

## **Depiction of Tribal Culture in English Movies: A Critical Analysis**

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*The Emerald Forest*

### **Abstract**

The present paper explores the nuances of the depiction of tribal culture in the new age medium the movies. Tribe and tribal culture sporadically gets represented in the medium of expressions controlled by capitalist and aristocratic elites. It is true in case of both traditional print

medium as well as the new technologically advanced medium like movie. The pertinent question in this regard would be: when it gets represented, is it really unbiased? Does the medium perpetuate the discrimination based on race, religion, skin color and many other factors that have been prevalent in discriminating and dividing the world into binaries such as: white-black, west-east, occident-orient, man-woman, and so on? Do these movies fall for stereotypes or bring forth the real picture of tribal life and culture to the audiences? The paper while seeking answer to these questions focuses on how the first cinema movies (dominant Hollywood productions) perpetuate colonial ideology of degrading the subjects to relegate them to the secondary positions.

**Key words:** tribal culture, English movies, representation, binary, medium, first cinema, capitalist, aristocratic.

## **Introduction**

In the digital age, movie as a medium has evolved to be the most popular as well as effective medium of mass communication. Traditional print media, viz. newspaper, journals, articles, and above all literary expressions have, so far, been the mirrors of the society. Yet the print medium could not become the universal medium in the sense that these forms of expression were the sources of information as well as entertainment for the literate population. The knowledge and perspectives of life imbibed within them had limited impact. In fact, these media have been restricted to the elite classes of the society. And, therefore, only the issues and perspectives comfortable to the elites, (of course there are exceptions) had accommodated the pages of these expressions. Even the seemingly revolutionary literary pieces have hidden agendas to protect the interests of the dominant classes. Movie, on the other hand, being a blend of technology and art soon became the most popular, universal and the first industrialized art form. It is viewed as the medium with utopian possibilities of social change. The movie as a text caters to the needs of both the literate and the illiterate alike.

However, the technological innovations from Thomas Edison's **Kinetoscope** to present-day high resolution digital cameras, studio system, animation, with inherent industrialization and excessive commercialization, seems problematic. Particularly, it raises the question of fidelity to

the sources, i.e., socio-economic and cultural forces it depicts. This is particularly true of the tribal people and their culture who till today have been living in the forest leading technologically simple life. The pertinent question in this regard would be: when their life gets represented, is it really unbiased? Does the medium perpetuate the discrimination based on race, religion, skin color and many other factors that have been prevalent in discriminating and dividing the world into binaries such as: white- black, west- east, occident-orient, and so on? Do these movies fall for stereotypes or bring forth the real picture of tribal life and culture to the audiences?

The paper attempts to seek answer to the above questions by analyzing The Emerald Forest (1985), At Play in the Field of the Lord (1991) and Avatar (2009) directed respectively by John Boorman, Hector Babenco and James Cameron. Being the Hollywood production, these are First cinema movies or dominant movies that undertake to depict tribal culture particularly of Invisible and Fierce People (the Amazonian tribes) Niaurna tribe and Na’vi the inhabitants of Pandora the planet. Merely calling these movies as dominant Hollywood production would not justify their inclusion in the first cinema category. Therefore, it is necessary to understand theoretical background that divides cinema into the numerical categories: the first, second and third.

### **First Cinema Concept and Definition**

It is quite difficult to situate a movie clearly within the paradigm of categories such as the first, second or third cinema. A single movie may be explored in the paradigm of any one of the categories. However, based on certain thematic and stylistic conventions Fernando Solanas and Octavia Getinao in their jointly written manifesto of third cinema entitled Towards a Third Cinema (1969) devised these categories. The big budget movies produced within Hollywood, realistic movies aiming to achieve particular artistic effects and movies devoted to the political activism that stimulate the resistance movement within third world countries are termed as the first, second and third cinema respectively. The first two categories are defined in relation to the third as:

