

From Comic Culture to Cyber Culture: Cultural Imperialism and Its Impact on the Youth Since 1960s

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Abstract : *The medium of comics, cartoons, animated movies, video games are mostly known as the popular cultural media, kid's stuff with their spandex superheroes. However through its long history these popular cultural media has proven themselves to be contagious and influential media towards the Third World and its children. The power within these popular cultural media is enormous, but unlike the avalanche- like power that could devastate anything on its path, the power of these comics and cartoons is unlikely otherwise; powerful yet penetrate in silently even to other culture and society as shown through their expansive demands all over the world ;especially among the children and youths. This paper aims to explore the importance of cartoons, comics, animated movies, video games etc in the imperial context through a series of case- studies spanning the age of Cultural Imperialism from American, European and non-European contexts. It will cover important threads of support and resistance to Cultural Imperialism in metropol and periphery, look at colonial development as well as any other theme relating to empire and effect they have on the youth culture.*

Keywords - : *Cultural Imperialism, Cybercolonialism, Decolonization, Imperialist Ideology, Orientalism.*

The cries of cultural imperialism are a relatively recent phenomenon. With the withering away of western colonial empires, nationalists in the newly independent countries often became outraged over the staying of colonial cultures. These nationalists came to term the presence and domination of western culture as 'Cultural Imperialism'. Paul Harrison's description in his book *Inside the Third World* is typical: "And so there grew up, alongside political and economic imperialism, the more insidious form of control-cultural imperialism. It conquered not just the bodies, but the souls of the victims...." [1] In time, the strength and attraction of western popular culture became even more dominated by that of United States. The development allowed the accusations of cultural imperialism to become common in the Third World countries. John Tomlison, in his book *Cultural Imperialism*, holds that "The cultural imperialism thesis claims that authentic, traditional and local cultures in many parts of the world are being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the U.S." [2] According to the theory of cultural imperialism, the television programs and other mass media as well, such as films records and also the comic books destroy native cultures and acculturate people in the Third World countries with American and Western European culture; further they carry ideological messages that subtly brainwash Third World people (especially the children) into accepting American and Western European bourgeois capitalist values and beliefs.

Now let us consider one of the celebrated studies, Ariel Dorfman and Armond Mattleart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* which attacks Disney Comics for spreading the bourgeois imperialist ideology. According to them the Third world people, those who read these comics are being indoctrinated. [3] In this process of reading the comics the people are also learning to believe in those characters values and worldview. This happens because human beings, especially the children, do not just observe the cartoons, (that is the basis of comics), but become cartoons themselves .They identify themselves with the cartoons and this is how comics works penetrating their consciousness silently. This is a form of invisible cultural imperialism through cultural medium which destroys native culture and indoctrinates children with western bourgeois ideology.

In India in the last few decades, comics (especially the western comics) were indiscriminately consumed by the children of all age groups-they became a thing of great attraction in the Sunday newspapers supplements. The old style of storytelling gave way to comic strips. Comics became a part of Children's Literature; they defined an exclusive age group as readership. Among them, the successful were the American adventure comics such as *Flash Gordon, Mandrake, The Phantom, Batman, Superman* etc. One interesting feature of the American superhero comics is the way in which they demonstrate cultural and social views. George Mortari, in his article says that these comics portray the western culture as "more developed", so too western people are "more evolved" than the oriental people and it is their birthright to rule over the "noble savages" [4]. Even though the process of decolonization began fifty years ago, the cultural attitudes portrayed in the western comics were often in the line with colonial thinking. For example, there is a tendency to assume that

the western world is richer, attractive and sophisticated, and this attitude perpetuates the idea that the oriental people need to be looked after, managed by the wiser occidentals.

