

# Power and Resistance

## A Study of Pocahontas from the Perspective of Postcolonialism

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper analyses the Disney animated film Pocahontas through the lens of Said's Orientalism and Spivak's feminism in post-colonial theory. The film represents the interaction of power between the coloniser and the colonised people, a rebellion against the Oriental imaginary represented by the Third World people of Pocahontas. As the quintessential representative of the Indian people, such resistance and challenge is of great significance to the forced silence of the Third World people for reflection and self-reconstruction.

### 1 INTRODUCTION: WOMEN, ORIENTALISM AND THE IMAGINATION

#### 1.1 Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Theory

Post-colonial cultural theory and criticism is a multicultural theory that focuses on the power relations of cultural discourse in former suzerain states, former colonies and Third World countries after the end of the period of direct colonial domination, as opposed to the colonial period. By re-reading the colonial past, new questions about racism, national ethnic cultures, cultural rights identities, and the identity and situation of Third World women are sorted out in order to break the dominant imagery constituted by the colonial discourse.

#### 1.2 Edward Wadie Said: The Construction of the Other

The Orient, as expressed by Said, is the relationship between knowledge and power. Orientalism is not only a serious study or a romantic imagination, but also a discourse that reconciles knowledge and power, geopolitical to cultural distribution, and is an expression of the cultural ideology of imperialism and colonialism [2]. Furthermore, Orientalism assumes an essentialist conception of the East, which turns the East into an object of knowledge and power in colonial discourse and into the eternal and unchanging 'other' of Western civilisation, thus establishing the 'European hegemony over the East' in a Western-centric world order. The "European hegemony over the East" in the Western-centric world order is thus established.

#### 1.3 Spivak: The Silent Woman

Spivak bridges Said's gap in two ways: on the one hand, the analysis of colonial discourse and on the other, the exploration of anti-colonial discourse. Said's masculinity makes him gender-blind. Spivak offers a postcolonial reading and critique of Western feminism from a female standpoint. Her theory critiques both the colonial discourse of imperialism and the male-centric discourse. In her critique of postcolonial feminism, the issue of Third World women as a silenced group due to the suppression of dual power discourses and the Western colonial narratives of Third World women are revealed and discussed [2].

### 2 POCAHONTAS: A HIERARCHY OF POWER

Pocahontas is Disney's first story based on a real historical figure and is set in the seventeenth century in 1607, a time of rapidly growing competition for colonialism. The film focuses on the love affair between the Indian Pocahontas and the English explorer John Smith, and the changes in the lives of the indigenous people brought about by the arrival of traders from the Virginia Company on Indian land. Although Pocahontas is dominated by love, it is the conflict between Indians and whites that is at the heart of its story. The power interaction between the two sides of the conflict is the focus of this study.

The most striking power gap in the film is between the Native Indians and the British colonists. The film is set at a time when the new maritime powers were on the rise. The humanism that emerged in society at the time inspired the Western Europeans to spread and expand their Christian influence abroad, to challenge and conquer nature, and to boldly pursue wealth and personal fulfilment, all of which became the main motivations for what has since been summarised by historians as the 'three G's': Gold,

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God and Glory. This is the point that the chorus at the beginning of Pocahontas constantly emphasises. Gold provides the motivation, religion the excuse, glory the passion, and especially the European insatiable quest for gold, which essentially reflects capitalism's urgent need to plunder wealth and accelerate the primitive accumulation of capital.

In Pocahontas, the oppression of power by the British colonists over the native Indians is manifested in two main ways: imagination and force. The richness of the Indian people's natural products and the low level of industrialisation are figurative representations of the British colonists' imagination of the Indian people. The film begins with the song of the British colonists. In the lyrics, in addition to the "3G" motive mentioned above, "And for a new world of paradise, we will be rich and free." It is also a direct reflection of the British colonial imagination of the Indian peoples: romantic, golden and silent and submissive. Thus, the fabrication of the "East" also rationalises at root the aggression of the "progressive and rational" West against the "backward and despotic" but "rich and productive" East. The invasion of the "backward and despotic" but "rich" East. It is easy to see that "Orientalism" is not a description or study of the real East, but rather a fictional and manufactured East in order to establish and maintain the Western cultural hegemony.

