

POCAHONTAS: THE INTERMINGLING OF THE POPULAR WITH THE POST COLONIAL

Pinki Chatterjee

*Department of B.Ed, Shri Shikshayatan College, Calcutta University,
20/9, Mahesh Dutta Lane, Chetla, Kolkata-700027, India.*

Abstract

Popular culture or pop culture gained ground around the 19th century after the Second World War, with the word 'pop' being derived from pop music. The rise of the popular culture had been attributed to the middle class and was informed by the increasing advancement and innovations in mass media and technology. This brought about social and cultural changes in the society. Popular culture does not fall under any school of thought and it is difficult to define what pop culture is because it encompasses a wide array of genres where it seeps through starting from music to arts to literature to advertisements and so on. "In his book, Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, John Storey offers six different definitions of popular culture. In one definition, Storey describes mass or popular culture as "a hopelessly commercial culture [that is] mass-produced for mass consumption [by] a mass of non-discriminating consumers." He further states that popular culture is "formulaic [and] manipulative," not unlike how he views the process of advertising. A product or brand has to be "sold" to an audience before it can be entrenched in mass or popular culture; by bombarding society with it, it then finds its place in popular culture." Therefore, a revered shoe painting by Van Gogh (A Pair of Shoes), epitomising a man's struggle in life can be turned into something called "Diamond Dust Shoes", produced solely for public consumption. Popular culture is the culture of the masses and is readily available to all, unlike high culture which remains reserved solely for the elite

classes. Critics have often dismissed it to be trivial, repetitive, lacking in originality and have criticised it on several grounds. One of the primary reasons why popular culture is problematic is because it discourages us to question what we see and believe and accept in our lives because what the masses or the society at a given point in time believes in, automatically gets accepted without an individual wanting it. He/She finds himself or herself to be a part of it almost subconsciously. This wide acceptance of anything and everything informs our thoughts and shapes the way we think. This paper would therefore take a look at a children's movie called Pocahontas and try to unearth certain postcolonial aspects embedded in the movie. By doing so, the paper would establish the fact that the intermingling of popular culture with children's texts like movies or stories is even more problematic because everything gets accepted and no questions are raised, creating a superficial world for children.

Keyword: popular culture, post colonial, children's text, Pocahontas

1. INTRODUCTION

Movies reflect various conditions of our society in ways more than one. One of the most significant aspects of movies is its ability to convey its message to the audience. Sometimes the meanings or the messages lie hidden underneath the surface and at other times it appears more directly to us in a straightforward manner.

Children's books and movies contain the strongest messages of societal conditions. The layer of innocent

veil over a profound meaning makes them even starker on identification. Thus, the objective of this paper is to talk about a popular children's movie, made by one of the most loved production houses of all time, Disney. The name of the movie is Pocahontas, a movie which was released in the year 1995 by Disney. The movie tries to encapsulate the essence of an American legend by twisting historical evidences and fictionalising it, giving us a rather romanticized account of the Powhatan princess, called Pocahontas and her interaction with English colonizers as a consequence. The movie thereby is almost structured as a historiographic metafiction (or works of fiction which alludes to both literary and historical materials in order to stress on the significance of the history of discourse).

2. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF POCAHONTAS

"Pocahontas was a Native American woman who was the daughter of the paramount chief of a network of tributary tribal nations that lay scattered throughout the Tidewater region of Virginia". According to a Native American legend, Pocahontas came into acquaintance with the English settlers/colonizers when they came to settle at Jamestown in Virginia around the 17th century. The legend particularly reflects in glorious light, the compassionate nature of Pocahontas. It is said that Pocahontas saved the life of an Englishman named John Smith by placing her head upon his own, when her father raised his war club to execute him. Though a large number of historians feel that due to their interaction, friendship could have blossomed between Pocahontas and John Smith but most of the historians doubt the veracity of the legend and dismiss it as a figment of imagination. This is so because there are almost two-three separate accounts written by John Smith regarding his meeting with Pocahontas' father and also because alternate versions of the legend are also found, which portrays a rather bleak picture of how Pocahontas was kidnapped, abused and made to convert to Christianity and later presented in the English society of England as an example of how a savage could be made civilized.

