

Triangulating Birmingham, Blackpool, Bombay: Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*

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Bhaji on the Beach is a 1994 road film (Tasker 165), directed by Gurinder Chadha, centered on female characters who struggle in conflicts of gender, ethnicity and generational differences. On the road are a group of British Asian women from Birmingham headed for Blackpool on a journey of self-discovery away from their routine lives. The day-trippers span three generations: Asha, a middle-aged newsagent with a university degree, who feels neglected by her husband and children, and frustrated by unfulfilled desires; Pushpa, an elderly Indian housewife and grocer; Rekha, a glamorous visitor from Bombay who has time to spare during her husband's business trips to London; Bina, a shop assistant from Marks and Spencer; Ginder, a young mother who wants out of an unhappy marriage and an abusive husband; Hashida, a student about to start medical school, who has discovered she is pregnant by her boyfriend, an Afro-Caribbean British art student; Ladhu and Madhu, two teenagers who have fully embraced western culture and are just out for fun with white English boys (given that, as they point out, Indian lads are keen on white girls); and Simi, the politically-committed organiser of the tour, who firmly believes in sisterhood and female solidarity.

Appropriating themselves of the public space of the English seaside resort, each of these women reaches some sort of crossroads. Through the acknowledgment that identity is the outcome of negotiating difference, the film clearly illustrates a collusion of divided loyalties, weaving together the lives of this group of women from different backgrounds and generations. At Blackpool, the characters' multiply inscribed identities, at the intersection of ethnic and gendered lines, place them in a position where they are forced to reconcile conflicting aspects of the British and Indian spheres they inhabit. It is at this juncture of transnational cultural flows that hybridised subjectivities-in-between coexist and are held in suspension.

It is the specificity of in-between spaces for British Asian women in their diasporic contexts – in other words, the hybrid potentialities facilitated by the triangulation of Birmingham, Blackpool, and Bombay – which the present reading of *Bhaji on the Beach* addresses. The purpose here is to examine the struggles over the “diaspora space” (Brah) Chadha’s diasporic female subjects are caught up in when visiting Blackpool, a working class British seaside resort.¹ Thus, what is at stake here is the tracking of routes more than the unearthing of roots.

From the outset it is crucial to be aware of the possible “intentional hybridity” (Werbner) on the part of Chadha, a transnational cosmopolitan filmmaker. The “inner compulsion” of the cultural politics of South Asian diasporic artists, Pnina Werbner suggests, is “to construct and then debunk and exorcise images of the almost mythical power of an older generation, guardians of the family and its sanctity” (903). The critic discusses at length what may lie behind novelists and filmmakers’ works when they render diasporic experience as not only one of cultural hybridised identity but also one of generational divide:

The intentional hybridities of the new wave South Asian novelists and film makers are deafly driven, in my opinion, not so much by a sense of diasporic marginality vis-a-vis the English public, but by the desire to resist and shock an authoritarian migrant South Asian older generation and induct it into the new realities of diasporic life. Their cultural politics thus needs to be read as part of a highly conflictual internal argument with and within the South Asian diaspora itself; a dissenting discourse that has as its mission to persuade a younger generation of British South Asians to be less compliant and submissive to their parents than they currently are. In this politics of the family the message is often assimilatory: to become more anglicised, liberal and individualistic. (903)

¹ Brah notes that “diaspora space” is “the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested”; “as a conceptual category [it] is ‘inhabited,’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (208-209).