While the film concentrates on the conflict of power between the British colonists and the Indian nations, the conflict between the superior and the inferior regarding power is also visible within the colonists. This is most thoroughly demonstrated by the character of Governor Ratcliffe. Not only is he a highly inflammatory liar, but he is also an outright colonialist. His predatorial nature is revealed in every public speech he makes, both to the Indians and to his associates from the West. Although Relew's intention was simply that these soldiers would work for him to dig for gold, these crew members were inspired and loyal to the Virginia Company precisely because they shared or at least had a similar sense of predation to this colonialist. The ethnocentrism spawned by primitive capitalist accumulation was a companion to egoism, to imperialism. As Westerners, both the soldiers and their leaders showed a common imagination of the 'East' as colonists and an overwhelming loyalty to power.

On the Indian side, the structure is simpler, consisting mainly of a power relationship between Chief Powhatan, the father of the heroine Pocahontas, Kocoum, a warrior of the tribe, and Pocahontas herself. Powhatan, as chief, had to lead the clan in the face of the foreigners, and as head of the family, he admired Kocoum, respected strength and force, wanted to marry his daughter Pocahontas to Kocoum, and used his power to persuade and arrange for Pocahontas:

"He is loyal and strong and will build you a good house with sturdy walls. With him, you will be safe from harm."

Kocoum, on the other hand, was a brave man who led the clan's warriors in foreign battles, and with the power he had gained through his strength he spoke to the chief to propose marriage to Pocahontas. The clan's power, led by the older male clan chief, is distinguished by force and gender as the subordinate.

### 3 POCAHONTAS: THE REBEL

If Pocahontas is a film that combines post-colonial, feminine and natural ecological perspectives, then the performance of its heroine, Pocahontas, a minority woman in search of self-worth who breaks the pull of traditional forces on her, is undoubtedly the most direct and powerful representation of these three perspectives. This paper will focus on Pocahontas' resistance to the essentialisation of patriarchal power over women, the suppression of women by the clan and the 'Orientalisation' and 'feminisation' of the Third World by the colonisers.

Firstly, Pocahontas is a typical 'Orientalist' rebel. "The "Orient" or the Third World is not just a geographical location, but also has deep political and cultural connotations. The West created a fictionalised version of the 'East': rich in goods and untamed in people.

From the first conversation between John and Pocahontas, it is clear that an ambitious white European male with his compass, his guns and his grand plans for the transformation of the region is intent on achieving the perfect exploitation of its resources, thus helping to free the dissidents from "backwardness and ignorance in order to achieve a sense of self-esteem and satisfaction. In fact, there is an implicit Eurocentric discourse in every word. In this mentality of superiority, they believe that they do not need to learn anything from other races, but rather to teach them something. Thus, when they encounter other races, they consider them to be "oriental first, human in general, and oriental last" and try to assimilate these "backward" peoples rather than engage in cultural exchange and learning with them.

John Smith's heroism is evident in the way he protects women, builds houses and roads, exploits resources and provides educational help. The self-centred male hero, John Smith, has the same sense of community as the rest of Europe, and is 'well-intentioned' in his desire to bring what he identifies as an advanced civilisation to the natives. All this is placed in the context of post-colonialism, and it is easy to see the 'Eurocentric' values that envelop Europe as a whole. This tendency has no regard for the real needs and psychology of other peoples and is entirely self-centred, ignoring the dignity and existence of other races. Such a concept is also linked to the hegemonic masculinity of feminism, the source of the traditional patriarchal understanding and domination of women, which is the result of this extreme objectification. The mental existence of the 'other' is ignored in favour of a material, such as power, culture, social identity, etc., which takes over forcefully in an attempt to change the mental idea of the 'other'.

