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Reclaiming Sociocultural Agency: The Resurrection of India and Africa in Postcolonial Cinema

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Abstract

Popular studies of postcolonial cinema have often grouped "Third World" countries together concerning their economic conditions, thus failing to take into consideration the impact that sociocultural factors can have on their cinemas. Third Cinema has often been equated with postcolonial cinema, and the generalizations presented in their context have led to a limited understanding of individual Third Cinemas relative to other cinemas from "Third World" countries. This includes the Hindi film industry, which despite being seen as a medium of resistance to the first cinema of the West, is much more commercialized and popular. This paper examines four films: *Pyaasa* and *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* from the Hindi film industry of India and *Mortu Nega* and *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* from Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau to compare and contrast how India and Africa have regained sociocultural agency through their postcolonial cinema. The findings of this investigation posit that while third-world cinemas – including an extension of the term that includes Hindi cinema for a structured analysis – explore common themes such as poverty, national identity, revolution, class/caste, colonialism, and postcolonial governmental failures, they are differentiated by their perspectives in terms of individualism versus collectivism, as well as by the extent of the colonial legacy's impact on their respective narrative and cinematographic styles.

Introduction

How have India and Africa regained sociocultural agency through their postcolonial cinema?[1] Grouping the postcolonial cinematic identities of "Third World"[2] countries is a complex issue that has historically been examined through the economic definition of the term. For instance, film scholar Roy Armes categorizes Third Cinema as emerging from nations that contribute less than 12 percent to the global GDP despite encompassing a majority of the global population.[3] However, this economic categorization tends to overlook the unique sociocultural nuances of the individual contexts of such developing nations. This is evidenced in American film scholar Teshome Gabriel's "Third Cinema in the Third World." While his arguments outline the common themes of postcolonial Third Cinema and the importance of considering historical development, societal perspectives, and cinematic styles influenced by colonial legacies while assessing the medium, they are not delineated by the individual identities of third-world countries.

The impact of colonialism on African and Indian cinema (the latter cannot be classified as Third Cinema as despite its opposition towards neocolonialism, it is a commercialized, popular medium), as exemplified by the case studies discussed later in this paper, cannot be uniformly assessed despite the exploitation and cultural devastation that both the regions suffered during their respective colonial periods. The legacy of colonialism has influenced not just narrative styles but also societal perspectives and values in distinct ways. Third Cinemas across countries seek to decolonize cinema as a response to neocolonialism and the reclamation of sociocultural agency is crucial, as individual sociocultural identities have been equally as integral as the economic context of a country in shaping its cinematic identity.

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[1] While this paper aims to investigate the similarities and differences in how India and Africa have regained sociocultural agency through their postcolonial cinema, it is important to note that Africa is a continent and therefore has several film industries among its 54 countries. Similarly, India houses 28 states and 9 union territories, most of them with their own film industries. This paper considers four case studies and while they belong to the aforementioned regions, they are not fully representative of them. The two case studies from India are from Bollywood, the Hindi film industry which is India's most popular, whereas the African case studies include films from Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria.

[2] While "Third World" is an outdated and derogatory term used to define economically developing nations, in this context it has been used in relation to the production of Third Cinema so as to generalize the thematic similarities of the medium.

[3] Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) p. 10.

This investigation aims to assess the sociocultural context of both India and the chosen African case studies, while simultaneously presenting the arguments put forth concerning the loss of sociocultural agency and the aesthetics of liberation. These arguments are then evaluated by examining four films spread across a production period of 65 years; this evaluation is structured as per the characteristic themes of Third Cinema, including but not limited to poverty, national identity, revolution, class/caste, colonialism, and postcolonial governmental failures.

Sociocultural Context and the Loss of Agency in India and Africa

A direct influence of colonialism has been the loss of sociocultural agency among the regions that were once colonized by European powers. Local traditions and subcultures were often sacrificed at the altar of more Westernized practices, which the elite groups of society were conditioned to see with a reverential gaze.[4] Western Cinema from the first half of the 20th century has played an integral role in stripping the colonial regions of such agency, largely owing to the portrayal of the colonial "subjects", which was superciliously skewed towards the imperialist powers.