2.1. Legacy of Pocahontas

Pocahontas is a much sought after pop culture icon, specifically in the Americas. Pocahontas' reference could be found in a number of North American places like Alberta in Canada, Virginia, Tennessee and a lot of other places in the United States. There are other objects too that bear her name, extending her legacy. There might be little truth to the legend involving her and John Smith, but that is the story that lives on till today due to its glorification in several movies and theatrical performances that weaved a tale of romance between them, even though she was actually married to an Englishman named John Rolfe.

2.2 Criticism and Contention

According to Camilla Townsend, author of *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* and a history professor at Rutgers University, the love story of Pocahontas and John Smith endured the ravages of time because "it was a story many white Americans wanted to believe in". "The idea is that this is a 'good Indian', Townsend said. She admires the white man, admires Christianity, admires the culture, wants to have peace with these people, and is willing to live with these people rather than her own people, marry him rather than one of her own. That whole idea makes people in white American culture feel good about our history. That we were not doing anything wrong to the Indians but really were helping them and the 'good' ones appreciated it." The 1995 movie too, portrays them as lovers but it is the movie in itself which raises important questions that remains latent under the garb of a bittersweet romantic tale, which will be the vantage point of discussion in this paper.

3. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF THE POPULAR AND THE POST COLONIAL

The movie begins with a journey song, "In 1607, we sailed the open sea, for Glory, God and Gold and the Virginia Company..." The very song in itself is reminiscent of the profit making motives of the colonizers. It also throws light on how the colonizers travelled to foreign lands to not only satiate their thirst for economic exploitations but to extend their control over the lands by converting the others to their religion.

From the very first outset, the Englishmen under their chief, Governor Ratcliffe were excited about the prospect of finding gold in America or "The New World". America was viewed by the British colonizers as heaven, where there were 'diamonds like debris', 'silver rivers' and 'Gold' which could be picked right off a tree. The extreme emphasis on finding gold could be alluded to another legend, the legend of the city of El Dorado or the mythical city of gold, where the Spanish conquistadors supposedly happened to have found a lot of gold during their invasion. The song therefore is extremely suggestive of the motives of the colonizers and its functionality could be compared to a chorus of a play. During their journey to the new land that they were embarking on, they were struck by a perilous storm which almost wrecked their ship, signifying an omen that something dark could be waiting for them. This perception has often been present in the colonizers' psyche. Whatever was new and unknown were always viewed as strange and dark by them. We find the same reference in Joseph Conrad's novel, "Heart of Darkness", where Africa was seen as a 'dark continent'. The fear of the unknown is one of the primary reasons for such an inference. This reminds us of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, of which he wrote extensively in his influential work, *Orientalism* published in the year 1978. It is a study of how "Western colonial powers like Britain and France, represented lands far away from the West. 'The Orient' is the collective noun that Said uses to refer to these places. 'Orientalism' refers to the sum of the West's representations of the Orient. Orientalism functions on the basis of the binary divisions it makes between the Orient and the Occident (the West). Each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other: the Orient is conceived as being everything that the West is not. The Orient is always portrayed in negative terms that serve to create a sense of the West's superiority and strength. Thus in Orientalism, the Orient and the Occident are positioned through the construction of an unequal dichotomy. The West occupies a superior rank while the Orient is its 'other', in a subservient position. This makes the relations between them asymmetrical. Said stresses in the introduction to "Orientalism" that the Orient has been fundamental in defining the West 'as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience'. The West comes to know itself by proclaiming via

