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## A Post Colonial Perspective on Film Viewing: Reversing the Cultural Inferiority

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to showcase the importance of watching films with a critical perspective. Films are often viewed and enjoyed for their entertainment purposes only. But critical viewing of films is also proliferating to underscore the influence of the cultural backdrop from which these films have been moulded. This paper uses a Post Colonial lens in the analysis of the movie *Barfi* to unfold a different story line which encompasses the still pricking colonial past of Indian history. Revisiting movies is done here not as a pastime but to underscore and expose many textual and historical nuances that might have overlooked otherwise. The paper here analyses how *Barfi* can be presented as a story of a postcolonial society and its victory.

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### Keywords:

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“A doubling, dissembling image of being in atleast two places at once.... It is not the Colonialist self or the Colonised Other, but the disturbing distance in between that constitutes the figure of Colonial Otherness”(Bhaba, 117).

*Barfi!*, a 2012 Indian film directed by Anurag Basu, unfolds the story of a deaf and dumb man named Barfi and an autistic girl named Jhilmil. Scrutinizing what Ania Loombasays, a postcolonial reading of *Barfi!* is apposite. Loomba observes that “Millions of Indians never saw an English person throughout the term of the Raj, although that did not mean their lives had not been woven into the fabric of empire. This kind of shallow penetration can be seen as a prototype of modern imperialism, which functions largely through remote control” (97). Ergo though the story of *Barfi!* is taking place mainly in 1970 Darjeeling (after the Independence), still there one can see the spectres of bygone British culture looming around. It is also a kind of ‘shallow penetration’ after the era of discernible and straight colonial jurisdiction, because the saga of Barfi and Jhilmil occurs in the partially

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colonized ambience of Darjeeling where the remnants of British style continue to persist in the edifice of buildings and also in the kind of social gatherings adopted/ adapted by the upper class of the society.

The film, in the pretext of a love story, is an overt delineation of the eponymous hero's pragmatic and creative resistance to the culture of the colonizer (British) through an analysis of the identity politics that run under the ostensibly lax storyline. Identity politics started gaining importance in the academic and political field since 1970s. An enquiry of the identity politics in the film *Barfi!* turns out to be more pertinent while inspecting the time period of the tale. *Barfi!* gazes in to 1970s from the vantage point of the present time. Apparently the story is told in the guise of a flash back but it actually explicates the identity politics which itself had its origins in 1970s. Identity politics empowers those who feel oppressed to give voice to their oppression through their own experience. Identity politics also necessitates the generation of self consciousness.

One of the integral parts of identity politics is minority influence. As a consequence of minority influence- that occurs when a majority culture (here the culture of the colonizer) is affected by the beliefs, customs and characteristics of a minority culture (here the culture of the colonized) - the majority exhibits a propensity to accept the beliefs of behaviors of the minority. Numerous factors like 'the sizes of majority and minority groups, the level of consistency of the minority group and situational factors' aid the operation of minority influence. In this film the minority influence is executed on Barfi by Jhilmil, the only person amidst the Westernised upper class who never treads on the heels of any rules and norms of constructed convention. In that world she is an 'aggressive', 'uncultured, and 'unsophisticated' 'Other' (in the guise of her autism). Yet no other character in the film is as unswerving as Jhilmil. And Barfi, the only person among the lower class to appropriate a partially Westernised dress style, belongs to the majority (Barfi is actually copying the British fashion of men which has been in vogue during 1950s) in his consciousness. Barfi also has worn a cap which is not in the style of the popular Indian cap.

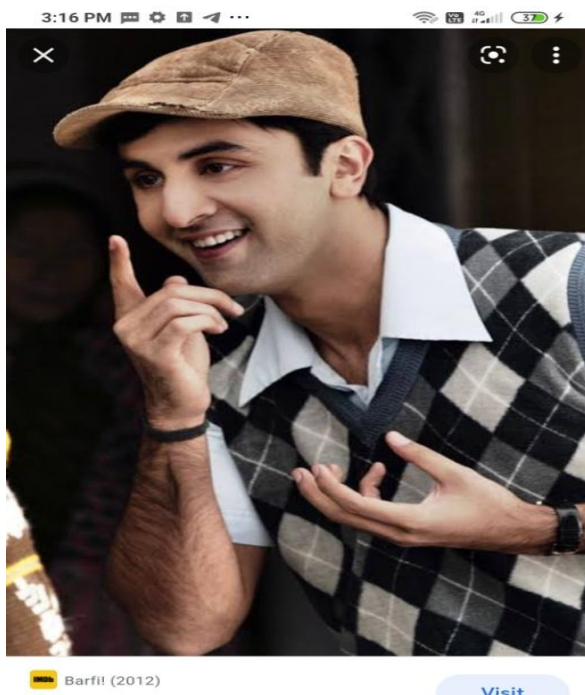


Figure 1. Barfi wearing Beret cap

But even then he is cognizant of the native or rather the 'Other' in him. Though he has been originally named as Murphy, a typical British name, his 'physical' (or 'social') impairment has made him to speak out his name as 'Barfii', which is the name of a quintessential Indian sweet. Barfii's name itself evinces the existence of incompatible identities within him. His actual name is Murphy (one of the most popular radios of Britain). Hence it can be said that since his birth the colonizer's influence has been with him. Ironically, though named after a 'talking' machine like radio, he is mute and stone deaf. His silence can be equated to the lost voice of the colonized who is always coerced to accept this scheming and manipulative silencing process by the colonizer. And in the era of neocolonialism the colonized has inadvertently accepted his languid and silent status quo.

