, the colonizers are insistent upon increasing the tax.

The British Officer: Double Lagaan demon!

The Girl: Our situation is not hidden from the Raja!

The British Officer: Even then, double Lagaan". (Gowariker, 2001, 30:39)

In this scene, a girl is crying because she cannot give the text. The girl represents the whole colonized clan of India and even the colonized countries where the colonizers accumulated hefty revenue in the guise of development. They developed basic infrastructure and industries at the cost of immense natural and cultural loss. They played havoc with the environment and natural beauty, exploited cheap labour, took huge benefits from the developmental projects without making up for the loss and in fact, left no stone unturned in colonizing the native consciousness. The tacit corollary of the very phenomenon of 'colonizing consciousness' is the obscurity of native culture and values leaving individuals placed in a sort of no-man's land. To this Homi, K. Bhabha an eminent postcolonial theorist, refers to as third space. According to Bhabha (2004), identity crisis is induced whenever an individual or a group is exposed to two diverse cultures, because of this cultural clash, the individual or the group often feels suspended somewhere in-between, this in-betweenness was termed as 'third space' by Bhabha. This leads to what Gayatri Spivak (1988) points towards as the issue of self-identity and self-representation. In her essay entitled *Can the Subaltern Speak: Speculations of Widow Sacrifice*, Spivak (2009) extends Edward Said's idea about how the Western powers took away the colonized people's right to self-represent and express themselves. They become so much embroiled in an ambivalent position that they

are either become victimized by the cultural onslaught of a foreign space or drawn towards the same out of fascination and infatuation. In both the cases their cultural identity is cast into oblivion. It is submerged to a great extent and they are deracinated from their roots.

In 'Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India' the British colonizers clearly draw a line of difference and many characters, with rare exceptions, show a derogatory attitude towards the Indians. They are maltreated in inhuman ways. Animals are given far more regard than these people. In fact, they are socially and psychologically marginalized and are thus, denied the basic facilities.

"How dare you to hurt my horse? Hurt my horse, will you?

I will destroy you, people! I will take so much Lagaan (tax)

you won't have ragged on your backs. You bloody slaves

will remain crushed under our boots." (Gowariker, 2001, 1:23:03)

These lines show callousness shown by the British which stems from the engrained psychic thinking that the colonized are inferior and so they deserve to be treated as animals. In the context of the movie understudy, they (British) deem themselves and their every cultural artifact as superior and worthier as compared to that of the wretched colonized people of India who are living on the edges of marginality.

"what was that you said about our game? What did he say?

"a stupid game" what do you know about the game?

I will cancel the Lagaan but you must defeat us in this game (cricket).

(Gowariker, 2001, 39:26)

Conclusion

Through scenic analysis of Bollywood motion picture "Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India", the researchers attempted to address the above mentioned research questions and came up with the following findings/conclusion.

First, the movie "Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India" is set in the backdrop of British colonialism where the English holds sway and the Indians are colonized. The whole government machinery comprises of the foreigners and the local denizens are compelled either to hold subordinate positions or to work in tough circumstances as farmers. The group of farmers earns their livelihood from field-works but the British colonizers take hefty taxes (lagaan) from these poor people. As a result, they are forced to live on the edges of marginality. They are ousted from the mainstream society. They hardly have any social privileges; they have no political rights and have no religious freedom. The analysis bears sufficient evidence to prove that the Indians as reflected in the said movie are physically and psychologically marginalized. They are treated worse than the animals and considered 'others'. They impose taxes; increase the amount whenever and wherever they want. The cancellation of taxation is stipulated with winning of a cricket match about which the farmers have absolutely no idea. This condition may well be read as colonizers' downright rejection of farmers' plea for relaxation in taxation because they are well aware of the fact that the rustic workers cannot even play cricket, let alone defeating their masters. Secondly, it is about creating a situation where they could ridicule their inability to play and laugh out the prospective follies.

In response to the second question, the study focused on how the colonialism and its lethality were challenged. In this regard, the heroic character of Bhuvan performed by Bollywood actor Aamirkhan, becomes an epitome of resistance and boldness. To the surprise of the British and dismay of his fellow farmers, he accepts the challenge and pushes his fellows to form a team and goes on to learn the game with the help of the white lady. The preparation for the final match forms a major portion of the film and it really has significant metaphorical implications. Bhuvan is the voice of resistance and decolonization; a figure that brings colonized at one platform to challenge the eurocentricity and colonial authority. He has to face umpteen problems because the team members are hardly adept in sticking up for their rights. He becomes a motivator and a driving force for the rest of peasants. After getting enough training and practice, he plunges himself and his team into this decisive battle. The colonized lot in India as portrayed in the film confronts their master rivals in the battle ground of cricket. And not only do they play satisfactorily but go on to win the contest and make their opponents lick the dust. This victory is symbolic of ushering in of the era of decolonization and the British severely feels the dent or deflation in their colonial power.

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