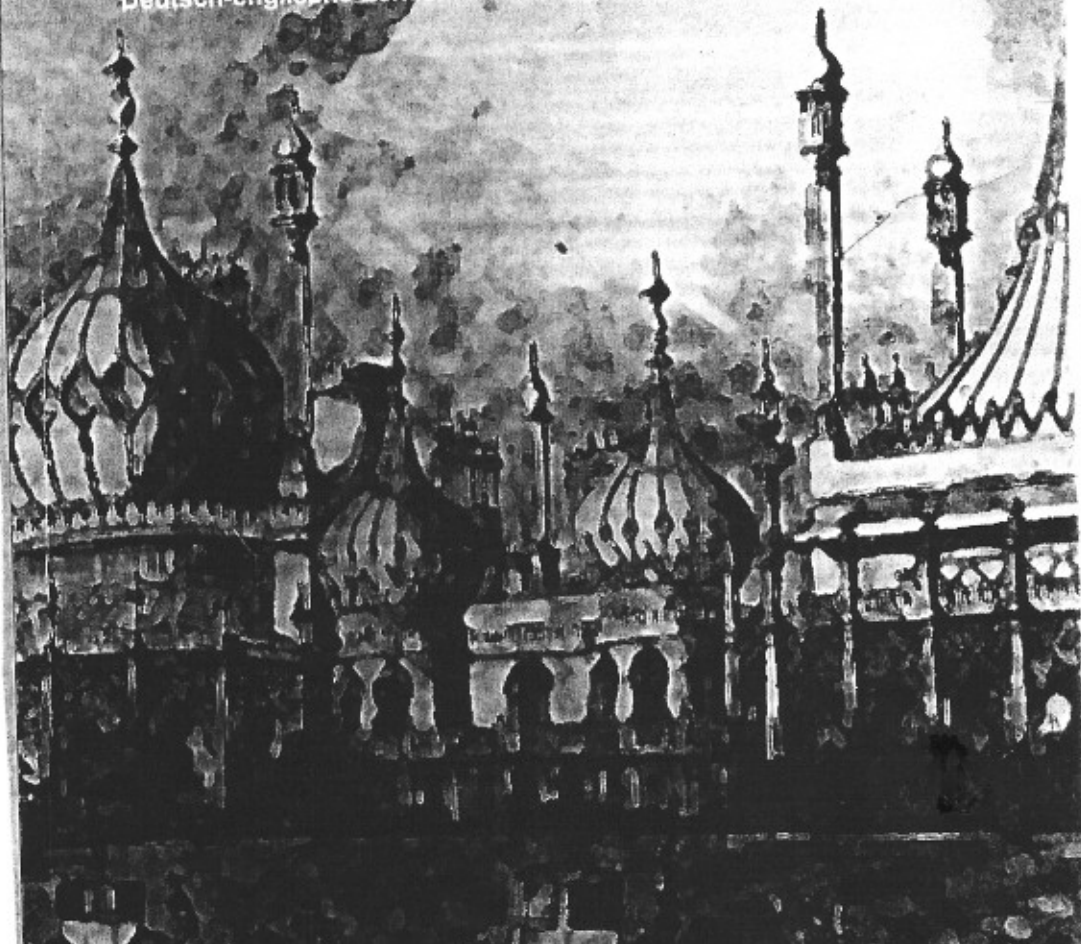


# HARD TIMES



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## India in Britain

Street Life - Literature - Music - Dance - Fine Art - Film - Language -  
Religion - Landscaping - Indian Restaurants

## Bhaji on the Beach and the Critics: An Essay on Hybridity

In den visuellen Medien gibt es seit einigen Jahren eine spürbare Präsenz von südasiatischen Minderheiten, in der deren Angehörige längst nicht mehr die traditionelle Rolle der exotischen, womöglich komischen Nebenfiguren einnehmen. Kureishis und Stephan Frears' Filme haben hier vielleicht den Durchbruch zu ernsthafter Repräsentanz signalisiert. Im Fernsehen zeigt etwa die populäre Serie *Goodness Gracious Me* das gewachsene Selbstbewußtsein der kulturellen Minderheiten. Am Beispiel des Films *Bhaji on the Beach* von 1993 bespricht Rainer Schüren, Professor für Englisch am Oberstufenkolleg der Universität Bielefeld, kulturelle und mediale Vermittlungsleistungen des filmischen Textes.

### "WRONGFOOTING"

#### THEORETICIANS OF HYBRIDITY

In a journal entitled *Third Text*, which undertakes to develop "Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art & Culture", Gargi Bhattacharyya and John Gabriel published an article about a film constructing a 'third space', reflecting contemporary 'black' or, to use more recent and more precise terminology, 'diasporic' ethnic culture in Britain. The authors quote Manthia Diawara's definition:

By third space I mean the familiar notion of hybrid spaces that combine the colours and flavours of different localities. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* the Asian presence and the English presence are combined to produce a third space which is occupied not only by youth of Asian descent but also by white youth of the punk generation.

