

Screening the White Women's Dilemma in Colonial India New Historicist Study of *A Passage to India* (1985), and *Heat and Dust* (1982)

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Abstract:

The events of the past can be accessed through different kinds of mediums such as written historic texts, the government records, the other sources like socio-cultural traditions, the oral sagas etc. But a new trend has become prominent from past few years that is representing history through films. So the events form history of any nation can be screened through the medium of films. In case of India, the films based on colonial era, represent the various kinds of colonial-colonised relations, socio-cultural interactions on both sides. The present study centers on the role of race and gender in relation to colonial politics. The present paper studies the phenomenon of screening the dilemma of white women during the colonial era in the history of India. The study examines the selected films from New Historicist perspective.

Keywords: Empire, Films, Colonialism, New Historicism, Race, Gender.

The films based on the history of colonial India comments on the various issues of life in respect to the colonial and colonised. These films essentially comment on the politics of using the medium of cinema for fulfilling the agenda of empire. The ideological structures of colonialism also exploit the role of patriarchy and gender in relation to the white women. The reproductive powers of the white women have been associated with the reproduction of the white Christian values in the context of colonialism. That's why the colonial politics has always been described full of racial as well as gender violence. Jigna Desai in her chapter "Preface: Insurgent Cameras and Postcolonial Squibs" writes, "Violence is one of the common traits associated with the racial other in colonial discourses". The films highlight the colonial administration's policy of knowing as well as exploiting the native culture, its tradition, social norms and even the geographical features of the colonised. These films also showcase the role of race and gender in the context of the ideology behind the imperial politics.

The films like *A Passage to India* (1985), and *Heat and Dust* (1982) based on the politics of colonialism have been interpreted in relation to both the colonial as well as the colonised. That's why such films represent the aspects of colonialism from both perspectives whether it was of the colonial master or the colonised native. The films based on historic events, ideas, incidents or specific historic eras have proved themselves as an amalgam of giving a new shape to historic and literary texts as well as other important sources about the concerned subject. Robert A. Rosenstone in his book *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, describes "how like a history book, a film handles evidence from that past within a certain framework of possibilities and a tradition of practice" (Rosenstone 127). The films based on the themes related to history served as the useful part of knowing about the past. Moreover it is easy to watch any film based on historic topic instead of reading a historic text. The films give the viewers to feel and experience any event of the past in the present.

The film *A Passage to India* (1985) was directed by David Lean based on E.M. Forster's novel of the same name written in 1924. The film *A Passage to India* (1985) is studied here as a continuous discourse of the agenda of imperial politics in colonial era in the history of India in relation to other films such as *Heat and Dust* (1982). Simon Featherstone in his article entitled "*Passages to India*" writes "the film does not celebrate the Empire, but the changes that it does make are indicative of the ways in which the politics of empire became an important part of popular culture in early 1980s" (Featherstone 293). In this way the film emerges as a medium through which India can be represented in its relation to English Empire and the politics of colonialism of the times. The film uses the Indian landscape to propagate the colonial politics of including and redefining the nature of the colonised people in accordance to its culture. Nicholas B. Dirks in his book *Colonialism and Culture* (1992) writes, "Often, these transformations seemed over determined, for culture in places such as India became, through colonial lenses, assimilated to the landscape itself, fixed in nature, and freed from history"(3). The mystery of the Malabar caves has been associated with the mystery of Indian culture. The history of a nation like India, its culture as well as peoples have been described in relation to its geographical features. The colonial films depict the native weather as uncivilised and barbaric like the colonised men who symbolise a continuous threat to the white women. On the other hand, the white women like Olivia and Miss Adella get bored with the English life style and they want to enjoy the real India. As in the *A Passage to India* (1985) Miss Adella puts it: *I am longing to see something of the real India*. But this is answered appropriately by Fielding who remarks: *Try seeing Indians*.

The film *Heat and Dust* (1982) also shows how Henry suggests Anne to be aware of what to drink and eat in India and have some injections before going there. He says: *No water ever anywhere. No uncooked foods, no fruit, or no salads*. This has been explained well by Cecilia Leong-Salobir in his book *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire* when he says that "The colonials took great care in following established rules of hygiene peculiar to the colonies. Boiling drinking water was mandatory, as was the washing of fruits and vegetables" (Leong Salobir 131-132). Thus the issue of food simplifies the problems of making contact with the 'other' and this was also described when Olivia visited *nawab's*

palace at the first time. The next shot captures Anne going across the Indian market along with people, the rickshaws, three wheelers and cars passing through. Similarly, the film *Heat and Dust* (1982) shows how the colonial politics used the native weather as a sign of difference between the colonised East and the colonial West. Douglas explains the heat and dust in India:

Douglas: No English woman is supposed to stand in this weather.

Olivia: You have these set notions about what English women are supposed to stand.

