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A NEOCOLONIAL OUTLOOK ON MRINAL SEN'S CALCUTTA TRILOGY

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Abstract

Neocolonialism is a term used to describe the economic and political control or influence that a country or group of countries may exert over another country or region, without formally colonizing it. This concept has been widely debated and discussed in the fields of international relations and political economy, with many critics arguing that it perpetuates the same patterns of exploitation and inequality that existed during traditional colonialism. One of the main ways that neocolonialism can manifest is through economic policies and practices. This paper primarily focuses on Mrinal Sen's Calcutta Trilogy - *Interview* (1971), *Calcutta 71*, (1972) and *Padatik (The Guerilla Fighter)* (1973) as seminal texts for the understanding of neocolonial experiences in Bengal post-independence. The paper also theoretically substantiate and analyse Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) in context of Mrinal Sen's "Calcutta Trilogy". These films are set in the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata) and explore various social and political issues that arise due to neocolonial domination during the 1970s. The films were critically acclaimed and are considered some of Sen's most important works. They were made in the context of the political, social and cultural changes happening in India during that time and it also explores the heteroglossic experiences of the people leading to alienation and identity crisis.

Key Words: Neocolonialism, White Mask, Calcutta Trilogy, Frantz Fanon, Mrinal Sen

Neocolonialism

The term neocolonialism was first used in the 1950s and 1960s to describe the situation in countries that had recently gained independence from colonial rule but were still subject to significant economic, political, social and cultural influences from their former oppressor. Neocolonialism is the indirect control or influence exerted by powerful countries over less powerful countries. Neocolonialism is often used to describe the relationship between developed and developing

countries, where the former exerts influence and control over the latter. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana and a prominent pan-Africanist, was a strong critic of neocolonialism. Nkrumah believed that neocolonialism was a new form of imperialism that emerged after decolonization, where former colonial powers continued to exert control over the newly independent states through economic, political, and cultural means.

Nkrumah argued, in his most seminal work *Neo-Colonialism, The Last stage of Imperialism*

(1965) that, neocolonialism was a more subtle and insidious form of colonialism than the traditional colonial model. He believed that it was characterized by the domination of the economies of newly independent states by multinational corporations and the developed nations, which he referred to as the "Dependency Theory." Nkrumah argued that this dependency was maintained through trade arrangements that were heavily biased in favor of the developed countries and through the exploitation of natural resources and cheap labor in developing countries. Nkrumah also believed that neocolonialism was perpetuated by the political influence of developed countries over the newly independent states. He argued that the developed countries often used their political power to manipulate the governments of the developing countries, to ensure that their interests were protected. Nkrumah also claimed that the developed countries maintained their political influence through the use of military aid, covert operations, and other forms of intervention in the affairs of the developing countries.

“ A state in the grip of neo-colonialism is not master of its own destiny. It is this factor which makes neo-colonialism such a serious threat to world peace.” Kwame Nkrumah (1965: x)

Neocolonialism is a complex phenomenon that operates through a variety of mechanisms to maintain the indirect control and influence of developed countries over developing countries. Cultural and media production is another important mechanism of neocolonialism - it shapes the way people in developing countries think about themselves and the world. For example, the media and entertainment industries in developed countries often portray developing countries as poor, violent, and backward, while ignoring the rich cultural and political traditions of these countries. This creates a distorted image of the world that reinforces the power dynamic between developed and developing countries. Neocolonialism is a process of economic and power relations between the former colonizer and the colonies and this has insinuated the beginning of Capitalism in the developing countries. English economist and social

scientist John Atkinson Hobson in his seminal work, *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), sees Capitalism as the "taproot of imperialism". The capitalist economy is the principal factor for the unequal distribution of funds. This unequal distribution of funds widens the gap between the rich capitalists and the working class. Industrial production was in excess as compared to consumer demand, so, foreign investments was the only way for the capitalists to earn profits. So, for investing in the colonies, the natives are needed to be "civilized", and to "elevate" them from their status, and thus, their traditional institutions should be diminished and new capitalist discourse should be created for the smooth transaction and imperialist control. Vladimir Lenin proposed that, imperialism and capitalism are the two sides of the same coin. According to Lenin, economic competitions between businesses and the government has led to a geopolitical crisis whose eventual consequences was the first World War.

