

HUMAN ZOO: THE HEGEMONIZATION OF 'GAZE'

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ABSTRACT: Most people of our generation is completely unaware of the existence of human zoos and the human exhibits who performed in them. This paper will delve deep in to the pathetic trajectory of their lives and how they became part of these 'freak shows', which once entertained millions of people over the world. This article will spot light on these mitigated and insignificant characters of human history, who were denied portrayal and life for the other half's betterment. Their negotiation of identities, their displacement, their marginalization, their generalization and their eventual corrosion in the history of time, will only be remembered as 'savage', 'uncivilized' and 'brutish'.

KEYWORDS: Human zoo, hegemony, gaze, colonization, capitalism, self-other, internal-external, cultural hegemony, human exhibits, savage.

I. INTRODUCTION

The human zoo was the modern era 'circus', where their antics or mere appearance were hilarious enough to make the provoked spectators 'gaze' in a sadistic or masochistic manner. These assortment of 'exotic' exhibitions were displayed in several disgraceful and ignominious "freak shows", which were a coherent part of world fairs, like, St. Louis World Fair (1904), and Bronx Fair (1914). They were deliberately positioned on stage to showcase their innate 'inferiority' and 'savagery' compared to the audience's high-breed 'superiority' and 'sophistication'.

St. Louis was hailed as "The Babylon of the New World" and as the 'epitome of civilization', where people from far-fetched lands gathered to celebrate the legacy of conquest, possession of human property and colonial arrogance. Babylon was known to progeny for its unbridled prosperity, enrichment and stagnant morality. This terrarium comprised of "native habitats" of Ainu people from Japan, Patagonians from the Andes and few members of the First Nations of North America. The 'noble savages' of the progressive world, often shunned their crisis as "black problem". The "white man's burden" of uplifting their living standard by providing them with fanciful costumes so that they perform on stage for the profit of the entrepreneurs, organizers, explorers and adventurers.

Though the term 'gaze' was a later coinage by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, but it was Michel Foucault, who first used the term in social and political dynamics in *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Jacques Lacan explained this gaze in psychological terms : "gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze."

II. REFLECTION OF 'HUMAN ZOO' THROUGH A WHITE MAN'S 'GAZE'

The inhabitants of Australia, Latin America, Central Africa and South Asia were categorised as 'exotic' and 'primitive', whose sole preoccupation was to entertain the modernised western world through their sinister appearance, vicious skin complexion, obnoxious eating habits and outrageous escapades. E. Ann Kaplan commented: "the imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject."

The Igrot village was considered the least civilized among all ethnic groups. They were displayed on stage with minimal clothing and they were asked to eat dogs, where the western audience gazed at them with disgust and ludicrousness. They were compelled to perform sacred rituals and hunting stunts before the masses.

After severe protestations by Filipinos in the Philippine, the show got banned in 1904, where a Congolese man, named Ota Benga, was ferried to New York to become a puppet of an exhibition at the Bronx Zoo. Immediately, he became the centre of the show, the card hang outside the exhibition read:

"Age, 23 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches.
Weight, 103 pound. Bought from the Kasai River,
Congo Free State,
South Central Africa,
By D. Samuel P. Vernes.
Exhibited each afternoon during September."

After Ota Benga, Saartjie Baartman was displayed as a vivacious and curvaceous exhibit, who was suffering from a terrible health ailment called 'Steatopygia'. Steatopygia is a health condition which aids in excessive formation of built up fat in the lower areas of the body, which primarily appears in women of African descent. Due to her large buttocks and inappropriate body structure, her body grabbed the attention of wealthy London customers at Piccadilly Circus. After her untimely death at the age of 26, her brain, skeleton and genitals were preserved in pickling juice and jars at 'Paris Museum of Man', until it was removed in 1974 for burial. Reverend James H. Gordon, superintendent of the Howard Coloured Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn, articulated his utter disavowal of these dehumanizing exhibits and said, "Our race, we think, is depressed enough without exhibiting one of us with the apes. We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls."

The gazers' fascination for the 'body' of the women performers, illustrate their innate consciousness of 'possession' and 'exploitation'. The dichotomy between "civilized versus savage" further aggravated the viewer's lecherous and libidinous eye movement, licentious and lewd remarks on their movements and salacious and lascivious hunger for gratification, speak volumes about the white barbarian's bestiality. Their penetrating and piercing gaze, dissect and analyse the body of the exhibits, judge their behaviour and culture in a generalised fashion and hence, concluded them as 'savage', 'primitive' and 'barbaric'.

The lone purpose of these exhibitions was to explicitly show, how these western societies invented a sense of the "other", in contrast to their overbearing and forthright "self". Edward Said, in his ground breaking and seminal work, *Orientalism*, overtly talked about the "white gaze" of repugnance and repulsion towards the dehumanised and colonised sub-humans. The "imperial gaze" further broadened the difference of superiority and dominance between the two, where the 'master-slave' dichotomy had intensified.

