

Colonisation of culture: (a) the irony of shifting levels of powerplay (b) shifting levels of powerplay make the winner a loser (c) Colonisation of culture and shifting levels of powerplay: no permanent winners here

by Ajanta Sen Poovaiah

Colonisation concerns the establishment of superiority through an infliction of moral and psychological defeatism . This is carried out by a systematic attempt at ignoring historical ties nurtured by the colonised with their past. Such an act of subversion has the effect of eroding the given indigent society's sense of self-confidence that it otherwise derives from taking pride in its roots. One of the first to fall victim and one of the last to recover from such an assault is the culture of its people. And needless to say that such a process, when operational on a long-standing basis, could have the effect of destroying certain initiatives that might have arrived had the colonised been allowed to retain a sense of pride in their own culture. By the end of War One , about eighty -five percent of the earth covering wide stretches of Africa, Asia and Latin America had already come under European domination. The ensuing sense of cultural-alienation and anomie experienced by the colonised may well be traced to this enforced Anglo-Saxon will imposed at least two centuries earlier and extending well past the late fifties and the early sixties. Our enquiry here is about emerging equations among these forces of domination in a post-colonial worldorder with reference to culture, and with specific

reference to the audio-visual medium of the television and cinema, that is being treated here for our purposes as a potent instrument for the colonising cultures, given the fact that this medium could hold a demonstrably important influence over the minds and behavior of people as well as in the evolution of a society's or an individual's sense of discrimination. Also, media today acts as a conduit for the expression and conveyance of transnational economic, social and cultural interests mostly through direct advertising, news films, soap and music. It is our understanding that while the current forces of colonisation of our screens and minds may still be traced in large measures to the earlier genesis of Anglo-Saxon domination, there is a quaint irony related to such a process that might be used to advantage in battling this problematique of concerning the hijacking of the process of cultural evolution of a society.

The irony of colonisation begins to acquire a cutting edge if one realises that while at one level of abstraction the oppressed are the South-South countries, at yet another the process of victimisation could very easily begin to shift towards the territory of the oppressor. There is no conspiracy involved here. It is a simple matter of the politics of the market place, with the functional parameters within which such a doctrine works in the West beginning to favour its relatively more powerful members. A major parameter in today's context would be the Galbraithian "technostructure", anticipated by him at least three decades ago; and the amount of weight ascribed to a nation or a bloc through its transnational corporations that are an inevitable concomitance of the growth of technostructures. So at one level,

there is the well-entrenched though not the necessarily obvious presence of the West over the de-colonised (but in reality the neo-colonised) culturescapes of Asia, Africa and Latin America -- and who can forget the annual brouhaha that France's overlording (via its Francophony funding and its resulting hegemony) causes at the biennial Oagadougou (Burkina Faso) film festival; at another level, countries such as France are themselves overcome by pressures of American cultural hegemony. By an extension of this example of American cultural pressures on France, it would be worthwhile understanding the politics of broadcasting obtained under such situations. In the recent war of wits fought out at the Uruguay round of the GATT talks (Dec ' 93), the sharp polemics generated in France and in other European countries against American cultural imperialism were essentially marked by a frontline defined by Godard-led-France and Scorsese-led-America. And there lay the rub to have to observe France's beleaguered position in a battle where Francophone aggression did not seem to count for much. So while Africa, in its own battle against Francophone hegemony, has been for while now trying out avenues to effectively subvert this force through the engagement of the skills of Afro-American film-makers (Haile Gerima, Raol Peck, Larry Clarke) who are essentially pan-Africanists at heart and whose cinema has been hailed in Africa and in progressive/libertine circles worldwide through the official Diaspora Award (also known as the Paul Robeson Prize); the question that naturally arose in this context was what France would do to subvert North American cultural hegemony popularly termed as the force of coca-colonisation in our country, and whose victims today are not just France but also Britain and most

of Europe, and a fact stated quite as emphatically by intellectuals such as Phillip Dodd (editor of the trend-setting 'Sight and Sound', British Film Institute) and others. Another significant example of the effect of transcultural domination determining the politics of broadcast of a country's electronic media is available in Italy where television lies completely in the hands of private funding and there are no medals here for guessing who culturally controls the small screen in Italy -- the Americans, of course. But to get back to France's efforts at countering American pressures; it appears that what France concretely did in its response to the GATT talks was to majorly assert that audiovisual services including cinema be considered under the GATS (General Agreement on Tariffs and Services) and not under the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariff). Accordingly, the logic of her argument began to build up on a premise that introduced the potential for excluding the entire audiovisual network of products and services from the Uruguay Round so that meaningful cinema could continue to find some cushioning through quotas, inevitably implying the well-advocated concomitance of such a frame of reference with accessibility to production finance as well as to an audience. As matters stand, France's rejection of America's conditionalities of free-market operations and her appeal for a continuation of the existing sixty percent quota of EC-produced material that is ordinarily reserved for screening on France's television had been forced into consideration in the final GATT talks at Marrakesh (April 94). The merit of France's appeal lay in the fairly compelling and heartening fact that such a quota arrangement (as represented by state support in France for French and