The White Gaze: A Condescending Lens Towards Africa

This argument has been evidenced primarily within the African context, where "the dominant image of Africa seen on Western screens was that of condescension and paternalism."[5] Several films that were shot and/or set in Africa exoticized its landscape but stripped it of its cultural integrity. This cinematographic invasion in terms of Africa's on-screen portrayal in the West used the landscape of the continent to a great extent, but the Africans were nowhere to be seen.

Such films shrouded the region with a synthetic sheen of mystery that erased the cultural values that form the basis of any society. This gaze of exoticization is best described by Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike in his book, *Black African Cinema*, where he writes that "the norm… [was] to use the selectively photographed or fictionally created exotica of Africa to create sensation"[6] to portray an image of untamed wilderness and savagery, furthering the stereotypes that were associated with the region by the Western populace.

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[4] Ibid., p. 18.

[5] Frank N Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) p. 35.

[6] Ibid., p. 36.

This exoticized portrayal also shifted the perspective through which Africa was seen by the Western populace, in that through the dehumanization and erasure of the African people, an interest was cultivated for films that were set amidst the rich wildlife of the continent rather than among its people. This reduced Africa to a mere landscape that films such as *Tarzan and the Apes* (1918) exploited, furthering the perception of the locals as "wild natives".[7]

Conversely, the African characters who were portrayed cinematically were often victims of a perverse and often voyeuristic gaze. The people of Africa were largely depicted as caricatures; as "savages or docile primitives doing funny things in the jungles to amuse white thrill seekers."[8] The exoticization also lent itself to a portrayal of the African people that was inspired by the colonial outlook towards slavery. This perpetuated the notion of what American film theorist Robert Stam describes as the "dark continent" idea[9] – cinematic representation that manipulated the global outlook towards a continent that had already suffered in terms of population stagnation and cultural decline as a result of colonialism.

Additionally, such films were culturally unrepresentative as most of them were not even shot in the continent itself, thereby losing out on any sense of cultural authenticity. Furthermore, the creation of the Colonial Film Unit – which made instructional films that were meant to didactically educate "unrefined" colonial subjects[10] – furthered this problem, as the films addressed subjects whose expressions were never even considered.

Colonial Legacy and Narrative Continuity in India

The sociocultural impact on the Indian cinematic sphere, meanwhile, was vastly different in that India was relatively free from the perils of the exoticized outlook that dehumanized the people of Africa. In fact, unlike Africa, where the local media was not equipped with the level of transportability that European media had, India's film industry(s) began to develop concurrently with those in the West, namely with the production of *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). This put Indians in a relative position of power; in contrast to Africans, they could dispel the ideologies that were being perpetuated against their culture through their own art.

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[7] Ibid., p. 40.

[8] Ibid., p. 36.

[9] Okaka O. Dokotum, *Hollywood and Africa* (South Africa: AHP Publications, 2020) p. 200.

[10] Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019) p. 4.

The progress of storytelling, meanwhile, was hampered because most of the narratives were mythological and screenings often featured live commentary. Spectators knew the plot, and this hindered the development of more complex narratives. In his book, Roy Armes argues that "the lack of concern with the kind of tight narrative continuity in silent cinema that was evolving in Hollywood helped ease the way for the universal adoption of the distinctive form of the Indian musical after the coming of sound."[11]

One could argue that the stagnation of narrative development in the early 20th century resulted in the song-and-dance structure of Hindi cinema – a characteristic associated with India's sociocultural fabric even today. It also allowed the country to formulate a style that was original to its own context. While a heightened focus on narrative continuity did come about with auteurs of the 50s such as Guru Dutt and Bimal Roy, the previously held notion allowed early Hindi cinema to be more languidly paced and less compositionally motivated than classical Hollywood cinema, especially as "culture-specific inscriptions permeate[d] narration in Hindi films."[12]

However, several academic investigations into the similarities between early Hindi cinema and the Hollywood studio model fail to consider the impact of the latter on the former's sense of characterisation. Unlike the Third Cinema that emerged from African regions such as Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria, Hindi cinema was significantly more individualistic in the portrayal of a character's motivations. This style impacted not just the general worldview of the film's (usually singular) protagonist, but also permeated into its cinematographic style – which was largely dissimilar to other 'third-world' countries' cinema (this argument is explored later in this paper).

