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SPECIAL ISSUE

Cultural Representations of India and Indian Diasporas on Screen /
Representaciones culturales de India y sus diásporas en la pantalla

INTRODUCTION

Jorge Diego-Sánchez & Juan Ignacio Oliva*

Universidad de Salamanca & Universidad de La Laguna/GIECO-Franklin-UAH/Ratnakara

Visions, voices, echoes, misrepresentations, stereotypes, fluidities, borders, screens, or contrasts (and all the in-between options) emerge as subtitles linked to the study of cultural representations of India and its diasporas. The conceptual images of roots and routes, icebergs, tapestries, visual memories, local festivals outside India such as La Tomatina, or characters and celebrities visiting India (or even retiring in an Indian hotel or stepping outside an Indian screen) articulate contemporary representations that renegotiate the past and future of how India is considered and how it is recreated in the present. This special issue, devoted to “Cultural Representations of India and Indian Diasporas on Screen,” includes fourteen research papers, two interviews, four pieces of creative writing and three reviews that aim to assess and revisit portrayals of India and its diasporas on screen through different genres. This volume is articulated with an interplanetary vocation (Spivak, Moreno-Álvarez) that unveils previous and future conceptualisations of the many Indias that are contained in such a heterogeneous and changing nation and in its history and narration. Moreno-Álvarez links “interplanetary” to “empathetic universals whose embodiment, spatiality and intersubjectivity is constituted in relation to others, where being human is being con-human” (85). It is our intention to look at India and its diasporas throughout different forms, perspectives, testimonies and with the con-human promise of a new screen that will foster a new and multiple representation of India. By so doing, these pages ignite a vocation to listen to first testimonies from producers, film-directors, writers, and scholars who portray their own image and understanding in texts where empathy and conviviality (Menon, Suárez-Lafuente) may emerge as key to evaluate and consider the cultural representations of India and Indian Diasporas on screen. Artistic, social, gender and political discourses in Indian cultural representations on screen are read, analysed and promoted in this issue. There are references (and articles) pointing to mainstream cinematographic practices like Bollywood, but this is not our core motivation. Instead, contributors offer different interdisciplinary perspectives in order to understand and see beyond the worldwide success of this mode of Indian cinema.

Accordingly, famous Indian filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray or Aparna Sen and popular films like *Maqbool* will be studied alongside much more contemporary (and unknown) titles like *Asuran*, *Behind the Bhangra Boys* or *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, to investigate and add different and recurrent agendas. Filmmakers and testimonies from the Indian diaspora will also be analysed and some contributions will present confronting views on the same feature (titles are not mentioned to avoid spoilers).

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Two sections with interviews and creative pieces are also included, where the reader will find motivational words as well as first-person testimonies from directors, producers, playwrights, poets and journalists. This issue presents three reviews on two interdisciplinary volumes on India Studies and a note on one film festival held before the COVID-19 pandemics struck the world (and we became even more dependent on screens and the mediated images they offer).

The volume starts with Carmen Escobedo de Tapia's article, which contextualises historically cinema in India and studies the strong link shared by history, nation and narration, in the arrival of cinematographic narrative forms and mechanisms to the country. She documents more than one hundred years of filmmaking, pointing out creative influences, contemporary topics, and the economics, politics and creativity that intertwine in moviemaking. The author manages to tackle what is within, beyond and besides cinema and how it has narrated the history of the many nations of India in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dolores Herrero, in the next contribution, departs from the previous historical framework to highlight the necessary vindications that, in terms of anti-casteism and diversity, are not included in mainstream Indian Cinemas. Her paper embraces how social inclusion can be made visible and is represented and stimulated from cinema. By studying the film *Asuran* (2019), she investigates contemporary Dalit cinema to guess the "Aesthet(h)ics" of such a cinema, meaning that there is a new aesthetics that demands and promotes and ethical consideration that calls for ethical responsibility. This theoretical label can be extremely helpful to study the subversion of characters, productions, and directors, as Herrero proves in her stimulating reading of *Asuran* and its anti-caste agenda. The conceptualisation is extremely useful to continue adding layers (or deciphering) in cinema about the cultural (mis)representations of recurrent topics for India studies such as caste, gender, sexualities or religious hegemonies. Nation-building, ideological concerns and colonialism are a constant in current post/decolonial debates and sociological India studies. Binayak Roy & Om Prakash Dwivedi study Satyajit Ray's films to assess his representation of power relations using vernacular languages (Bengali) and the