The article is itself a hybrid between an interview and an essay. The interview with Gurinder Chadha, director and co-author of *Bhaji on the Beach* (referred to as just "Bhaji" in the following) is generously interspersed with analytical comments on recent developments in the critical articulation of racial and national

identities. The authors refer to the efforts of Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall not only to re-define 'British' - mostly used synonymously with 'white' - identities as culturally plural rather than fixed around some national, ethnic, racial or other absolute boundary but also to explore ideas of diasporic cultural identities and new hybrid ethnicities (58). (Academic discourse has obviously said goodbye not only to the term but also to the paradigm of multi-culturalism.) But their attempt to present *Bhaji* as an example of a new "genre of black film which takes its agenda in part from theoretical debates" and "the interchange with academic work as its powerbase" fails to convince. Chadha is polite enough to say that "the writings of people like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy ...make sense to me", but she makes it very clear throughout this interview - and many other interviews as well - what her perspective is.

My positioning comes mainly from [being] part of a community. From my parents and family...You could hardly call it my power base...but that's my base, that's my nurturing base and it's from there that I take and move on, which is why I get quite affected when

Asian people criticise me. I don't give a toss when white people do - when it's other Asian people about my sort of age that have problems with it then I feel bad, because I feel I've taken something that's all of ours and tried to make something that's still all of ours.

.....  
[Hanif Kureishi's] *The Rainbow Sign* is about the first time he went to Pakistan - brilliant - it just captures all those feelings the first time you go there. The changes you go through. And then you come back and that struggle, wanting to be part of it, knowing you're not part of it, and then not wanting to be part of it because it doesn't work properly on other people's terms. He deals with the complexity of that relationship. (57f)

It is this dynamic, ever shifting and boundary-crossing "multiple focus" that Chadha finds "empowering" as a source of creating a filmic reality which is the result of a process whose starting "space" is "all of ours" and whose product is a 'third space', a kaleidoscopic re-arrangement of its elements that is different but "still all of ours". Chadha's film demonstrates that it takes an uncompromising spirit and a powerful dose of destructionism to achieve the reconstruction of such a 'third space'. Some newspaper critics

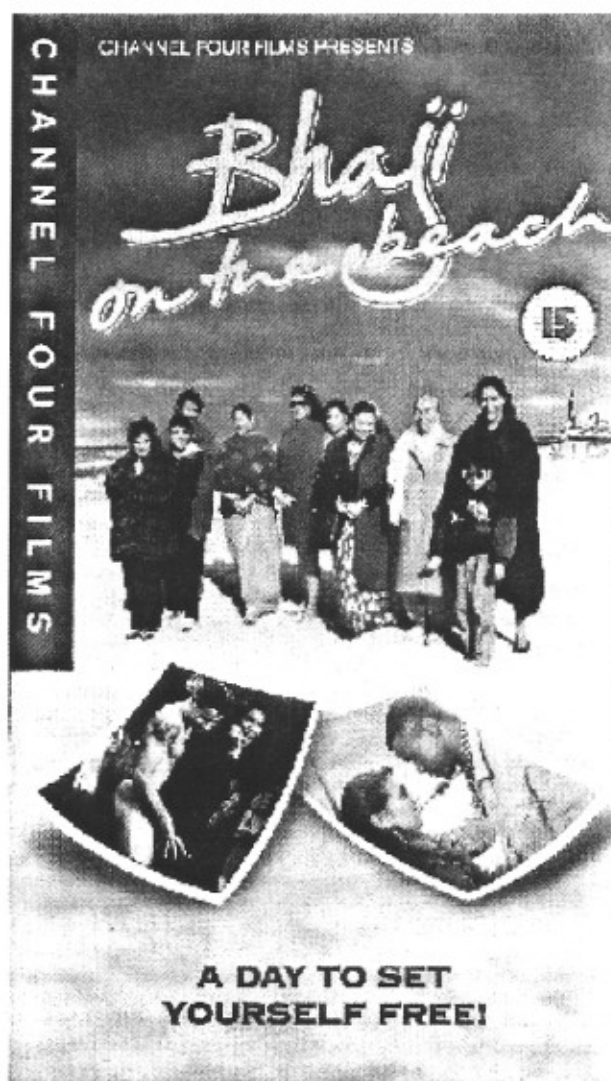
have called her film "needlessly cruel and tasteless" (Walker), or a film doing its job "rudely" (Brown). There are very angry responses from 'black' (re)-viewers of the film: it is "an insult to all decent Indian women" (Nanda) or it "degrades Indian culture" (Chaudhary). We will come to these later.

