

A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF *INTERSTELLAR*

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Introduction

In post-modern world, the production of culture, in the broader sense, of signs, representations, images, and even life styles has begun to outstrip the older modes of production . Deconstructing and investigating this whole realm of culture seems imperative for understanding one's cultural reality. Issues concerning race, gender, nuclear and green politics and less commonly, of the aged and of animal rights, the investigation of these cultural forms as the producers and bearers of meaning, values and power has proved central. Nelly Richard, French Cultural theorist, argues with regard to economic and cultural organizations, that

"the concept of modernity represents an effort to synthesize, its progressive and emancipatory ideals into a globalizing, integrative vision of an individual's place in history and society. It rests on the assumption that there exists a legitimate centre: a unique and superior position from which to establish control and to determine hierarchies."

Cinema acts as the same legitimate centre, trying to control and determine hierarchies. It represents active form of the modern, mass-cultural entertainment. Not only it provides a space for creative expression, but more often, propagates a certain world-view, which is pivotal to accord an individual's worth. Film allows analysis of the familiar world in much the same way as psychoanalysis analyses the structures of dreams and everyday life. According to Fredric Jameson, an American literary critic and Marxist political theorist;

"postmodern cinema is the nostalgia or 'retro'. Films like *American Graffiti*, *Starwars*, *Chinatown* or *Body Heat*, these are all films Jameson writes, which set out to recreate a particular period , so that in the case of *Star Wars and Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which is being evoked, is not an actual past, but rather the kind of narrative experience: the adventure story, the science fiction movie that seems to typify the experience of the 1950's."

In the process of the verbal and the visual narratives of the cinema, there is always an attempt of revival and widening of cultural politics. There is always a hidden ideology in films, either implicit or explicit. Emergence of the cinema stresses upon contemplation rather than

involvement, concentrating on the structure of the individual shots rather than the dramatic sequence. Cinema acts as a medium to prorogate or dictate the politics of the elite and the dominant.

Over the course of the 20th century, Hollywood movies and entertainers within the industry have enormously influenced national politics, cultural constructions of American identity, and social change. Using motion picture as a channel, political ideology is constructed and a national identity is created. Propaganda efforts, the shifting political priorities of the industry, and the impact of local, state, and national politics has all contributed to the motion picture productions. *Why We Fight*, the seven film documentary series created by the U.S. Government had Frank Capra, a celebrated and influential director, direct these propaganda films to explain the purpose of World War II to American soldiers, and to garner support during the war of America. The commercial and government sponsored project exemplified the key aspects of Capra's American Dream: optimism, rural virtue over urban corruption, hopes for classless society, and patriotism. However, the films deeply ignored the flaws of the society and denied any human values to the enemy. By the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency encouraged more scholars to study the deeper connections between the entertainment industry and politics, which had seemingly reached an apex with the actor-turned-politician taking the presidential oath of office on 20 January 1981. During Reagan's administration, scholars further assessed how American film had transformed American culture and politics. Amidst Ronald Reagan's use of stories and Hollywood imagery to advance domestic and international policies, historians also pursued archival research about the politics of such imagery and the meaning of silver-screen images, and constructions of American identity through the medium of film.

The language systems of metaphors and regime of images, used in the Hollywood cinema, seem designed to silence those whom they embody in representation. It is imperative to deconstruct the very structure of dominant and marginal. Racial stereotyping in Hollywood is a fetishistic projection of those things which are disavowed by the colonial self. Edward Said states that "the right of formerly un-or misrepresented human groups to speak for, and represent themselves in domains defined, politically and intellectually, as normally excluding them, usurping their signifying and representing functions, over-riding their historical reality". Cinema today is used as a tool by the capitalist mentality to subjugate the marginal through alienation and progressive commodification. It is important to challenge the Western constructs to serenely self-aware rationality, and to show their existential dependence upon the forms of the *Other* that they expel beyond their boundaries of rationality.