Looking at *Bhaji on the Beach* from a somewhat related angle, this was one of the earliest films to share with mainstream audiences the experience of living in England as a second-generation British Asian. Highlighting the political edge of Chadha's artistic project, the filmmaker herself has frequently remarked (no matter how much we might like to put the centre/periphery dichotomy down to logocentric binarism) that her films are about moving "marginalised people" to the mainstream (Pais). Besides, *Bhaji on the Beach* does not attempt to give expression to one "authentic" or "essential" South Asian experience, but rather places the stress upon heterogeneity and the "living" of "identity through difference" (Hall 57). E. Ann Kaplan underscores this intent when she forwards that women filmmakers such as Chadha, herself a bearer of hybrid identity, "seek to intervene in the imaginary – to change how images are produced – rather than to present minorities 'as they really are'" (219). The critic reinforces her argument by adding that the "problem of being in-between is constant across a broad range of texts (...) proving how much it concerns women making films, how much this subjectivity in-between also needs to be worked through the complex situations of being-in-between" (237). As Leonard Quart points out, what the filmmaker holds out as an answer for British Asians is "not assimilation or, obviously, traditional immigrant culture (...) but a fluid, open, bilingual identity that represents for her the new England. For Chadha, 'difference is celebratory,' but not exclusive" (49). Against a monolithic understanding of diasporic experience, *Bhaji on the Beach* offers a *multilithic* reading in its deployment of gendered migrant identities. As previously suggested, issues of diasporic subject locations which emerge in this filmic text reveal an ongoing negotiation of identity by means of "promiscuous geographies of dwelling in place" (Jacobs 5) in which essentialising categories such as traditional/modern, us/them, and South Asian/British constantly disrupt and solicit one another.

Although it does not do complete justice to this textured text, it is possible to discern a pair of significant tropes that link the film to the contemporary condition of hybridity and transnationality. In this respect, two closely related conceptual issues can be underpinned: space and the condition of being outside/inside, which relate in the film to the themes of female mobility and post-colonial appropriation. In the remainder of this essay, to illuminate the issues under discussion, the focus will rest on

the seizure of Blackpool as a conflicted site where the female characters express both their sense of self and their desires for the spaces which constitute, after all, their “home”. This seaside town is the shifting locus where new forms of Britishness are negotiated so, paraphrasing Gargi Bhattacharyya and John Gabriel, attention will be drawn to the day trip romances with Britishness, whether in the guise of a displaced and outdated actor, or bags of tasteless chips on the pier (59).

When the Birmingham-based Saheli Asian Women’s Group organises a day trip to a working-class beach resort in the English midlands, with its “field of meanings associated with national life” (Bhabha “Introduction” 3), there is an odd sense in which they are travelling to a place where they are both insiders *and* outsiders.² Calling up intricate relationships between identity and place, the use of travel as trope belies the configuration of deterritorialized female subjectivity within the framework of a home/ /journey binary at the heart of the diaspora. Pertinent to the way in which *Bhaji on the Beach* renders the significance of the complex dynamics of space and travel to the agency of gendered diasporic characters³ is Bhabha’s argument in *The Location of Culture* that the ambivalence of colonial discourse is manifested in paranoia and anxiety that surfaces as soon as it leaves the home and encounters the colonised in the colonies. Diaspora communities reverse this process by creating the same ambiguity within the core of former colonial powers by forcing narratives to engage with or encounter their past. Manifesting hybridity, these centres become ambivalent locations where colonial discourse is subject to “citation, reinscription, rerouting” (Spivak 217), where migrants live straddling the border of two

² However, as Moya Luckett notes, “the dialectical nature of travel suggests that the greatest pleasure occurs precisely when female protagonists are at their most nomadic, linking feminine subjectivity with public space” (242).

³ Luckett draws our attention to the double face of travel, related to “the tensions of modernity, highlighting the diverse power relationships and subject positions produced by post-industrial capitalism”; one of its faces corresponds to a liberation “as boundaries are crossed in search of pleasure, while its choices suggest agency” while “[e]xile, nomadism, immigration and repatriation represent travel’s other side – one marked by poverty, forced movement and loss, all of which further strip the woman of her agency, glamour and sexual identity” (235).

cultures, one which is their homeland and the other the host country. This new social space of displaced individuals produced by transnational migration (a global “ethnoscape” to bring into play Arjun Appadurai’s suggestive term⁴), has been carved up not only in metropolitan sites, but also, as Chadha’s film well illustrates, at the very heart of insular Britain, somehow reinventing a locus of earlier exclusion. Symbolising popular England, the northern seaside holiday resort of Blackpool – with its pier, tower, illuminations and attractions such as games machines, karaoke, elderly people clapping along to the “Birdie Song”, chips and male strippers – becomes a site of fluidity and possibilities and, in this manner, may be seen to offer a kind of interstitial space and place where the overlapping of different cultural positionalities occurs or, to put it differently, a diaspora space “where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*” (Brah 209; author’s italics) is fashioned.