The evolution of the modern comic (as evinced in the Montclair Art Museum) book began in 1933 with the publication of the *Funnies on Parade*. The course of comic book (and American pop culture) changed irrevocably in 1938 with the publication of National's Action Comics. Superman's debut marks the birth of the Golden Age of comics. The Superman comic strip ran from 1939 to 1966. Then Batman also appeared in newspapers. The other comic heroes that joined Superman were Blue Beetle, the Black Hood and the Flash. After the World War II while superheroes were marginalized, the comic book industry rapidly expanded, and genres such as funny animals, romance and humor became popular and were reflected in their sales as their flagship licensed title, Walt Disney's Comics and Stories. The 1960s saw a superhero revival and superheroes continue to be a dominant genre today. In addition the graphic novel publishing format enabled the comic book medium to gain respectability as literature. [5]

The manifestation of 'non-European' in colonial literature is best seen in adventure novel and stories which deal with travel, where the European protagonist often ventures into the distant and unknown land and people. A series of work dealing with 'lesser civilizations' can be seen in travelogues, adventure novels and most importantly in comics. The 'non-European' other is more graphically represented in comic books which became popular in the early decades of last century. *Flash Gordon* by Alex Raymond is one of the most famous American comics: it opened to comics a whole new imaginative world. Flash is blonde, blue-eyed hero, depicting "superior race", continuously waging war on Ming who look and sound like oriental. Mongo is an exotic land, a land where magic pervades and Ming is a yellow man in gaudy outfit. Concurrently, huge technical advances are made by Dr Zarkov, machines which allow faster-than-light space travel and new Earth-like planets, potentially colonisable are discovered to confront-as Greg Grewell says, the "inferior and barbarous" and "exterminate the savages"[6]. *The Phantom* by Lee Falk, another enticing comic series with an attractive hero of white skin in black mask is an example of a narrative in which a white child is lost and Othered into a type of 'feral blood' and eventually evolving as the king of the Others. The children grew up reading about the exotic land, fraught with variety of animals, the Skull cave and its inhabitant-the Phantom. All these heroes were portrayed as exceptionally strong characters, possessing extraordinary power to fight against the evils of the society. As these comics were primarily western creation, they mirrored more of western values and ideals. The influence of American comics was so strong that they monopolized the comics market in India. Indian publication like Indrajal Comics translated and published American comics viz. *Phantom, Mandrake, Flash Gordon*.

Among the other comics that have stood the test of time-and have been transcreated into other genres such as films-is *TinTin*, the adventures of a young reporter. In the many *TinTin* adventures, the hero (es) is brought into contact with numerous non-European people –the list extends from Native American to Chinese; and from Central Asians to a hidden civilization of Incas. The configuration of the non-European nationals show much prejudice, reflected in the graphics of the caricatures. For example, the Indian in *TinTin* is either exotic, extravagant nobility (such as in the *Maharajah of the Cigars of the Pharaoh, TinTin in Congo*) or of wily, scheming, evil manifestations. What we see in Herge's *TinTin*, therefore, is a conflict of civilizations-where the naturalized value system of the European Imperialist is contested by non-European agencies that, for the writer's purpose, are deemed as "evil" and as "ignoble". To satiate the end of the comic series, TinTin and Captain Haddock essentially overcome whatever the "bad ones" throw in their way, while maintaining the European power balance and upholding its values and ethics. The values in turn are naturalized into the growing minds and consign in the young reader the need to be like *TinTin*, being perceptive to the "bent nature" of the non-European world.

Now-a-days the graphic novels are also increasingly being recognized as cultural artifacts that open unique and compelling windows onto not only mass or popular culture but also on the broader social and political processes that help to define the American culture. These Graphic novels –cheap to produce, easy to reproduce, bridges the spheres of art and literature, help us to understand how through these novels, the Latin American Societies make sense of their past, envision their futures but also, in some cases, misrepresents the orients. An example of this misrepresentation and stereotyping of the orients can be seen in Craig Thompson's graphic novel- *I'm not Your Habibi*. When one opens *Habibi*, one might assume that it takes place a long time ago, in a fictional far-away land that happens to look and feel just like Disney's Agrabah. Fatemeh Fakhraie says in her article, *I'm not Your Habibi: Thoughts on Craig Thompson's Graphic Novel*, "It is simply an Orientalist reimagining of a modern Arabia- Thompson needs modern machinery to further his conservationist theme, but he still wants his pre-modern harems full of odalisques with no cell phones and his pre-modern camel caravans crossing a desert that his very same construction would build roads through." [7] Thompson admitted that he drew inspiration for *Habibi* from the Orientalist art movement. Orientalist paintings are a primary example of Orientalism as a racist point of view because they are Western depictions of Arab lands based on preconceptions

of the painters. Thompson traps himself by not realizing that his magical land full of harems is exactly the kind of fantastical interpretation that many Middle Eastern people and Muslims have had enough of.