“First cinema is the dominant Hollywood product, a spectacle aimed at a digesting object. The world experience and historic process are enclosed within the frame of a painting, the same stage of a theater, and the movie screen; man is viewed as a consumer of ideology, not as the creator of ideology” (Solanas and Getino, pp. 51)

The first cinema is the product of industrialized production system of Hollywood. The emergence of Hollywood in 1910 signaled cinema's industrialization. The Hollywood productions with its vast factory-like studios and integration of the aspects of business colonized the world market of cinema from production to distribution and exhibition. Hollywood cinema industry primarily propagated the colonial ideology of exploiting others. In short, the first cinema is an imperialist cinema of imperialist nations. Even temporally, the emergence of cinema and colonial conquest of the European powers in much of Asia, Africa and Latin America were parallel activities.

The stylistic devices, the cinematic conventions and socio-political commitment associated with categories the first, the second and the third cinema are analogous to Frantz Fanon's three phase model of anti-colonial struggle expressed in 'The Wretched of the Earth' (1963). Fanonian model tracks the colonial subjects' attitude towards the colonizer's political and ideological conquest of native land and culture. Cinema in this process has served as one of the intellectual asset to perpetuate colonial supremacy. The analysis of *The Emerald Forest* (EF hereafter), *At Play in the Field of the Lord* (APFL hereafter), and *Avatar* would reveal how the colonial supremacy is maintained through the employment of various cinematic devices. Later in the second half of the twenty-first century the colonized nations also used the same medium to counter the colonial influence. This cinema of resistance is popularly known as third cinema. Second cinema was in existence since the beginning, however, was detached from the political activism. The second cinema or art cinema prefers to take cinema on new artistic levels against the extreme professionalism and marketability of Hollywood.

### **Frantz Fanon's Three Phase Model of Anti-Colonial Struggle and Cinema**

Frantz Fanon in his book 'The Wretched of the Earth' (1963) commented on how the colonized natives perceive and react to the colonial experience in his three-phase model of anti-colonial struggle.

#### **First Phase**

According to Fanon the first phase is that of political assimilation, particularly for the native artists and intellectuals. The artists bring out more stereotyped representation of the native people and their culture. While differentiating between native and foreign culture, these artists take liberty to put the colonizers' culture over the native one. Though the common masses remain intact to their tradition and culture, the bourgeois of the colonized nations wish to be like the colonizers, in a way they want to put 'white mask on black skin'. The first cinema in the same way takes for granted the rights of representing natives so as to keep them passive and inferior.

The native tribes represented in EF, APFL, and Avatar are mostly passive observers and mute sufferers. John Boorman in EF presents tribes engaged in internal conflict. Two tribal groups: the invisible people and fierce people are constantly in warring situation. The white colonizers employ the colonial policy of 'divide and rule' to destroy the nature and peaceful living in the company of nature by taming the fierce people with liquor and guns and use them to fight against the invisible people who protect the nature, for they simply believe that the trees are like their ancestors sacred and adorable. Only after the involvement of modern humanitarian heroes, under whose leadership, they learn to resist and fight for their rights. As in APFL and Avatar the external agents who happen to be the protagonists of the movies, Mr. Lewis Moon and Jake Sully respectively leads the Niurana the Amazonian tribe and Na'vi clan to open war against the colonizers, who wish to transform tribal people culturally so the natural resources of the land they inhabit can be explored.

## **Second Phase**

The second phase is that of identification. The realization that the assimilation and adaptation of the ways of colonizers has brought a halt to the national culture in every field and the renovation of the native culture would generate national consciousness on general level and self-consciousness among the tribal people. In this phase natives strive hard to prove that the native culture is greater and comfortable than that of the colonizers. Adherence to the national culture is the feature of this phase. In the words of Frantz Fanon

“The persistence in following the forms of culture condemned to extinction is a demonstration of nationality” (Fanon, Frantz, pp. 237).