Orientalism everything it believes it is not. It is important to observe Said's argument that Western views of the Orient are not based on what is observed to exist in Oriental lands, but often result from the West's dreams, fantasies and assumptions about what the radically different, contrasting place contains. Orientalism is first and foremost a fabricated construct, a series of images that come to stand as the Orient's 'reality' for those in the West. This contrived 'reality' in no way reflects what may or may not actually be there in the Orient itself. It does not exist outside of the representations made about it by the Westerners. Orientalism imposes upon the Orient specifically Western views of its 'reality'." In the movie, there are constant usage of terms like 'savages', 'heathens' and 'injun' (which is a derogatory term for Native Americans) that create a line of distinction between the Englishmen and the 'injuns', giving way to Said's concept of the 'Self' and the 'Other'. The envisioning of the "New World" by the colonizers was in itself steeped in fabricated reality. Later on in the movie, we find the Englishmen digging with all their life to find gold but to no avail. The Englishmen, Governor Ratcliffe in particular, were so confident about their assumptions that they refused to believe that there was no gold, so much so that they rejected the word of a native inhabitant. This is reminiscent of the British philosopher James Mill who could justify writing a multi-volume history of India just by consulting the available documents in England and without ever visiting India and without knowing any Indian languages. This is what Mill wrote in the preface to his history of British India justifying his position: "This writer [...] has never been in India; and [...] has a very slight and elementary acquaintance, with any of the languages of the East. [...] [Yet] it appeared to me, that a sufficient stock of information was now collected in the languages of Europe, to enable the inquirer to ascertain every important point, in the history of India."

Soon after in the movie, we see that there is an interaction between John Smith, the British naval captain and Pocahontas, the daughter of the chief Powhatan. In this scene, we see John Smith gazing at Pocahontas in an awkward fashion giving us an impression that he may not have seen human beings like that before, taking us back to the route of Orientalism. We then observe that

John Smith takes it upon himself to impart knowledge to Pocahontas, a responsibility arising out as a result of the "white man's burden", something that we find in George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant" as well. John Smith thinks that by virtue of his superior position in the society, it is his duty to civilize Pocahontas. He tells her how his people would teach them to make the most of their land, and civilize them. He tells her, "There's so much we can teach you, we have improved the lives of savages all over the world." He then tries to project the metropolis' advancements when he talks about London. He calls Pocahontas' people 'savages', which Pocahontas takes as an offence. John Smith then tries to pacify her by saying "it's just a word you know, for those who are uncivilized". Here we observe that Pocahontas is seen as a weakling who could be manipulated easily. This position of Pocahontas arises due to her being doubly colonized. She not only faces the colonizer's imposition of his thoughts on her but also experiences patriarchy. In a scene prior to this, we observe that she murmurs in her native tongue Algonquian, when John Smith asks her, "you don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?" She then retorts in English. Patriarchy prevents her from expressing her thoughts in her own tongue and also she is taken as an inferior who would not be able to comprehend a foreign tongue. Pocahontas' father too, thought that she should marry Kocoom and lead a normal family life away from perils. But she was born a free spirit like her mother who wanted to choose her own destiny. We therefore observe that she was part of a patriarchal experience. Pocahontas later faces the oppression of the colonizers too when Kocoom, with whom she was supposed to get married gets shot by Thomas, an ally of John Smith, which reiterates her position of being doubly colonized. However, we notice the first instance of post colonial resistance by Pocahontas when she urges John Smith to look beyond the colonial prejudices and biases as she sung, "How high a sycamore grows, if you cut it down then you will never know". Her resistance is also an example of how she has been able to decolonize her own mind from the oppression, influences of the colonizers. The second instance of post colonial resistance can be noticed

during the outbreak of the war between the Native Americans and the Englishmen. After the Englishmen seriously injure Namontack, a Native American and later kill Kocoom, with whom Pocahontas was supposed to get married, the Native Americans decide to rise in arms. They adopt the violent ways of the British to eliminate them from their lands. Even though the Englishmen were better equipped, with modern guns at their disposal, the Native Americans took to the old ways of bow and arrow and raw physical strength as their weapons. We also notice the rituals followed by the Indians before the starting of the war. We see that they paint their faces according to their tradition. This too, is an act of resistance. Even though the British promise or at least claim to grant them a better future, the Indians hold fast on to their own tradition, culture and beliefs. One can only resist or show resistance to something when one has a deeper sense of his/her own roots.

