

Assimilation through Oppression in Rajamouli's *Rise! Roar! Revolt!*

Brylan Graber

1. Background

Director S.S. Rajamouli's film *RRR (Rise Roar Revolt)* (2022) is a fictional retelling of the stories of revolutionaries Alluri Sitarama Raju (Rama) and Komaram Bheem, set during Indian resistance movements in the 1920s. In the film, Rama is depicted as a British officer, concealing his intention to secure firearms and provide them to the Telugu people, while Bheem is an auto-mechanic who veils his identity as a revolutionary protector of the Gond tribespeople. Throughout the film, Rama's primary operative as a British officer is to apprehend the "hunter targeting the Governor,"¹ and in pursuit of that quest, he encounters Bheem. The two of them develop a friendship that Bheem characterizes as "more precious than my life."² However, the two are thrown into inevitable conflict when Rama realizes that Bheem is the "hunter" he is tasked to apprehend, and the two are pitted against each other in battle. Bheem is captured but is later freed by Rama, and the two revolt against the Governor to free their peoples.

2. Thesis

Throughout the film, Rama and Bheem are forced to conform their ethnic identities to British standards to pursue their revolutionary goals.

However, in doing so, they adopt aspects of the colonial culture they rebel against, even when they have no need to conceal their identities. To what extent does their forced adoption of British norms and practices change the way they treat their colonial oppressors, their own people, and themselves? I argue that, while Rama and Bheem's revolutionary goals never change, their assimilation into British culture complicates their sense of identity, leading to alienation from their community as they attempt to reconcile the differences between their native ethnicity and their adopted culture.

3. Identification of Oppression

Perhaps the most straightforward characterization of Rama and Bheem's complication with identity is their subjugation under British rule, which can easily be identified as oppression. Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" defines oppression as "some inhibition of [the] ability to develop and exercise... capacities and express... needs, thoughts, and feelings."³ To provide an example, Young defined cultural imperialism as a face of oppression, defining it as "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm."⁴ Rajamouli is not subtle in the expression of cultural imperialism throughout

1 *RRR (Rise Roar Revolt)*, directed by S.S. Rajamouli (DVV Entertainment, 2022), 0:27:02. <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=rrr&jbv=81476453>.

2 *RRR*, 1:21:20.

3 Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression" in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 40.

4 Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," p. 59.

the film, including a scene where Bheem is assumed, wrongly, to understand the pronunciation of his love interest's name⁵ and is condescended for his lack of traditionally Western-European dance skills.⁶ Violence, another of Young's faces of oppression is a reoccurring subject throughout the film as Indian peoples are shot, smashed, and tortured for doing little-to-no violent activity themselves.⁷

The question then is not whether forcible assimilation and oppression occurred but rather how it distorted Rama and Bheem's sense of identity. For Rama, his identification as a British Officer in this oppressive regime certainly changed the way he acted against his people, as he ended up bringing oppression through violence to his people, and for Bheem, he assimilated in a way he likely never would have if these oppressive structures were not in place. I will demonstrate this in the following chapters.

4. Identification of Ethnicity

For the first half of the film, Rajamouli conceals Rama's true intentions from the audience, portraying him as a stone-cold officer who will stop at nothing to rise to the rank of "Special Officer." In pursuit of this, Rama violently broke up a demonstration protest of the very people he vowed to protect⁸ and relentlessly lashed his best friend, Bheem, to the point of near death.⁹ While Rama never loses sight of his goal to secure firearms for his people, he laments this fact, writing to his wife:

I'm hurting the people whose freedom I'm fighting for. I have betrayed my closest friend. I

am nearing my goal, but am I losing my way?¹⁰

This invokes the question: does Rama's identity as a British Officer, even with his revolutionary goals, lead him to unjust violence against his own people due to a skewed identity under his colonial oppressors? While under different circumstances, David Cortez in "Latinxs in La Migra" finds a similar pattern in Latinxs electing to work in immigration law enforcement agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). While discourse of the topic has revolved around Latinxs entering immigration enforcement because of a lack of connection to their ethnic identities¹¹ or being "vendidos [sell-outs],"¹² Cortez argues that the matter should rather be boiled down to survival, asserting:

faced with dwindling economic circumstances and scant occupational opportunities, the decision to enter immigration work is, for Latinxs, purely instrumental, and at root, about little more than basic economic self-interest.¹³

The self-interest thesis can certainly be applied to portions of *RRR*, better explaining why most of the Governor's police force throughout the movie seemed to be Indian, including more than half of those tasked to handle the mass demonstration in the film.¹⁴ When applied to Rama, the self-interest piece partially holds, as the "Special Officer" position is needed to gain access to firearms for his people, but survival cannot fully explain Rama's actions, as once he is granted the title he has been seeking he risks himself to save Bheem, and when questioned on his decision he replies that he "will gladly die [to energize the people]."¹⁵ But Cortez's interview

5 *RRR*, 0:50:11.