Formulations as interstitial or diaspora space are useful in accounting for the strong sense of identitary criss-crossing and structural disturbing of a traditional seaside town which are a feature of *Bhaji on the Beach*. The use of these analytical frames corresponds, in a way, to the “theoretical creolization” Avtar Brah understands as central “if we are to address fully the contradictions of modalities of enunciation, identities, positionalities and standpoints that are simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’” (210). It is precisely the fixities of identity which the female characters are presumed to fall between that the film disputes by mapping out their very condition of in-betweenness, placing them in the hybrid space of Blackpool, that day a significant location for the negotiation of wide-ranging, sometimes conflicting, British Asian identities. Thus, challenging what one of the male characters in the film declares, fusion in *not* confusion: in Chadha’s film the condition of being hybrid is assessed as a productive state, and the temporary mobility away from the domestic the women experience creates a third space of possibilities and counter-discursive practices.

In reality, the title *Bhaji on the Beach* stands as a metaphor for the negotiations of identity and place which arise through diasporic settlements

⁴ Appadurai defines *ethnoscape* as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups” (33).

and hybrid cultural forms. The association of “bhaji” (the collective name given to side dishes usually of vegetables, which are served as an accompaniment to the main course) with Blackpool hybridises both Indian food and the seaside holiday resort. Not unrelatedly, the film constructs a fantasy of Blackpool, representative of white, working-class British culture, as both Bombay and Bollywood, a conscious artistic choice in the words of the director: “The reason for choosing Blackpool was because of the lights. I know that when those lights come on it’s where England meets Bollywood” (Bhattacharyya and Gabriel 63). This is not a static landscape, but a site in the process of becoming, saturated with the politics of transformation. Clichés of popular seaside England such as karaoke music, Wurlitzer organs, white children riding donkeys on the beach, and fish and chips are exposed (and spiced up, as when Pushpa flavours with chilli powder the epitome of British food) to create new meanings by the group of female sightseers.

In a counter-colonial move to (post-colonial) centres, Blackpool is also a place of nostalgia for British Asians, with *Bhaji on the Beach*’s filmmaker personally recognising the significance she ascribes to localities such as the seaside town, “‘returning’ her to family holidays in the 1960s” (Bhattacharyya and Gabriel 59). As already hinted, the decision to set the film in that specific location turns the excursion of the group of British Asian women into a journey – both literal and figurative – to sites associated predominantly with working-class white English. In Chadha’s words:

the film is reinstating us in those spaces, those places. We used to go to the sea-side all the time and do all the things the women do in the film like any other day-trippers. For me the film is very English. It’s also about me reclaiming my Englishness, challenging the contexts others set up for us. (Bhattacharyya and Gabriel 63).

Rephrasing Jane Jacobs’s words to meet the filmmaker’s, the expressions and negotiations of Englishness do not just occur *in* space: they articulate themselves *through* space and are *about* space (1), allowing for “imaginative spatialities of desire” (x). The alternative world staged in Blackpool is hence reconfigured as a creative materialisation of both the imperial and the post-imperial within British culture, highlighting similarities and points of contact, merging in a fantastic *mise-en-scène* the signs recognised as

specifically British and those which also stand, in particular for the visitor from Bombay, for India. The female characters in *Bhaji on the Beach* find themselves – literally – struggling to find their place in the English seaside resort while clinging to the ideas of a homeland they left behind, caught between conformity with Indian cultural norms and their own often uneasy integration into British society, in other words, trying to reconcile their Britishness with their Asianness.

All the entrenched values of Indian culture which the older women have carried around for decades contrast sharply with those of the visitor from Bombay, the socialite Rekha Tendon, more westernised than the aunties Pushpa, Asha and Bina. The first we see of this character she is wearing a fake pink Chanel suit, stiletto heels and sunglasses. She gets out of a taxi holding a copy of *Hello* magazine, and exclaims loudly “Asha, darling!” when she sees her friend at the bus stop. At a later point in the film, Asha tells the women that one of her daughters had recently shaved all her hair off. In her embarrassment and dismay, not only does she appear to be nurturing memories of traditional Indian values against oblivion, but she also seems determined to pass them on to her children who have never been to the home country. Against the corruption she associates with the West, Asha remarks that she tried to teach her daughter “morals from back home” to which Rekha replies: “Home? What home? How long is it since you’ve been home? Look at you! Your clothes, the way that you think. (...) You’re twenty years out of date.”

The above quoted verbal exchange reveals the South Asianness of Asha, a first generation immigrant from India in Birmingham, to be constructed in the same way as Rekha’s “modern” Indian identity is. The characters’ choice of clothing clearly shows this process, both in the women’s traditional saris – which, according to Rekha, nobody wears any more – and in the exaggerated westernised attire of the cosmopolitan Bombayite. Moreover, such opposing viewpoints on the idea of home are an example of what Appadurai has referred to as a sense of “Indianness-in-motions” (Appadurai 10). With a critical eye, Chadha shatters the older women’s notion of “home” through the observation, delivered by Rekha, that they have no trace of what that is. Indeed, the filmmaker uses this character to draw attention to the untenable idea that one can “go home”, or that an ideal homeland actually exists outside the migrant’s imagination. The

memories the women hold from “back home” are thus revealed to be nothing more than fantasies marked by ambivalence and negotiation.

By introducing the character of a visitor from India, Chadha opens the way for the dismissal of feelings of diasporic nostalgia for the idealised homeland and for the recognition of the identities of the other female characters as hybridised ones, in that they inhabit a cultural third space. *Bhaji on the Beach* engages with the migrant’s relationship with a homeland, and punctures nostalgic feelings from the beginning. This is apparent in the dream sequences involving Asha during the outing in Blackpool – to which attention will now be drawn – where she is troubled by visions, often of a religious nature, of a “traditional” home, frozen in an illusory moment outside history, in confrontation with “modern” British society. The first fantasy scene is one of many in the film that examine the function of home in the everyday construction of female identity and underscore gendered normativities. Asha is faced up with a statue of the Indian deity Vishnu confronting her with the slogan “Duty, Honour, Sacrifice” backed up by images of her as a devoted wife and caring mother. On the face of being commanded to uphold what are presented as Indian values by the deity (appearing in the filmic frame as a patriarchal surveillance agent), she looks worried and scared. The scenery becomes more and more threatening towards the end of the scene, with flashing light and increasingly fast cuts creating a sense of confusion and loss of balance. Stressing the transnational overlapping of spaces, we see Asha tumbling through a dream-space filled with grossly oversized commodities from her daily life – a can of Coke, an ice cream cone, Bollywood film posters and VHS tapes –, which overwhelm her. This sequence is significant in its representation of the changing relationship between diasporic subjects and the homeland in light of globalisation, in that there is an apparent disjuncture between British consumerist values and Hindu culture associated with an idealised home. In addition, it results in a sense of undermining of the normative basis of the family: Asha’s estrangement is critical of heteropatriarcal constructions, and is a first step to rewrite dominant narratives of the diasporic subject who longs for the homeland and finds western society a locus of contamination.

During another one of her “dis-Orientations” (Desai 144), she walks into the sea and is rescued by Ambrose Waddington, a self-entitled “actor, historian and ancient Blackpudlian”, who takes her on a sight-seeing

excursion of the seaside resort, culminating in a visit to an empty theatre. In this town not-so-absent narratives of imperialism are made visible through the male character: his white formal jacket, cravat, Panama hat and upper-class accent act as cultural signifiers of British colonial era. As Asha and Ambrose stroll through a conservatory, she asks if he has ever seen any Bollywood films to which he assertively replies “Seen them? I’ve been in them! *Gunga Din*! *Bhowani Junction*!”⁵. The reference to these (colonialist) Hollywood narratives acts as a catalyst for the next dream sequence, a courtship ritual typical of a Hindi film song. Drawing on Bollywood conventions, Chadha builds the setting of perfect heterosexual love: in an ambience of romantic music and soft lighting, Asha runs through the park dressed in an ornamented sari, while Ambrose is in a wig, traditional kurta pajamas and made-up to look Indian. He chases her through the garden and when he catches up with her by a tree it starts to rain and the make-up streams down his face, revealing the whiteness beneath the streaks of brown face-paint.

Ambrose is trying to find a place in a changed Britain, a nation he sees in decline and devoid of tradition: “it breaks my heart. Look what we have become. Not like you. You’ve kept hold of your traditions, proud, exotic, fascinating, gentle, exquisite and beautiful.” As can be gathered by his fascination with Asha and his comments about skin tone and clothing, his own image of her is entirely bound up in the Orientalist discourse of the exotic. He stands for an anachronistic othering of South Asian culture and, embodying a displaced Raj nostalgia, wants to colonise the diasporic woman Asha. At the beginning, she had imagined Ambrose as something he was not, but soon realises that he is little more than an Englishman brownfacing himself. In the end, as Chadha notes, this emasculated and disempowered character is an easy target for mockery not to be taken seriously:

Ambrose is a metaphor for a certain kind of England – a bit sad, crumpled, living in the past: no malice, and reflecting a certain breed of Englishman, definitely living in another

⁵ *Gunga Din* (1939) and *Bhowani Junction* (1956), both Hollywood films, were directed by George Stevens and George Cukor, respectively.

world. (...) I don't dislike him. I wish he would see himself for who he is – hence the fantasy with him blacked-up with all his make-up running. I was making a statement about racism in cinema. This was alluding to all those actors who blacked-up to play Indian roles – the most effective way to use the medium and its language to turn the tables round. (Bhattacharyya and Gabriel 61)

The ridicule of Ambrose putting on make-up underscores the performativity of identity, of what it means to be British in contemporary British society and also, via the parody of traditionally set Bollywood films, of what it means to be Indian. Evoking performativity helps to understand certain elements in *Bhaji on the Beach* as a response to the social environment that the film was made in, or to a specific set of events that preceded it. Indeed, by framing the relationship of Asha and Ambrose – which could stand for the broader issue of Britain's relationship with India and the position of the Indian diaspora in Britain – within the images found in Indian melodrama, Chadha alerts us to the fact that Bollywood is central to processes of imagining the homeland, and shaping gendered (female) identities for the diaspora. However, there is more to the filmmaker's intention and the film allows for a negotiation: having the choice, upon emerging from her dream, Asha rejects Ambrose and marks out her own position, turning the gaze back onto his Orientalism.

Throughout the several fantasy sequences, she struggled to find a female subjectivity outside of the gender constructions available in her community. The daydreams provided an opportunity to express thoughts, dissatisfactions, and secrets, and allowed for a space where oppressions were both rearticulated and resisted. By engaging in a relationship with Ambrose, although mediated by Bollywood, she was offered the chance to step outside traditional boundaries in order to construct her identity as a British Asian, and this was a turning point for the character. It is her in-betweenness, part British, part Indian, which opened up the possibilities for her to invert overdetermining dominant narratives of marital respectability. In the last daydream, after seizing the lure of romance embodied by the character of Ambrose, she faces her own frustrated desires and speaks up for herself:

But I haven't done anything wrong. I went to college. My life was not meant to be like this. Duty, honour, sacrifice. What about me? I was a good student. I didn't get headaches then. What happened? I wasn't born selling bloody newspapers.

