

Colonisation of culture: a "take-off" from African cinema -- towards potential comparative categories for India

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Pan-African cinema is feared to be viewed in exile, with its dominant viewership located mostly at Western film festivals such as the ones in Berlin, Venice, Cannes and London, or at the Vues d'Afrique in Montreal, Le Festival de Trois Continents a Nantes, le Festival d' Amiens, and the Milan Festival of African cinema. These festivals are perceived as more promising avenues of market for African cinema than what could be wrought by Africa's own festivals at Oagadougou (Burkina Faso) and Carthage (Tunisia). There is also the additional factor of external (foreign) financing _____ represented by a large percentage of Francophony sources and by a relatively small percentage of Anglophony, and of late by Gulf (petro money) sources. This area of problematique ends up giving definition to the overall language, aesthetics and political discourse of African cinema as well as to its portrait of multiculturalism. It should be matter of interest to understand whether the African situation can throw up conceptual categories for comparison with our own. The identification of our structures with pan-African conditions is primarily with the intent of magnifying the on-going search for a viable South-South platform, embodied already in congregations such as the G-15, the G-77, the Bangkok agreement, the ESCAP and so on. These groupings can be expected to draw up an

alternate agenda to the one that is usually dictated by the Bretton woods institutions; and an agenda that could have the effect of galvanising into action a series of legitimate discourses, and through these, a convergence of issues related to the politics of de-colonisation and the spread of misinformation through communication "highways" laid down by the West. An essential prerequisite for this would be to ensure that the dialectics of these are spoken in a 'language' that is easily comprehended as well as articulated to our own advantage. One envisages a language that helps to convey the thought that culture is a matter of one's pride and joy, that culture has as much social as it has political value. This was specifically articulated a decade ago by Amir Jamal a minister of finance and economic planning (and such portfolios) in Tanzania since the county's independence, and has written forcefully in an area related to the cultural dimensions of development.

Two aspects that need to be defined here because these form the basis of our discussion ahead are: (i) South-South -- its meaning and framework, and (ii) 'cinema' as an allegory of media which is being considered here as one of the most potent transcultural routes of domination. For us, South-South is not just a semantic euphemism for the Western world's usage of the term Third World solidarity (a post-Vietnam war movement that is only today arguably beginning to gather force); but is representative of an entity whose definition needs to be extended beyond the existing narrow Western notion of a term that depicts the Third World as representative of countries that do not belong to the club of the 'developed' or the erstwhile socialist bloc countries; logically here, the Third World embraces the remaining countries of the

world positioned at various stages of the development spectrum ranging mostly from the developing to the 'underdeveloped', and located in Asia, Africa and Latin America; but without doubt countries that have been floundering for survival under sub-autonomous conditions of existence. Our objection to the use of the term Third World is two fold: the first stems from the underlying tone of disparagement that is associated with anything that is not the first or the second but downwards of these, by the tone of pre-emptiveness that surrounds it, as though the medals for development have already been distributed and the Third World, hereby, and forever stands condemned to wear the mantle of such a 'bestowal'. The second objection relates to the semantic value of the Western definition which appears technically refined but is, in fact, quite crude and imprecise because it fails to reflect the collective sensibilities of a people belonging to the colonised, neo-colonised or de-colonised nations whose "economic and political structures have been shaped and deformed within the colonial process"¹. The domination referred to here is structural and not merely economic ('poor'), racial ('non-white'), cultural ('the backward') or geographical. Since 'Third World' as a terminology has wide prevalence we will use it interchangeably with 'South-South' albeit the refinement introduced above. Also in the relatively restricted undertaking of our propositions and counterpropositions related to African cinema, we will view 'cinema' not in an unqualified, pure sense of the term, but more as an allegory for entertainment and enrichment on screens both big and small, with the intention of working on the McLuhanian sub-premise that the "pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press,

radio, movies and advertising" are of a similar nature, although working at different scales and proportions; and of these, cinema forms an important indicator of our cultural values because it represents the very evolution of a cultural language, which according to a prominent Indian film maker Shahani, "seeks to portray the image, speech, language, writing, music or any other cultural preoccupation" of its people. Overall, a fairly well-claimed position adopted by media studies for well over the last two decades is the one that maintains that the media as an 'objective situation' could well be responsible for shaping 'human disposition, or attitudes and habits' ²

