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The Human Spirit in Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India

Britt Crossman, Communication '08

In *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*, George A. Kennedy claims that all cultures engage in some form of persuasive discourse meant to transmit cultural knowledge and, thus, conserve social values and maintain social order, and that, often, these forms include myths, song, and religion, which are passed down through the generations to reproduce a unifying cultural sense of self. In as much as film can be considered a modern-day corollary to these forms of rhetoric, one could conclude that certain movies—advertently or inadvertently—perpetuate cultural identities and solidify national interests as well. One recent film in particular, though, presents an addendum to Kennedy's theory: the Bollywood hit film *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*. Through the juxtaposition of Indian and British cultures during the British colonization of India, the filmmakers suggest that one can transcend cultural construction.

The film is set in 1893 when India was under British rule, a relationship that brought many changes, many unfavorable to the indigenous population. Indians were treated as second-class citizens who were often paid less than the British workers for performing the same task and who were also made to work for the British building railways, roads and setting up telegraph lines, but were denied the privilege of using such services (*Nineteenth Century*). With the spread of British rule came also the spread of the English language and many of the native Indian languages were wiped out. A system of Subsidiary Alliance was established that divided the country into Princely States ruled by native Rajas who answered to England's monarch and, therefore, created a system of indirect British governance ("British Raj").

Lagaan tells the story of the small village of Champaner in Northern India and its struggle with the British over the lagaan, an annual land tax that is paid to the British consisting of a portion of the village crops. Despite a terrible drought, the British double the lagaan and the villagers have no choice but to go before Captain Russell, the British army captain in charge of Champaner, and plead with him to lift the lagaan for the season as the people may not even have enough crops to survive the year. Captain Russell proposes a deal to the villagers saying that if they can beat the British in a game of cricket then the lagaan will not be levied for the next three years, but if the British win, the villagers must pay triple the lagaan at the end of the season. With the aid of Captain Russell's sister, Elizabeth, and the leadership of a young man named Bhuvan, the villagers learn the game. In the end, after the British take a devastating lead in the tournament, Bhuvan and his team win by default when the British make a mistake.

The story of *Lagaan* highlights the issues of the caste system, male dominance, and cross-cultural supremacy. Although it may seem that the film conserves the traditional values held by colonial Britain and India, in actuality the film presents the aforementioned traditions to suggest that the human spirit is as strong as the transmission of cultural knowledge, specifically in its quest for equality regardless of class, gender, or race, as this essay will show.

One distinguished feature of traditional Indian society still practiced today, although not officially, is the caste system, a hierarchy in which each member of society is born into one of five levels: the Brahman (priests) at the highest level, followed by the Kshatriya (rulers, warriors, and landowners), the Vaishya (merchants), the Shudra (artisans and agriculturalists), and lastly the Harijan (untouchables) at the bottom of the hierarchy (Callahan). In *Lagaan*, there are portrayals of the caste system in Champaner, which appear to be evidence of rhetorical tactics that reproduce this hierarchy whereby the villagers are reminded of their social positions. However, the film ultimately challenges perpetuation of this social order. The first example of the caste system that we see is with the Raja. While the British controlled the land, the Raja acts as an intermediary between Captain Russell and the villagers; it is he to whom the residents of Champaner go when the lagaan is raised because he is higher up in the caste system and they are simple farmers near the bottom level. Despite their low position the men on the cricket team are still very prejudiced against those lower than them, more specifically Kachra, an untouchable with a deformed arm. During cricket practice, a stray ball lands at the feet of Kachra who has been observing the match from the sidelines. Upon discovering that Kachra has a good throwing arm, Bhuvan wants Kachra to join the cricket team as the final member, but the others all quit because Kachra's participation violated the caste system. It is at this point that Bhuvan steps forward to defend Kachra. He argues that it was ridiculous for them to act in such a manner, especially with the entire village's survival depending on the match, and if Kachra could help them to win then what right do they have to dismiss him. By standing up for Kachra and realizing that he is no different than any other player, despite his caste level, Bhuvan defies the social tradition of the discriminatory caste system. The film makers do not come right out and say that the caste system is wrong, but instead plant a seed of doubt in the viewers' mind to prompt them to question the morality of such a social value and in doing so challenge the boundaries Indian culture places on social mobility.