Apart from the economic domination from the developed countries, Neocolonialism has a persistent psychological and cultural impact on the developing country like India. One of the most significant impacts of neocolonialism on West Bengal was the transformation of the region's economy. The British introduced cash crops, such as indigo and tea, which replaced traditional crops and forced many farmers into debt. Additionally, the policies favoured the development of export-oriented industries and led to the exploitation of local resources and the displacement of small-scale farmers. This had a lasting impact on the region's economy and contributed to persistent poverty and inequality even after the colonial period was over. Moreover, the new forms of art, literature, and music, which challenged and often displaced traditional cultural expressions. This led to the creation of new cultural identities, which combined elements of both Western and local cultural traditions. The neocolonial policies often suppressed or discouraged local cultural practices, leading to the loss of aboriginal cultural heritage and traditions.

Understanding Fanon's "as white as possible"

Black Skin, White Masks is a seminal work of Frantz Fanon, a West Indian psychiatrist and

philosopher, published in 1952. The book explores the psychological impact of colonialism and racism on Black people and their experiences with identity, self-esteem, and dehumanization. Fanon argues that Black people, who live in a world dominated by White people, are subjected to a constant barrage of messages that their skin color makes them inferior. This leads to feelings of worthlessness and self-hate, which can result in a sense of shame and a desire to assimilate into White culture. The title *Black Skin, White Masks* refers to the idea that Black people are forced to wear a mask of White behaviour and culture in order to be accepted and feel valued.

Fanon highlights the importance of recognizing and rejecting internalized racism, which is the idea that Black people have adopted negative views of their own culture and skin color. He argues that this internalized racism is a product of the systemic racism and discrimination that Black people face on a daily basis. Fanon also highlights the importance of reclaiming Black identity and embracing one's cultural heritage as a way of overcoming feelings of worthlessness and self-hate. He argues that this process of reclaiming one's identity is essential for the liberation of Black people and the development of a strong, self-confident, and proud Black community.

Black Skin, White Masks is a powerful and thought-provoking work that provides a unique insight into the psychological impact of colonialism and racism on Black people. Fanon's analysis remains relevant today, as people around the world continue to struggle with the effects of racism and the quest for self-acceptance and liberation. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the complexity of Black identity and the impact of systemic racism on Black people's lives.

The filmography of Mrinal Sen

The 1960s and 1970s was a time when Bollywood, as we know it today, was at its pinnacle. Films like Shakti Samanta's *Aradhana* (1969), Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anand* (1971), Raj Kapoor's *Bobby* (1973), Shayam Bengal's *Ankur* (1975), and many more, were shaping the future of Bollywood cinema, and on the other hand, a regional industry was also emerging with the light of directors like

Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak, representing Indian cinema in the international film sphere. The films of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak depicts Bengal in its sterling indigenous realism but with a universal aperture of understanding.

Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen are two of the most prominent filmmakers in the history of Indian cinema. Both of these filmmakers have made a lasting impact on the Indian film industry and their works continue to be revered and studied today. Satyajit Ray was born in Calcutta in 1921 and went on to become one of the most influential filmmakers in the world. He is best known for his *Apu Trilogy*, which consists of the films *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), and *The World of Apu* (1959). The Apu Trilogy is considered one of the greatest works of world cinema and it is widely regarded as a masterpiece of Indian cinema. The films in the trilogy are known for their sensitivity, realism, and their portrayal of the rural life of Bengal. Mrinal Sen was born in 1923 in Faridpur, Bengal and went on to become one of the most important figures in Indian art cinema. He is best known for his politically charged films that address social and political issues in India. Some of his most famous films include *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979), and *Kharij* (1982). Sen's films are known for their innovative style, their use of non-linear narrative, and their complex characters. He was a pioneer of the New Indian Cinema movement, which sought to challenge the traditional conventions of Indian cinema.

Mrinal Sen's films explored various themes such as poverty, social inequality, and political oppression and aimed to shed light on the realities of Indian society. Sen's first film, *Raat Bhore* (1955), marked the beginning of a new era in Indian cinema and was a departure from the conventional and escapist films of the time. He went on to make several more films, including *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), *Interview* (1971), and *Calcutta 71* (1972), which marked the start of the Indian New Wave. These films were experimental in nature and challenged the conventional norms of Indian cinema by incorporating elements of realism and social commentary. One of Sen's most celebrated films is

Ek Din Pratidin (1979), which portrays the story of a middle-class family struggling with poverty and unemployment. The film's realistic portrayal of everyday life, coupled with its strong social commentary, makes it a significant landmark in Indian parallel cinema. Another notable film by Sen is *Khandhar* (1984), which explores the theme of death and the complexities of human relationships. The film was widely acclaimed for its powerful storytelling and its thought-provoking exploration of the human condition.

Sen's contribution to Indian cinema was not limited to the film industry. He was also actively involved in promoting independent cinema and supporting young filmmakers. He was a strong advocate of freedom of expression and was a vocal critic of censorship in Indian cinema. Mrinal Sen's films have had a profound impact on Indian cinema and continue to inspire filmmakers and audiences alike. His films serve as a reminder of the power of cinema to challenge prevailing norms and spark important conversations about the society we live in. His legacy lives on through his films and his contribution to the world of Indian parallel cinema.

Neocolonialism and Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta Trilogy*

Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta Trilogy* is a series of films that reflects the cultural, political, social and psychological landscape of Kolkata (Calcutta), India during the 1950s and 1960s. This trilogy, which consists of the films "Interview," "Calcutta 71," and "Padatik," is considered one of the most important works of Indian cinema, and it is widely recognized as one of Sen's most important contributions to the world of film.

Interview is the first film in the *Calcutta Trilogy*, and it was released in 1970. The film explores the relationship between a wealthy businessman and a journalist, who is interviewing him for a magazine article. The film is a critique of the Indian society of the time, and it explores the divide between the rich and poor, as well as the corruption that is prevalent in the country. Sen portrays the disillusionment and alienation that many people in India felt during the time, and he highlights the social, political, and economic issues that were affecting the country. *Calcutta 71* is the

second film in the *Calcutta Trilogy*, and it was released in 1972. The film is a commentary on the Naxalite movement that was taking place in Kolkata during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Naxalite movement was a communist-inspired uprising that sought to challenge the Indian government and bring about social and economic change in the country. Through this film, Sen explores the complex relationships between the different factions of the Naxalite movement, and he highlights the human cost of political violence and social upheaval. *Padatik* is the third and final film in the *Calcutta Trilogy*, and it was released in 1973. The film is a meditation on urban life in Kolkata, and it explores the experiences of middle-class individuals who are living in the city. Through this film, Sen highlights the disconnection and isolation that people often feel in the midst of a bustling urban environment, and he reflects on the challenges of maintaining relationships and finding meaning in life. Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta Trilogy* is a powerful and thought-provoking series of films that explore the cultural, political, and social landscape of Kolkata. Mrinal Sen provides a critical commentary on the issues that were affecting India during this time, and he highlights the human cost of political violence and social upheaval. The *Calcutta Trilogy* remains one of the most important works of Indian cinema, and it continues to inspire new generations of filmmakers and audiences.

Interview is a graphical description of a young man who loses a job opportunity in a foreign company due to his failure to arrange a suit for the interview. Mrinal Sen used the suit as a metaphor in the film. Mrinal Sen pictures a disoriented society who is still in the hangover of colonialism and holds the culture and value of the former oppressor as a benchmark to judge its own people. Mrinal Sen brilliantly depicted the ironical situation where at the beginning of the film colonial statues are being taken down from the streets of Calcutta (a remarkable scene delineating decolonization), but, the irony is, the actual decolonization needs to occur, is from within. Ranjit's quest to get a suit for himself is an effort to be "as white as possible". Moreover, Ranjit's search for a perfect suit for the interview brings out his psychological inadequacy and his desire to climb the social ladder.

The film builds Ranjit's frustration to an extent that it culminates in Ranjit breaking the glass of a shop window and stripping a suit-wearing mannequin completely naked. This jarring climax scene in *Interview* breaks the fourth wall to address the structural barriers to success. An upset and enraged Ranjit Mallick talks back at the camera:

"If I had some extra money, some saved-up money, four or five spare suits, a wardrobe, then tell me, wouldn't I have secured that job?"