Graphic novel is an important medium which takes away the need of children to visualize anything while they are reading- their power of imagination and judgment are deliberately curbed and they see everything through the eyes of the author-they see only those things which the author wants to show them and thereby they develop a false conception about the Oriental people and their lifestyle.

Comics have been known as a popular medium of entertainment for quite a long time. In his article, *Manga: Invisible Cultural 'Imperialism' Through Popular Medium*, Hafiz Ahmad shows that based on cartoons and drawings, comic appearances such as its funny characters and stories with full bright color pages with superheroes in spandex have attracted the attention of many people, especially the children. [8] The children with tender minds learn whatever they read. They try to imitate their favorite heroes and learn their actions and dialogues. That is why in USA, the anti-comics movement led by Dr Fredrick Wertham through his controversial book *Seduction of the Innocent*, and accused that comics had had a dangerous influence on its young readers. [9] They imbibe the characteristic traits of the western culture more minutely than their indigenous culture by getting fascinated with things that are beyond the realm of possibilities. The cultural bias projected in these comics (as in the case of *Flash Gordon*, *TinTin* etc, mentioned above) make the children feel that the western people are superior to them and they should blindly imitate them and look down upon their own culture. And thus the black skinned children want to put on white masks and become "not quite/not white". [10] Thus the whole gamut of comics is a strong weapon of the western people which brainwashes the children of the third world and perpetuates the Us/Other discourse. Bradford Wright is of the opinion, "...a slightly older group of audience-readers who... are capable of perceiving these texts within a broader social and political context" [11] can realize that these comic books are offering a profound insight into American and Western European culture and society which are slowly diffused from America and Europe to others, essentially Third World countries.

"Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but our minds as well."-Frantz Fanon.[12] The process of resisting the evil effects of colonialism has been one of the chief efforts of the colonized countries because "writing in our language per se- although a necessary first step in correct direction- will not itself bring about a renaissance in our cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control"-Ngugi Wa Thiongo.[13] By the late sixties and early seventies, indigenous comics began to appear in the market. Cartoonist Pran's *Chacha Chowdhury* and India Book house publication *Amar Chitra Katha* series of comics started to gain popularity and were able to seriously dent the western comics market. The Indian comic industry reached its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These indigenous comics were launched to rival the western superhero comics. The superhero comics in the early '80s marked the third wave, with creators and publishers hoping to benefit from the success of the superhero genre in the West. However, one of India's earliest superheroes is *Batul the Great* was created during the 1960s. In the 1980s at least 5.5 million copies of these Indian comics were sold. Dozens of publishers churned out hundreds of such comic books every month. While Pran's comics based on a few characters and their adventures, *Amar Chitra Katha* brought out mythological stories and regional folk tales of the country. The new Indian comics soon gained widespread popularity during this period that the Indrajal Comics which was publishing American comics, developed an Indian character Bahadur. In the recent years new publishing companies such as the Virgin Comics has appeared in the market in the last few years. India hosted its first ever Comics Convention in February 2011. According to estimates, the Indian comic publishing industry is worth over 100 million dollars.

The arrival of Satellite TV and changing lifestyle in the nineties affected the comics. Children, who comprise a major share of comics readers, are no longer reading comics. Readership fell as they are more inclined towards TV and video games. Many comics publishing companies in India either closed down or discontinued new publications. How are the ideological influences and cultural pressures imposed by the West (especially America) in this cyber-age? This case study calls on the notion of Cybercolonisation-that is, the colonizing of cultures by a diverse range of computing ideologies both overt and subtle-to examine how these ideologies are shaping theoretical and cultural mindset of the East.

The lives of the children now-a-days are thoroughly saturated by the pop culture influences that promote values of consumption, competition, sexism, racism etc. From Disney to Barbie to MySpace; children today navigate a range of popular culture and media. In examining Warner Brother's Cartoons, more specifically focusing on Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons, we find that they have clearly displayed racism and racial stereotypes, sexism and other negative messages which are obviously not suitable for children to watch. These cartoons represent American society and popular culture. It is very interesting to note that some of these cartoons, our generation grew up watching would have biased and racist connotations-glorifying the western culture and demeaning the eastern.