Interstellar: An Appraisal

Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* is a movie that justifies the Western constructs of this self-aware rationality. This science-fiction drama manipulates the audience and propagates the colonial ideology through its *parole*. It is a path breaking work, which combines the puzzles of high science, with spectacular effects to create an astonishing space odyssey. The movie is set in the near future, where Earth has been rendered uninhabitable for humans. It can no longer produce food to sustain humanity and thus scientists are looking for an alternate world that will play host to the near homeless species. An intergalactic exploration, therefore, by a group of astronauts in order to secure the future of human race, apparently seems a noble mission. The movie sets out to be an ode to the exploratory genius of man but on a closer inspection, many representations of

the colonial times are discovered. It is not what the narrative shows explicitly which is matter of concern but what remains hidden within the scientific jargon of the movie. Underneath the science and visual spectacle the underlying plot is a long standing and long nurtured dream of colonization. The colonial ideology is not only glorified as the sole solution for the continuation of human race but also justified.

The practice of colonialism according to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, usually involved “the transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining allegiance to their country of origin” (1). Colonization was almost always preceded by exploratory or travel missions. The man, in the colonial discourse in the movie is an active discoverer who takes possession of lands which are often seen as passive or awaiting discovery. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffins argue that, “the process of discovery is reinforced by the construction of maps, whose existence is a means of textualising the spatial reality of the Other, naming ... spaces in a symbolic and literal act of mastery and control” (28). Therefore, in naming the potential worlds as ‘Dr. Miller’s planet’ or ‘Dr. Edmund’s planet’ the process of colonization has already begun. Furthermore, Ania Loomba referring to *The Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition of the ‘colonialism’ points out that “this definition quite remarkably avoids any reference to people other than the colonizers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established” (7). One finds that the narrative employed by the director, subscribes to this view, for the possibility of an encounter is averted and negated. The movie ends at a crucial juncture where humanity has set up camp on a surrogate planet and any further action is suspended. It is implied that what is dubbed as ‘Plan B’ has been set into motion. Prior to this, a detailed exposition of this plan is provided by Dr. Brand, who while exhibiting the five thousand fertilised eggs explains, “With the equipment on board, we incubate first ten . . . within thirty years we will have a colony of hundreds.” A plan of literal embryonic colonisation, in case the population on Earth cannot be transported to the surrogate planet, is the contingency plan wherein lies the hope for humanity. However, in a crucial plot twist, it is revealed that underneath the benevolent sentiment of saving humanity, the motive is to establish an American colony in another galaxy and that the secondary plan is in fact the primary plan of action. The intent of colonial expansion could not have been stated in more explicitness. Connecting the dots, we find that the initial exploratory teams went into the space in search of geographical and biological information, creating a way for the later colonizers and settlers, who take over the territory and utilize the material resources with the claim that the land now belongs to them.

The action of the movie is driven forward by the conflict between Man and Nature. The dichotomy of self and Non-self justifies and explains the actions of the man, as per the director. The subject of the movie is the colonizer i.e. man, who has colonized the nature. Therefore, the consequences of his actions are never questioned. Nature is portrayed either as unyielding or savage as on earth, or as an object to be conquered and won over as on Capt. Edmund’s planet. For Aime Cesaire “colonization = thing-ification” (6). On Earth, the nature has already been used and abused to the extent where it has been made barren and sterile. After having sucked all the natural resources, mankind looks for another ‘home,’ which will in due course of time be exploited beyond imagination. On Capt. Edmund’s planet, nature is again depicted as an object to be used and abused and thus the ‘thing-ification’ of nature robs it of its essence. In putting man’s identity in a binary opposition with nature, it (nature) has been relegated to an inferior

position. "It is imperative for the One to set up an Other in order to define itself" (De Beauvoir 26). Nature nurtured man and his kind for generations but as soon as the status quo changes, he decides to flee, looking for greener pastures. "We are not meant to save Earth, we are meant to leave it," says Prof. Brand, the patriarchal, authoritative mastermind of the whole process. At another instance, the protagonist Cooper remarks, "Man was born here; he was never meant to die here." "The same progressive detachment from nature was the basis of Western Rationality and dominated the colonial discourse" (Ashcroft, Griffins and Tiffins 68).