Pocahontas protests against John Smith's rudeness from the very beginning of the conversation in the face of a strong 'Orientalist' scrutiny. From commenting on his name and refusing to accept the blueprint he describes, the argument eventually comes to a discussion of 'savages', 'What you mean is ... not like you.' This is her questioning of the self-centred nation and is the spirit of the whole play.

The film's theme song, Color of the Wind, is a testament to the defiant spirit of Pocahontas, whose voice conveys a harmonious ecological and cultural outlook that the Indians hold dear. This part of the cantata is Pocahontas's

powerful rebuttal to 'Orientalism' and white centrism. " question, criticise and resist white European perceptions of Indian 'orientalism' and 'Western knowledge'. These arrogant whites, who claim to be from a 'civilised' society, can be equally ignorant when it comes to nature and other races. Pocahontas' resistance to 'Orientalism' goes beyond mere rhetorical arguments and strikes at the heart of the colonialists, hoping that they will reflect on themselves and change their perceptions and actions. She is expressing the splendour and tolerance of nature, but also the message that culture should in fact be diverse and communicative.

Outside of Pocahontas being analysed through a post-colonial lens, more viewers have always seen it as an animated romance. In traditional romance films, the hero is portrayed as a fit, attractive prince and the heroine presents a love story of saving and being saved, while the East is characterised as female or selectively ignored and devalued. Under the effect of Disney's animated spectacle, the cultural ideology of Western post-colonialism is implicitly encoded within. The seemingly clichéd plot of Pocahontas' opposition to traditional clan arranged marriages and her courage to pursue true love also shows a feminist side to her.

In traditional society, women are not given strong social responsibilities until they are married, and are only subordinate to the role of wife and mother. In the film, Pocahontas's chief father, keeps emphasising: "You have your mother's spirit. It was her dream to see you wear it at your own." This conception of women as part, if not all, of motherhood pushes women into a path of life that is identical to that of their mothers.

Pocahontas' choice of love is not shackled by 'orientalism' or conservative sexism, she is aware of the conservatism of patriarchal and clan power. By the end of the story, she does not base her future on her choice of a stable marriage, her husband's wealth, but provides a plot line that is not 'the white man is saving the brown woman from the brown man'. She is not possessed by an ideology of self-sacrifice, but has a perception that most women do not have because of the limitations of their time, and is rebellious and innovative.

#### **4 LIMITATIONS: THE INCOMPLETENESS OF POSTCOLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

Although the ending of the film is progressive in that it reflects the general trend towards the integration of the cultures of the colonised and the colonisers in the course of the conflict, it is still not possible for the colonised to win on their own. However, the final victory was not achieved by the colonised on their own, and the final peaceful ending was due to the fact that some of the colonisers were the first to realise that they were anti-war. Thanks to their open-mindedness, rational introspection, generosity and even love that broke through racial boundaries, the conflict was finally resolved. This is in fact an incomplete reflection of the colonialist discourse.

Secondly, the theme song of Pocahontas, 'Colour of the Wind', is sung by Pocahontas to the British colonial representative, John Smith, and to the audience as an expression of Indian questioning of white superiority. This may appear to be a successful voice and articulation of the Indian nation, but the Indian 'voice' is a marginal one between the native Indian language and English. The Indian language appears only twice in the film, the first time in a chant sung by the Indians when Pocahontas's father returns from victory. The second is when Pocahontas teaches John Smith how to say "hello" and "goodbye" in Indian. Indian vocalisations were in fact drowned out by the predominantly English European colonial languages, and the weaker native language remained subservient to the stronger colonial language [4].