First I would like to point out a hidden connection between such strong language and the more discreet ways of more academic pundits like Bhattacharyya and Gabriel. In their summary of what Chadha said about her film, they write: "In the film each woman has her own story and this multiple focus allows a number of issues to be raised. *Instead of presenting Asian women as two-dimensional caricatures of passivity, brutalized by a backward culture and fanatical menfolk, Bhaji shows us a variety of Asian women characters*" (my italics). This awkward way of formulating tones down or de-scandalizes Chadha's relentless exposure of intracultural rifts and clashes, her destruction of cherished self-images and i(n)de-ologies. What is obvious to practically all critics, especially those with an Asian background, is that, although the film does indeed not present Asian women as two-dimensional caricatures of passivity, it *does* present them

as brutalized by cultural traditions such as arranged marriage and unabashed machoism. In fact, the main storyline - with Ginder in the centre - rests on the problems caused by these two features of traditional Indian culture. Another feature is racial prejudice: dark or black people are regarded as inferior by all the older and traditional women in the film, in

to racism - they avoid the word and just say "prejudice" - but to the fact "that she is caught between her loyalty to her boyfriend and the expectations of her parents". Thus, an intracultural problem is turned into one of human relationships in general. Similarly, Ginder's decision to get divorced from her violent husband - in the words of the authors: "to escape a violent marriage" - is presented as "caused as much by her own investments in marriage and family as by the repressive pressures of the community" (59). In the Indian journal *Cinemaya* Mohini Kent follows a similar strategy of turning a negative (negative, that is, in Western eyes) feature of Indian culture, an intra-cultural, as yet largely unresolved, clash of values into a universal phenomenon of the human condition: "Chadha was determined not to portray him [Ginder's husband Ranjit] as a bastard, a typical macho Indian man. He is a man torn between his wife and his mother: a choice faced by millions of men the world over" (24).

What may be the point of this - unintentional - ignoring or slanting? I think it serves to make the culture portrayed appear more homogeneous than it is, both in reality and in *Bhaji*. This runs counter to what the film really does and what both Chadha and her script writer Meera Syal had



set out do to. Syal, who as an actress in England, found it "limiting" to play "eternally noble, hard-done-by victims", she wanted to play "rounded characters, and real people [who] have layers, make mistakes". She knew that it was now time to get rid of "the protective umbrella of PC [political correctness] under which we can shout, 'not fair'" and to open "an honest dialogue about what is happening within our community". "And what white writer ... was going to have the courage to do that? And that is why I started writing" (Syal). And Chadha, in an interview in 1998 remembers very clearly saying to Meera Syal that what she would like to do was "to make a film about the two most taboo things to do with our community - one is African-Caribbean and Asian relationships and the other is domestic violence" (Wambu 36). No wonder the film was hotly discussed in the Asian community and made the watchdogs of Indian cultural and racial homogeneity rant and recoil.

There is no mention of this, black' response in the article under discussion here. The sociological - or ideological? - habit of creating sameness or homogeneity within a culture to make it easier to deal with and to identify it as your own or as the other - leads to an ironic encounter of artistic and academic cultures. Chadha states that her film takes Englishness and Indianness and remodels both and, in doing so, "wrongfoots" people. This is exactly what happens to Bhattacharyya and Gabriel. Taking the cue from Chadha, they seem glad to be able to suggest

that the film's thrust is directed first and foremost against traditional homogeneous, white' culture:

One of the most important contributions of black films in the 1980s was their success in challenging assumptions of cultural and racial homogeneity in mainstream film. 'Whiteness' remains largely invisible both in film and in other cultural forms. As Richard Dyer suggests, 'white' films have colonised definitions of the normal. In 'black' film, the marginalisation of white characters encourages the white audience to acknowledge its whiteness, instead of just taking it for granted. As Stuart Hall has argued, it takes a lot to get the English to acknowledge that they too have an ethnicity which displays itself in various ways. Black films thus make it easier to think about whiteness in relationship to other characteristics, for example age, gender, and class.

Let us leave aside the question of whether Chinese, African, or Indian films also colonise definitions of their respective normals and look at Chadha's wrongfooting her interviewers in their expectation that her 'black' film should challenge 'whiteness'. Speaking about Ambrose, the white, ageing, eccentric actor who falls for Asha, one of the elderly Indian ladies, she says:

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 world. His being so familiar with this Indian woman and her encouraging him is an interesting *challenge for the older Asian generation* (my italics). When my mum saw the film I thought she might be offended by Ambrose and his amorous intentions, but instead she was struck by the fact that it was the first

time she had seen a white man behave in a 'gentlemanly' manner to an older Indian woman in films, television, anywhere.