Throughout the movie, one witnesses repeated scenes of male dominance in both the local society and in the British settlement. The exhibition of such a tradition serves as a means of conservation of a tradition that says male dominance is acceptable and passes that social value on to the next generation who will do the same. However, Bhuvan resists perpetuating this tradition.

The first example of male dominance appears in Champaner where only the men confront the Raja about the increase in lagaan and go with him to appeal to the British; this is because India is, and has been, a patriarchal society in which men are in charge of the community and its well-being and the women's responsibility is to their husbands and families. Such gender positions are once again seen when the cricket team is formed only of men because it would be unacceptable to have a woman on the team; instead, any woman wishing to participate does so by providing the team members with meals and moral support. One must wonder if this tendency toward separating the men from the women stems from the same need to place one another into caste levels—if it comes from a need to show superiority over one another. It is almost as though being female is a caste level all its own in regards to the restrictions on what one can and cannot do. As for the British, male dominance is seen in Captain Russell's treatment of his sister Elizabeth.

Because he is the male in the relationship, he expects Elizabeth to obey his orders to stay away from the villagers. However, Elizabeth disrupts the social order by challenging male dominance when she ignores her brother's orders and continues to assist Bhuvan and his team in their training. By defying her brother, Elizabeth breaks through the cultural boundary concerning the suppression of women.

It is here that a pattern begins to emerge: the film makers, once again, address the issue of equality, this time between genders rather than class, but with the same intention of dispelling such prejudices. By establishing a pattern of male dominance throughout the film and then interjecting an event that directly challenges this pattern, the film makers call into question whether social rhetorical practices exist solely to conserve how a particular people think and act. Yet again, the film makers apply a method of subtle questioning; they do not say that male dominance is wrong, or a part of traditional Indian culture that should be changed; instead, they merely bring the issue to the audience's attention in a manner which says, "See, sometimes good things can happen when a woman does not allow herself to be controlled by men," and leave the audience to draw its own conclusions concerning the cultural tradition of male dominance.

Lastly, there is the issue of cross-cultural supremacy. Throughout the movie, there is a feeling of perceived British superiority; as previously mentioned, the British see themselves as higher beings than the Indians and treat them as second-class citizens. Repeatedly, there are examples of prejudice such as the treatment of Indians as servants and the overall manner in which the British talk to and about them. For example, the British refer to them as "darkies" and there is a particular scene in which Captain Russell whips an Indian servant and tells him, "You bloody slaves will remain crushed under our boots." The statement is an obvious instance of imperial rhetoric, by which the British control the Indians. Underestimation of the Indians' intelligence is the reason why Captain Russell proposes the dispute over the lagaan be settled on the cricket pitch: he doubts the villagers' ability to learn and master the game and beat him and his team.

However, Elizabeth, once again, defies the assumption of intercultural superiority. The film makers show Elizabeth in a favorable light as someone who is friendly, helpful, respectful, just and genuinely interested in the native culture of India. She realizes the unfairness of the deal offered by her brother to the villagers and offers to assist them in learning the game of cricket in order to rectify the situation. The effort she makes to learn the language and take part in the song, dance and religious ceremonies projects a feeling of appreciation of cultures other than her own; in contrast to the other British, especially her brother, Elizabeth is not of an ethnocentric mindset. In creating the character of Elizabeth, the film makers are able to show that one cannot judge an entire group of people by a select few. The preconceived British perception of the Indians is proven wrong, as are the Indian views of the British. By being accepting of the local culture and traditions, Elizabeth does not take advantage of her imperial position by trying to impose imperial identity upon the villagers. Once again, one can see the film's subtle push toward equality as the film makers show the good and bad on both sides of the battle; they show that despite religion, skin color, class, and culture, no man or woman is superior to any other.

The filmic text of *Lagaan* extends the notion that the aim of rhetoric is conservative, that rhetoric can serve the purpose of dispelling prejudices and creating equality among class, gender, and race and culture. Does the story of *Lagaan* suggest that rhetoric should be used in order to advance societies into a more modern standing? One must decide if it is more important that rhetoric maintain traditional social hierarchy or that tradition be abandoned so that all members of society have an equal voice, for it is not possible for the two to coexist. This then raises the question of who should decide which social values should be preserved and which should be altered or disregarded altogether. Or should alternatives simply be suggested, as they are in this film, and society as a whole left to make the decision of what they will adopt?

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