Snoep said that, “They were shows. Public entertainment. The villagers from Africa or India were acting out a role. Significantly there were barriers between the public and the performers, to reinforce the notion of separateness.” The organizers of *Inventing the savage* claimed that the “human zoos” were viewed by more than 1.4 billion people worldwide. More than 20 million people attended the 1904 World’s Fair, where the western world was frantic to see the ‘barbaric’, ‘uncouth’ and ‘savage’ people as described by explorers and adventurers. Through their tainted telescope, the white people were unable to perceive their degraded morality in their rekindled sense of racial superiority.

In this institutionalised and organized ‘hierarchy of violence’, where the progressive western torchbearers occupied the apex of the system and these sub-human indigenous people were tethered and conditioned according to the whims and whimsicalities of the modern world. Much like slavery, human zoo was the living hell, where they were denied minimum food and hygiene and their survival was itself a reward.

The history of English colonialism was least admirable of all. During the 16th century, Cardinal Hippolytus Medici had a large menagerie of exotic races of people and animals. Similarly, an Englishman, named William Dampier possessed a tattooed native, who was falsely branded as ‘Prince Giolo’ in order to attract the attention of people and to earn greater profits from false endorsements. Maximo and Bartola was the stage name of twin Salvadorian siblings, who suffered from cognitive inhibition and were exhibited in the human zoo of the 19th century.

In the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey vehemently condemned the “scopophilic gaze” of the audience from the seemingly dark and hideous auditorium. Adhering the line of Mulvey, the spectators of these inglorious human zoos unapologetically gazed at their bestial and brutish trait. This gaze is of pleasure and supremacy, they derive undeniable delight and strength from their pathetic plight.

The “male gaze” towards the caged inhabitants of exotic species, monopolise the one-sided narrative of dominance, segregation, power imbalance and eroticism. They were presented as almost nude with voluptuous breasts, curvaceous hips and luscious body proportions. The women exhibits were the caterers of male sexual gratification, where their physical postures were the epitome of satiation and pleasure. Contrarily, the women were denied the power and vehemence to subvert the very gaze, that they unboundedly received.

The human zoo was the receptacle of vengeance and contemptuous remarks, they were relegated from an inferior position to the level of ‘beasts’ and ‘ferocious’ creatures, even a slightest contact with them might taint a person’s reputation and social standing. Over generation, they were accustomed to judge themselves through the “mirrored eyes” of the polished and advanced buyers and spectators, who unrestrainedly enjoyed their primitive sluggishness. They were the bearers of ‘bread’ for the Europeans and simultaneously they were the recipients of severe beatings, starvation, unpaid labour, maltreatment and deprived medical concealment.

The human exhibits capacity to return both the pleasure and repulsion was null. Chicago scholar, Bernard Cohn once said : “the colonial project of control and command”, formed an edifice of information and knowledge, where struggle for power and domination was always on the other side of superiority and supremacy.

In this extraordinarily insufferable period of colonization, the ‘cultural identities’ and ethical values were blurred and merged into an overbearing and overshadowing misconception of ‘savage’. Their history was robbed, their legacy tarnished, their identity eroded, their culture suppressed and their language exterminated. They were on the verge of complete submission to the foreigners, who like ‘Messiah’ had saved

them from an impoverished existence and showed the glory of a bright day, where they were even more tormented in multifarious manner.

Surprisingly, human zoo was prevalent in India as well, until the Supreme Court, the apex body of law had banned it in 2013. As large as the city of Manhattan, the distant island of Sentineles tribe, was removed from all civilizations and who was declared the most dangerous tribe in the world. The touring companies used this Jarawa island as the most fascinating and exciting spot for tourism and they endorsed it overtly on their websites, by giving a glimpse of an exquisite assortment of this tribe, where *Holidify* declared the Jarawa as a “major attraction” and *Flywidus* offered the tourists to drive through the Jarawa reserve. One touring company stated that, “They are the wonders of the modern world, for they feed on raw pigs, fruits and vegetables. They don’t speak any language known to general public. Their pitch black skin and red eyes will leave you dazzled in case you happen to meet them”.

CONCLUSION

Antonio Gramsci coined the term ‘hegemony’ but its implication and manipulation is evident from the time of Herodotus and Xenophon. As per Marxist philosophy, ‘cultural hegemony’ is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class which manipulates the culture of that society – the beliefs and explanations, perspectives, values and mores, so that the commanding ruling force is accepted as the cultural norm of the society. Equivalently, the mammon worshipping capitalist society’s gaze at these tribes and consign them to a pedestal of ‘generalization’. To the ruling force, they were devoid of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘singularity’, their culture was loathed ubiquitously and their down cast eyes made the white people imagine themselves as the great ‘Redeemer’.

CITATIONS

- [1.] *Human Zoo : The Invention of Savage* by Lilian Thuram.
- [2.] *Spectacle ; The astounding Life of Ota Bengaby* Pamela Newkirk.
- [3.] The essay *Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey.