

***Bride & Prejudice* and the (Post-)National Cinema Debate**

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The primary location of Gurinder Chadha's film *Bride & Prejudice* (2004), a Bollywood-influenced adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, is 21st-century rural Amritsar in north-western India. In this reworking of Jane Austen's text, the Bennet family become the Bakshis, the main cast members are Indian, the action moves between India, London, and Los Angeles, and the characters discuss post-imperialism and globalisation. In the filmmaker's words, despite these updates, *Pride and Prejudice*'s "themes have all been brought out, but with an Indian twist" (Chadha in Gritten).

Thus, as in the novel, the Bakshis reside in a large country house beyond their means and the mother believes that the only road to financial survival is to scan the internet for suitable husbands for her four unmarried daughters. The character of Elizabeth Bennet becomes the headstrong Lalita Bakshi, while Darcy is an Oxford-educated wealthy heir to an American hotel chain, and the two meet while he is visiting India for a friend's wedding. At first, Lalita is appalled by Darcy's arrogant and condescending attitude toward India, which he finds plain and provincial, and the Indians, who he deems responsible for holding India back. The arranged marriage system that she regards as a "global dating service" he sees as "backward", and Punjabi dance styles are characterised by him as "screwing a light bulb with one hand, and patting a dog with the other" (Sandhu). Lalita is annoyed that snobs such as Darcy assault her country in what she considers to be a new form of imperialism. Indeed, she believes him to be a throwback to British colonialism since he is considering buying a beach resort in Goa. "I don't want you turning India into a theme park," she tells him, "I thought we'd got rid of people like you". The two are set on a path for love, and spend the rest of the film revising their opinions of each other.

From the outset, the film's edge lies in its inclusion of Indian culture into a British canonical text, not only in the Bollywood-styled musical interludes

but also in raising issues such as the economics of 21st-century cultural tourism resulting in the tourist-driven “India without all the Indians”, in Lalita’s words. Nonetheless, in the context of this paper, I intend to consider not *Bride & Prejudice* thematically — and, in this respect, issues of mobility and location generally associated with diasporic filmmaking are peripheral to my investigation—,¹ but the *debate* around the film to focus on the manner in which critical discourses intersect to classify it as a national and/or diasporic cultural product.

Speaking, as I propose to do here, of a film that is defined by its filmmaker as British but by critics as South Asian diasporic entails a brief consideration of the most recent debates about identity, community, belonging, and nation in cinema studies. In the essay “The Instability of the National” (2000), Andrew Higson suggests that we need to rethink the boundaries of British cinema from a transnational perspective. Re-working the key metaphors of travel and mobility, liminality and the diasporic, marginality and the hybrid, the critic calls into question the understanding of British film culture as a national cinema. As he himself admits, expressing the concerns many had already articulated with his concept of a British national cinema, he “was perhaps at times rather too ready to find British films presenting an image of a coherent, unified, consensual nation” (35). In fact, one should take into account that in recent decades “new types of film-making have embraced multiculturalism, transnationalism and devolution” thus making up for “a powerful critique of traditional ideas of Britishness and consensual images of the nation” (35).

Underscoring the constitutional fuzziness of national cinemas (O’Regan 139), the critic puts forward a postnational model for British cinema, able to accommodate the complexities of the permeability of borders and of the fluidity of identification, and to integrate ambivalent representations of national identities in postwar Britain such as featured in filmic narratives as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Trainspotting*. Following this contention, *Bride & Prejudice* can also offer us insight into what shape a postnational cinema might take. The author elaborates further on this move from “a British cinema of consensus to one of heterogeneity and dissent”:

Some of the identities and positions explored in films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Bhaji on the Beach* are surely as much either local or transnational as they are national. Given the transient and fleeting nature of many of the allegiances established in these films it seems problematic to invoke the idea of a singular, indisputable British nation, however complex and devolved — hence my preference for the idea of a post-national cinema. (40)

¹ Also secondary to this paper is the critical analysis of existing terminology in the field of diasporic cinemas (e.g. “migrant”, “diasporic”, “accented”, “minor”, “transcultural”, and “transnational”).

As acknowledged by Higson, John Hill disagrees with the discarding of the label “national cinema”. Hill recognises that “while the British cinema may no longer assert the myths of ‘nation’ with its earlier confidence, it may nonetheless be a cinema which is more fully representative of national complexities than ever before” (212). This argument echoes Homi Bhabha’s formulation of the Janus-faced boundary of national culture, which is “always a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating new sites of meaning, and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation” (4).