In post-colonialism, the traditional colonial era has become history as colonies have become independent. However, the colonial nature of imperialism still lingered in the colonies. Although they no longer plundered and enslaved the Eastern world by means of large-scale armed aggression, they remained at the centre of the world's political, economic and cultural interactions, dominating the world's Eastern countries, which were on the periphery and in a position of being determined. The famous Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci introduced the concept of 'cultural hegemony'. In his analysis of the powerful civil societies in the advanced capitalist countries of the West, he pointed out that cultural hegemony is an essential form of intellectual and cultural domination. Cultural hegemony refers to the imposition of ideological and cultural values between countries and nations, and is a form of cultural power and cultural colonisation, which occurs whenever countries and nations with economic power attempt to impose their ideological and cultural consciousness on others. This will lead to contradictions, conflicts and even wars between cultures. It is through the discursive and historical forgetfulness of culture that capitalist "cultural hegemony" is formed, in order to gain acceptance.

Fredric Jameson, a critic of post-colonial theory, notes that the First World holds the dominant power of cultural export and can see its ideology as a dominant global value, encoding its values and consciousness in the entire cultural apparatus through the cultural media and forcibly indoctrinating the Third World, while Third World cultures are left to passively accept the threats to their cultural traditions, the loss of their mother tongue, the devaluation of their culture, the constant infiltration and reshaping of their ideology, and the resulting marginalisation of their culture.

Said sees this opposition between the politics, economy, culture and perceptions of the sovereign state and the political culture of the marginal state as a clear dichotomy. In this oppositional mode of power discourse, the marginal state is often a mere weak accompaniment to the "myth of power" of the sovereign state, a self-deprecation in the face of cultural hegemony. This power politics creates or fashions an 'oriental myth' to demonstrate its cultural supremacy. This is the aforementioned 'Orientalism' as a cultural mirror image set up by the West to control the East.

This 'de-territorialisation' of Western culture permeates all aspects of social life and brings about a transfor-

mation of cultural experience. Under Western or patriarchal scrutiny, history becomes a narrative landscape of the 'seen'; the 'falsity of history' is created in fiction and distortion; history is subjected to 'cognitive violence' as it is rewoven by a central discourse. History is squeezed by the "cognitive violence" of the central discourse and suffers a permanent marginalisation. What is more, gradually the traces of this cultural memory of the East are framed by the West, and by virtue of their powerful culture, the cultural colonies, which are on the "periphery" outside the centre, become more politically, economically, culturally and linguistically dependent on the suzerain state, and the stigma of "subordination. The brand of "subordination" was then ingrained in the memory of Eastern cultures.

According to Said, the 'Orient' is a place invented by the West and filled with the collective memory of colonialism. Orientalism is not a genuine discourse about the East, but a subjective Western perception of itself, a projection of desire and a reflection of power. The fictional "East" of "Orientalism" is fundamentally different from the West and allows the West to see the East in a new and prejudiced light, thus "creating" a national essence that is completely different from its own. It allows the West to see the East in a new and prejudiced light, thus 'creating' a national essence completely different from its own and enabling it to grasp the 'other'.

Finally, Pocahontas' resistance is class-based. Pocahontas, with her status and power as a chief's daughter and tribal princess, is able to demonstrate her power to pursue free love and her own destiny, without which she would not be able to demonstrate her resistance. This is in contrast to her friend Nakoma.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Fredric Jameson says: "Popular culture products, however inconspicuous, still implicitly negate and critique the social order, even though they emerge from that order." In Pocahontas, an animated film with a female protagonist, the protagonist is no longer an object to be rescued. Through Pocahontas' defiance and challenge, the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised people, the patriarchal clan and women, are revealed. This popular cultural product emphasises the integration of people with the natural world and respect between communities, breaking through Western stereotypes of the 'Oriental', especially Oriental women, and defying the confinement of 'Orientalism' and Western-centrism. This paper attempts to explore the various power relations in the film and Pocahontas' resistance to them in the light of postcolonial theory. Through this paper, it is possible to understand the postcolonial consciousness in the film as an emphasis on the spirit of freedom from the centre and the concept of human society as a community of destiny.

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