

## **Color determining the good and the bad: A post colonial analysis of the movie ‘Lion King’ using Edward Said’s theory of ‘Orientalism’**

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‘Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is a specific expose of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not. He identifies a European cultural tradition of ‘Orientalism’, which is a particular and long-standing way of identifying the East as ‘Other’ and inferior to the West.’ Orientalism was defined by Edward Said as the process of the West defining itself as a superior civilization by constructing itself in opposition to an “exotic” and inferior other or “Orient.” ‘The term Orientalism is now sometimes applied to cultural imperialism by means of the control of discourse, not only in the orient, but anywhere in the world.’ The ‘other’ as described by the west is inferior and barbaric. The west is portrayed as ‘white’ and civilized. On the other hand, the east or the third world countries such as Asia, Africa and the Caribbean islands are black, cruel and needs to be civilized. The paper attempts to apply the theory of Orientalism to the Disney movie ‘The Lion King’ where such oriental and occidental features can be attributed.

‘The Lion King’ is one of Disney’s most loved classics, popular even decades after its original release in 1994. Telling the tale of a lion cub who was tricked into abandoning the kingdom which rightfully belonged to him by his scheming uncle, it is a fun family movie with an endearing storyline and a beautiful soundtrack to complement it. But as with most Disney

productions, there are hidden meanings and subliminal messages galore in this children's favorite. The paper attempts to analyze the movie through a post colonial framework, tracing elements of racism, social hierarchy, and geographic differences from the visual text.

The different aspects of the movie such as the visuals, music and characters can be approached in a post colonial understanding. The power hierarchy among the animals and the language used are colonial in nature. One of the striking postcolonial features of the movie is the color difference of the characters determining the good and the bad. Most of the good characters were shown to be fair in color but few bad or villainous characters were shown in darker shades. Mufasa, the mighty king is white whereas his brother, Scar who is the villain of the movie is black. The color correlation between Mufasa and Scar were there to make a visual difference between the good, upstanding father figure who is there to teach Simba right from wrong and the lowly, and the underhanded antagonist who is malicious and wicked. The fact remains in most connotations that light or the color white is good and dark or the color black is bad. So if you happen to recognize the hyenas or the scruffy underfed lions as marginalized or evil and then you physically see them as darker pigmented, you are strengthening these connections. The hyenas are the supporters of the antagonist who are considered as savages, black and uncivilized with a heavy not so fluent English accent. Rafiki, the mystic monkey is portrayed having African features in the movie. The setting and images in the movie can be looked at from the post colonial point of view. Rafiki is a highly respected person, having access to and influence in the kingdom. The movie begins with Rafiki presenting the prince to the animals of the land. He is depicted with African features who also speak Swahili and poor English. The songs and music associated with Rafiki is also purely tribal.

Simba is the prince of the Pride Lands and son of King Mufasa and Queen Sarabi. He has been told by his father to stay away from the ‘dark lands’. The term dark in itself has a direct denotative meaning. The animals of the pride lands are civilized and superior while it is the hyenas, the barbaric ones that reside in the dark land. They have separated the two lands. The animals in the kingdom can be compared to the colonial West where the lion king is the colonial head. There is a clear cut social hierarchy within the animals based on the food chain. They speak in English and behave in a ‘civilized’ manner. Rafiki is a mandrill who plays a crucial role in the movie. Unlike the other ‘civilized’ animals of the pride lands, Rafiki is a tribal and has an African accent when he speaks English. He speaks in Swahili most of the time, which is an African language. Mysticism has always been associated with the East in Post colonial studies. In the movie, Rafiki is the main source of mysticism chanting mantras and engaging in spiritual activities. Though his chants are gibberish, they have strong African tribal influence. Rafiki’s prediction that Simba is alive and then finding him adds to his mystic abilities. Appearance of Rafiki is another factor that gives him oriental features. He is dark and has painted his face much like the African tribal. He lives in a cave and draw paintings on the cave wall like the pre historic men. The eroticizing features of Rafiki very much fits into the notion of Orientalism. Rafiki has tribal and African features make him different from the other ‘civilized’ animals of the pride lands.

There is a great deal of black and white imagery (Pride lands vs. the Shadow lands) in the movie. The hyenas – Shenzi (Whoopi Goldberg), Banzai (Cheech Marin) and Ed (Jim Cummings) – are clearly a gang who all speak in inner-city slang. Anti-immigrant allegories are another theme allegedly surrounding the hyenas. The hyenas can be compared to the blacks and

Latinos who live in the Elephant Graveyard and aren't allowed to enter the Pride Lands where all the food is located and are quickly banished once they cross the border. Hyena's are relegated to the worst areas and have no access to good water or food - few opportunities for social mobility. This can also be traced in the colonial history of humans. The number of Hyenas is much larger than the number of lions which we can see in the scene of Hyena's march. But the power is still within the hands of the lions which show the disproportionate amount of power that lies in the hands of the few. The voices of the hyenas were given by people who could add humor to the scene.

The analysis of the movie, 'Lion King' reveals a number of subliminal and inner hidden meaning that can be read in different perspectives. The postcolonial reading of the visual text reveals one such perspective. The attributed oriental and occidental features associated with the characters, their power structure along with the music and visual elements of the movie make it remarkably colonial.

### **Bibliography**

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