While Higson’s opinion is persuasive, Hill’s line of reasoning is more relevant for my purposes because, on the one hand, it highlights cinema as one of the most dynamic sites of cultural negotiation and, on the other hand, it strengthens the impact British Asian filmmaking has had on opening up the definition of national cinema. Indeed, following the commercial success and critical acclaim of films by Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, Hanif Kureishi, and Gurinder Chadha, the cinema of the Indian diaspora has become the object of close attention and has had the potential to capture British mainstream audiences. *Bride & Prejudice* is now set to capitalise on this growing influence in general, and on the crossover appeal of the exotic that is associated with Bollywood in particular.

At this point, I would like to address the film’s positioning at the nexus of the national and the transnational, and I will try to elucidate this issue by focusing on Jigna Desai’s project — *Beyond Bollywood* — published in 2004 and devoted to films in English from and about the “Brown Atlantic” (South Asian diasporas in the United States, Canada, and Britain). Within a transnational comparative framework, this critical project interrogates and reformulates the dominant emphasis on the nation in cinema studies by positioning South Asian diasporic filmmaking as an interstitial cinema which negotiates and trafficks between the two largest global cinemas — those of Hollywood and Bollywood — as well as individual national cinemas (ix).

According to Desai, current South Asian diasporic films are most frequently integrated into the canons of national cinemas through the logic of cultural hybridity (36). This signals a change when compared with South Asian British films of the eighties which were “neither easily incorporated into the national cinema as the films openly challenged national narratives and identification processes nor were able to enter the film industry without intervention from social movements” (54). As the critic puts it, “the shift from the eighties to the contemporary moment is the move away from an emphasis on multiculturalism to one primarily on profit” (65). In fact, since the nineties, the British film industry, powerless to compete with Hollywood, has found itself ambivalently recognising the role that British Asian filmmaking has played as a potential site for profit and in the promotion of its international image (39).

In this context, screenwriter-filmmaker Gurinder Chadha was the first British Asian woman to achieve access to mainstream media production in the eighties through state-supported funding, and was in the vanguard popularising “Asian Kool”. *Bride & Prejudice*, her latest work, is, in fact, part of a body of “Asian Kool” films and TV series — including *East is East*, the BBC’s satirical series *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No 42*, as well as Chadha’s famed *Bend it Like Beckham* — which have managed to carve out an increasingly prominent niche in the cultural industries in the UK. While this is an encouraging trend, the visibility of British Asian representation in the public sphere depends on the political economy of these industries. Following Desai’s theorisation, this hypervisibility has been integrated into the mainstream through the rhetoric of cultural hybridity, since late capitalist diversification supports “plurality in constructing and penetrating its differentiated target markets” (66).

Nevertheless, the interstitiality of British Asian films prevents assimilation and full co-optation of dominant ideologies; thus, “[a]lthough many of these films are read as Hollywood, British, or even Bollywood films, their disjunctures, heterogeneity, and hybridity belie this attempt to define them by their relation to these dominant cinemas” (Desai 36). Indeed, *Bride & Prejudice* is interstitial because it is “created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. Consequently, [it is] simultaneously local and global, and [it] resonate[s] against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that [it] benefit[s] from them” (Naficy 4).

It is against this critical backdrop that I position Chadha’s film. *Bride & Prejudice* provides a unique overview of the debate on (post-)national British cinema, as a cultural practice that challenges monolithic understandings of nationhood, and instead gestures to a transnational ethos. Indeed, it stands as an “attempt to make the Bollywood experience accessible to Western audiences” (Adams), while at the same time it addresses itself to a strand of British cinema heritage, having been filmed at Ealing Studios, at the centre of the national film industry for more than a century. Chadha herself underscores this “palimpsestual simultaneity between the national and the transnational” (Banerjee 449) by defining the film as “a combination of Bollywood and Hollywood, all tied up with a very British overall sensibility” (Driscoll 13). In other words, what emerges at this juncture is the argument that this film serves as an interesting entry point for addressing broader debates in the study of (post-)national cinema since it represents, simultaneously, an important hybrid perspective within British cinema as well as a more global viewpoint taking in the phenomena of transnationalism and diaspora.

