

DEPICTIONS OF IMPERIALISM IN BRITISH AND INDIAN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

MARK BIRCHILL (Film, Media and Popular Culture)

Abstract

This article begins by defining the extent, and key characteristics, of British Imperialism before examining two science fiction films - *At the Earth's Core* (1976) made in the UK and *Koi... Mil Gaya* (2003) made in India. *At the Earth's Core* is about a Victorian explorer Dr Perry who discovers a world, and different beings, beneath the Earth's crust. *Koi... Mil Gaya*, the first Bollywood Science Fiction film, is about an alien visitation in India. The article analyses how each film depicts and engages with Imperialism. As there are many facets to imperialism, it focuses on three specific areas: exploration; post-colonialism impact; and the gaze of 'the Other,' examining both the colonising (Empire) and the colonised country. It concludes that, whilst the British film retains a 'lost world' narrative, the Indian film depicts a non-threatening invasion but the continued desire for certain factions to seek to exploit or profit from, the Other.

Definition and Extent of British Imperialism

ASHCROFT et al. define imperialism as 'the formation of an empire [...] in which one nation has extended the domination over one or several neighbouring nations' (1998, 122). For Britain, the empire extended far beyond 'neighbouring nations' (122). More specifically, imperialism was 'a conscious and openly advocated policy of acquiring colonies, for economic, strategic and political advantage' (122). Porter agrees, asserting that 'the roots of British imperialism were material, not cultural' suggesting imperialism was governed by the needs of capitalism (2004, x).

In its heyday, British imperialism ruled over 500 million people, over a fifth of the earth's population and extended over nearly a quarter of the earth's surface (Jackson 2013, 1; Porter 2004, 1). Around a third of the world's nation-states have experienced British rule or significant British influence at one point or another (Jackson, 2013, 5). Britain's influence, in

the form of its empire, extended over vast areas of the world's continents including Africa, the Americas, Asia (notably India) and Australasia. The size and reach of Britain's empire gave rise to the proud claim that 'the sun never sets on the British empire' (Jackson 2013, 5; Eldridge 1977, 7). And whilst the British Empire is primarily associated with the Victorian era and first half of the last century, it did not end until the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 (Stockwell 2008, 269).

Key Characteristics of the British Empire

Although it has been argued that the British Empire is 'an abstraction' whose features are amorphous, there are undoubtedly specific features associated with the British Empire (Crimson in Jackson 2013, 26). Key to the empire was its purpose as a 'coherent inter-territorial trading zone' (Jackson 2013, 27). In its early days, the British Empire functioned as a mercantile, protectionist system based on commercial regulation and the trading of commodities including sugar and tobacco (27). In the second stage of the empire, raw materials were imported from the empire so that British industry, during its post-industrial revolution, could convert them into finished goods for export (Jackson 2013; Thompson 2008).

The empire was, for many, a 'field of opportunity' (Jackson 2013, 30). British citizens enjoyed pursuits such as safari, and for anthropologists, archaeologists and scientists the empire 'provided a vast laboratory in which they could experiment and enjoy rights of privileged access' (31). For professionals such as engineers and doctors, the empire also provided many opportunities (Thompson 2008). Cartography, for example, was an important pursuit in surveying for military campaigns (Jackson 2013).

The British Empire also meant cultural influence: Britain's systems of government, law and education were imposed upon the colonised (Jackson 2013; Ward 2008; Thompson 2008). British imperialism also introduced Western forms of literacy, time, medicine and spirituality (Jackson, 2013). However, the empire sought to ensure that a fundamental divide was propagated: 'rulers cannot allow the ruled to become *too* like them, because this would denote equality, and empires are not made up of equals' (Jackson 2013, 33).

At its heart, the British empire was a 'racial construct in which whites were of higher status than non-whites' (Jackson 2013, 42). Furthermore, the British were highly proprietorial. The empire was 'their empire, their playground [...] that needed European help, reform, restitution or civilization' (Jackson 2013, 42-3). In relation to Britain's (and others') imperialism in the East, Stafford (2014) regards colonialism as a way of describing and classifying local cultural practices from a Western perspective. When we observe the Victorian explorer undertaking ethnographic studies, he is doing so through a Western lens.