Warner Brothers began its animation production in 1929, with the first Looney Tune, titled *Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid*. The success of the first Looney Tunes show allowed for the Merrie Melodies Production to begin in 1930, and from then on their success boomed and we came to know the familiar stars of Looney Tunes such as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Porky pig. Slowly they made their way from theatres to television screens. The target audience was mainly the children. Children are sensitive beings and any negative depiction portrayed can be damaging for them. Merrie Melodies cartoons were all about racial stereotyping in their early years and still racial stereotyping is shown through the media through various modes of technology today. Speedy Gonzales and his accent portrayed a stereotypical Hispanic immigrant, black people's voices and accents in many cartoons were stereotypical as well. Showing this to children is problematic, because not only does it give children the impression that people with a certain skin color are supposed to act in a certain way, but it opens the door for children to learn how to discriminate and treat others as unequal, which is not right.

The oriental kids are also addicted to these cartoons. The racial and cultural bias projected through cartoons makes the oriental children feel that the western people are superior to them from ideological and cultural standpoint. When the children laugh at Speedy Gonzales and takes the side of the Spanish invaders, Miguel and Tulio (*The Roads to El Dorado*), they are actually laughing at themselves and supporting the white colonizers and their scheme of becoming the "gods" of the colonized (the orientals). The constant depiction of these cultural and racial biases through these cartoons, which are forms the diet of the younger generation, is an indirect way of perpetuating the colonizer/colonized discourse and legitimizing their claim of supremacy over us.

Cybercolonization also takes place through gamescape—that is, through the computer games. Video/computer games have become omnipresent on the cultural landscape—ranging in content from the religious to the hedonistic. Shoshana Magnet, in her journal, *Playing Colonization* opines, "These videogames have established a gamescape—an imagined landscape for the cooped up children." [14] The culture of children today has been overwhelmed by video/computer games, with their pre-packaged fantasies, immersing kids in a world of images, simulacrum and virtual reality, sucking out their imagination, and subjecting education and parental authority to blistering attack. Lalane in his book *Racism in Video Gaming* views that, "Instead of engaging themselves in various physical games, the children engage themselves in the virtual world of video games, which with their fast pace and flashy graphics, shorten children's attention spans, blunt their creativity and foster hyperactive and violent behavior". [15]

This video/computer game culture slowly percolated through our culture and our children also developed a strong fascination towards this game culture because these games serve the same function that storytelling and books have always done, providing narratives that allow the children to interpret their universe. Our children slowly adapted and internalized their culture through these games including style, dress, demeanor, argot, attitudes, activities etc. Thus we see that the western people imposed their cultural and ideological beliefs and notions in a subtle way on the minds of the younger generation and captivated their minds in such a way which caused a major cultural shift as noticed from the lifestyle of our future generation. These are the various tactics of cybercolonization adopted by the west.

Resistance against colonial domination has been one of our chief efforts since the historical times. This process of resistance continues to persist even in this cyberage. Although Hollywood has been making full use of technology and every year it puts animation movies in theatre and does excellent business, India is also not lagging behind. In the early nineties, India had its first full animation film theatre -*Ramayana: The legend of Prince Rama*. Over the last few years, many DVDs of animated stories from *Panchatantra* and Indian folk tales have been produced. Parents want their children to learn more about their own culture and this is the best way. The Indian animation and gaming industry is now busy seeking its own Pokémon moment that will be the trigger for domestic animators, illustrators and gaming wizards to collaborate and build a multibillion dollar industry of toons and games. Complete decolonization of our children's mind has not yet been possible but efforts are being through these animated versions of the Indian mythologies and folklores to rebuild within our children the characteristic traits of our culture that has been lost. The animated versions of Indian mythologies reflect the convergence of the classical with the popular culture where stories from mythologies acquire renewed life through the popular medium of cinema.

Therefore it is now clear that the structure of comic industry, or the cultural pattern in children's comics or the mass media network, all are either in control or in close association with the American and European values and attitudes, creates socio-political and philosophical implications. Many evidences are provided above to show the cultural invasion, in operation through children's comic magazines and through the cyberworld. Children's comics and cartoons provide a case of cultural propaganda and stereotyping in favor of socio-political and economic interests developed within the Anglo-American culture. But significant resistance can also be seen from the non-European countries through these cartoons, comics, and animated movies etc who are trying hard to establish their own cultural identity by negating these kinds of cultural invasions.

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