As a cultural product bearing out the increasing presence of the South Asian diaspora on the map of mainstream British culture, *Bride & Prejudice* can be seen as an ambivalent text, central to British Asian filmmaking whilst being re-appropriated into the multicultural heritage industry. As other “Asian Kool” films, it has been consumed mainly by a mainstream British and a

British Asian elite audiences². After all, exotica has always been a marketable commodity in the West, and this film apparently illustrates Desai's contention that "visibility can become a way to spice up culture without a compensatory interrogation or shift of values and epistemologies" (62). Moreover, Chadha participated in the London-based workshops and collectives in the eighties, benefiting from state funding of minority film and TV productions, so her films are positioned within and work inside the mainstream.

Nonetheless, it is my contention that the aesthetics and content of the film, on the one hand, and its characterisation by Chadha, on the other hand, reflect both the interstitiality associated to South Asian diasporic filmmaking, and the resultant negotiations of the institutionalisation into British cinema. On the one hand, it is a hybrid film, following Laura Marks's concept, and a case in point of diasporan aesthetics (Kaplan) because it blends different film styles together, using a range of techniques and perspectives which merge Indian cultural influences with western conventions; in addition, it is a hybrid film as well on the face of its articulation of diasporic cultural identity as a legacy of a colonial past. On the other hand, underscoring the complexity implicated in the notion of British cinema, Chadha wants her films to be representative of the "new" national cinema, and *Bride & Prejudice* is no exception: "What I'm trying to say is that Britain isn't one thing or another. It isn't just *Howard's End* or *My Beautiful Launderette*. There are endless possibilities about what it can — and is — already" (Chadha in *Sight and Sound*, 1994, quoted in Street 107). To be sure, in an interview given in 2000 she had already stated that her first feature film — *Bhaji on the Beach* —, which preceded *Bride & Prejudice* by a decade and set up the tone for the following work, was about "opening up what we mean about British cinema" since it was "a very British film, made in a very British way, with Indians" (Chhabra).³

The dominant reception of *Bride & Prejudice* indicates an inability to locate it as part of the British national cinema. As illustrated by Desai's

² Pnina Werbner writes that the "overt message" of "the new wave of British South Asian novels (...) enables these works to reach out successfully to mainstream audiences and to a small elite of British South Asian intellectuals" (Werbner 901). What she notes seems to apply as well to the screen as to literature: "[t]he great danger of over-abstract interpretations of diasporic works is (...) one of ignoring the reality that, until recently, most high cultural works by South Asian intellectuals have been ultimately financed and consumed mainly by a mainstream English and a small secular South Asian elite audience" (Werbner 903). Karen D'Souza and Tasleem Shakur go even further: "How far can these comic cultural portrayals [such as *Goodness Gracious Me*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, and *Bend It Like Beckham*] which seem constructed to the sensibility of mainstream British audiences offer a social critique, or are they merely a pragmatic strategy? Why are those films hugely popular with Western audiences but not necessarily with the British South Asian community?" (D'Souza and Shakur 90).

³ E. Anna Claydon addresses *Bhaji on the Beach* as "representative of the new British cinema: the British cinema which has moved beyond, but not necessarily past, a concept of a homogeneous, British, English culture in which all other cultures are Othered by society and (...) towards a multiculturalism with which dominant white English culture is not yet at ease" (Claydon 149-150).

placement of Chadha's works within South Asian diasporic film production, most responses to the film are characterised by a puzzling consensus on its "Indianness" — underscoring notions of translation, masala, and fusion — even if the filmmaker defines it (and herself) as British. Then, are we to see Chadha as a British filmmaker, or are we to consider her, as Gayatri Gopinath has done just last year, as part of "a new crop of Indian diasporic feminist filmmakers" who "are in no small part responsible for this translation of Bollywood into Hollywood, in that they act as modern-day tour guides that in effect 'modernize' Bollywood form and content for non—South Asian audiences" (162)? The othering of the film by cultural critics seems to me highly problematic. What is at issue here are the ways in which both levels — the national and the transnational — interact, and *Bride & Prejudice* must be read in terms of a multiple discursive participation.