Regaining Agency and the Aesthetics of Liberation

While a fundamental shortcoming in the worldview explained by Roy Armes is that it limits cinematic perspectives to economic terms alone, it is effective while considering the aesthetics of liberation as proposed by American film scholar Teshome Gabriel in his book, *Third Cinema in the Third World.* He writes that "the aim of Third Cinema is not to re-aestheticize traditional cinematic codes but to politicize cinema to such an extent that a new cinematic code appropriate to its needs is established,"[13] thus furthering the country's (usually postcolonial) cinematic identity.

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[11] Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West* (1987) p. 109.

[12] Mahoro Semege, 'Cultural Specificity and Cinematic Narration' (2021) 19 FI 17-40.

In Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema", they define the dual intentions of the Third Cinema. It is a rejection of the propositions and concepts of traditional cinema, namely, those of Hollywood; and the need to use film to serve an ideological and revolutionary end.[14] This extract is also used to emphasize the intent of such cinema in Gabriel's work. He argues that the aesthetics of liberation are primarily anti-colonial and that the aesthetics only serve as a medium to bring out this anti-oppression messaging. He writes that "third-world filmmakers have realized the importance of incorporating traditional art forms to retain the distinctive flavor of popular mass culture."[15] In this context, the popular mass culture is seen as a component of society that is in direct collision with the cultural values of the elite, which are often formed as a result of colonialism. Gabriel conveys that the class differences in third-world societies necessitate the demarcation of who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed, for these divides can be intraracial too.

Gabriel also delves into the use of song-and-dance to convey joy and despair, and how this serves as an aesthetic of regaining sociocultural agency in Third Cinema as seen in the Senegalese film *The Other Francisco*. However, this example also highlights the broad generalizations that his arguments make, in that due to the purely economic definition of what constitutes a third-world country, his arguments view some of the poorest countries in the world with a uniform lens, thus leaving no space for delving into more specific ways of regaining sociocultural agency.

Furthermore, the author addresses the struggle for the emancipation of women as a recurring theme in Third Cinema: "The issue of the role of women in bringing about social change is one of the most essential themes and is integral to the practices of Third Cinema," he writes.[16] While this is not an "aesthetic" of its own, this thematic exploration is key to the anti-oppression politics that Gabriel advocates for and expresses that Third Cinema is essentially designed to counter. Gabriel also mentions the thematic recurrence of anti-imperialist armed struggles, which are explored later in this paper through the analysis of Flora Gomes' *Mortu Nega.*

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[13] Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982) p. xi.

[14] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World' (2021) 13 IUP 378.

[15] Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World* (1982) p. 16.

[16] Ibid., p. 18.

The next section uses the themes outlined by Gabriel to assess the similarities and differences between the postcolonial cinemas of India and Africa; it uses four case studies, *Pyaasa,*[17] *Mortu Nega,*[18] *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India,*[19] and *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman,*[20] to do so.

Reclaiming Sociocultural Agency in Diverse Postcolonial Cinematic Contexts: 1957-2022

Pyaasa

Poetry and Narrative as a Medium for Dissent

Set in Calcutta, *Pyaasa* (India, 1957) follows Vijay, a cynical Urdu Poet (Guru Dutt), whose poetry is undermined and mocked by publications for tackling social issues instead of romantic ones. The film also explores his relationship with the prostitute Gulabo (Waheeda Rehman) and his former partner, Meena (Mala Sinha), who is now married to Mr. Ghosh (Rehman[21]), a reputed publisher for whom Vijay eventually works as a domestic help.

Pyaasa's postcolonial anger towards the "system" is evident in its poetry; primarily in *Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par* (1:29:10 - 1:34:50), or "Those Who Are Proud of India", and scholars Gaurav Gadgil and Sudha Tiwari accredit this sense of rage towards the displacement that artists were feeling in a post-independence India, where, after a decade of promise, a sense of hopelessness had set in among those who struggled to find how their contributions mattered in terms of the Nehruvian national-building process.[22]

Poetry as a Revolutionary Medium

Pyaasa's eventual sociocultural legacy is developed not only through its thematic tropes but also through its narrative arcs; Vijay

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[17] Guru Dutt (dir.), *Pyaasa* (Guru Dutt Films Pvt. Ltd., 1957).

[18] Flora Gomes (dir.), *Mortu Nega* (Instituto Nacional de Cinema da Guiné-Bissau, 1988).