Here Chadha is telling her interviewers in her typically 'gentlewomanly' manner that, in her eyes the need to challenge assumptions of cultural and racial homogeneity is at the present time more urgent for the 'black', in this case, the Asian, or more precisely, the Indian community in the U.K. She is using the very traditional British literary and filmic genre of social comedy to achieve her aim, a genre depicting and analysing the whole array of intracultural tensions and conflicts in Britain. (cf. Schüren 1998) The plot, a critic in the *Spectator* complains, "is a variation on one you've seen a million times: a group day out, by the end of which the various problems are resolved much as you'd expect" - in a comedy, one should add, for everybody knows that the 'real' ending of social comedies is always open in the spectator's mind.

The passage quoted above and its context in the article elucidate what I think are the essential qualities of cultural hybridity:

**(1) Hybridity is not a state, but really a dynamic process of 'hybridisation'.**

It means the process of breaking up powerful notions and images of intracultural sameness and the careful use of sameness-generating (and reality-obscuring) terminology like 'black', 'white', 'British', 'Asian' or 'Ausländer', for that matter. Only if every

cultural group involved in that process is prepared to take part in that process of self-questioning can the most important prerequisite for the creation of hybridity be established:

**(2) Reciprocity is the key factor in this process in which differences must be negotiated honestly.**

In real life, lack of reciprocity can often be noted in comparisons, especially if parameters are not made explicit or the comparison is disguised as a statement. Why, a student of Turkish extraction complained in one of my courses, do we always hear that a low level of education is responsible for xenophobia in Germany, and why does nobody ever draw parallels between this and the even lower level of education of most Turks and the possibility of xenophobia in Turkey where, in theory, it should be much more rampant than in Germany? Why is "hostility toward foreigners" in Germany discussed as if the Turks were merely the "objects" or victims of a German problem, and not potential problem sharers in a reciprocal cultural process?

In Chadha's terminology, this would be called "challenging representations" or "constantly wrongfooting you" (61), and she uses this method almost excessively in her film, and I think in her life, too. In the short passage quoted above Chadha wrongfoots her interviewers, recalls how she was wrongfooted by her mother, and how her mother was wrongfooted by the representation of a white man in the film. The

film abounds in scenes of carefully contrived contrasts establishing reciprocity. When in the Black-pool cafe, Pushpa, the most culturally uncompromising of the Indian ladies, eats her own Asian food over a cup of tea, she is the object of racist remarks from the white waitress, a woman her own age. When she notices Hashida sitting behind her, she makes disparaging remarks about good girls that are turned bad by their relationship with a black Caribbean, for which Hashida retaliates by pouring hot tea over Pushpa and, to close the circle, throwing cutlery at the white waitress. Chadha remembers that she worked hard on this scene to get all three parties involved intercut effectively.

**(3) In film, and to a lesser extent in literature, the most effective method of making the process of hybridisation visible is careful multiple contrasting**

In Chadha's words:

The only way I can talk about [the politics of the film] is in terms of throwing up every extreme, every polarity, that I have to deal with in my life - whether that's racism in terms of black or white, or black or Asian, or older generation and younger generation, or Indianness and Englishness and Britishness and internationalness, all those different values are in that film. You have tradition on the one side or modernity on the other, Indianness on the one side, Englishness on the other, cultural specificity and universality - but in fact there is a scale between each of these polarities and the film moves freely between them....I am constantly trying to wrongfoot you, whether you are white, Asian, male or female. (Bhattacharyya 60f)

What happens in *Bhaji's* Black(!)pool makes it an archetypal third space. It is presented as a British Bombay or rather Bollywood, and it is structured around triangular arrangements of contrasts like that in the cafe scene described above. These triangles are all connected with one another. One of the most obvious ones is the triangle Asha in real, modern British life - Ambrose - Asha in dream sequences of a spiritual Indian life. The great launderette opening scene in *My Beautiful Launderette* is structured in the same way: all the main characters (including 'group' characters like the skinheads) are assembled there, arranged, or arranging themselves, into ever changing triangular sets, busy, as it were, creating hybridity out of their conflicts in carefully intercut takes. Chadha's Black-pool is an extended version of Kureishi's launderette: A lot of mostly Asian dirty linen is washed there in public, in front of a mostly white audience the world over. "It was after I saw *My Beautiful Launderette* that I decided that I wanted to direct. I thought wow! This is something I could do", Chadha said in a recent interview (Wambu 38).