3.1. The Physical Image

The fact that the movie is replete with contrasting images of 'the Self' and 'the other' is well established by now. However, throughout the movie we come across images of physical appearance which allows Orientalism to operate even further. Governor Ratcliffe says in the movie that "their skins are a hellish red; they are only good when dead. They are vermin, barely even human; they are not like you and me, which means they must be evil." Through these lines we understand that the Natives were not even considered as humans by the Englishmen. Another instance of similar notion occurs when the Englishmen retreat when they spot the Natives, they react in a way as if they had spotted beasts. We find parallel comparisons of physical appearance in Joseph Conrad's novel, "Heart of Darkness". Marlow who was stationed at the Outer station where the work for the railway line construction was being carried on, describes the physical appearance of the Africans who were working there: "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was

going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die." Marlow further explains, "suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roots, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? [...] we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse." Marlow describes the Africans as prehistoric beings who are yet to evolve into human beings giving us a similar comparison which we come across in the movie.

3.2. The Cultural Connection

As we have earlier noticed, John Smith's first interaction was rather awkward and from the conversation during that meeting, we could discern that he comprehended the Native's culture to be thoroughly uncontaminated from any foreign influence and therefore uncivilized. John Smith's reaction reminds us of a famous European anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. "Malinowski travelled in the early 20th century to the islands of Papua New Guinea to study the natives in their 'original' setting. Malinowski's writings on these natives represent them as the possessor of a distinct culture which has remained uncontaminated by any foreign influence." There is a "picture of Malinowski sitting with Papuan islanders where it is easy to believe both in the pure uncontaminated nature of their aboriginal culture and the distinction separating them from the culture of white man sitting between them." showing their separate cultures. From what we understand from this instance is that the Aborigines might have had their own traditions and their own gestures but that does not suggest that they have a pure and uncontaminated culture. But then if the Papuan islanders' culture is uncontaminated then there has to be an explanation as to how it possibly would have been so. A "modern day anthropologist James Clifford, explains in his essay *Travelling Cultures* that Malinowski's portrayal of the Papuan culture as pure, static, unchanging and uncontaminated is an illusion and such illusions about pure uncontaminated

cultures are carefully constructed not only by Malinowski but almost by all anthropologists writing about their field studies on dwellers of spaces far removed from the West. The illusion is created for instance by stressing on the isolation of the field which the anthropologists study. This for instance is done by leaving away details about how the western anthropologist himself or herself travels to that distant location, because a detailed account of that travel will immediately destroy the notion of isolation and cultural uncontaminatedness by connecting the anthropological field with the metropolitan centre. In other words, if the anthropologist managed to find his or her way to the field of study then that field cannot but be connected to other places and consequently its culture cannot but be influenced by and mixed with other cultures. The notion of cultural isolation and uncontaminated cultural purity also crumbles if we remember that the anthropologist is communicating with the inhabitants of his field of study in some way or the other. So there is definitely some sort of translation going on through which the anthropologist understands the culture of the native inhabitants and vice versa. If a culture is all sealed up and isolated, then the very possibility of such a translation and communication has to be ruled out. So as Malinowski's case suggests, no culture is isolated enough to maintain any sort of purity or an uncontaminated essence that has remained static over time". The same is true in the movie. We see that after a brief discomfort both Pocahontas and John Smith seem to understand each other in ways that could lead up to quite a lengthy conversation. We also notice the interaction between John Smith and Pocahontas' pet raccoon. Even though Smith says that he had never seen anything like it, he knew just what he needed to do to keep it off him. Homi Bhabha, one of the most prolific figures of Post Colonial theory talks at length about culture in his work, *The Location of Culture*. "Culture for Bhabha is something which is fluid, something which is perpetually in motion. It is a melting pot of several disparate elements which are regularly being added and which are regularly transforming our cultural identities. Bhabha suggests that culture is an ever-unfolding process. Rather than being characterised by an unchangeable essence it is characterised by change, flux and transformation and most importantly by mixed-