Accounting for the commercial success of films such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, Jigna Desai has recently argued that these feminist cinematic narratives "attempt to disrupt South Asian gender normativities of heterosexuality through challenging the dominant gendered ideologies such as female chastity and virginity, multiracial romance, and arranged marriages" (Desai 214).⁶ Asha's evolution as a character who steps outside the borders plainly shows that Chadha's film is, on the one hand, a "resisting" story in depicting Indian women as strong, as survivors and as pleasure-loving", while, on the other hand, it "reverses the gaze" by placing the story "within the Indian communities' viewpoints" (Kaplan 250).

Bhaji on the Beach was (one of) the first mainstream films that, assisted by its cross-over appeal, explored the barriers to being accepted as British and contested the association between Britishness and whiteness. Challenging the tendency to maintain rigid boundaries between cultural formations, it called attention to diversity. In fact, the film exhibits a strong sense of the constructedness and fluidity of identities, and a rejection of "essences." Concurrently, it depicts negotiations of gendered subjectivities and female empowerment in a transnational, and in some sense, deterritorialized world, offering fluctuating points of identification. In the words of the filmmaker:

Our cultural identities [in Britain] are made up of so many different things (...) In Britain, you really have to question your identity. When you accept that you are not from India or no longer have links with India, then you have to question what are you and what makes you English? (Chhabra)

⁶ Nevertheless, according to the critic, these cinematic narratives "seek to challenge and rewrite the sexual agency associated with the heterosexual [Third World] female but simultaneously foreclose queer sexualities and nonheteronormativities" (Desai 212). Gayatri Gopinath traces a similar "evacuation of queer female desire that enables a heterosexual feminist subject to come into being" in "films by South Asian diasporic feminist filmmakers that purport to 'update' the Bollywood genre" (163).

The filmic narrative resolution points out that diaspora is the much-desired home. By documenting the struggle of a diasporic group to make a homespace in the old imperial heartlands, through the negotiation of displacement and disenfranchisement, this film not only raises pertinent issues relating to the construction of a (feminine) diasporic Indian identity, writing against the representation of South Asian diasporic women as submissive victims of heteropatriarchal control, but also aims at re-defining British identities as culturally plural rather than fixed around some national, ethnic, or other absolute boundary.

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ABSTRACT

Bhaji on the Beach is a 1994 road film, directed by Gurinder Chadha, centred on female characters who struggle in conflicts of gender, ethnicity and generational differences. Appropriating themselves of the public space of the English seaside resort Blackpool, each of these women reaches some sort of crossroads. Through the acknowledgment that identity is the outcome of negotiating difference, the film clearly illustrates a collusion of divided loyalties, weaving together the lives of this group of women from different backgrounds and generations. At Blackpool, the characters' multiple inscribed identities, at the intersection of ethnic and gendered lines, place them in a position where they are forced to reconcile conflicting aspects of the British and Indian spheres they inhabit. It is at this juncture of transnational cultural flows that hybridised subjectivities-in-between coexist and are held in suspension.

KEYWORDS

Gurinder Chadha, género, ethnicidade, hybridity, generational differences

RESUMO

Bhaji on the Beach é um "road film" de 1994, realizado por Gurinder Chadha, centrado em personagens femininas que lutam contra sentimentos conflitantes relacionados com género, etnicidade e diferenças geracionais. Apropriando-se do espaço público da estância balnear de Blackpool, cada uma destas mulheres chega a uma encruzilhada. Através do reconhecimento de que a identidade é o resultado da negociação da diferença, o filme ilustra claramente o confronto de lealdades divididas, ligando as vidas deste grupo de mulheres provenientes de diferentes contextos sociais e gerações. Em Blackpool, as suas identidades, exibindo múltiplos pontos de identificação situados na intersecção de linhas de género e de etnicidade, colocam-nas numa posição em que são forçadas a reconciliar aspectos conflitantes das esferas britânicas e indianas que habitam. É nesta confluência dos fluxos culturais transnacionais que as subjectividades entre-lugar hibridizadas coexistem e se mantêm em suspenso.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Gurinder Chadha, género, etnicidade, hibridez, diferenças geracionais