The native artists and intellectuals in this phase seek identity within the national culture by 'reclaiming the past'. In the first cinema movies EF, APFL and Avatar the tribal self-consciousness however, is not the product of tribal self-awareness rather the external agents or the members of the civilization or in this context the colonizers: Tommy, Lewis Moon and Jake Sully respectively who adopt the tribal ways of living generate among tribal people the sense of being and advocated the cause of native culture. The resistance-struggle the movies depict, therefore, is not the insider's attitude but the product of outsider's empathy for organic goodness, innate spirit and spontaneity and environmental and cultural concerns. It clearly implies that the natives are passive, disorganized and incapable of executing the organized revolt. Therefore, they need to be protected and talked about. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak's question in her article 'Can the Subaltern Speak or Someone else should Speak for them?' Becomes pertinent in this context. As long as someone else is speaking for the subalterns, they will not get the proper expression. That is what these first cinema movies are doing.

### **Third Phase**

Third phase signify the revolution and political activism. The awakened national or self-consciousness results in both the political and artistic spheres. This revolt on broader level is visible in art, culture, oral lore, crafts and designs and active struggle. Among tribal people the belief in their age-old mythology is the source of assistance. Tommy, for example, after rescuing the women from brothel in a stormy night articulates a myth that every stream has a snake like spirit and the river where these stream meets becomes powerful anaconda that can destroy any obstacle in the way. While rescuing the women from brothel he takes help of his biological father who have constructed the dam in the river and lives in the newly established city adjacent to the dam. From the very site of the dam tommy was kidnapped by the tribal people ten years before and raised as one among them. The construction of dam symbolizes the modern encroachment in the lives of tribal people, the destruction of natural flow of life and consequent threat to the native land, people and their culture. This belief, however, turns out to be true in the movie. But, in reality, what is expected from a leader of tribe is to initiate a revolt to destroy the dam construction. Thus, the

revolutionary impulses presented in the movies proves to be superficial and ineffective. This again implies the exoticness of tribal people, their culture and beliefs.

### **The Colonial Ideology in the Movies: *The Emerald Forest, At Play in the Field of the Lord and Avatar***

The colonization has never been solely a military expedition, rather involves ideology as a controlling agency to colonize the minds of the ‘exotic others’. All European imperialist powers successfully employed ideology in colonial expansion. They made natives believe that the native people, culture and ideology are inferior to those of colonizers. According to Marx, ideology functions as the superstructure of a civilization: the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society. The ruling ideas are always those of ruling class. The colonization of mind and through it the cultivation of belief in self-inferiority among the natives established European hegemony. It is true of different superstructures within the colonial powers, viz., literature, culture, technology, language and audio-visual medium like movie. Though the narratives of the movies record the political activism and consequent battles against the colonizers, cinematic techniques and thematic motifs are employed so as to ultimately degrade the colonial subjects.

#### **About the Movies**

The movie *EF* is about a father’s search for his son who has been abducted by a tribe ten years ago. Bill Markham the Engineer appointed to construct a dam on a river in Amazonian forest of Brazil found out that his son is being abducted by a mysterious tribe. He undertakes a search for his son Tommy, but all go in vain. Finally, after ten years while on one of his search expedition he finds his son, completely indigenized and on way to become the leader of that tribe. Tommy refuses to go back to the civilized world of his biological father, instead he happily marries a tribal girl and after the death of the leader of the tribe ‘Wanadi’ who raised him as his son, he becomes the leader. In the course of the movie we happen to see the manifestations of tribal culture, viz., the hunting expedition, tribal internal conflict, initiation ceremony, marriage ceremony, totemic rituals as well as adverse effects of the modern encroachment on their lives. The rival tribe, sort of cannibals, kills a journalist Werner accompanying Markham to cover the story of his search for

son. He meets the civilized brothel owners, who provide the tribal people liquor and gun to bring tribal girls to the brothel. The fierce people attack the village of invisible people and capture their women. Bill Markham helps his son Tommy to rescue women from brothel. Finding that the dam constructed has become a threat to the forest and tribal world of his son, Bill Markham reassesses his loyalties and belief to the progress and decides to explode the dam. But before he could, the nature itself breaks it making the flow natural.