This very notion of colonial ideology has been opposed by Olivia when she completely disagrees with Douglas and remarks: *The only thing I can't stand is the Englishwomen, the memsahibs.* This depicts Olivia's different outlook towards Indians and she has determined to endure the heat and dust of India instead of going to Shimla with other British ladies. Cecilia Leong-Salobir in his book *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire* explained the colonial psyche about the Indian weather when he says that "India in the early nineteenth century was perceived by the Europeans to be a place where disease was part of the landscape and where sickness rapidly resulted in death" (Leong-Salobir 117). But this was unacceptable to Olivia while belonging to the same British class. Through Olivia's character film comments on the question of fixed, self-determined colonial identity. Because the colonial powers describe India as a dirty place to live because of its heat and dust.

A Passage to India (1985) also begins with a medium long shot of the Gateway of India on the edge of the sea and an extreme long shot of British Governor with his wife entering from the sea side on the red carpet. Then the camera shows the Indian crowd right from the sea side into the market. It shows the snake charmers and the people selling their flowers and fruits. This scene has got the same setting with the opening scene of the film *Man Who Would be the King* (1975) which also shows the snake charmers in the market. As Brian Cogan in his article "We Are Just Having a Peaceful Rally: Bloody Sunday and the Modern Irish Postcolonial Film" writes, "it is not just the content that adds ambiguity to the film, but also the nature of the production" (Cogan 22). So in this way, a New Historicist study explains how the film intentionally introduces India, its people, their doings and the British as strangers to the land of mysterious caves and snake charmers. The film describes about the colonial mind-set of the British as fixed, racial and full of doubt towards the Indians. It becomes clear when Mrs. Moore asks Mr. Turton to be introduced to some Indians with whom they must have come across socially as friends. But in response Mrs. Moore get an arrogant answer:

Mr. Turton: As a Matter of fact we don't come across them socially.

Mrs. Turton: East is East, Mrs. Moore. It's a question of culture.

The film also depicts a large number of Indians sleeping in miserable condition. The next scene describes the life in the Indian market, full of fruits and vegetables, the buyers and sellers and in the end it shows how a dead body is being carried away. The film juxtaposes the two different images of the colonial and the colonised. While in contrast to the Indian side, the film depicts the British civil lines as a beautiful and peaceful place. That is why the

importance of English wife has been propagated continuously to make ensure the reproduction of white Christian values in the context of colonial politics. But in real, this has made the white women to feel lonely and under the burden of white supremacy.

On the other hand, the films showcase Indians as Barbaric and uncivilised people. The films also depict the native weather as well as its geography as a muddle, violent and unstructured. That is why the films like *A Passage to India* (1984), and *Heat and Dust* (1982) depict the native people as an uncivilized and dirty crowd. But these two selected films also comments on the difference between the British perspectives regarding Indians, their socio-cultural and geographical features. The film *A Passage to India* (1984) portrays the characters of Adella Quested and Mrs. Moore who show some respect towards Indians. In the same way, the other film *Heat and Dust* (1982) also showcases the British characters who remain in favour of the Indians like Olivia and Anne. Michael Ryan and Melissa Lenos in their book *An Introduction to Film Analysis: Technique and Meaning in narrative Film* (2012) explain how "how all films bear the marks of the moment in which they were made, and as a consequence, they are available for historical interpretation"(Lenos & Ryan155). The film bear the impact of representing some event of history of colonial era in the postcolonial times. The New Historicist analysis of the films helps to explore the other underlying structures of colonial ideology such as the role of race and gender in the context of colonial India. The female characters like Olivia in *Heat and Dust* (1982)and Miss Adella in *A Passage to India* (1984) try to explore India and Indians beyond the set limits by the white community. In the end, the both ladies have to suffer and they are neglected by their English relatives. That is how Kumari Jayawardena in her book *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (2014) describes how both the ladies crossed the bridge of the difference between the colonial and the colonised, white and the non-whites. She writes, "they crossed boundaries of accepted race, gender and class positions, proclaiming sisterhood, and taking political stand against colonial rule" (Jayawardena 9). The selected films also explore the dominant role of patriarchy under the umbrella of colonialism. In both selected films, the white English women have to suffer because of their gender and being white. Suzanne Leonard in her article "The Threat to Whiteness: The white Women's Marital Betrayal in the Colonial Settings" explains "Olivia's story realizes the reproductive anxiety that circumscribe the figure of the white wife in the colonial context" (Leonard134). Moreover, these English women also represent the whole white race and that is why they are expected to save as well as reproduce the white Christian values. Such racial values are necessary to preserve the superiority of the white colonial race over the other colonised race. The films showcase the dilemma of white female protagonists who seem to be attached to Indian people and India but they are neglected as well as out casted in their own race. This happens to Olivia in *Heat and Dust* (1982) in and Miss Adella Quested in *A Passage to India* (1984). The films showcase the suppression of white femininity to uphold the colonial superiority over the colonised. The miserable plight of both Olivia and Mrs. Adella Quested highlights how even the white women themselves have been colonised the under the alliance of race, gender and colonialism in the larger context of colonial politics.

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