[19] Ashutosh Gowariker (dir.), *Lagaan* (SET Pictures, 2001).

[20] Biyi Bandele (dir.), *Elesin Oba, The King's Horseman* (EbonylifeTV and Netflix, 2022).

[21] Not to be confused with Waheeda Rehman, another actor in the film.

[22] Sudha Tiwari and Gaurav Gadgil, 'Poetics of *Pyaasa* and Narratives of National Disillusionment' (2013) 74 IHC 939.

(Dutt), the film's protagonist, himself acknowledges art – and poetry especially – to be a revolutionary, change-making medium. He is instantly dismissive of the notion that acceptable poetry consists of romanticization alone, and is intent on producing works that are politically charged.[23] His poetry is also more accessible than those of his elite counterparts, thereby reaching out to the masses who strongly take to his work after its eventual publication towards the end of the film. The film's inherent sense of rage is also channelised into the protagonist questioning if the art form is only the prerogative of the rich, which conveys two thematic dilemmas that advocate the film's attempt at regaining sociocultural agency: the disparity between the educated and the prosperous and the collision between the film's individualistic perspective and anti-materialist ideology. Revolution, an inherent theme of Third Cinema, is used to further convey two other thematic dilemmas specific to the cinema type: poverty and colonialism.

Poverty and the Chasm Between Education and Prosperity

In terms of the sense of disparity, agency is not regained as much as it is created to show the chasm between those who are educated and those who are wealthy. Vijay, despite being backed up with college-level education, is unable to find employment and make ends meet, thus conveying a changing colonial context that evidenced disproportionality between the "economic (income, consumption) and the social (health, education) characteristics of poverty," which other scholarly works, such as one by scholar Pramit Chaudhari, have frequently associated with one another.[24] This disparity, which reflected the anger directed towards the government's failures, also challenged the colonial notion that was conveyed through cinema in that the 'educated' white man was often pitted against the 'savage' person of color,[25] thus, portraying formal education as the sole foundation for creating 'civil', and thereby, successful individuals. Vijay's lack of financial stability countered this argument that had been historically used to spread colonial propaganda, especially because a scene in the film depicts Vijay's education as conventional in a Westernized sense.

Individualism as a Byproduct of Colonialism

Pyaasa is individualistic in that unlike Third Cinema which emerged from Africa, it is staunchly focused on the motivations of a single individual, based on whose experiences the broader themes of the film are conveyed. Unlike Gabriel's argument, which posits that Third Cinema generally manipulates space over time,[26] *Pyaasa*'s narrative involves several timeline jumps that are more aligned with more Western forms of cinema that are compositionally motivated in nature. The cinematography is also reflective of such individualism, and largely consists of close-ups of Vijay's face, as is evidenced in the poem *Jaane Woh Kaise Log The* (1:03:09 - 1:07:10).

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[23] Ibid., p. 940.

[24] Pramit Chaudhuri, 'Changing Perceptions to Poverty in India: State and Poverty' (1993) 55 Sankhya: Indian J. Stat. 316.

[25] Frank N. Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (1994) p. 36.

This sense of individualism, which holds leverage in comparison to the collectivist perspective often "derogated… [by Western] structural binarism" in African cinema,[27] can be contextualized by acknowledging that since Indian cinema had developed much more substantially during the colonial period than African cinema had, early postcolonial films in India had many more Western influences. However, this trend has evolved throughout Hindi cinema's history, and *Lagaan* (which is discussed later in this paper) is evidence of the same.

This individualistic gaze, which is a legacy of colonialism, is in direct collision with the film's socialist perspective, as the messages of anti-materialism and equity that are propagated until the film's denouement are juxtaposed with the heightened focus on a single protagonist. From a contemporary perspective, these parallel ideas also serve as reflections of a more moderate approach, allowing the film to recede from the frequently radical ideas that it disseminates.

The Intersection Between Female Emancipation and Anti-Materialism

The anti-materialism of *Pyaasa* is reflected in Meena's predicament, in that she is shown to have chosen a life of privilege over love; the film views this decision through a critical lens. Dutt subverts the notion of an "ideal" Hindu woman – one of a "chaste, virtuous and self-sacrificing wife,"[28] as Meena's character is depicted to be largely spineless. This is frequently juxtaposed, through the use of cross-cutting, with Gulabo's pure-heartedness, or rather what is now described as the Hollywood cinematic trope: the "hooker with a heart of gold." This enables Vijay's male savior syndrome in that, through the use of this trope, women are often saved by a heroic male figure who lets them lead a "respectable" life instead.[29] While on the surface the use of this trope may appear as a byproduct of the colonial legacy, the almost-deification of a prostitute is a starkly feminist reclamation of agency, especially because the notions of ideal womanhood and "respectability" in Indian societies during the colonial era were frequently prescribed by the colonizers themselves.