Diawara's article provokes us to attempt an assessment of her material, albeit, at a higher level of approximation and against the backdrop of countries facing similar conditions of victimisation and marginalisation. India seems like a fine example of a country that could lend itself to such an exercise. Some reasons being that: India and Africa share the obvious characteristics of size - both are awesome in their proportions; both feature heterogeneity and diversity reflected in the respective spheres of their culture, language and political ideologies; both the landmasses have a shared past of colonisation as well as a shared present of neo-colonisation. Both India and Africa can lay claims to having nurtured an intelligentsia (Nehru, Achebe, Armah, educated in the West and or in home-based Western-style institutions but politically and ethically inclined homewards; the same Westernised elite also forming sections of their respective political establishments. But while India has always been characteristically a state that is "dominant but not hegemonic" ⁵, Africa's body politic comprises

states that are not necessarily so. These are, of course, only some of the many available broad parametric considerations. Given these and others, the pan-African situation in terms of its cinema being colonised by forces originating and located outside its sovereign boundaries begins to find reflections on the Indian sub-continent. The two questions that form the quintessence of the above-mentioned reflection are (1) what is the effective audience for clean, healthy and quality entertainment in India; with at least a segment of this entertainment additionally projecting themes underpinned by Indian sensibilities and Indian moorings? In other words, themes that make contact with the experiences of its viewers? and, (2) if most of the audience that has access to satellite television (ST) prefers to view ST to home-spun television (HT) programmes, what is it but a kind of colonisation of our own screens? Admittedly, this element of the colonisation process does not have a significant lateral spread, being confined largely to metropolitan and non-metropolitan urban India; however, it is a colonisation that cuts deeper into Western sensibilities and influences than is otherwise apparent, and is directly a function of (i) the politics of broadcasting (ii) its available technology and (iii) the ownership of broadcasting, all of which contribute singularly or collectively towards the influencing or the control of the message of a given broadcast. Besides, this a reflection of a process of "internal colonisation"⁶, which by its very subtlety and intangibility and deep internalisation assumes more dangerous proportions with equally lasting repercussions, than influences that are concrete and visible on the surface.

The questions addressed above could put us squarely into a debate on the role of the media and the government in locating cultural imperatives on a value-oriented scale that contains the lowest common denominator in terms of popular values upwards into those that nurture individualistic expressions of creativity; and needless to say a scale that must perforce be a derivative of the country's economic and political imperatives and conditions. Interpreted broadly, this means that since the state is one of the financiers, a stated/declared cultural policy becomes mandatory in order to reduce 'ad-hocism'. Secondly, as part of an effort to strive towards a cultural policy that 'pays' and yet enriches it might be useful to prompt ourselves into an "urgent need to study the popular culture" ⁷, an effort that has made some scholarly strides such as in Guha and Spivak's the 'Subaltern Studies' project (1988), as well as in the works of the Australian Morris' 'Metamorphoses at Sydney town' (1990) For the moment, however, we will attempt a strategic retreat from participating in the above debate, in favour of continuing to address ourselves to the more specific agenda that we have drawn up for ourselves. And not before we have admitted that some of the issues thrown up by globalisation, including the more transparent ones expressed in the rhetorics of the redoubtable issues of trade and technology transfers, will continue to remain on the distant horizon or subsume our interests in the unprepared sweeps of their force, unless we are prepared to warm ourselves towards marketing parables that are attuned to picking up signals from the market place, where films and the rest of the media can expect to find no exceptional treatment; the main signal in this instance consisting of the high premium laid by the market place

on its viewers' prerogative for a freedom of choice of viewing situations.

A second major area of the African situation replicating itself in a pan-Indian one is with regard to the marketing of our cinema in the West (cinema representing one of the most sought-after of Third World products); and as an extension of this proposition, the theme of the marketing (at various levels) of similar other products. Notice the way the 'Festivals of India' end up showcasing abroad a fossilized version of our cultural artifacts as though our folklore, traditions and heritage have been diachronically frozen since the times of our ancient civilizations or since the periods of catharsis following the periodical onslaughts by foreign conquistadores. The concept of 'discontinuous continuity' asserted by African scholar Roger Bastide⁸ and which truly and soulfully summarizes the stream of consciousness underlying the passage of time behind our own cultural conditions is, however, quite contrary to the Anglo-Saxon mode of thinking. Undoubtedly, at least a part of the interest shown in African or Third World cinema stems out of considerations for values or aspects as prioritised by the West. This kind of racism of approach has been squarely condemned in the past by critics of African studies such as Sergio Buarque de Holanda who have felt that the very emphasis by the West on cultural differences and the factor of the exotic (in alien cinema in the West and other cultural products) effectively made for a kind of a cultural ghetto for our products. And again, the very concept of treating Third World cultural material as "a source of aesthetic enjoyment" for the West to the exclusion of all other concerns is, indeed, quite reprehensible. This perspective might