Such activities give rise to the construction of an 'imagined Orient, both "exotic" and "Other"' (Stafford 2014, 128). Edward Said (2003) developed the term 'Orientalism' in relation to postcolonial discourse asserting that the 'Orient' (which Orientalism is the study of) is a Western or Occidental construct. Said suggests that the Orient is not a clearly defined area of the world but rather a term developed by scholars, politicians etc. in the West to describe the East. As an extension of this, the term 'Other' has emerged. This relates to what is 'non-Western' or even, in some circumstances, 'not Hollywood' and is at the centre of studies of power relationships between coloniser-colonised. Furthermore the 'Other' refers

to the relationship between the dominant (coloniser) and subordinate (colonised) parties in which the latter is described in the opposite (negative) terms assigned to the former (Stafford, 2014). Such binary oppositions include educated vs ignorant, honourable vs deviant and wise vs childlike (128).

Background To The Films

At the Earth's Core (1976), based on American writer Edgar Rice Burroughs' 1914 fantasy novel was produced by the British company Amicus Productions, founded by two Americans, Milton Subotsky and Max Rosenberg and based in the UK at Shepperton Studios. Amicus was best known for producing cheaply made science fiction and horror films.

At the Earth's Core was moderately successful at the UK box office in 1976. This may suggest a reasonable appetite for nostalgia for the British Empire that is represented through these films. *At the Earth's Core* coincided with the decline of the British Empire and the collapsing British film industry at the time (BFI, n.d.). Former colonies were gaining independence, for example, leading to Britain's loss of status.

Koi... Mil Gaya (2003) on the other hand, directed by Rakesh Roshan, topped the Indian box office in 2003 (MuVyz, n.d.). The film also had global success, finding an audience among the Indian diaspora. The film's success spawned two sequels *Krrish* (2006) and *Krrish 3* (2013). A TV spin-off *J Bole Toh Jadoo* appeared in 2003.

Koi... Mil Gaya was made two years after the coining of the term BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) in 2001 which refers to the emerging and fast-growing economies that would have

increasing global influence. It was anticipated that this would also include influence in terms of science and technology, including the 'space race' (BBC 2014).

Detailed Exploration of The Films

At the Earth's Core tells the story of Victorian explorer Dr. Abner Perry (Peter Cushing) who builds a machine, the 'Iron Mole' to explore the world of Pellucidar, discovered beneath the Earth's crust. Once in Pellucidar, and with the help of his American financier David Innes, he liberates a tribe of human slaves from the prehistoric, psychic Mahars.

The film is set in the Victorian era but the decade is unspecified. It opens with a *mise-en-scène* of industrial machinery constructing the 'Iron Mole' drilling machine. This scientifically fictitious exploratory vessel is juxtaposed with Stevenson's Rocket, an invention of the empire that was significant in improving transport of goods and people. The filmmakers are suggesting that the 'Iron Mole' shares historical significance with Stevenson's Rocket. Humans are dwarfed by the vastness of this construction, giving the impression of power and control and that the British, as owners of this shipyard, are the masters of this world. Costume design (Perry is well dressed in a suit, rather than workers overalls) enables the viewer to understand that he is an important man who plays a significant part in the invention as well as the building of the 'Iron Mole.'

Instead of travelling to far-flung areas of the world where resources may have been exhausted, Perry decides to explore the last remaining unknown and unexploited area of the world - the earth's core. Although the earth's resources have been exploited under British imperialism new lands could be discovered under the surface by machines powered by

natural resources the British had already exploited. Perry's motivations represent many roles, all of which share imperialist values: explorer, scientist, inventor, botanist, collector, curator, industrialist, ethnographer and anthropologist. These roles share a common goal: the sequence of exploration, discovery, study, cataloguing and reporting.

Inside the 'Iron Mole' cartography is portrayed as a map of the earth from crust to centre. The map places England at the top (most important), with other colonising nations such as France. Colonised nations are located further down the map simply grouped as 'Africa.' The map is red. As Jackson suggests:

Visual depictions of the empire's geographical extent were regularly encountered by British people and British subjects overseas, reflecting nationalism, race patriotism, and an emergent pride in the creation of a British-shaped world order. Most commonly this was through maps of the world centred on the British Isles and showing imperial positions shaded in red.' (2003, 5)

Ashcroft et al. state that the process of discovery is reinforced by the construction of maps 'whose existence is a means of textualizing the spatial reality of the other' (1998, 31). Furthermore, they regard the naming, or more often re-naming of spaces as 'a symbolic and literal act of mastery and control' (1998, 32). Importantly, the names that were assigned would be British or European, reflecting the language of the colonising power. This is reflected in *At The Earth's Core*: the 'Iron Mole' creates its own path on the map, (visually creating a red line of penetration on the map on screen) reflecting the discovery of new

lands. Significantly, this mapping of the newly discovered world comes from a Euro-centric, or British-centric, perspective.