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[26] Teshome H Gabriel, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films' (2011) 5 Informa 196.

[27] Stephen A Zacks, 'The Theoretical Construction of African Cinema' (1995) 26 RAL 7.

[28] Sneha Singh, 'The Ideal Indian Woman: Defined by Hindu Nationalism and Culture' (2021) 4 IJSSHR 2369-2377.

Mortu Nega

Revealing National Identity Through Cinematic Techniques

Set between 1973 and 1977, *Mortu Nega (*1988, Guinea-Bissau), which follows the life of Diminga in the aftermath of the 1973 war in Guinea-Bissau, portrays her challenges as she navigates post-war life, endures drought, copes with her husband's illness, and faces conflicts over limited resources. Directed by filmmaker Flora Gomes, this ethno-fictional portrayal of the country's struggle for independence was also the nation's first independent feature.

Collectivist Perspective as a Medium to Convey Sociocultural Identity

The film uses a collectivist cinematographic style to reveal its sociocultural identity. The protagonist, Diminga (Bia Gomes), is not as much of a catalyst to the events around her as she is a bystander to them; she is only a medium to tell the parable of a nation. The collectivism here is characteristic of Guinea-Bissau's societal structure itself, and it is revisionist in that it reverses the lens through which the world had been conditioned to look at Africa.

The condescending gaze, as explained by Ukadike, did not just strip the people of the continent of their cultural integrity and individual national identities,[30] but also looked at them through the individualistic perspectives that defined British and American cinema. Even though Guinea-Bissau was essentially a Portuguese colony, the uniform depiction of the African people impacted the perception of the continent as a whole. Portuguese colonial cinema, on the other hand, skimmed over the implications of colonial rule and "diverted [its] attention towards matters of form and cinematic language – spectacle and entertainment" instead.[31] By using a collectivist perspective to portray its people, the government-funded *Mortu Nega* was able to exercise its role in shaping the global perception of its country.

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[29] Marissa H Luning, 'Prostitution: Protected in Paradise' (2007) 30 Houst. Law Rev. 193.

[30] Frank N. Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (1994) p. 37.

[31] Sally Faulkner and Mariana Linz, 'Portuguese film: Colony, postcolony, memory' (2016) 16 JRS 2.

Recurring wide shots from an aerial perspective are also indicative of the fact that the film's stillness is intentional; unlike classical Hollywood cinema, it is not burdened by the need to be plot-heavy and "motivated compositionally,"[32] and therefore the emphasis on the scenery does not just align with the defining trait of Third Cinema – regaining sociocultural identity – but also serves as a showcase for the country's natural aesthetic value. Yet, despite serving as a showreel of the country's landscape, *Mortu Nega* has a sense of hopelessness that permeates until the very end of it, except in the denouement, which includes a celebration of the advent of rain.

Metaphors to Convey Postcolonial Government Failure

Mortu Nega is similar to *Pyaasa* in that it recognises the postcolonial government's failure by depicting its consequences. Much like the 1957 film, *Mortu Nega* also expresses a sense of disappointment towards the institutions of power. However, while this is channelized as righteous anger in *Pyaasa*, over here it is reflected in the narrator's tone as a whole. Much like the subsequently discussed *Lagaan*, *Mortu Nega* also uses the natural phenomenon of drought to mirror the resounding legacy of colonialism. The advent of rain is a common thematic thread that runs through both films, and the juxtaposition between a natural crisis and a man-made one (poverty as a consequence of colonialism) only accentuates the focus on the disparity that emerges from imperialistic societies.