**... WHY SOME PEOPLE LAUGH AND OTHERS DON'T: THE PUBLIC RESPONSE TO BHAJI**

The responses of critics and audiences to *Bhaji* were, and are, even more divided than those to *My Beautiful Launderette*. (cf. Schüren 1994) Kureishi, at the launching of his film in the U.S., had to face Pakistani activists

claiming that "the movie was an insult to Islam: There were no Pakistani homosexuals or drug dealers" (Kurcishi 1986). These activists disagreed sharply with the film's representation of their ethnic group because of its "destructive" message about ethnicity. I remember that when I taught them film to an ethnically mixed group of students a Turkish immigrant raised in Germany said he did not want to go as far as these watchdogs of 'Islamic' homogeneity. He distinguished carefully between what a collective religious identity required him to think, and what his own experience as an immigrant among immigrants in Germany may require him to ignore:

Omar loves his friend Johnny, which is not typical for a Muslim immigrant. I know that this argument can be regarded as a stereotype: but when I think of a Muslim I can't think of him as queer. But the truth is that I have no idea about how many Muslim immigrants are queer or not. (my italics)

The fact that the immigrants in the film are not representative of their ethnic group and thus "spoil" the homogeneous picture of it, made some Turkish students dismiss the film as "unrealistic". It is distorting, they said, to show rich Pakistani businessmen or alcoholics, since most of the Pakistanis in England are workers. That these students insisted on a homogeneous, conflictless, 'good' identity of what they, being 'brothers in faith', regarded as their own cultural group, almost automatically led, in our classroom discussion, to an analogous perception of an 'other' side just as homogeneous.

When *Bhaji* was shown at the Locarno Film Festival for the first

time and the audience "clapped for ages" and there was a twenty minutes' standing ovation, Chadha became aware of the fact that there were hardly any black people in the audience - "it was all like this mixture of French and Italian, German and Swiss"(37)-but there are not many blacks around in Switzerland anyway. When the film was on in London, she realized that the reason *Bhaji* was a success was "not because black people went to see it, but because white people went to see it"(38). So at the Tottenham Court Road cinemas there was little opportunity for her to find out what, she said, interested her very much: Why some people laughed and others didn't when they were confronted with scenes like the cafe scene. (Bhattacharyya 62)

The *Eastern Eye*, a tabloid for British Asians, had a front page article entitled "NO SEX PLEASE WE'RE ASIAN" - showing a close-up picture of Rashida and her "Black lover", the African-Caribbean Oliver, and reported that "furious critics blast 'Bhaji On The Beach'":

#### **No sex please, we're Asian Furious critics blast 'Bhaji On The Beach'**

A controversial new film featuring steamy sex scenes and a Black/Asian relationship has sparked off a nationwide protest. *Bhaji On the Beach* hit the cinema screens last Friday and walked straight into a storm with calls for the film to be banned.

Billed as a comical daytrip to Blackpool by a group of Asian women, the movie was given the official okay by British film censors but it has left watchdogs in the community shocked and appalled.

Scenes of a housewife frolicking with a middle-aged white man, a pair of man-hungry teenagers chasing boys and an Asian girl made pregnant by her black boyfriend have caused uproar in some sections of the community.

Community leaders complained of being sickened by sizzling sexual romps and the movie's controversial, no-holds barred portrayal of wild young Asian women. Mathor Krishnamurti, head of the Institute of Indian Culture in London, couldn't contain his fury and slammed the film as "vulgar and offensive" from start to finish. He now wants the movie banned and the filmmakers to be heavily fined. "This film is full of vulgarity and is an insult to all decent Asian women," said a disgusted Mr. Krishnamurti "the idea of falling in love and getting pregnant before marriage is outrageous."

The 65-year-old leader, a highly respected member of the community, said he was shocked and appalled by the lurid scenes of naked male-strippers cavorting with an elderly Asian actress.

#### **Indecent**

"Can you imagine watching this film with your family, sister or wife - it is grossly indecent and made in bad taste," he stormed. A devout Hindu, he said, he was particularly insulted by a "blasphemous" dream sequence where a scantily-clad girl lights a cigarette from a holy diva, with a deity of Lord Rama present. "If this is what is going on then we need to educate our young girls - we parents will now be extremely wary of what we let our children do in future," he said sternly.

Gurinder Chadha was delighted. "The cultural conflicts which explode like mines throughout the film", as an Indian film critic put it in *Cinemaya* (24), had had the desired effect of scratching the public, homogeneous surface of a smug Indianness and established a bit of reciprocity: the attempts of apostles of 'blackness' to colonise the normal, to use Richard Dyers

phrase. When Chadha was interviewed by the author of the article she defended the film as "vibrant and varied" (as opposed to "static" and "homogeneous") and she suggested "that critics should loosen up." She offered them free tickets: "They might even enjoy themselves," she giggled mischievously, knowing about the particular cultural importance of the difference between what is public and private. One of her friends from the production team could not refrain from adding that "the makers of *Bhaji On The Beach* had, in fact, toned down the movie and could have gone full-out and dealt with issues like child abuse and rape as well." (Nanda)