With the stripped mannequin, Mrinal Sen strips the false subtleties of our unequal social structures and our duality of existence in the newly created neocolonial society.

Mrinal Sen's film *Calcutta 71* was a landmark in Indian cinema, not only for its artistic merits but also for its social impact. The film was released in the early 1970s, a time of political and social upheaval in India. The film focuses on poverty, unemployment, and urban decay resonating with the Indian audience, and it remains relevant to this day. *Calcutta 71* focuses on the lives of the urban poor, who were struggling to survive in the overcrowded and decaying slums of Calcutta post-independence. The film's portrayal of the harsh realities of poverty and its effects on the people was a departure from the romanticized and idealized portrayal of the poor in previous Indian films. It was a stark reminder of the social and economic inequalities, class struggle and massive capitalism resulting in heteroglossia of existence in Indian society.

Calcutta 71 was instrumental in raising awareness about the plight of the urban poor in India. The film's impact on Indian society was not limited to poverty and social inequality. It was also seen as a critique of the Indian state's inability to address these issues effectively. The film's portrayal of corruption and political apathy was a reflection of the widespread discontent with the government's handling of social, and cultural economic inadequacy with the introduction of a newly evolved neocolonial culture.

Mrinal Sen's *Padatik* (1973) is a powerful example of a post-independence social film that

sheds light on the political, economic and cultural struggles of the working class in the newly formed neocolonial society. The film follows the journey of a young activist who moves to the city and becomes involved in the workers' movement. Through his experiences, Sen masterfully depicts the reality of life for the urban poor, including the harsh living conditions, the struggle for basic rights and dignity, and the fight against exploitation and indirect oppression. Sen's use of cinematography and editing techniques contributes greatly to the film's impact. For example, the use of long takes and close-ups allows the audience to become fully immersed in the character's world, while the editing style emphasizes the film's political and social themes. This is particularly evident in the film's climax, where the workers stage a strike and the police respond with violence. The film's use of montage techniques, such as cross-cutting between the workers and the police, creates a powerful contrast between the two groups, emphasizing the injustice of the workers' situation.

One of the film's most notable themes is the struggle for the basic rights and dignity of the aboriginal people. The workers in "Padatik" are depicted as struggling to survive in the face of extreme poverty and exploitation, and their fight for basic rights and dignity is portrayed as a central part of their struggle. The film's portrayal of the workers' living conditions, including cramped living spaces, lack of basic amenities, and exposure to pollution and disease is a commentary on the newly evolved social structure in a neocolonial setup. The film is about the struggle against exploitation and oppression and a factual description of people trying to be "white" in their quest of getting an honourable lifestyle. Through the portrayal of the workers' movement, Sen highlights the exploitation and oppression that the working class is subjected to and the ways in which they fight back against these injustices.

Since independence, neocolonialism, in context of India, can be seen in various forms such as the exploitation of resources, control of markets and trade, and the exertion of cultural and political influence. One example of neocolonialism in India is the exploitation of its natural resources by

developed countries. India is rich in minerals and other natural resources that are of great value to developed countries. Foreign corporations often take advantage of India's lack of regulations and weak enforcement mechanisms to extract these resources at low cost, leading to environmental degradation and the depletion of India's resources. Another form of neocolonialism in India is the control of markets and trade by developed countries. The Indian economy is heavily influenced by the developed world, especially the United States and Europe, through the policies of organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These policies often favor developed countries, leading to trade imbalances and the exploitation of Indian workers and resources.

But the exploits of neocolonialism is not restricted to the political and social space of India, rather it has affected the people psychologically and has fundamentally created inferiority amongst the people to such an extent that people have started rejecting their indigenous values and ethos in their quest for a polished lifestyle. Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta Trilogy* is a stark portrayal of a neocolonial world in which people are trying to replicate their superiors and in this quest of trying to be "as white as possible", they are compromising their culture and originality.

" Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism. For those who practise it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress." Kwame Nkrumah (1965: xi)

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