



POPULAR CULTURE AS AN ENTRENCHING AGENT: A POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF *KING KONG*, *GEORGE OF THE JUNGLE* AND *EPIC*

JHANSI SURESH

MPhil (English) Research Scholar

Jain University, Bangalore

jhansisuresh41@gmail.com

9980421341

Abstract

The concept of colonization though has existed from the very beginning of human race for example: 2nd century Roman Empire to 16th century modern colonization which is the European colonization. The aim of European colonization is not just tributes and goods but it extends epistemic violence along with economic, political, military and cultural dominance over the colonized country. As a matter of fact the colonial rulers not only subjugated the colonized humans but also extended their imperial rule over colonized land and all of its subjects which include flora and fauna. Thus, the deep rooted pagan culture of the colonized land was uprooted due to colonization. This western imperialistic nature is very evidently seen in their treatment of the colonized people, which is represented in many fictions and non-fictions written by both colonizers and the colonized. On the other hand, it is well-known that popular culture that includes visual entertainment plays a vital role in shaping the mind-set of the people. The paper intends to explore that sector of popular culture, which includes movies which can be studied and analysed using the lens of Postcolonial Ecofeminism.

In 1970 a French feminist critic, Francois d'Eaubonne drew attention to the possibility of drawing a parallel between nature and women, especially the way in which the two entities are oppressed. Since then several feminist critics deploying various brands of feminist criticism combining them with environmental ethics have thrown light on how marginalization of women and nature is strategized by the patriarchal codes. Over a period of time this mode of analysis has come to be known as ecofeminism and has gained tremendous ground in academic endeavours. Ecofeminist theory equalizes the human act of domination over nature to that of men's act of domination over women. Also, it views the rich dominating over poor and whites dominating over coloured people in similar vein. These theorists and academic activists through their various acts like writing articles, books, national and international conferences aim to sensitize the urgent need to conserve environment and bring about gender equality.

The paper will attempt a close reading of three films namely King Kong (2005), George of the Jungle (1997) and Epic (2013) and highlight the way in which the three movies perpetuate the marginalization of women and nature with the consequence that naturalizes the marginalization. The paper will argue that though these movies seem innocent they end up entrenching and validating the age old practice of domination of white men over nature and women.

Keywords/Phrases:

Ecofeminism, Popular Culture, Eco film theory, Marginalization of women and nature

Introduction to Ecofeminism:

We see that nature is always feminized, even termed as 'Mother Nature'. Ecological Feminism also known as ecofeminism is that branch of feminism which studies parallel between nature and women. This movement began in 1970's after a series of conferences held in United States which involved the meetings, discussions and brainstorming executed by female academicians and professionals. The main agenda of the conference was to bring into light the various ways in which feminism and environmentalism could be combined in order to promote equality for women and nature. Ecofeminism as a philosophy emphasizes the ways in which nature and women are treated by the patriarchal society. Thus, oppression



of women and human treatment of nature are the basic concerns of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists argue that there is a strong relationship between destruction of nature and suppression of women by the male dominated society. Historically we can see that, women and nature is constructed as chaotic, in need of control and irrational but on the other hand men are portrayed to be orderly and rational, giving them the power to conquer women as well as nature leading to its exploitation. Thus the main goal of ecofeminists is to deconstruct these notions about nature and women. By 1980's ecofeminism branched out itself as radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminism speaks about the male dominant society which equates women and nature.

Cultural ecofeminism brings in relation between women and nature. This interconnectedness between women and nature is not only seen in historical, canonical and mainstream literary texts but also depicted in popular culture in cinema.

Popular Culture as an entrenching agent:

Popular culture is many a time considered only as a source of entertainment. But, movies, are like, kitchen where a particular culture is cooked and served to people, which is consumed passively leading to a stereotypical culture development. Only by analyzing them as a whole, we can see the stereotypical concept being drilled into our collective mind and one can decipher the hidden message contained within. Today movies are producing commercially successful cinematic art containing a complex, nuanced, philosophical, social, cultural and political views that when viewed across the collective genre of cinema begins to emerge with some clarity. Thus, when the movie is serious about promoting serious social message, it is also promoting certain stereotypical notions which are accepted to be natural over a period of time. As a result of which, millions of people those who watch these movies sees life as in comparison to the movie and an alternate reality is being shaped by the movie and many of those watchers are children when it comes to adventure and animated movies. Movies are usually created under 'male gaze'. In such representations women takes the role of an object of desire.