*APFL* concerns the Christian Missions attempt to pacify the tribal and change their religious faith. The mission post in a river base in Amazonian forest strives hard to convert tribal people to Christianity. The couple Lesile and Andy Huben are in charge of the mission. There arrives Martin and Hazel Quarrier. Martin is very honest and enthusiastic to preach the word of Lord to the tribal to bring about change in their lives. Lesile Huben's intention, however, is to pacify them and capture their land, as he cuts a deal with local inspector to make the Niaruna tribal people leave their habitat. The local inspector appoints Mr. Lewis Moon and his friend to do the job. Moon is the American pilot who in emergency had to land the aircraft at missionary outpost. Moon however, identifies with the tribal people and parachutes near the tribal village to become one among them. Moon knowing the intentions of the mission, stimulates tribal revolt. At the same time he becomes a cause for the complete destruction of the tribe. Lewis Moon in his tribal avatar sees Andy Huben swimming nude in the river and exchanges kiss with her. The flu he catches from her makes the whole tribe seriously ill resulting in its complete destruction. Even, Martin Quarrier, who realizes the futility of mission tries to help the tribal people but is killed by the tribal servant to Lesile Huben. Lewis Moon survives the goose men's attack, deep drowned in regret.

*Avatar* is a science fiction movie by James Cameroon. It depicts the invasion of Na'vi tribe of Pandora the planet, rich with the mineral called unobtanium. The film is set in 2154, when humans have depleted Earth's natural resources, leading to severe energy crises. The Resource Development Administration (RDA) is mining the minerals on Pandora whose atmosphere is poisonous to the humans. The scientists use human hybrids called 'Avatar' who resemble the native giant habitants called Na'vi. The avatars are operated by genetically matched humans. Jake Sully a paralyzed former marine replaces his dead brother. At first Dr. Grace Augustine considers



him inadequate for the avatar operation but accepts his service as bodyguard. While guarding Dr. Grace and fellow scientists collecting biological data, Jake's avatar is attacked by the wild animal. Jake flees into the forest where he meets Neytiri the native girl. Neytiri witnesses sacred omens and takes him to her tribe. Mo'at the spiritual leader of the clan orders her daughter Neytiri to initiate Jake to the tribe and teach him the ways of Na'vi. After initiation Jake and Neytiri choose each other as mates. Meanwhile Colonel Miles Quaritch, head of RDA security force, promises Jake to replace his legs, if he gathers information about the tribe and their gathering place the giant Home tree which stands on the enormous storage of the mineral. But Jake mesmerized with the tribal beauty and their way of living declares not to support RDA. Outraged Quaritch and RDA administration orders to destroy the Home tree. Even, Na'vi held Jake and Grace captive when he confesses his being a spy. To convince the tribe again Jake successfully attaches his soul to the Toruk, a dragon like predator feared and honored by Na'vi. With the help of new leader Tus'tey Jake unites all the Na'vi and fights a winning battle against RDA and becomes Na'vi forever.

### **Neither Neutral Nor Unbiased**

These simple narratives of political activism, however, are not neutral or unbiased. Ultimately through stereotypical representation, proving native religion, culture, history and technology as inferior, and employing specific cinematic techniques the natives are depicted as exotic others, uncivilized brats, savages, superstitious and inferior. Mike Wayne in his influential book *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (2001) identified the four key markers: the historicity, politicization, critical commitment and cultural specificity, that help to bring forth the implicit colonial ideology disguised beneath the overtly neutral narrative.

### **Historic Non-Specificity**

The detachment from the history, and perception of man as consumer of ideology not the creator are the governing features of first cinema. Tribal people and their culture as the object of representation is uprooted from their ancient history and culture, rather they are presented as engaged in futile internal conflicts. The enmity between tribe of invisible people and fierce people diverts our attention from historically specific details concerning the tribes and landscapes they inhabit, rather the focus is shifted to the romantic and sexualized portrayals of the tribal people.