Though Barfii is the 'silenced' 'Other', when the occasion demands he tries/strives to be like the colonizer. That's why he 'mimics' the Western dance style while dancing with Shruthi in the party of the upper class. His endeavour to perform the dance in his own 'uncivilised' manner has been properly warned and curtailed by Shruthi. He has discerned that if he has to be with Shruthi, he has to bridle and subjugate the native in him. So his resolve to have on a suit of British fashion (though can't afford such an outfit) while moving to Shruthi's parents to ask for her hand in marriage is suggestive of Barfii's recently procured insight to smother the native in him. He is also keen to maintain a balance between his native self and the more dominating foreign identity in him. The images of Barfii striving to gain balance can be seen throughout the first half of the film. When he has failed to raise an active protest at the unjustified dismissal of his father from the job and also at the denial by Shruthi, Barfii perceives that in the world of the powerful he has been forcefully muted and also has been exploited in a duplicitous manner. He can also realise that his silence has been both manipulated and denigrated by those in power. He has proposed Shruthi by revealing his real identity.



Figure 2. Barfi is named after Murphy Radio

Though wearing a Western outfit, he has said her through action that he is deaf and dumb (or in a way he indicates that he is the less powerful one in the society of the powerful). He also declines to be seated in the restaurant in a Western fashion while he has been going to propose Shruthi. But he has been abandoned by her only because of his silence (under the advice of Shruthi's mother). And since he is 'hearing and speech impaired' as said by the police officer Barfii is also made the convict of Jhilmil's 'murder'. His silence is his weak

point. Hence here also “the underlying premise was, of course, that Indians can mimic but never exactly reproduce English values, and that their recognition of the perpetual gap between themselves and the ‘real thing’ will ensure their subjection”(Loomba, 146). At this crucial and salient juncture he apprehends his necessity to voice his protest. Here the colonized’s pejorative and constructed identity is eroded by the colonized’s felt need to question his consequent identity crisis. At his discovery that to be a meek convoy of the foreign in him is detrimental to his own native identity, Barfii has sought the assistance of Jhilmil to aid him in his quest for his ‘ownness’.

“One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities.... Language becomes a medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conception of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (Ashcroft, 7). In one instance the film also posits an opportunity to shake this colonizer’s power perpetuation through language. Jhilmil trains Barfii to write his name or it is through Jhilmil Barfii is taught to document his identity (since naming is the first phase of identity construction). Barfii learns from Jhilmil to record his identity in the language of the colonizer. But she inverts the colonizer’s language and thus she succours Barfii to construct an identity which is the exact opposite of the colonizer’s contrived identity. Thence he also has commenced writing his name in an inverted method (in a way she has fabricated Barfii’s own identity by underscoring his ‘Otherness’). It is also a process of ‘abrogation’. Here she questions the so called ‘correct’ and ‘standardized’ use of the language of the colonizer.

Abrogation is observed as a mechanism of the colonized to refuse the linguistic dominance of the colonizer. It “involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication” and it is also “the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages” (Ashcroft) and it thus indicates a means of going away from the colonial dominance. Though Jhilmil has undergone a British education, she has never had to encounter the vexation of identity crisis. She has her own bizarre style of perceiving things which is not ubiquitous. She has seen things in an inverted manner or in way she has been able to subvert the constructed identity in herself and in others. The glass ball which she has always used is symbolic of this. She loves to look through that glass ball. And the vision in the glass ball is an inverted vision. She also loves to see things by lying upside down if she is not with her glass ball. When she has temporally gone away from Barfii, she has left her glass ball and paraphernalia with him. Barfii, who has been at the close of solving his identity crisis, can easily locate the glass ball and starts looking through it. The new inverted vision has been a novel experience for him. He starts to see things differently. He has been also able to invert the constructedness of his existence and surroundings. It is a moment of complete recognition. He has then recommenced his search for Jhilmil with a new vigour. It culminates in the solving of his identity crisis. He adopts what is native in him.