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historical particularities of a state (Bengal and the Bengal Famine). They develop a close reading of the anticolonial project of Ray in *Shatranj ke Khilari* (*The Chess Players*, 1980) and *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973). They study the historical and linguistic complexities of the region and illustrate the dynamics through which the British Raj made use of those differences in terms of urban/non-urban areas, economic means of production and access to education. They categorise these two films as part of a “post 1970” filmmaking that Ray exerted in response to the betrayal of the Nehruvian dream and thus of Ray’s own values.

Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez contributes with an article that talks to Roy & Dwivedi’s paper to add a new layer. She surveys the ways in which the real story of the Royal Oudh Family was told through journalist chronicles and Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “A Real Durwan” (1999). If the previous paper described the life stories of the Royal Oudh Family presented by Satyajit Ray, here Moreno-Álvarez revolves on the notion that build the concept of ‘a real representation.’ Her article is extremely pertinent for this volume because she compares a literary and a journalist representation to decipher and analyse the nuances through which the traumatic experiences of Partition have been told. She navigates throughout these two notions of reality alongside the line “Believe Me / Do not Believe Me,” detailing that emotions can be ignored, misused or incorporated in a narrative or cultural representation to understand different levels of history (and its essentialisation). Her contribution enriches and opens new questions in respect to the field of New Historicism and Postcolonial Studies, recalling what western journalists and readers did not acknowledge in the cultural representations and chronicles of the times. With the constant possibility of a cinematographic adaptation of Lahiri’s short story composite *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) (where the story is included), Moreno-Álvarez’s engaging article emerges as pioneering because it pinpoints and discusses on the nuances through which India has displayed its own history and which real-false stories have been told. It is in this sense that Anwesha Dutta Ain’s paper labels Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*, 1955) and *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*, 1991) as cinematographic fictional narratives that are subtexts of fictional ethnography, allowing thus to recognise the ethnographic particularities of the non-urban areas described in the 1955 film and the urban particularities of Kolkata in the 1991 feature. Dutta Ain studies Ray’s dialogues and cinematography to highlight the importance of cinema in documenting life, times, and symbolism of specific times. Then, as in Moreno-Álvarez poignant lines, it is how and why we believe it (or not) that the spectators and researchers should pay attention to.

The particularities of Bengal and its own history of Anglo-Indian identities (and stereotypes) are theorised in the next article, where Felicity Hand studies the cinema of Aparna Sen and her (re)creation of alterity. Hand presents and explores Sen’s cinema to illustrate Sen’s personal allegiance when illustrating different Indian identities. She studies *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002) and *15 Park Avenue* (2005) to assess Sen’s portrayal of disability, ageing and communalism. Hand highlights the particularities of the three women who star in the films to offer a deep analysis on religion, caste, and sickness to allow the reader/spectator to understand Sen’s commitment with *othered* figures. Hand’s contribution is a perfect



corollary for the preceding articles as she illustrates the history, stories, agenda and regional particularities of India and the many multiples Indias contained in such cinematographic mediations.

