

MUSK VS NOLAN: Artistic Liberty and its Recoil



CONSIDERING THAT **SPACE**X billionaire Elon Musk is preparing for inter-planetary space treks, it isn't surprising that he should have watched Christopher Nolan's *Odyssey* based on the epic voyage across land and sea of Homer's legendary Greek hero Odysseus. The film has been a box office hit across continents. Despite the film's commercial success, critics — including, and especially Elon Musk, have expressed dissatisfaction over various aspects of the film. These have implications for how these subjects will be dealt with in the future.

What is exceptional is that Musk should have accused the celebrated director with having “lost his integrity” because of liberties taken with the story's literary fidelity. He has further alleged that Nolan has cast African origin Lupita Nyong'o as Helen of Troy because he wants to cater to Hollywood identity politics and “he wants the awards.” These barbs are indeed radical. How rational are Musk's remarks? Musk has come out in the open to defend himself by saying that his partner is half-Indian and that one of his sons is named after a famous Indian scientist and that for those reasons he is not racist. Is the opposition justified in roasting him?

Nolan's Direction is Troubling

Nolan's direction is troubling, not least because his improvisations in this film are often rather contrived. For instance, the use of colloquial words like “Mom” and “Dad” to address royal parents in an ancient setting, and other profanities like the “F” word in conversations is jarring. This derogation does not quite pass off as earthy modernisation but as puerile tinkering with the ethos of a text that is two thousand years old and therefore demanding of higher respect. His Odysseus is melancholic and tired, introspective and haggard at times, quite unlike an archetypal classic hero who would be slick, bold and almost super-human.

The interlude of the Sirens, the captivating creatures whose beauty and song lures sailors to wreck their ships on the rocks has Odysseus tied to the mast, without wax in his ears unlike the rest of his crew, but neither are the Sirens visible, nor is their ser-

enade enticing or hypnotic. The locales are bleak and weather-beaten, hardly full of divine splendour and beauty.

Issue with Helen of Troy

The issue is with his Helen of Troy. This is an iconic character that has been the subject of art by famous western masters across the ages. Paintings such as *The Love of Paris* and *Helen* by Jacques-Louis David (1788), *Helen of Troy* by Evelyn De Morgan (1898), *Helen on the Walls of Troy* by Gustave Moreau (1880) and films starring Brigitte Bardot, Sienna Guillory and Diane Kruger as Helen, all depict her with an extremely fair, ivory or pale white complexion.

That's an image that has stuck and has never been disputed over millennia. No doubt there is merit in attempting to undo that stereotype. Somebody had to pick up the gauntlet.

Nolan's Nyong'o, as Helen of Troy, truly stands out. Startlingly, though. Not because she is black. Nor, because she appears, as some have grotesquely asserted, unattractive. It is because Nolan portrays her as wooden, without words to speak — words that would complement



Photograph by Image Press Agency

What is exceptional is that Musk should have accused the celebrated director with having “lost his integrity” because of liberties taken with the story’s literary fidelity. He has further alleged that Nolan has cast African origin Lupita Nyong’o as Helen of Troy because he wants to cater to Hollywood identity politics and “he wants the awards.” These barbs are indeed radical



her intrinsic beauty, words that would lend to her the imperious aura of a face that could launch a thousand ships. He never quite lets her be Helen. It’s also not whether a black woman can or cannot be the most beautiful in the world. It is that Nolan himself seems only half to believe his own decision. A bold choice, made and then flinched away from, curdles into a gesture aimed at critical applause rather than a conviction argued through the drama.

Contemporaneous epic literature has negated the premise that dark skin means lesser beauty. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Rama is *megha-shyama*, dark as a rain-bearing cloud, and the darkness is not a flaw to be apologised for but the very signature of the protagonist. In Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* the word Krishna literally means the dark one; the incomparable Draupadi is born Krishnaa. Across these stories, *shyama* — dusky, deep and dark — is the aesthetic summit, the mark of majesty and desire. In fact, both Ramanand Sagar and B. R. Chopra as directors who won colossal applause for their television productions, took liberties with the complexions of Rama and Krishna by choosing Arun Govil and Nitish Bharadwaj to play those roles and depicting them with their natural fair complexion. That Indians across the country were mesmerised by these heroes does not make them racist. It was essentially because the roles these actors were cast in were so scrupulously central to the narrative that their detailed performances fully justified this stylisation.