Perry and Innes crash land. The set design presents this as an alien world. Purple and orange lighting, silhouetted trees and jungle suggest an other-worldly *mise-en-scène*. Although the world presented visually is clearly alien, it maintains a recognisable structure in terms of the familiar pattern of a (Western) hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy are the Mahars, prehistoric, flying reptiles who have telepathic control over the Sagoths. The Sagoths, controlled by the Mahars, enslave the humans.

Explorer Perry's initial reaction is one of excitement for this new world; he is eager to collect and catalogue plant samples, assuming the role of botanist. When Perry's life is in danger during an encounter with a gigantic prehistoric bird-dinosaur hybrid, he ignores the danger and recalls cataloguing a similar bird species native to England. Perry's appetite for discovery gives him a strong imperialist superiority to the situation, a form of arrogance. As Rieder states, there was a common assumption 'that the relation of the colonizing societies to the colonized ones is that of the developed, modern present to its own undeveloped, primitive past' (2008, 40). However, Perry fights the Mahar in a scene played for laughs with an umbrella, scarcely a modern day weapon.

Perry is 'rescued' from this situation by the Sagoths, wielding primitive weapons. However he is rescued only to be enslaved. Costume and make-up render the indigenous Sagoth, ape-like, 'Oriental,' diminutive in height. They communicate in grunts. The choice of depiction may reflect the 'Other.' As discussed earlier, the 'Other' is depicted as the opposite of how a

'western' coloniser is represented; Perry is represented as educated, civilised, the Sagoth as ignorant, uncivilised.

In their capture and subsequent enslavement of Perry, the Sagoths represent the 'savage' over the civilised. Although this represents what Rieder terms the 'lost-race motif stories' where a traveller or group of travellers encounter 'a previously isolated race of civilisation in an exotic, nearly inaccessible setting,' the tables are turned as the coloniser (Perry) is captured (2008, 31).

The Sagoths are also not the lowest rung in this hierarchical ladder; the humanoid cavemen are their slaves, as a result of the Mahars' control. Perry and Innes find the Sagoth enslavement of the caveman to be abhorrent, perhaps reflecting Victorian anxieties relating to the slave trade in the Empire. This perhaps dates the setting of the film to the mid-Victorian era as slavery had been abolished by the British through the Slavery Abolition Act 1833. When Perry and Innes are captured as slaves, their appearance changes to demonstrate that they have been assimilated to the level of the cave people. Perry and Innes, once English imperialist gentlemen, wearing top hat and tails, are reduced to wearing ripped and dishevelled clothing.

Nevertheless, despite the visual representation of Perry and Innes as slaves, their intellectual superiority is maintained. Perry's ability to read hieroglyphs leads to their liberation. Victorian scholars would have been able to accomplish this because of Western colonising of Egypt and the subsequent archaeological study of the country. Perry uses colonial superior

knowledge to solve the cave-people's problems and this drives the narrative towards the collective liberation.

Innes falls in love with Mai, a cave person, after he is responsible for her liberation from enslavement. However, Mai decides not to leave with Innes, electing to stay with her people to help build a better society. Although, it could be thought unusual for explorers to leave a society to do their own re-building, this may reflect the changing attitudes to colonialism at the time the film was made. Colonised countries were gaining independence with the imperial power, Britain, retreating and leaving the newly-independent countries to rebuild. This post-colonial narrative, where countries are left to determine their own future, having been liberated from their oppressors, is reflected in Mai's desire to stay and help her newly-freed people.

The resolution of the film reflects the notion of the 'Other'; the humanoid slaves are the ones deemed worthy of rescue and, therefore, freedom. The slaves have differing looks and personalities; they are recognisable as humans. The Sagoths, although themselves enduring a form of slavery, controlled by the Mahar, are not deemed worthy of rescue. They are depicted as having 'Oriental' features, as being uniform and without the power of communication. The Sagoths are depicted through the colonialist's gaze.

The narrative of *At the Earth's Core*, which features the main protagonists as the coloniser discovering a new world, can be contrasted with the narrative driving *Koi.. Mil Gaya* (regarded as the first Bollywood Science Fiction film) which is one where the once colonised are visited by aliens from outer space.

Koi... Mil Gaya begins with scientist Sanjay Mehra contacting aliens whilst working in Canada. Whilst observing the alien spacecraft, he loses control of the vehicle and dies. His wife (Sonia) survives. She is carrying their unborn son (Rohit) who suffers brain damage resulting in a learning disability in later life. The film's narrative then transfers to present day India where Rohit makes contact with the same aliens via his father's old computer. The aliens' spaceship lands in Rohit's town of Kasauli. One alien, who Rohit names Jadoo (Hindi for magic), is left stranded on earth. Jadoo has special powers which enable Rohit to live without disabilities.