Characters on a cinema screen look bigger than the spectators and some film versions or adaptations overtake and transmute literary classics to reconstruct and arbitrate its messages and personalities. Therefore, some cinematic images of India are understood as biased realities. Rosa García-Periago departs from this power and expands Hand's reading about alterity in respect to how female sexuality has been portrayed in Indian cinemas. She documents the adaptation of Lady Macbeth and her sexual desire in *Maqbool* (2003) and *Veeram* (2017) to offer nuances on the implications of being a married Indian woman. García-Periago examines these adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to consider the transformations of the source text in these two films that transmute specific topics and representations to fit the demands of the Indian audience and understand Shakespeare's classic. She traces these two Indian Lady Macbeths explaining the different aspects through which Indian cinemas have conceptualised women sexual desire and its interconnection (or not) with evil. Her contribution guides readers and spectators to know more about Indian traditions of cinematographic representation but also about historical and ethical particularities that let us think (and act and adapt) beyond the screen of cinemas. Thea Buckley enriches the discussion on adaptations with her work on *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014), a Malayalam-language film that displays the generational tensions of a family on a colonial tea plantation in the South of India. The movie is a mashup of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Biblical *Book of Job*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* that, as Buckley points out, allows the director to transgress on themes of national division that can be traced to Partition while adding a social evaluation on caste differentiation and indigenous populations within India. This is a new seam in the multiple quilts through which India can be defined, thus letting spectators, readers and researchers to know and revolve more on the multiple darns, threads and frays through which the multiples Indias –inside India– are displayed.

Hegemonies and normativities are shown, questioned or challenged through narratives and cultural representations. Portrayals of gender and sexual orientations on screen may dissent or either inherit some of the preestablished hegemonic discourses. Regiane Ramos & Jairo Adrián-Hernández study the interference and control of religious discourses in LGBTIQ+ identities in Sukhdeep Singh's documentary *Sab Rab De Bande (We're all God's Creation)* (2020). They explain that Singh's feature challenges previous taxonomies on gender identities and sexual orientation in the specific queer Sikh community of Delhi and propose an intersectional study that informs their reading on the testimonies gathered in the film. The possibility of a joyful activism and the collection and portrayal of a community in the diaspora, in this case a Sikh community in Eastern Canada, is examined in Rohini Bannerjee's article on another documentary, Nancy Ackerman's *Behind the Bhangra Boys* (2019). Bannerjee accounts for the social responsibility shared in the diaspora to illuminate a territory and come to terms, for instance, with the unceded territories of Mi'kma'ki, otherwise known as Nova Scotia. Both articles



decipher the cultural representation of two Sikh communities and add a comparison on how diaspora, sexual orientations and gender identities are shown in public life, stressing the necessity to assess and value cultural representations on screen to understand traditions, histories and personal stories of individuals, communities and possibilities such as a joyful activism. The particularities of diaspora are later specified by Shilpa Bhat, who studies a particular song in a Bollywood film (*Naam* 1986) to digress on the power given to nostalgia, memory and music in the creation and recreation of identity. Bhat offers an insight on music as a source of nostalgia that engages with the importance of Bannerjee's reading of Ackerman's feature to also foster a joyful activism. Understanding history throughout particular stories facilitate complementary and opposing views about a specific event.

The cultural representations of the trauma of the Partition of India in 1947 proliferate in Indian arts to reconceptualise how political and economic powers get hold of readings or portrayals of the event and its political and economic consequences. The ARTICLES section of this issue finishes with two contributions on Partition and its cinematographic representations. Elena Oliete-Aldea studies Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) throughout a transdisciplinary and transtextual approach that allows us to understand the particularities and nuances of films about the Raj and the specific particularities that nostalgic representations open. Oliete-Aldea magnificently links the tradition of heritage film about the Raj to the twenty-first conjuncture of a political, humanitarian, and economic crisis. She circumscribes Chadha's film as a revision of India's Partition in a global and local scenario that leads us to question future cultural representations on the topic. Accordingly, Sandeep Ain also talks about Chadha's film adding questions on the relevance of the incorporation of Chadha's personal elements in the narrative. The article talks to Oliete-Aldea and initiates a dialogue that enriches, because he adds different films and literary texts that complement and question, as in the first article of the section, the kaleidoscopic image of India on screen. Finally, as a sort of addendum, Amit Ranjan Biswas adds his own testimony and motivation as film director and screenplay writer of *Bridge* (2016), emphasising the alchemy of cinema and its therapeutic qualities.