6 *RRR*, 0:57:00.

7 Young, "Five Faces of Oppression." p. 68.

8 *RRR*, 0:09:30

9 *RRR*, 1:58:00.

10 *RRR*, 1:55:15.

11 David Cortez, "Latinxs in La Migra: Why They Join and Why It Matters," *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (June 25, 2020): 106591292093367, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920933674>, p. 689.

12 Cortez, "Latinxs in La Migra," p. 691.

13 Cortez, "Latinxs in La Migra," p. 691.

14 *RRR*, 0:08:19.

15 *RRR*, 2:09:44.

with an ICE-ERO agent, CJ, better characterizes why Ramas would pursue seemingly self-defeating actions:

If we, ourselves, are not . . . in ‘the henhouse,’ so to speak, then we’re screwed—we don’t even have anybody to look out for our rights... Otherwise . . . you’ve got no hope.¹⁶

When applied to Rama, this would mean that his justice lies not in being a *vendido* for a worthy cause, but rather in being “in the henhouse.” Not only can he use his position in order to bring his people firearms, but additionally to protect them from harsher enforcement. Agent CJ asserts that there is leeway in “the way we enforce them [laws]; when we show discretion, where we show discretion.”¹⁷

5. Identification of Self

During the film, Bheem always remains a revolutionary but simultaneously begins to adopt aspects of the British culture. Some of those aspects are necessary, such as Bheem’s occupation as an auto-mechanic, but Bheem takes it further than needed in order to rebel and save his sister. Bheem’s love interest throughout the movie is Jennifer, the Governor’s daughter: the very Governor from whom he is trying to rescue his sister. Throughout the film, he trades aspects of his identity to be with her; from letting Rama style his hair and wear British attire¹⁸ to asking Rama to teach him how to read and write in English.¹⁹ I argue that through this process, Bheem takes on a distinct identity; certainly not British, but not fully Gond either. I would compare his situation to that of Gloria Anzaldúa’s characterization of her *mestiza* identity. In her piece, “La conciencia de la mestiza,” she characterizes her mixed identity like this:

16 Cortez, “Latinxs in La Migra,” p. 699.

17 Cortez, “Latinxs in La Migra,” p. 699.

18 RRR, 0:54:30.

19 RRR, 2:55:31.

20 Gloria Anzaldúa, “La conciencia de la mestiza” in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p. 81.

21 RRR, 00:58:00.

Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.²⁰

While Bheem’s identity does not perfectly weave with this narrative—after all, he is presumably solely descended from the Gond tribespeople—he does seem to end with a dual consciousness of sorts. While he consistently connects with his Gond roots, he, in turn, willingly adapts to particular aspects of British culture. This is particularly shown through his attendance at the British formal party Jennifer invites him to, and his subsequent turn to express himself with the “Naatu” style of dance.²¹ Through his assertion of his Indian identity at a British gathering, he “kneads” the two and produces a unique set of circumstances, one that could be described as an Indo-British consciousness.

6. Summary

Rama and Bheem’s assimilation into British culture complicates their sense of identity, alienating them from their communities through their subjugation to colonial oppression, which in turn leads to Rama’s required violence against his own people and Bheem’s mixed Indo-British consciousness by the end of the film. Assimilation, as a means to an end, led to a drastic change in how they viewed themselves, even if they never lost the cause they were fighting for.

Bibliography

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "La conciencia de la mestiza" in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Bunniefuu. "RRR (2022)." *Foreverdreaming.org*. Transcripts - Forever Dreaming, November 14, 2023. <https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?t=131698>.
- Cortez, David. "Latinxs in La Migra: Why They Join and Why It Matters." *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (June 25, 2020): 106591292093367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920933674>.
- Prasad, Vijayendra, S.S. Rajamouli, and Sai Madhav Burra. "RRR (Rise Roar Revolt)." *IMDb*, March 25, 2022. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8178634/>.
- Rajamouli, S.S., director. *RRR (Rise Roar Revolt)*. DVV Entertainment, 2022. 3 hrs., 7 min. <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=rrr&jbv=81476453>
- Wikipedia Contributors. "Alluri Sitarama Raju." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, September 18, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alluri_Sitarama_Raju?oldformat=true.
- . "Komaram Bheem." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, September 3, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Komaram_Bheem?oldformat=true.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 1990.