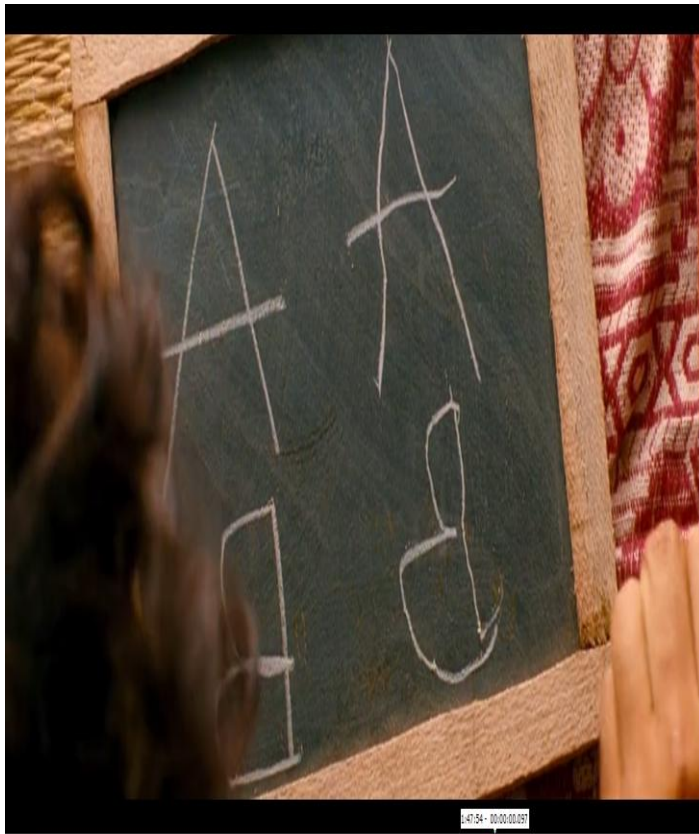


Figure 3.Barfi learning alphabets



Figure 4.Jhilmil's glass ball

“One of the most striking contradictions about colonialism is that it needs both to ‘civilise’ its ‘others’ and to fix them into perpetual ‘otherness’” (Loomba, 145). When Barfii has realized this double strategy of the colonial influence, he once again seeks the espousal of Jhilmil’s strategy. It is her level of consistency that entices Barfii the most because he as a bearer of both native and foreign identities has never been able to find the key to decipher his crisis. He has seen Jhilmil dancing ‘awkwardly’ in the Bengali wedding that they have attended after they have run from Darjeeling. She has to confront jarring criticism often for her such naïve and gauche idiosyncrasies when she has been at her partially colonized home and surroundings. Barfii also has been once subjected to the selfsame ordeal when he has been at the dancing party at Darjeeling with Shruthi. But when Jhilmil repeats the same tactics at a traditional Indian wedding occasion amidst a number of ‘Others’ nobody derides Jhilmil because for the ‘Others’ nothing in Jhilmil seem to be ‘unacceptable’ and ‘unsophisticated’. They have just accepted the genuineness of her so far falsified and maltreated ‘Otherness’. And Barfii thus has realized that the native in him is not ‘unsophisticated’ and ‘awkward’. He has also identified that how much he endeavours to pretend like the colonizer, the native in him always makes him appear as the ‘Other’ and hence the exploited and the condemned one. So he has discerned that such a balancing position is not welcomed. Accepting what is native in him is more stable, but it doesn’t mean to banish the foreign in him. It just means to make the native in him more dominant than the culture of the colonizer. It is a process of self conscious ‘Othering’. He has made an identity to the ‘Other’ in him and thus solved the vying forces of identity in him.

“A major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes in to being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model” (Loomba, 9). Here also such a kind of displacement does occur. But this displacement takes place in a different dimension. Barfii’s native place is Darjeeling which is a partially colonized. Such a place enlivens the identity crisis in Barfii. Kolkata to where Barfii has moved later with Jhilmil is considered as the centre of Indian Independence Movement. Due to the growing Nationalism and the geographical disadvantages, the British Raj had to shift its capital from Kolkta to Delhi in the year 1911. So Kolkata symbolises a place of native resistance and power. Moving to Kolkata from Darjeeling has been essential to Barfii to build the native in him. Hence the process of dislocation actually aids him to create the native in himself. Once he has been able to place and balance himself, Barfii’s homecoming ceases to be a problem. Since the influence of Jhilmil has worked upon him, he has understood the real pang of denying the ‘Other’ in favour of the foreign inside him. And his return to Darjeeling with a new resolve is suggestive of the newly gained confidence in him. Now the partially colonized ambience is no longer a threat to him or to the ‘Other’ in him. And the film ends by underlining this idea of his transition. The traditional Bengali marriage of Barfii and Jhilmil completes his endeavours to solve the crisis in him. Barfi’s victory in his venture to give ‘voice’ to his own felt oppression through his own experiences and the subsequent struggles to gain confidence over his move to abandon the ‘negative’ (colonizer’s) identity in favour of his own native identity aid the film to come up with a propitious message. *Barfi!* exhibits a positive stroke in the creation of the ‘own’ identity of

the 'Other' and the silent and deaf(or dumb??) Barfi turns out to be the 'speaking' symbol of the colonized's cultural resistance.

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