In Nottingham and other places religious leaders warned Asian parents that Asian men would be keeping watch outside the cinemas. Vivek Chaudary reports in the *Guardian* that many of the girls rushed out straight after the screening, and when asked for permission to have their photographs taken turned their backs and said they had been threatened if they went to see the film. Thus, ironically, the response of the watchdogs of an Indian sameness achieved the very effect they claimed the film had: the degrading of Indian culture and the distortion of Indian values. A Scottish video chain later banned *Bhaji* because it "makes reference to religious beliefs which a Scottish community probably knows nothing about." "I doubt, that most people will even understand it", was the comment of the chain's owner, Mac Rasul (Bathia).

An article in *The Voice*, written by a British-Afro-Caribbean journalist, demonstrates how blind to reality the constant and uncritical propagation of ideologies of black homogeneity and unity can make those who believe:

**When Theresa Greer went to see an acclaimed new Asian film dealing with mixed relationships, she was bitterly disappointed by the reaction of the audience.**

I have always thought of us as one people - Asians and Negroes (or whatever term is used to describe us with the thicker hair these days).

Well we are more or less the same colour, aren't we? And we are all regarded as foreigners by the indigent, 'British' population. We are foreign even though we were born and bred here. In my area we all speak with a Cockney accent. It could be Geordie, Yorkshire or even Scottish, it makes no difference.

If you are Black you are still an alien. I felt that there was a kind of bond between us - what does a little kink in the hair matter? I have always had Asian friends. At school my closest friend was Asian. My mother would constantly moan at our phone bill. She could not understand how we spent all day at school together yet would telephone each other every evening for another gossip. I never thought, as my mother did, that Asians thought themselves 'better' than us.

I went to see the celebrated film *Bhaji On the Beach* the other night. It's famous because it is the first British film to have an Asian female director. I wanted to give it my support, seeing it as an encouragement to all Black women. I did note, however, that one issue that it dealt with was inter-racial relationships between Negroes and Asians. There were a large number of Asians in the audience, which I thought encouraging - particularly men, a group of whom sat directly behind us.

Laughter could be heard throughout the film interspersed with shouts of 'whore' and 'nigger' from our 'brothers' behind, brothers who

sang along to the reggae music playing in the background. The sound of kissing of teeth mingled with the music.

From us, amazement. Maybe, naively, we thought that these attitudes no longer existed. Hadn't we all grown up together, were we all not Black 'foreigners'?

How can we get anywhere in combating the injustices which we face if we are divided ourselves, looked down upon even by the people whom you regard as your 'brothers and sisters'?

These thoughts were highlighted again recently in an episode of *Each* which focused on the racial split between Negro and Asian Trinidadians.

It upset us to hear their laughter ringing through our ears - laughter that was full of hate. We could not understand their ignorance, a fact that I voiced loud and clear.

When 'Black' people face conflict 'we' are one. But underneath are we really?

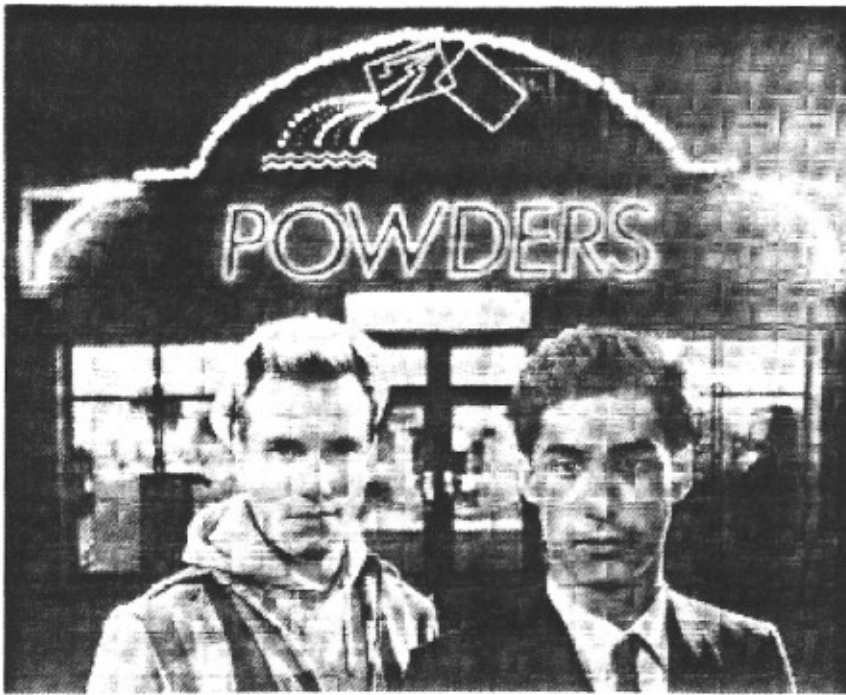
The last but one sentence may contain an answer to the question of why even journalists like Theresa Greer could cling to the illusion of black homogeneity for such a long time: it was just the other side of the white homogeneity coin (discourse) and the result of a discussion in which almost any problem of the black community was described in terms of race and as a binary relation between black and white. "I am struggling against the binary position. I want to talk about new ideas that are not fixed ... there is more to my life than racism. For me there is an empowerment, a tremendous excitement about being able to partake in so many different things," Chadha once said, referring to an Indian film, *Purab Aur Paschim* (East or West) condemning the Western lifestyle of Indians in Britain. What she