Eco film Theory:

In an Eco feministic film the audience experiences a stage of self-identification creating an 'eco-gaze' where the audience identify themselves with the female character who considers nature as solace. This is the essence of an 'eco-gaze'. Thus when these adventure and animated movies equate women and nature, allow the subduing of women and nature by patriarchal society, the same trend is inherited by the younger generations too. This kind of an analysis led to the development of ecofilm theory, where ecofilm theory is used as a tool to analyze movies encapsulating the themes of ecology and role of women in such movies come to forefront. Ecofilm theory analyses how the world is reflected, recreated and imagined in movie.

Ecofeminist analysis of Peter Jackson's 'King Kong' (2005):

Peter Jackson's King Kong (2005) is a remake of the 1933 original film with same name directed by Merian.C.Cooper. The movie is stitched around the plot of an ambitious filmmaker who persuades his team consisting of the cast and a hired ship crew members to travel to a mysterious island where they encounter the huge 25 feet tall gorilla called Kong, the central character of the movie, whom the filmmaker calls '8th wonder of the world' and is captured by the filmmaker and brought to New York city with the intention of making money by exhibiting the giant creature. Kong can be read as the symbol of natural world in the



movie, represented as chaotic, untamed, wild, and ferocious thus, the one who needs to be civilized. Whereas, the filmmaker named Carl Denham becomes the symbol of civilized human society. A clear demarcation between humans and non-humans is depicted in the movie. It reminds us of the 'Eco apartheid' concept given by Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist. Eco apartheid is the separation of human beings from nature. This separatism is vividly shown in the movie King Kong. Also, the name Kong being very similar to Congo leads to the analogy that the central character is designed to represent a subaltern. In this case, as the movie encompasses mega depiction of anthropocentrism the subaltern is none other than nature itself.

Another important aspect of the movie is, Carl Denham recruits a blonde actress named Ann who is promised money and fame to be a part of the travel to mysterious island. We see that Ann is used to lull the giant creature and eventually Kong falls in love with the white actress. Though Ann belongs to the white mainstream society both Kong and Ann possess similar characteristics of being helpless, to be rescued, weak and emotional. Kong the symbol of nature is equated with Ann the symbol of womanhood. Thus, nature and woman are represented as chaotic, beastly, wild and at the same time weak, emotional and helpless who can be rescued exclusively by white men. Though on the surface level King Kong seems to be an adventure movie about monstrous gorilla, it propagates anthropocentrism and patriarchy by representing nature and woman to be controlled by men in the society. Kong the symbol of nature is uprooted from its natural habitat and exploited by modern civilization, for which Ann is used as bait symbolically objectified as beauty to kill the beast. Yet both beauty and the beast are oppressed by the white male dominated society, which is naturalized and presented through the movie.

Ecofeminist analysis of Sam Weisman's 'George of the Jungle' (1997):

George of the Jungle is a comedy live-action film based on spoof of Tarzan directed by Sam Weisman. Also it is inspired by the cartoon series of the same name produced by Jay Ward studios. Being a product of Disney productions, the movie carries an undercurrent of dark representation of colonized country and its inmates, in this case Africa and the apes. In the movie George who is the protagonist is a misplaced child of the white parents, who is brought up by an intelligent speaking ape in the forest of Africa. In the course of the movie, we see George being involved in number of acts saving the apes who brought him up as well as his to-be-wife Ursula, who is a white woman on an expedition to central Africa and is lost in the Jungle. George is portrayed as highly intelligent and strong human being, regarded as king of the apes, also called as 'White Ape' who can speak and understand the language of apes and humans. Unlike kong in the movie King Kong, George belongs to white human race, thus he possess the characters like intelligence, strength who soaks into civilization quite easily and is not captured as Kong. Instead, George is an epitome of colonial hero. He is a white man put into the native population of Africans symbolically represented by apes in the movie. We see that the Ape that brought up George as a child is eventually captured and is ultimately saved by civilized George through his intelligence and strength.