Camera angle constantly resting on the bare breasts of the tribal women in EF, for example, projects the tribal beauty as sex object. Though nudity is natural and normal among the tribal people, but, the gaze with which it is presented in the movies reveals sexual connotations. Sexuality of tribal women is even made more explicit by incorporating the sexual relations between tribal women and non-tribal male. In all the three movies beautiful and engaging tribal heroines engage in sexual relations with non-tribal males who by choice have adopted tribal living. In this sense, tribal beauty is one of the attraction that drives them to assimilate among the tribal.

The conversion is shown not as intended to place them at a better position than they are right now, but to rule and exploit them as servants or laborers. Apart from a few scenes depicting the rituals of tribals, the movie places them out of the orbit of tribal history and tradition. And, representing tribal people to be studied asserts their subjective position.

Na'vi culture in James Cameroon's *Avatar* is seen to be historically grounded in tradition and culture but ultimately end up considering man as consumer of ideology. Jake Sully's acceptance of Na'vi way of living and decision to transfer his consciousness to his avatar self to permanently become Na'vi suggests the utopian possibilities of Na'vi culture. The movie fails to track the history of native traditions and cultural practices, rather it sporadically hints at historical records. Apart from Netyri's explanation to Jake concerning the historical significance of Toruk to the clan, there is no other significant record available. It is after the entry of Jake Sully's avatar, the Na'vi's start fighting back against the colonizers. Implicitly, suggesting that native inhabitants are not capable of fighting the exploitation. They just accept their inferiority in turn asserting supremacy of colonizers.

### **Political Consciousness**

Making the oppressed aware of their culture and situation and igniting a spark of revolution with the thought of changing the present scenario becomes, in due course, often in gradual steps, the task of native intellectual, artist or a leader as it happened with all the third world countries once colonized by European powers. In the movies, however, this task is given fully to the colonizers themselves, who are shown to be main architects of such opposition, if not the leaders.

The external agents Tommy, Lewis Moon, and Jake Sully are the epitomes of revolution. Until they are not incorporated, tribal people are mute sufferers and passive observers. The selected first cinema movies revolve around those three characters as protagonists. The focus is more on the idiosyncrasies, romantic affairs, and character development of non-tribal heroes rather than political activism of the natives. In a way tribal people are not considered worthy of being heroes of the movies. Three of them are accepted as Godly gifts and soon become the decision-making authority within tribal governing system. Only after these external agents are incorporated in tribal social structure, occasional bouts of political consciousness are visible. The bouts, however, are not the product of tribal thought but the influence of external agents or *massihas* (almighty protector).

In short, the movies systematically affirm that the tribal people cannot revolt on their own. Raising voice against exploitation is the birth right of non-tribal people. The romantic love affair of three characters with beautiful tribal girls simply adopts the non-tribal modern romance-inclined movies.

### **Critical Commitment or Cinematic Identification**

A political movie representing the plights of subaltern groups should be able to provoke its audience to take necessary political action required to maintain the dignity of them. The cinematic identification is more prevalent in the third cinema movie than its first counterpart. It enables audiences to empathize with the sufferings of indigenous people and consequently through cinematic revolution empowers them to invoke the revolution while dealing with real life problems. This first cinema on the other hand, do not lay any foundation for the cinematic identification, rather it makes audience impotent by diverting their attention to idiosyncrasies, romance or moments of personal intimacy. The movies under discussion, however, do not invoke empathies of the audience that may lead to a revolution, rather invoke sympathies making them more vulnerable to the colonizers rage. In the EF Tommy after the death of his tribal father, as a leader of tribe, is more concerned about the whereabouts of his would-be wife Kachari rather than the fate of the tribe called Invisible People. Moon in APFL catches cold from Andy who was swimming nude in the forest river, when they kissed, and infects the whole Niaruna village leading

to its complete destruction. Avatar also focuses more on the heroic deeds and romantic engagement of Jake Sully's avatar executed to impress Neytiri the Na'vi female.