does in *Bhaji* can be seen as an expression of her conviction that "the new identity" must not "be defined in white racist terms". And obviously she succeeded in convincing at least one sad viewer of her film of this.

The critical reception of the film in India seems to have been much more detached. Aruna Vasudev in *Cinemaya* emphasises the cultural time lag between modern middle class society in India and "the stern patriarchy still prevalent in Britain's Indian society"(35).

today."(34) Not quite, though, because at the end of her review she seems to address her Indian readers with an undertone of admonition:

For audiences from the Indian sub-continent there are perceptive insights into the plight of displacement generally and of the rigidity of specifically Indian behaviour and reactions. Without being 'feminist' in the commonly accepted western sense, the film exposes the violence inherent in the male attitudes and the dominant place the mother occupies in the psyche of the average Indian man. (35)



Scene from *My Beautiful Laundrette*

She notes that Rekha, the only 'real' Indian among the the "women of Indian origin" on their trip to Blackpool (played by the same actress as the 'real' Pakistani lady in *My Beautiful Laundrette*), criticises the older ladies for their cultural backwardness: "She knows that the 'tradition' her old friends are clinging to so senti-mentally, are a thing of the past in India as it is

Chadha would again have smiled mischievously: Hadn't she again succeeded in teasing out reciprocity? Western critics, haunted by PC, had never dared to name the obvious: the rigidity that causes so many interpersonal and intracultural conflicts in Indian life. Or had they just cherished comfortable assumptions of Indian cultural homogeneity?

To white British critics, as to the white British audience in general (and to the younger British Asian audience in particular), the film came as a great relief. "People reviewed it as a breath of fresh air," (*Black Film Bulletin* 39) Chadha remembers. At last there was someone who was not in tune with the nostalgia about ideal extended families and the preservation of identities. Instead, there were women "wrestling with the reality" (Quart 49) of an immigrant community torn by conflicting forces within and surrounded by a fast changing, 'cold', and still class-ridden society. Chadha always refused to call her films 'black' - at least "in the way that most people think black film is" - and emphasises again and again that her films "look at the ways cultures are shaped and informed" (Wambu 36) - and not at fixed identities.

To Alexander Walker, film critic of the *Evening Standard*, the main 'character' of the film seems to be a cultural 'space': Blackpool "cunningly chosen for its gaudy tawdriness" and - its resemblance to "Bombay-by-the Sea". In a sense, he suggests the film is "distinctly British". In a similar vein Georgina Brown writes in the New York *Village Voice*:

Seeing it [*Bhaji*] from abroad I can only be deeply touched by England, by all these first- and second- generation Birmingham Asians ... taking a day trip to Blackpool. They're so bloody English! Even the aunties in their saris and with their crimson third eyes and carrying - along with chili powder for the chips - their closed minds and horrid prejudices. What a vital spicy crew!



This is what Chadha referred to as breath-of-fresh-air-reviewing: White British (American, French, German ....) audiences felt empowered to recognize the presence of their own 'space' in the third space created by the film. Not in the flat sense of the phrase "we are all the same", but in the sense that the 'others' are also troubled by a culture full of conflicts, faultlines, contradictions and nasty things, some of which appear very similar to those in 'our' society. This sense of reciprocity established successfully may explain the almost gleeful wallowing of Western critics in the film's anti-PC elements.

Leonard Quart in his review in *Cineaste* uses his strongest language to describe the characters: Ranjit is "the spinelessly brutal husband", his brother is a "crude macho", the families are "oppressive", and there is "racism", "parochialism", "intolerance", and - surprise - "insularity" among the Asians ("who have the capacity to abuse and tyrannize each other") depicted in the film.<sup>(49)</sup> Alexander Walker, who finds the film "excellent in the way it shows the Asian-British in the half-way house between their overseas imperial past and their suburban British present", keeps on about the theme of reciprocity:

It is the story of a vanful of Asian women and girls setting off from Birmingham for a day by the sea at Blackpool - to the tune of Cliff Richard's *Summer Holiday* rendered in Punjabi - and a good way of showing the New Brits against the old Anglo-Saxon rites of seaside outings and comic encounters and revealing the

best and worst of the two communities. "This country has cost us our children," laments venerable Aunty Pushpa (Zohra Seagal)...Ginder (Kim Vithana) has fled her curry-tempered husband (Jimmi Harkishin) and gets no sympathy from Asha, her corner-shop ma-in-law (Lalita Ahmed). "She was too dark," flutes Ahsa, "can't trust the dark ones."