Prior to his death, Sanjay's Canadian co-workers treat his theories about contacting aliens with contempt. According to Peers, Britain's assumed superior economy and industrialised status had led to a narrative of 'trusteeship or belief that more advanced nations have a moral responsibility to help "backward" nations develop' (2006, 4). Here India and Indians are viewed still as the 'backward' colonised nation. It is forgotten that India had a historic association with Astronomy before the British colonial rule. Jantar Manar Observatory in Jaipur dates from 1734, for example, whereas British direct rule of India did not begin until 1858.

When the alien spaceship hovers above the town of Kasauli, the locals welcome the aliens, celebrating Alien Day, dressing up as aliens and characters from films. This echoes Empire Day that was celebrated in colonies of the British Empire, including India. The locals embrace the 'invasion' and state 'that it will make them both rich and famous.' Notably, world news

bulletins do not initially treat seriously India's claim of alien invasion, therefore re-enforcing the status of India as a second class nation that has been colonised.

The depiction of Jadoo is seen through the lens of the 'Other.' His 'alianness' is highlighted: he is small, animalistic and has no communication. This is in contrast to the middle class, educated and privileged background of Rohit's family and associates. Jadoo relates to children and is welcomed by them.

Jadoo is received in different ways by different groups in the film. The main protagonists treat him like a child (due to his diminutive height) and want to hide him from the gaze of adults. The goal of the authorities, represented by the police, government and United States experts, is capturing the alien, dead or alive, believing this will make them famous and rich. This desire for fame and wealth is similar to the role that Dr Perry assumed in *At the Earth's Core*; he embarked on his voyage in the hope that it would bring him fame and fortune. Therefore the roles of the colonisers and colonised are reversed, as it is the colonised - once by Britain and now by aliens - who want to profit from the alien invaders.

The Indian authorities also want to catalogue and display the alien in a zoo, reflecting Perry's actions when faced with an avian dinosaur in *At the Earth's Core*. He sought to catalogue and potentially exhibit it, in the Victorian colonial-explorer tradition. British colonisers brought back exotic creatures they found in newly discovered countries. Elephants, for example, were brought back from India, where in Britain they were big attractions in travelling carnivals, circuses and zoos, as the coloniser had never seen these creatures before. In a shot in *Koi... Mil Gaya* the alien is seen next to an elephant to emphasise this point. The

authorities further emphasise this by treating the alien like an animal even though it is humanoid in appearance. They first capture him in a net and then transfer him to a cage. This runs counter to the expected narrative: the invaded is capturing the invader.

There are symbols of a post-colonial globalised world within the film. In the sequence in which Rohit summons the spaceship using his deceased father's computer, we see familiar brands such as Nescafé and Coca Cola that have arrived in India as a result of globalisation. However, the spaceship's arrival extinguishes these Western symbols as well as the power, and the population resorts to candlelight. As yet, we do not know what the spaceship's arrival will mean; is it an invasion or something less sinister? What is clear, however, is that the arrival of the spaceship removes the power from the town and therefore the town's ability to function economically. Present-day India still has power outages. Is this a commentary on its own post-colonial standing on the world stage?

The aliens have the power to 'remove' the learning disability; they replace Rohit's disability with superhuman powers and he becomes stronger both cognitively and physically. This may reflect the (British) colonisers' powers over Indians during the empire. Britain introduced its own systems of medicine that it perceived as being superior to those practised by the indigenous population. It also, however, represents the fact the colonisers, in this case the aliens, are in a position to give and to take away, leaving the colonised subjected and beholden. They give Rohit his powers and take them away as they leave India. Does this suggest the colonised are at the whim of the coloniser?

Conclusion

Both these films depict aspects of imperialism, albeit in different ways. The British (colonising power) film demonstrates the pursuits of empire, such as exploration. It represents an invasion for resources rather than gaining a new territory for political or military motives. The film has a familiar narrative, with 'lost world' narratives dating back to 1890s.

The Indian (colonised power) film depicts a non-threatening invasion. Jadoo is welcomed and accepted by most, although authority figures wish to profit from him. Such figures would traditionally have been at the forefront of any imperial mission to profit from a new land and here are seeking to profit from the alien invasion. This suggests that in a post-colonial, post-empire world, certain factions within society seek to exploit, or profit from, the Other.

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