Class, Gender, and Cinematic Techniques

Class and gender are two societal constructs that reinforce each other within the context of this film, and this characteristic of Third Cinema (as defined by Gabriel) is evident in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* as well, a film discussed later in this paper. While *Mortu Nega* never aggressively highlights Diminga's economic status, its mise-en-scene and the spatio-temporal relationships she shares with her guerilla fighter-husband convey the same. This disparity is also explained relative to the class privileges of the colonizers, for in the combat scenes, they are often positioned in helicopters – and therefore above – in comparison to the locals, who are fighting from the ground. Diminga, who accompanies her husband during this initial segment of the film, is a bystander to an event that is fully fought by men, and this displacement is conveyed similarly: through the manipulation of spatial relationships as attributed to Third Cinema.

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[32] David Bordwell and others, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 19.

The lack of continuity techniques at play also maintains a consistent sense of realism that scholar Birger Langkjær has termed a "Third Cinema practice."[33] This can be best understood through arguments put forth by French film critic Andre Bazin, who argued that while the montage – a series of moving films that are edited together to create a continuous sequence – has played a vital role in establishing cinema as an art form, its excessive use now poses a hindrance, detracting from the true essence of cinematic realism. He suggests that montages are structured to offer audiences only the selected shots that filmmakers want to convey, thereby restricting viewers from forming their interpretations and experiencing the film on a deeper level.[34] While Bazin's theory was posited concerning the state of Western cinema in the 1960s, the use of the montage is also a legacy of colonialism that Third Cinemas have inherited; *Mortu Nega*'s attempts at manipulating space over time maintain the ethos of decolonizing such cinema while also maintaining the viewer's engagement with the film.

Lagaan

Caste, Class, Collectivism, and Cultural Identity

It is the advent of rain, and the suffering caused by its scarcity, that is key in defining the motifs of *Lagaan* (India, 2001). Similar to *Mortu Nega*, drought is used as a medium to convey the damage caused by imperialism and the postcolonial government's failure. Set in the 1890s, *Lagaan* depicts a group of villagers led by Bhuvan (Khan) who confront the oppressive British regime by challenging them to a cricket match in an attempt to relieve themselves of an exorbitant land tax after consecutive years of drought.

Caste: Subaltern Hierarchies

An inherent sense of inclusivity, albeit the trappings of star power that accompany it, is seen in the film's portrayal of caste; this is evidenced in the character of Kachra, whose name directly translates to "garbage". By astutely portraying the horrors of the caste system by expressing it in the form of Kachra's disability and the attitudes of those in the team towards him, the film "shows how an apparently subaltern community can develop a hierarchy within itself and create structures of discriminations."[35] This depiction conveys the individuality of each social system, as it highlights the disparities that are characteristic to each of them. While Bhuvan's attempt at inclusivity initially reads as an upper-caste savior complex that has been attributed to postcolonial cinema,[36] the film subverts this trope in the climactic match, when Kachra becomes the team's sole sense of hope, thus inverting the very complex.

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[33] Birger Langkjær, 'Realism as a third film practice' (2011) 51 JMCR 40-54.

[34] André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) pp. 25-40.

Collectivism as a Medium-to-Class Dynamics

Along with caste, the film also addresses class. The class disparity is conveyed through the obvious paradox that forms when the British come to odds with the Indians; this is reflected not only in their exploitative taxation policies but also in the mise-en-scene – such as the sports gear of the latter, which is made out of wood. Class is also depicted within the Indian community itself, largely through the depiction of the disparity between the king and his peoples, emphasizing a similar point about hierarchical structures within subaltern communities. However, since the former is seen as an ally of the latter, the disparities are not fully highlighted.

Instead, the relationship between the *maharaja*[37] and his subjects is used to convey a sense of collectivism in that it shows a united effort that transcends the boundaries of religion, class, caste, and even race. Several long takes are framed as pan-shots and are repeatedly used to emphasize this sense of collectivism; "*Lagaan* privileges the communitarian dimension of the colonial struggle over individual psychology, and this is expressed in [the] strategic cinematography."[38] In parallel, Gabriel's theory posits that while Western films use close-ups to convey psychological interiority, Third Cinema uses them for informational purposes. The cinematographic principles used in Lagaan fall in the middle of this spectrum, thus suggesting that the film cannot be purely sorted into either of these categories.

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[35] Md. Nabil, *Does Lagaan Speak for the Subaltern(s)?*, diss., Stockholm, Stockholm University, 2013, pp. 2-3.