Worse still is the secret that slips out en route: Asha's daughter (Sarita Khajuria) is pregnant by a Brummie boy (Mo Sesay). And he is coal black. "Chaos is come," wails aunty ...

Some of the natives are friendly, like the ageing actor laddie (Peter Cellier) who takes a shine to Asha and squires her around town. Some of the incomes are as bad as the homegrown skinheads, like Ginder's yobbish brother-in-law (Tanveer Ghani) strung around with chains and a permanent bellow.

The Blackpool location has been cunningly chosen for its gaudy tawdryness. It resembles Bombay-by-the-Sea, so that the daytrippers in their dayglo saris and shawl never look too much out of place against the exoticism of striped deckchairs and multi-coloured illuminations.

Occasionally the culture clash is needlessly cruel and tasteless. It's not really amusing to see dignified Aunty Pushpa being manhandled by male strippers who look like down-market rip-offs of the Chippendales.

But to turn this tale of a seaside outing into such a complex excursion into multi-ethnic manners, and make it funny and comprehensible too, is an uncommon achievement. To make it racially truthful is a brave one .....

At last, Walker seems to say, someone is honestly and comprehensibly doing some groundwork for what is now called negotiating ethnic identities. As a counterpart to Walker's relieved critical breathing, we find similar relieved, and even more straight-

forward, "confessions" in the 'black' cultural scene. Readers of a 'black' journal (*Eastern Eye/Spice*) were warned ten days before the release of the film, that:

The positive images lobby black people who feel that we shouldn't wash our dirty linen in public - will have their politically correct knickers in an uncomfortably tight twist. Chadha deals with the distrust older members of the Asian community feel towards Afro-Caribbeans, the taboo against mixed-race relationships, the propensity of Asian men to shag white women while insisting that Asian women are temples of purity who shouldn't be defiled. At one screening a holier-than-thou section of the audience hissed when Pushpa hides her purse from the Afro-Caribbean family sitting next to her on the beach.

The anonymous author of the article draws the readers' attention to some other areas of reciprocity that will go unnoticed in a western audience but pique - or please - an Indian one: One of the dream sequences of Asha is a "piss-take of a moralizing movie" called *Purab Aur Pachim* (East and West) whose heroine, an Asian girl brought up in London, is always seen with a blonde wig and a glass of whisky in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Chadha put this allusion in her film to "get my own back on that film" - and other films creating a positive but false homogeneity for the 'own' at the cost of stereotyping the 'other' into the corresponding negative homogeneity.

Where, one begins to ask after so many breaths of fresh air, have the PC and the positive/negative homogeneity lobby been all the time? Mark Steyn in the *Spectator*

was very much disappointed by the film. Disgruntled with Britain in the final throes of Thatcherism, where film prizes are handed out "to grouchy British Lefties" whose films reflect the "general awfulness of Britain", his view of *Bhaji* is strangely selective:

The best moment in *Bhaji on the Beach*...is when a posse of [white] Black Country [industrial area around Birmingham] lads moon out of their Ford Cortina at some Asian ladies in a mini-bus. The attention to detail puts Merchant-Ivory to shame....Each wan, pimply buttock. Has been expertly cast. A category of Best British Moon Shot would bestow important recognition on this distinctively British skill.

To Steyn, his own British culture is homogeneously awful, he is disappointed that *Bhaji* does not present the other culture as homogeneously beautiful: the fact that Cliff Richard's *Summer Holiday* sung in Punjabi is the film's signature song, symbolises, he thinks, "how British Asian films defer to Western models". In the first part of this essay, I have tried to demonstrate how difficult it can be to unlearn simplifactory, 'homogenizing' interpretation of cultural products, and how the practitioner of film taught the theoreticians a lesson by "wrongfooting" them. Fortunately we are now getting analyses that take diasporic hybridity more seriously, like Eleanor Byrne's article in the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, in which she writes about new paradigms in the presentation of 'whiteness' in black British cinema. Looking at *Bhaji*'s representation of white people, she makes the point that the film successfully escapes the "danger of simply maintaining a

privileged status for whiteness", which may be the undesired result of attempts "to radically deconstruct rigid hierarchies of 'race' in a theoretical climate of fascination with hybridity and syncretic cultures". (172)

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