be elucidated by instances of our daily interactions with Western cultural funding and broadcasting bodies such as BBC's Channel Four, which at the end will accept a film on rioting from an Indian director, only and only if, the theme of rioting has been particularised in the communal context of India, and not if the film intends to deal with rioting as a worldwide phenomenon albeit engineered by contextualised sets of dynamics (such as in the instance of riotings in the U.K., or in L.A., and so on). In this context, it becomes difficult to obscure from our views the fact of America's or Europe's multicultural identity belying its own pockets of conservatism. Channel four's funding of Pankaj Bhutalia's 'Moksha' and Manjira Dutta's 'Seeds of Plenty, Seeds of Sorrow' does nothing to alleviate these apprehensions. While 'Moksha' quite clearly exoticises an utterly grim situation of widows banished away from mainstream life into wilful oblivion, Dutta's film commissioned on the occasion of the Rio Summit of June'92 and dealing with American capitalist designs, leaves behind questions in the viewer's mind regarding the " 'independence' of its stance and credibility" by the very nature of the equation drawn up between the producer and the director (Spectrum India BIFF'94).

Outside of the above-mentioned areas of similarities emerging from African cinema that find their echoes on our sub-continent, there can be traced at least two major areas of divergences in India from the pan-African situation. (1) The fact that while ninety percent of African films are funded by Francophone institutional and state finances (this excluding sources of Anglophone financing); such is not true of India where most films

are either state, corporate or privately funded. Implicit in this is also the fact that while we get to retain some measure of 'freedom' over our own decision-making in key issues related to our cultural policy, the same ceases to be true for a majority of African cinema; which understandably gets hemmed in by conditionalities outlined in the various MoUs drawn up during fund acquisitions. With the result that much of their own decision-making with regard to their cultural policies is probably undertaken in a 'de facto' political way. At a broader level of understanding, this also means that in the course of borrowing money from external sources, African film-makers are also obliged to borrow the financiers "language, symbol, ideas and concepts."

(2) A second major area of divergence arises from the fact that we have (one distinct institution) that Africa does not, viz., the Bollywood⁹, a veritable machinery reputed to be one of the largest of its kind in the world and which, without much contention, parallels itself in its scope and presentation, with the structure at Hollywood. It is arguable whether Bollywood by itself could ever have resisted and offset colonising influences over our own visual media, or at least have provided the machinations to insulate us from Western inflictions via the Anglo-Saxon cultural domination route. What is certain, however, is (the fact) that the element of advantage attached to owning the presence of such a massive setup (that does contain some powerhouses of talent in music, choreography, cinematography, art direction, acting and editing) remains only on the surface. At the sub-text level, Bollywood today survives on the distinct strains of a strategic alliance with alien influences that eventually tend to convert the

gains (of having a Bollywood), even if these gains appeared as a mere saving grace, into net losses. Obviously because, the potentials of this machinery have got deluged by its prevailing software that passes for cinema in Bollywood -- a software that is based on recurrent attempts to assimilate into its folds some of the worst traditions of violence and perversities churned out by the Hollywood and the Kung-fu brigades; and which along with its insufferable plagiarisations have collectively worked towards its culture-products and their properties diminishing rather than exceeding the sum of their complex wholes. What might have made a difference is if Bollywood had attempted to translate these alien influences into elements that were relevant to our own contexts. And this could only have been possible if we drew our inspirations from these influences with a sense of informed admiration rather than with a sense of unqualified awe. The sum of such a given situation being that since Africa has no such monoliths as the Bollywood, the question of deconstructing its effects does not arise in their context. One is also tempted to add that far from demolishing the value of possessing an institutional reference such as the Bollywood, one would go so far as to draw at least one significant parallel between the master Satyajit Ray and The Bollywood viz in their love for the audience. In no uncertain terms, Ray had underlined the need for film-makers to "stoop to conquer" if they wished their films presence made in any meaningful way within their own countries. Interpreted in broad terms this could include an emphasis on developing regional language cinema and television. Both Bollywood and Ray have, indeed, pitched themselves at the level of the lowest common denominator of audience outreach (the

former in Bengal, the latter all over the country), and yet with such obvious distinction in their styles, commitment, outcome and moral coherence., that Bollywood seems a travesty of everything that holds a positive value in the the public sensorium and is considered personified by the cinema of Satyajit Ray.

- 1 Bombay International Film Festival for Documentaries, Short and Animation Films (BIFF)
- 2 Stam and Spence, *Movies and Methods II*, Nichols (ed), p. 632
- 3 Burke, *Dramatism in Pros and Cons*, McLuhan, 1966, p 165
- 4 *Sight and Sound* is a (trend setting) monthly journal on film criticism & cinema-related issues published by the British Film Institute, London.
- 5 EPW, 1991, p 2166
- 6 MP, Arnmah
- 7 EPW, 1991, p 2163
- 8 *Bastide in Mintz; Slavery, Colonialism and Racism*, 1974
- 9 Bollywood is the film industry based at Bombay and signposts similarities in its functioning and size with those of the film industry at the Hollywood.