[36] Pardeep Attri, "Article 15': Dalits Don't Need 'Upper Caste' Saviours' (*HuffPost*, 26 June 2019) <https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/article-15-dalits-upper-caste-saviours> accessed 1st January 2024.

[37] The Hindi translation for "king".

[38] Antonio D. Sison, *World Cinema, Theology and the Human* (London: Routledge, 2012) pp. 67-88.

Cultural Identity Through Music and Cinematography

Unlike *Pyaasa*, the film's discography is not driven as much by ideas of resistance and protest as much as it is by a reflection of its characters' cultural syntax. Songs such as *Radha Kaise Na Jale* (1:31:16 - 1:37:00), set against festive backdrops with religious significance attached to them, generally inspire a sense of unison and hope instead of dissent. The only exception is the song *O Rey Chhori* (1:54:48 - 2:00:40), which manipulates the montage, a Western cinematographic technique developed by Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein to a significant extent while simultaneously differing from Gabriel's definition of the use of montages in Third Cinema. Gabriel argues that conventional cinema has reduced crosscutting – alternating (one sequence) with another when editing a film – to a method that is used solely to show a collision between characters; conveying the conflict in an obvious manner. However, crosscutting shows not just a build-up of conflict but also the simultaneity of events, as it does not merely juxtapose two parallel motifs but also shows the reasons for the characters' motivations. Therefore, Third Cinema has used it to convey more "explicit ideological collisions."[39]

In the song *O Rey Chhori,* crosscutting – and sometimes, even manipulated spatial relationships – are used to convey the (narrative) collision between Elizabeth and Gauri's love for Bhuvan. However, the parallel motifs also convey that the two events are happening simultaneously, and not in isolation of each other. This ideological collision occurs as a result of the juxtaposition of the above-discussed themes in the film's context. This synergistic relationship, which creates meaning by combining the use of crosscutting in European and Third Cinema contexts, exhibits defiance towards the colonial method of using this technique to show conflict alone.

Elesin Oba

Decolonizing via Thematic Subversion and Paradox

Similar to *Lagaan*, *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (Nigeria, 2022) also uses a retrospective lens to address the loss of sociocultural agency that occurred as a consequence of British colonialism. Starring Odunlade Adekola and Shaffy Bello among others, this film set in 1943 follows its titular protagonist (Adekola), who struggles to commit ritualistic suicide to join his late monarch in the afterlife, after British officers deem his sacrifice unethical.

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[39] Teshome H Gabriel, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films' (2011) 198.

Subverting Colonial Notions of Religion and Death

Dissimilar to *Lagaan*, which uses cricket – a unifying theme – to express its anticolonial angst, *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* depicts religious rituals that are in direct collision with the primary colonial religion: Christianity. In the film, Elesin is seen as wanting to have sexual intercourse with an unnamed girl he finds attractive before the occurrence of his ritualistic suicide. Engaging in such casual sex was seen as sexually promiscuous in most Western societies, and these notions were a direct legacy of the colonizers' dominant faith; furthermore, many Christians linked "the moral degradation of our society" as a consequence of "excessive sexual promiscuity."[40] While this attitude is mirrored in that Elesin has to marry the unnamed bride before consummating with her, it is his lust that drives his marriage and not contrariwise. This, when set against a background of religious rituals, serves as a stark contrast to the views endorsed by more Western countries (which stemmed as a byproduct of their religious beliefs) during the colonial era.

The celebratory gaze in which death is addressed also sharply juxtaposes with the colonial notion of death; a moment marked by grief. In fact, the British characters in the film describe such ritualistic practices as "barbaric", and these sentiments are mirrored in the paternalistic attitude through which they describe the sociocultural elements of the Nigerian people: religiously symbolic attire is referred to as a "fancy dress" and a "Pagan outfit". This tone is not dissimilar from the condescending attitude that was evident in early British and American cinema towards the African continent, and yet, the difference lies in the fact that the film is directed by the Nigerian novelist and playwright Biyi Bandele. By reclaiming the control over a narrative that was once peddled by the oppressors of the region, Bandele's film serves not just as a critique of colonialism but also as a reflection of the times it is set in.