ness or interconnectedness which Bhabha terms hybridity.” Bhabha stresses on cultural hybridity by stating that the notion of a pure and uncontaminated culture is a myth. In order to understand Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity we need to understand that for Bhabha culture is not a static entity, or an essence that can be fixed in time and space too, in the movie reflects on this interconnectedness when she sings “we are all connected to each other in a cycle, in a hoop that never ends”, referring also to the dynamic nature of culture. Since cultures are interconnected, Pocahontas could also be stressing on the aspect of humanity that she felt should be recognised by biased people like Smith. We have already observed that she had urged Smith to look beyond his own prejudices, therefore it could well be that she held a stance like the stoics. “The stoics considered themselves to be citizens of the world because they believed that all human being formed part of a universal community, and every individual has duties and obligations not just to his fellow citizens of a particular state but also to this greater human community. The whole world was conceived by them as a huge polis or a state and all human beings were regarded as its citizens.” We see a similar thought pattern in the works of the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. “Kant in his essay, *Toward Perpetual Peace* published in 1795, not only talks about a world state but also about cosmopolitan laws which will extend citizenship to all humanity.” We see a change in the attitude of John Smith in the concluding scene of the movie where he bids goodbye to Pocahontas by doing a hand gesture of the ‘Wingappo’, which was the Native’s tradition and way of saying goodbye, portraying a convincing picture of a cultural exchange between him and the Natives.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, we see that the movie Pocahontas although a product of popular culture, is replete with multiple layers of postcolonial connotations, blurring the line of distinction between popular culture and postcolonial ideas. The problematic aspect here is that it is a children’s movie. Children are not aware of such complex underlying meanings, therefore everything gets accepted unquestioningly. We have to remember that ultimately it is the adults who write children’s stories

and scripts. The world that they have a sense of is an unfamiliar ground on which children are asked to tread on. Certain things that need to be told with caution are viewed as normal, leading to a continued tradition of ignorance and discrimination. A child might grow up not respecting differences of other communities. Also, not making them aware of certain colonial machinery imbued within the film would lead them to take them as it is, so for example, they may not feel the need to communicate in their mother tongue at all and think that speaking in English is the best way to express oneself as is the case with so many people these days irrespective of their age.(Children however, cannot be expected to be explained the colonial machineries in ways an adult would be explained, but these issues have to be dealt sensitively in a simplistic manner for them to gain comprehension.) It is not wrong to express oneself in ways and languages that one desires but not attaching any importance to vernaculars or mother tongue is wrong as it removes one away from his/her own culture and roots to an extent. A lot of the times due to the continuation of Neo-colonialism, we see that the older population who would teach the young ones about what should be acceptable and what should not be, themselves suffer from ignorance. Therefore developing a questioning attitude in children needs to be an essential part of the conditioning or socialising process in order to not make them victims of a consumerist pop culture which may shine brightly but it has to be remembered that all that glitters may not be gold and that even though “the medium is the message”, they have to learn to exercise their own critical enquiry.

REFERENCES

Books

[1]J. J. McLeod, “Reading Colonial Discourses” in *Beginning Post Colonialism*, 1st ed. India, Viva Books, 2011, ch. 2 sec. 2.1-2.4, pp. 37-44

Online Sources

- [1]. <https://www.womenshistory.org>
- [2] <https://historicjamestowne.org>
- [3]. <https://philosophynow.org>
- [4]. www.oxfordbibliographies.com

[5]. <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/06/21/pocahontas/>

[6]. <http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Pocahontas.html>

[7]. <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com>

[8].

https://nptel.ac.in/noc/individual_course.php?id=noc18-hs05