On the other hand, role of Ursula is limited to that of being a beautiful American woman who constantly gets into problems in the expedition and is saved by her male counterpart, in this case George. She is represented to be someone who has to be controlled, protected and well-guarded from the potential problems that she might get into. Similarly, the apes are shown as uncivilized, wild and foolish though they have ability to speak in the movie. We see the ape seeking help from George, indicating itself to be in a helpless situation. Thus, Ape a symbol of nature and Ursula symbol of woman are both under the protection of a white man. This



projection is highly exploitative in nature, which pass on the message that both nature and woman must be in control and seek help of a male dominant society. George a symbol of white man constantly asserts his dominance over nature and woman portrayed in the form of ape and Ursula.

Hence, the character of George is designed to carry the idea that only an intelligent white man can bring sufficient order in the chaos embedded in nature and woman, thus equating nature and woman to be in need of control and help from a white man.

Ecofeminist analysis of Chris Wedge's 'Epic' (2013)

Epic is an animated movie directed by Chris Wedge and produced by Blue Sky studios owned by 20th Century Fox released in the year 2013. On the outlook 20th Century Fox studios may appear to be only a source of entertainment but in reality they have shattered those ideologies by producing commercially successful cinematic art and is serious about promoting social message in the form of certain stereotypes which are accepted to be natural over a period of time. As a result of which, millions of people those who watch their movies and many of those watchers are children who form their understanding of the world based on these movies. The story revolves around the concept of humanoids, which are the micro humans referred to as leaf men in the movie, whose queen has the power to regrow all plants and thus sustains the natural habitat necessary for existence of all living beings including humans. The bugs are portrayed as antagonists trying to decay all that is regrown by the leaf men's queen and ultimately are successful in killing the queen. The intriguing portion of the movie to us is the interference of human beings in this humanoid society. A scientist working on proving the existence of these humanoids and the protagonist of the movie, his 16year old daughter Mary Katherine play an active role, when Mary is shrunk and becomes a humanoid while the queen of leaf men gets killed and the dying queen handover the bud of life which sustains the forest to be planted to save not only leaf men and humanoids but the entire earth.

The leaf men's queen can clearly be viewed as nature and Mary Katherine as a girl who constantly needs to be protected and helped either by the leaf men head or her father both of which are symbols of patriarchal society. Though given the stature of a queen and saviour for both leaf men's queen and Mary, they are neither shown as strong or powerful. Their roles are entitled for acting queen and protagonist, whereas the real heroes who rescue them are shown to be white men. Thus the movie propagates the idea of nature and woman to be weak and controlled. The queen meets her death when she declines to listen to the advice given by her head of the army and Mary is shrunk and faces all the troubles when she leaves her father against his wish.

These two instances reiterate the ideology that subjugates nature and women throughout the movie. Also, the bugs presented as destroyers of forest and black in colour goes onto show the racist colonial attitude propagated in the name of entertainment.

Conclusion:

These stereotypical representations of nature and woman are the products of centuries of similar portrayal of them in religion, mythology, literature and popular culture. Nature and woman as a signifier has assumed a greater signification of being chaotic, wild, and indecisive at the same time weak, emotional and helpless who is tamed, civilized, and protected exclusively by men. This ideology reaches people in the most natural way as possible, leading to misunderstanding of the position of nature and woman in our society.



It becomes our prime duty to debunk these ideologies and understand the unique and equal positions that nature and woman hold in our society leading to the conservation of already exploited nature and work on erasing marginalization of women. Humans through careful analysis can understand and break down these underlying stereotypical images in the world about nature and women to continue to live as a part of the world, as Chief Seattle rightly said –

“Man did not weave the web of the world; he is merely a strand in it”

References:

1. Barry, Peter (2012), *Beginning Theory*. Viva Books
2. Bradley, Stephen (2016), 'Legend of Tarzan': Post-colonial reboot less than compelling, www.commdiginews.com
3. Epic, Chris Wedge, Blue sky studios (2013)
4. Garard, Greg (2012), *Ecocriticism*. Routledge
5. *George of the Jungle*, Sam Weisman, Disney live-action film, (1997)
6. Hein, Carolina (1975), *The visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, GRIN Verlag
7. *King Kong*, Peter Jackson, Wignut Films (2005)
8. Mellor, Mary (1997), *Feminism and Ecology*, NYU Press
9. Munkittrick, Kyle (2011), *The Hidden Message in Disney Films*, Tumbler
10. Shiva, Vandana (2013), *From Eco-Apartheid to Earth Democracy*, www.nextnature.net