A Paradoxical Portrait of Womanhood and Class

Contrary to the agency that it is reclaimed in terms of representation, the portrayal of women in the film is paradoxical – veering from objectification to deification. One on hand, the opening scene shows a group of half-naked women who are caressing Elesin's body, which serves no purpose but to fulfill his sexual desires. This "implicitly re-enforces the myths of the woman viewed as [a] sex object,

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[40] Miguel A. De La Torre, *A Lily Among the Thorns: Imagining a New Christian Sexuality* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007) p. xi.

[a] wayward nymph and [for] masculine pride (a cheap trophy for the men)" in the larger Nigerian cinematic spectrum, which has seen an "increasing sexualisation" in the portrayal of women in recent years."[41]

On the other hand, women are shown to be integral to the ritual that forms the crux of the narrative, and this is evidenced in the film's collectivist perspective that is conveyed through several shots of hordes of women singing and chanting together, celebrating the advent of Elesin's death. The film's ethos also lies in the character of Iyaloja (a Yoruba word that translates to "leader of the market women"[42]), a matriarchal figure whose superiority is positioned by her class status. This is implied in a scene where she convinces the subservient parents of her son's to-be-wife to give their daughter away to Elesin, who wishes to consummate with her. The portrayal of this societal dynamic is conveyed subtly by the mise-en-scene, such as through their attire relative to Iyaloja, as well as their positioning – sitting on the floor while Iyaloja sits on a pedestal.

This nuance serves a dual purpose: it exhibits how the societal norms of gender and class reinforce each other; this aligns with Gabriel's argument in that he writes, "to differentiate among thematic lines is not characteristic of the Third Cinema. Instead, it addresses issues of class, culture, religion, sex, and national integrity simultaneously."[43] Furthermore, this positioning also conveys that hierarchies often exist within subaltern communities as well, consolidating the aforementioned argument about the existence of power structures within oppressed sections of society.

Conclusion

As the comparisons thus far have substantiated, India and Africa's reclamation of sociocultural agency is rife with both similarities and differences. However, it is undeniable that the sociocultural fabric of countries from which the case studies originate has played a role in shaping the individual identities of Third Cinemas from India and Africa. While the thematic tropes that are evident across the four case studies – such as class, anti-colonialism, and female agency – are commonalities among the cinemas of India and Africa, they are communicated very differently in each of the case studies. These thematic tropes persist as an aftermath of colonialism, and the cinema uses such societal constructs to examine the extent to which imperialism has damaged the sociocultural fabric of former colonies and to decolonize the legacy of their future works.

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[41] Floribert Patrick C Endong, 'Pornography and Women's Objectification in Nollywood Films: A Study of Nigerian Actresses' Perception of Acting Sex and Nudity Scenes' (2022) 20 JIWS 58-59.

[42] Morooph Babaranti, 'Iyaloja of Lagos Champions Advocacy for Mothers and Newborns' (*Mamaye*, 16 Dec 2009) <https://mamaye.org/blog/iyaloja-lagos-champions-advocacy-mothers-and-newborns> accessed 2nd January 2024.

[43] Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World* (1982) p. 15.

The syntax through which these themes are conveyed, however, is largely different and always specific to their country of origin. For instance, the individualism that serves as a cinematic legacy of colonialism in Indian cinema is used to convey the feminist ideas of *Pyaasa* which subvert the notions of what it means to be a "virtuous Indian woman." However, similar themes of female agency are also conveyed in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman*, almost always through a more collectivist gaze that mirrors the Nigerian society. The cultural values of third-world countries that were often looked at paternalistically by the West are also reclaimed in that their legacy is altered by filmmakers of Nigerian and Indian origin. This is visible in both *Elesin Oba*, where a ritualistic practice is put at odds with the ethical notions attached to colonialism, and *Lagaan*, where the British are depicted as villains through narrative arcs that frequently result in them mocking Indian customs and traditions.

The sociocultural agency is also reclaimed by reshaping the cinematic legacy of colonialism in that not just the narrative templates, but the cinematographic style is also severely modified; within the context of the Indian case studies, this is evidenced in the evolution from 1957's *Pyaasa* to 2001's *Lagaan*. The experimentation in the use of crosscutting so that it defies the Western convention is observed in the latter's style, while also mirroring a more collectivist gaze relative to that of *Pyaasa*. It is these intertextual relationships that amplify the stylistic and formal differences in the visual grammar and cultural syntax of various Third Cinemas, thus reinforcing that sociocultural agency is regained in ways that are specific to each region.

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