A stark individualist strain, disguised as humanistic and universal disposition, is propagated in the movie, where mankind is reduced to one homogenous group with no cultural or racial distinctions, represented by America. As the European colonizer believed in their "white man's burden" to bring civilisation to the uncivilised, similarly it is America that now has developed the same patronizing attitude towards the rest of humanity, as depicted in the movie. Ambassador W. H. Page writing to American President Woodrow Wilson in 1913 said, "The future belongs to us. . . . Now what are we going to with the leadership of the world presently when it clearly falls into our hands?" (Cesaire 23). This exact sentiment echoes in *Interstellar*, where America shoulders the responsibility of the existence of whole humankind. It is noteworthy that the exploratory crew consists of Americans who as per Dr. Brand 'represent the best of humanity.' In addition to this, the camps setup in Dr. Manhs's and Dr. Edmund's planets hoist the American flag, demarking the area as American territory. Peter Bloom questioning the seemingly Universalist sentiments of the movie opines, "The US doesn't just lead the mission into space to find a new home, it is the sole country that is involved" (6). The conclusion of the movie presents an even bleak picture. "When the protagonist wakes after having battled the unexplored dimensions of space, in an American space station, he finds a replica of earth, with children playing baseball, the quintessential American game" (Bloom 7). Although the climax, as we witness, is pictured as a mission safely accomplished for a new colony is safely established with an American flag flying high, questions abound that why is it not possible, for any living system to already be extant on Dr. Edmund's planet? After all, it provides a viable and sustaining atmosphere along with the essential bio-organic compounds for human survival. Why should it be taken for granted that the land is uninhabited and devoid of life? The movie therefore reinforces the idea that it is only America that has the intelligence and courage to survive in the future. The ideology propagated is one of American superiority that allows them to colonize territories, whether they be planets or galaxies.

Conclusion

Cinema, as a postmodern art form buttresses and proliferates ideologies that redefine the criteria of good and evil. Due to its far-reaching influence, many a time it becomes a tool to further ideologies and indoctrinates the masses. "Ideology doesn't pertain to political views alone, but defines the beliefs, values and concepts of a society. It guides the very mental framework" (Lomba 26). Ideology is at the crux of any representation, the ideas that are subscribed, upheld and eulogized. It is by putting to use this ideology disguised through movies that the unsuspecting audiences can be influenced and manipulated. The movie prepares the ground for "domination by consent" in Gramscian terms.

The American hegemony is achieved by creating subjects who willingly submit to the concept of American greatness. "Ideology is crucial in creating consent, it is the medium through

which certain ideas are transmitted and more importantly, held to be true” (Loomba 30). In an example of incorporating and transforming the dominant discourse, Prof. Brand manipulates the ideas of the protagonist Cooper, who overcoming his initial skepticism joins the team of explorers. It is here that ideology plays the most pivotal part, for most of the audiences more often than not, relates with the central character, which is portrayed as a “stereotypical common man,” thereby justifying the colonial instinct. Althusser believes that Ideological State Apparatuses “such as family, media and literary texts assist in the representation of the dominant system by creating subjects who are ideologically conditioned to accept the values of the system” (qtd. in Loomba 33). Thus the seemingly innocent and apolitical medium like the movie plays an integral and essential role in the indoctrination of the masses. The movie develops a false-consciousness, thereby creating consent for colonial ideas to propagate under neo-colonial garb.

The film is a declaration of the colonial desires ever present in the self proclaimed superior nations which is constantly mutating and evolving. It is a means to propagate and strengthen the agenda of the “white man’s burden” to warrant the consolidation of colonial discourse. This latent principle of colonialism has, in the name of progress, “drained the essence of societies, trampled cultures underfoot, undermined institutions and confiscated lands” (Cesaire 6). The movie helps generate the consent for American domination and in so doing centralizes the power to a single dominion. It becomes a means to propagate the colonial hangover in a neo-colonial garb. Gone are the days when man was defined as the Other, in a fantasy to colonise galaxies, nature itself has to become the Other, for greater the odds, greater is the glory is overcoming them, which is the only befitting destiny of the American dream.

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