Nolan Then Invents a Detail Homer Never Wrote

Nyong’o’s Helen, on the other hand, occupies only a few moments of a three-hour film, much of it spent standing quietly as the trophy her husband Menelaus has recovered. Nolan then invents a detail Homer never wrote: a large scar running down the right side of her face. This is never explained. In fact, her husband Menelaus jeers, quipping that hers is the face that launched, not a thousand ships, but — “maybe five hundred now”. The most beautiful woman in the living world is briefly introduced and then left to be mocked. A director who wanted to argue for this Helen would have given her the room to make the argument herself and fully essay her role in and around the Trojan

Nyong'o's Helen, on the other hand, occupies only a few moments of a three-hour film, much of it spent standing quietly as the trophy her husband Menelaus has recovered. Nolan then invents a detail Homer never wrote: a large scar running down the right side of her face. This is never explained. In fact, her husband Menelaus jeers, quipping that hers is the face that launched, not a thousand ships, but — “maybe five hundred now”. The most beautiful woman in the living world is briefly introduced and then left to be mocked

AI Created Illustration



war — seductress, queen or daughter of Zeus. Nolan instead gives her a deep scar and a deadpan presence.

To be fair to Nolan, Nyong'o also plays Helen's sister Clytemnestra, and it is there, in the dual role, that she comes partly alive. That is precisely the point that exposes him. Where she is allowed to act rather than to symbolise, the casting instantly justifies itself. Which only sharpens the question: if Nolan knew how to let this actress do the work, why did he not trust his own Helen to do any? Colour-conscious casting should have been more than a headcount or another tick of a box.

The Line Between Reinterpretation and Tokenism

David Lowery's *The Green Knight*, for instance, portrays Dev Patel as the medieval, Arthurian Gawain and lets him carry a wholly convincing reinterpretation on his own shoulders. The choice is argued and integrated. You could not remove it without the work collapsing. Nolan's Helen, by contrast, could be recast tomorrow and you would barely notice the absence. That is the line between reinterpretation and tokenism — not the colour of the actor, but whether the film has the nerve to build something definitive.

Whoopi Goldberg is simply right that Nyong'o, an Academy Award winner, is among the most luminous performers of her generation and it is absurd to police the casting. No one sensible demands documentary accuracy from the film — because there cannot be one, especially when it is retelling a myth. But extent of liberty is the point. If you are free to reimagine Helen, you should be obliged to make the reimagining meaningful, not frivolous. A liberty seized and then abandoned is not daring; it is cosmetic. Nolan has earned, across a career, the presumption that his choices are deliberate. That is exactly why the shyness here confuses and disappoints.

The only charge that Musk perhaps got wrong is the assertion that the Academy's



inclusion standards somehow forced this casting. Eligibility rules do not have anything to do with who is cast in which role. The colour of an actor's skin, or their looks cannot be the consideration as the history of awards reveals. Nyong'o, Halle Berry and Will Smith have won Oscars. Nicole Kidman won it for playing Virginia Woolf in the *Hours* wearing a prosthetic nose and Frances McDormand for *Three Billboards* for her role as a tormented, grieving middle-class mother.

So too have many others — winning for their performance and not for their glamorous appearance. And therein lies the irony that should trouble the film's admirers more than its critics. The person most adversely affected by the whole affair is the actress herself. Nyong'o's singular strength is her interiority — the long, conversational, morally intricate role in which a face slowly blossoms into a captivating mind. Casting her as the archetype of beauty and then reducing her to a wounded cameo, clearly diminishes her. Nolan's casting of a black Helen could have emerged as the boldest and most memorable masterstroke in modern cinema and not just an attempt to pander to Hollywood's woke culture. If only he had dared to let his Helen speak, seduce, argue, and grieve at length, and then dared us to look away.

Instead, he settled for the gesture, the caricature.

Is Musk's pointing out Nolan's shortcomings being ignoble? This is perhaps an assertion not so much against Nolan as in demanding tribute to Homer and his original work. Is being critical of the casting of Lupita Nyong'o in a cameo role tilting towards being racial? Musk has in the past been associated with racial controversies in his companies, including facing corporate lawsuits about work related discrimination. In this case, however, his critique appears truthful, mainly because justice has not been done to this great actress. For all these reasons, Musk's boast and promise of a remake of *Odyssey* that will be rendered more scrupulously by his own AI platform Grok Imagine — feels apt and hugely exciting. **BW**

Is Musk's pointing out Nolan's shortcomings being ignoble? This is perhaps an assertion not so much against Nolan as in demanding tribute to Homer and his original work. Is being critical of the casting of Lupita Nyong'o in a cameo role tilting towards being racial?

The author is a former Secretary in the Government of India