

# The Politics of “Whiteness” in Films

Film Review

## Dunkirk

### Why the Lack of [Southeast Asian] and African Faces in *Dunkirk* Matters

By Sunny Singh (2017)

SOURCE: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/01/indian-african-dunkirk-history-whitewash-attitudes>

The blockbuster purports to be a historical portrayal, but in fact it's a whitewash. And these decisions help corrode societal attitudes

What a surprise that [Nigel Farage has endorsed](#) the new fantasy-disguised-as-historical war film, *Dunkirk*. [Christopher Nolan's movie](#) is an inadvertently timely, thinly veiled Brexiteer fantasy in which plucky Britons heroically retreat from the dangerous shores of Europe. Most importantly, it pushes the narrative that it was Britain as it exists today – and not the one with a global empire – that stood alone against the “European peril”.

To do so, it erases the [Royal Indian Army Services Corp companies](#), which were not only on the beach, but tasked with transporting supplies over terrain that was inaccessible for the British Expeditionary Force's motorised transport companies. It also ignores the fact that by 1938, lascars – mostly from South Asia and East Africa – counted for [one of four crewmen on British merchant vessels](#), and thus participated in large numbers in the evacuation.

But Nolan's erasures are not limited to the British. The French army deployed at Dunkirk included soldiers from [Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and other colonies](#), and in substantial numbers. Some non-white faces are visible in one crowd scene, but that's



it. The film forgets the [racialised pecking order](#) that determined life and death for both British and French colonial troops at Dunkirk and after it.

This is important, firstly, because it is a matter of factual accuracy in what purports to be an historical portrayal – and also because it was the colonial troops who were crucial in averting [absolute catastrophe](#) for the allies. It is also important because, more than history books and school lessons, popular culture shapes and informs our imagination not only of the past, but of our present and future.



Christopher Nolan

The stories that we share among ourselves give us the vision of our individual and collective identities. When those stories consistently – and in a big budget, well-researched production like [Dunkirk](#), one must assume, purposely – erase the presence of those who are still considered “other” and less-than-equal, these

narratives also decide who is seen as “us” as opposed to “them”. Does this removal of those deemed “foreign” and “other” from narratives of the past express a discomfort with the same people in the present? More chillingly, does it also contain a wish to excise the same people from a utopian, national future?

A vast, all-white production such as Nolan's *Dunkirk* is not an accident. Such a big budget film is a product of many hundreds of small and large decisions in casting, production, directing and editing. Perhaps Nolan chose to follow the example of the original allies in the second world war who staged a [white-only liberation](#) of Paris even though 65% of the Free French Army troops were from West Africa. Perhaps such a circumscribed, fact-free imagination is a product of rewriting British history over the past decades, not in the least by deliberate policies including [Operation Legacy](#)? Knowingly or not, Nolan walks in the footsteps of both film directors and politicians who have chosen to whitewash the past.

## Instructor's Note

Folks, a reminder: at the time the Second World War commenced (in Asia in 1937, and in Europe in 1939), the United Kingdom (Britain) and France controlled a vast colonial empire comprising most of Africa and large parts of Asia—including India. They did not hesitate, as in the First World War, to recruit soldiers from their colonies to fight for them in the two world wars. That is how, Africans, Arabs, Chinese, Southeast Asians, etc. came to be involved in these wars as combatants. Later, after the United States entered the wars (World War I, in 1917; and World War II, in 1941), obviously, recruits from all peoples of color living in United States (and Canada too) also became combatants in the wars in Europe and Asia.

But why is it so important for Nolan, and for many others, that the film expunge all non-white presence on the beach and the ships? Why is it psychologically necessary that the heroic British troops be rescued only by white sailors? What would change if brave men fighting at Dunkirk wore turbans instead of helmets? What would alter if some of the soldiers offered namaaz on the sands before rising to face the advancing enemy for that one last time?



*Film still from "Dunkirk"*

Why is it so important that the covering fire be provided by white French troops rather than North African and Middle Eastern ones? Those non-white faces I mentioned earlier – they were French troops scrabbling to board British boats to escape. The echoes of modern politics are easy to see in the British-first policy of the initial retreat that left French troops at the mercy of the Nazis. In reality, non-white troops were at the back of the queue for evacuation, and far more likely to be caught and murdered by Nazi soldiers than their white colleagues who were able to [blend into the crowd](#).



*Film still from "Dunkirk"*

Could we still see our neighbours as less than human if we also saw them fight shoulder-to-shoulder with "our boys" in the "good" war? Would we call those fleeing war ["cockroaches"](#) and demand gunboats to stop them from reaching our white cliffs if we

knew they had died for the freedoms we hold so dear? More importantly, would anti-immigration sentiment be so easy to weaponise, even by the left – in the [past](#) and the [present](#) – if the decent,



Film still from "Dunkirk"

hardworking Britons knew and recognised how much of their lives, safety and prosperity are results of non-British sacrifices? In a [deeply divided, fearful Britain](#), Nolan's directorial choices succeed as a Brexiteer costume fantasy, but they fail to tell the story of Operation Dynamo, the war, and Britain. More importantly, they fail us all, as people and a nation.

All storytellers – and novelists, poets, journalists, and filmmakers are, ultimately, just that – know the power we hold. Stories can dehumanize, demonize and erase. Such stories are essential to pave the way for physical and material violence against those we learn to hate. But stories are also the only means of humanizing those deemed inhuman; to create pity, compassion, sympathy, even love for those who are strange and strangers. Stories decide the difference between life and death. And that is why Dunkirk – and indeed any story – is never just a story.

+++++

This reading was processed by the instructor for this class; therefore,  
some links/images/comments are not in the original.

© All rights reserved by their respective copyright owners.