In an attempt to clarify this issue, for the remainder of this paper I will trace through Chadha's description of herself as cultural producer and of her work in the media. When asked in 2003 by an interviewer on how it felt to be the only Indian woman filmmaker in the British film industry, she stated her case rather directly: "I consider myself more to be a British filmmaker and part and parcel of the rest of the British film industry" (Chhibber). Two years later, she asserted: "It's so great for me to have turned things around by doing well as a British filmmaker. There's a lot to celebrate" (Arnold). During the course of the interview, Chadha clarified what she understood by the experience of the Indian diaspora she tried to translate into cinematic terms with *Bride & Prejudice*: "I don't make Eurocentric or Indo-centric films (...) If anything, I'm diaspora-centric. (...) *Bride & Prejudice* is my way of appealing to that fact." On a different occasion, she defined the film thus: "It is a British film made by British finance, obviously because I am British. (...) I have been in England all my life. My links with India were through Hindi movies in the local theatres. I see myself as British-Punjabi. It works for me. (...) I never see myself as an outsider in the West."⁴ During the course of other talks, she made things even more clear about the film's origins: "Let us remember, *Bride & Prejudice* (....) was financed by Pathe in Europe, and American rights were pre-sold to Miramax. It doesn't have Indian money in it" (Arnold); "I had a different audience now with *Bend It Like Beckham*, a global audience and so I decided I would make a Bollywood-style British movie that would introduce the Indian film language to a global audience and open up, I hope, Indian films to audiences who were not familiar with them."⁵

I would like to point out that adapting *Pride and Prejudice*, changing just one letter of its title and transplanting it to contemporary India, takes on a decidedly different meaning when the filmmaker in question is part of an

⁴ http://www.bollywoodmantra.com/613_bride-and-prejudice-is-not-a-k3g.html.

⁵ <http://www.ealingtimes.co.uk/search/display.var.534220.0.0.php>.

incursion of cultural producers from the periphery into the tradition of British literary canonicity. In its postmodern ironic style, *Bride & Prejudice* can be regarded as a rewriting of nostalgic images of a romantic and pastoral England usually associated with previous Austen's adaptations to cinema and television. As Chadha remarked in interviews, she "quite like[s] the mischievousness of taking one of Britain's great traditions and Indianising it"⁶; in her words, she "decided that, like David Beckham, Jane Austen was another delicious English icon ripe for subversion" (Young). To her, "[t]here's a sort of audaciousness about taking the most British things — football and Jane Austen — and making them Indian. It feels very cheeky taking a great English literary classic and turning it into a Bollywood-style film" (Kasriel).

Against the backdrop of the booming mainstream success of the Bollywood film industry and of the hypervisibility of British Asian cultural production⁷, the thorny questions I have tried to address are the following: does *Bride & Prejudice* have the power to heighten reflexivity in a world where cultural difference is celebrated and consumed like other market commodities? How are we to understand the film, especially at a time when "hybridity, diaspora, and postcoloniality are now fashionable and even marketable terms" (Hutnyk 118)? Although in my mind these queries still beg further answering, it seems, to reach the conclusion of this paper, that Chadha has managed to balance a contradictory and complex positioning as a filmmaker at the nexus of national and transnational forces, politically and financially capitalising on the alterity industry (Huggan) dominating mainstream discourse, while fleshing out the "instability of the national", to borrow Higson's expression.

To take it one step further, *Bride & Prejudice* invites a critical perspective which questions the somewhat reductive debate around (post-)national British cinema. While it is widely acknowledged that Chadha's recent films go along the "Asian Kool" wave, I posit that, by asserting herself as *British*, and discarding the critical labels others have devised for her as cultural producer, Chadha's ultimate subversion, adapted to this increasingly transnational and globalised age, resides in claiming her Britishness. In this way, she denies a positionality determined by the logic of hybridity and "otherness" dominating the commodification of cultural difference and its incorporation into mainstream commercial consumption. Far from being merely a biographical detail and more than a defence of an ever more contested and fluid concept of British identity, I put forward that Chadha's assertion of her Britishness acts as a refusal to fit in the marketing niche of the postcolonial exotic (Huggan),

⁶ <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/thscript/print.plfile=2004092300730100.htm&date=2004/09/23/&prd=mp&>.

⁷ Desai argues that this hypervisibility "may be seen as the flip side of the invisibility that characterized racial and cultural politics earlier in Britain", and she bluntly adds that "the burden of representation has now become the spectacle of representation" (Desai 69).

thereby unsettling the expectations cultivated by cultural critics who, looking through nostalgic lenses at British Asian filmmaking in the eighties, are eager to dismiss her diasporic concerns as having been co-opted in the name of profit and commercial viability.

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Filmography

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