### **The Cultural Non- Specificity**

The movies are culturally non-specific. They fail to present specific tribal culture as a site of political struggle. The movies under discussion are seen as either celebrating the utopian possibilities of tribal culture or denounce it as barbaric, deeply engrossed in superstition and useless ritual. The realistic picture of tribal culture is not made available, which cinema as a part of culture should do. The first cinema is not deeply rooted in social structure for, it never undertakes to criticize existing social order. The three movies, though end on optimistic note and victory of tribal people, are least interested in solving the problem permanently. Tommy being a leader of invisible tribe, after their reunion with the women of the group who were taken to the brothel, prefers to move deeper in the forest, but ignores the reoccurrence of similar threat to their existence by the rapid encroachment and modern intervention in the natural flow of life. The APFL is exception; it presents the complete destruction of both the missionary's mission and Niaruna village as well, exposing Moon (Kis-Mu) not as god but as human. It implicitly indicates that the intervention of either side in the lives of each other would result in complete destruction.

The movies are culturally non-specific in the sense that the rituals and ceremonies depicted in the movies are like 'purple patches'. The ceremonies and rituals as manifestation of culture are not properly placed in their respective cultural context. The initiation ceremony, marriage ceremony, singing and dancing, etc. are depicted simply for the sake of representation. The cultural, historical, ritualistic and environmental significance of these cultural practices doesn't get expressed.

### **Cinematic Techniques Employed**

Apart from the thematic concerns, certain cinematic conventions and techniques employed in the movies also perpetuate the colonial ideology. The costume and make up, for example, assert the exoticness, barbarity and technological inferiority. The aspect of appearance such as nudity, body paintings, chunky Jewelry, feather crowns, crowns of spike, flower crowns, bow and arrow strengthens the stereotypes of 'primitive other'. In short, the cinematic representation of the native

in general and the tribal people in particular encourage intellectual investment in colonialism. As Edward Said argues

“The orient was almost the European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experience”. Said, Edward, pp.1.)

The tribal characters are made exotic through unusual costumes, distinguished body paintings, dreadlocks as symbols of dirtiness. Even the landscapes in which these characters enact their roles reinforce their barbarity and uncivilized status. Tribal people finding solutions to the problems posed by modern encroachment in their world in superstitions and totemic rituals reassert the passivity of these people. Rather than initiating a struggle against the modern intervention and encroachment the native tribal people engaged in rituals sounds outdated and illogical.

### **Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Connotations of Camera Angle and the Shot Sequence**

The paradigmatic and syntagmatic chain of shots connote a set of attitudes toward the native people and their culture. The sequence and framing of shots in APFL depicting the scene after the arrival of Martin and Hazel Quarrier at the missionary outpost in Amazonian river base is taken as a representative example for the analysis. It well explains the syntagmatic and paradigmatic chain of connotations. Three subsequent shots from the movie APFL clearly explore how cinematic techniques assert Eurocentric attitude.



Shot 1.

The lower angle close-up shot on the face of Hazel Quarrier asserts her dominance as white lady in tribal setting. At the same time the expressions on her face connotes the disgust and dislike for the hot air and the place she has just arrived.



	<p>Shot.2.</p> <p>Hazel is hysterically wiping the hand of her son Billy. The action confirms her feelings that everything at the place she has arrived is dirty.</p>
	<p>Shot.3.</p> <p>The third shot depicting a malnourished child licking the things scattered on floor confirms Hazel's opinion.</p>

Figure: 1.

The first shot compared with the subsequent shots in syntagmatic chain represents the Eurocentric attitude of the white people towards the tribal people. The contrasting combination through the parallel montage of well-dressed, white, sophisticated boy Billy and mother Hazel posed against malnourished, black, dirty poorly dressed mother and child affirms the difference between two worlds. The lower camera angles assert the dominance of Hazel while upper camera angle denounces the native lady and her child as unimportant.

### Conclusion

At the end it can be said that the answer to the question raised in the introduction of this paper would be, *yes* the movies are biased while depicting the tribe and their culture. The movies under discussion perpetuate the colonial ideology through both thematic motifs and cinematic techniques.

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