European cinema) has, in the recent past, actually translated itself into a string of critically as well as commercially-acclaimed films such as the *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*, *the Crying Game* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (which also has some American financing). France's victory against Hollywood, however, has stood largely on the grounds of her assertion that a country is privy to the important right of its "own images and to its own culture"; this in spite of France and Europe being confounded by the spectre of the "very viability of European cinema and television in a U.S.- dominated world". Because, increasingly, it is Hollywood films that have begun to take away the most prestigious of awards at European film-festivals, including at the recently-held Cannes Festival where America's '*Pulp Fiction*' won for Quentin Tarantino the *Palme D' Or* (Golden Palm) in May '94.

Although the above examples of domination revolve around the same organising principle of "conflict of civilizations" which is Samuel Huntington's very current terminology for such frictions, what does not escape our notice are the perceived difference in the characteristics of the two sets of domination --- of Africa by France, vis a vis that of France by the U.S.A. While the west would like to swear by a uniform logic of explanation, this useful extremely chic articulation in terms of culture conflicts is not nearly enough of an explanation for the above-mentioned differentials embedded in domination - attitudes. In our opinion, it is the levels of domination that determine contemporary post-colonial power equations. What is of concern for us here, therefore, is the following enquiry arising out of this chosen perspective: must it always be that only when a member from

the West begins to assert its self-determination, that the problem of oppression must shed its colours and acquire legitimacy? At the end, the two axioms that appear to be transparent without requiring much interpretation are the following: (a) that all kinds of dominations are equally reprehensible, but some are more equally so than the others. In our context, the unmistakable racism underlying this logic must not be lost from sight; that, in matters of discrimination, what eventually finds forefronting is what affects the interests of a Western nation. Therefore, when they say avoid discrimination, it is usually (or invariably) edited to read --- avoid American discrimination of a European nation or its products or its affairs; and not American or European or any discrimination of any product irrespective of where it occurs around the world from any where around the world; and (b) given the various levels of domination and powerplay where the winner is never a permanent winner, this should be the time for the erstwhile loser to sally forth for a win if only the essential spirits are retained.

It may be well worth noting here that shifting levels of powerplay could have implications for all of us. While at one level, the West subverts the initiatives of the non-West (earlier through political and economic domination and now in its neo-colonial avatar, through economic and cultural domination), the same pattern is replicated by us, the post-colonialists, through an application of the same colonial mode of functioning that had earlier been inflicting upon us. This is applied at all levels, beginning with the microcosm of the 'communities' of indigent people who have lived in their unique ecological niches (such as

the Santhals of the Chotanagpur) but who are increasingly beginning to get culturally swamped by our dominant mainstream culture through a process of "internal colonisation", right upto the macro-levels of the sub-continental where, again in the case of India, a certain domination is exercised over its less 'powerful' neighbours through established framework such as the SAARC that is meant to mutually reinforce the interests of South Asian nations. But given the fact that India this objective purpose finds occasional subversion.

At the moment, however, we will concern ourselves with that level of powerplay where, as coherent cultural systems we continue to remain at the receiving end of neo-colonial cultural aggression. This collective of the South-South will necessarily, have to find its own instruments to subvert West-imposed schemes (such as the GATT or other less obvious but equally subvertive instruments), and then go on to set an alternate agenda that outlines its own imperatives as well as defines the necessary contours of potential machinations that will be empowered to tackle to advantage our own concerns encapsulated in "the hard toil of class, gender and other kinds of struggle", and allow us to exit from the vicious cycle of transnationally-engineered cultural orbits in order to survive with dignity. But what will really count in this regard is an indomitability of spirit that will likely ultimately bend the West's induration/induracy into the realisation that there are no permanent winners in this game; that some day "we are all likely to swim or sink together" and that the West's responsibilities will have to extend "beyond protecting its own hide".

- 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.