Testimonies of those who represent are important to familiarise with their particularities and willingness. The section INTERVIEWS adds two conversations. The first one is led by Regiane Ramos & Jairo Adrián-Hernández with the director Sukhdeep Singh. It is extremely important to hear the specific words because they enrich and contextualise in first person the research (and contextualisation) previously made by Ramos & Adrián-Hernández. The particularities in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity and religion that Singh shares illuminate some of the questions posed in the previous section. Also, his words invoke the possibility of transformation and the necessity to reassess how ethical a society is. The dialogue between producer Paramita Bannerjee and Mónica Fernández Jiménez displays the complexities of making an independent film in a particular setting of Bengal. The motivations, artistic choices and in-between journeys inform spectator and readers about the complexities of making a film, documentary, short, shooting a videoclip, or simply choosing the nuances and perspectives to represent cultural ethos and/or aesthetics.



What happens when someone switches off (or on) the light that accompanies a screening, the writing of a film or the start of a streaming in/about/from a specific place? This question is answered in the section CREATION with four testimonies. Firstly, poet and scholar Zinia Mitra shares a poem on one character in Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*. Then, Aritra Basu's play "A Final Showdown against Streaming Giants" presents different Indian directors discussing (and strategizing!) on (against!) the Video on Demand streaming sector. The section closes with two poems based in the city of Kolkata and specifically a particular Southern area. Diego-Sánchez's poem "Bhavani Cinema" interpellates a local cinema that shows and has seen many lives, representations, roots and routes of multiple Indias (or at least some of them, experienced by the co-editors). Juan Ignacio Oliva's translation into English adds slowness, beauty and deepness to share the whirlwind energy of the place and the spaces it gathers through images, films and stories. On the other hand, the lines of Oliva's poem "Kalighat" act as perfect corollary for this volume: routes and roots of stories, dwellings, wanderings and the metaphorical process of experiencing Indian culture(s) barefeet, with well-trodden shoes or stepping on new boots. The whimsical tone opens a connection with the histories and stories that have permeated the place he details, and that so continue. Diego-Sánchez translates these lines into English, adding a solemn tone, almost premonitory, to round up the journey both embarked, sailed and ventured together in this issue.

The volume ends with the section *Reviews* that includes one about a film festival and two about two interdisciplinary volumes on multiple India(s), so that the reader and spectator can continue switching on and off different lights that open up new and old cultural representations of India and its diasporas on screen. Finally, the editors want to acknowledge the reviewers of this issue, who have generously shared their time, expertise and feedback to the articles that you will read (and some others who await to be read in future publications). Thank you for sharing this journey that now continues with you, reader. You are the one turning lights off so that new footlights can be switched on.



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ARTICLES

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF INDIAN CINEMA: A CALEIDOSCOPIC VISION OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Western image of India has traditionally been based on the attraction of stereotypes like the exotic, the mystical or the spiritual; if this imaginative construct is evident in literature, with examples like Paul Scott's *The Jewel in The Crown* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. I suggest that this recreation could also be applicable to cinema through stereotypical visions that originally appear in films about India. In this article I aim to explain the evolution of Indian cinema as a genre of its own, using postcolonial concepts like 'mimicry', 'hybridity' or 'liminality' discussed by H.K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), and through the threefold perspective developed by Priyamvada Gopal in *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (2009).

KEYWORDS: Indian Cinema, Postcolonial Studies, Cultural Studies, Bollywood, Film Studies.

ORÍGENES Y EVOLUCIÓN DEL CINE INDIO: UNA VISIÓN CALEIDOSCÓPICA DE INDIA

RESUMEN

La imagen de India que tradicionalmente ha ofrecido occidente está basada en una atracción hacia estereotipos como lo exótico, lo místico o lo espiritual; si esto es evidente en ejemplos dentro del ámbito de la literatura, como *La joya de la corona* de Paul Scott o *Pasaje a la India* de E.M. Forster se puede aplicar al ámbito del cine a través de imágenes estereotipadas que aparecen originalmente en las películas sobre India. En este artículo ofrezco una explicación panorámica de la evolución del cine indio como género en sí mismo, utilizando los conceptos poscoloniales de *mimicry*, *hybridity* o *liminality* que H.K. Bhabha desarrolla en *The Location of Culture* (1994), y utilizando la triple perspectiva que Priyamvada Gopal explica e ilustra en *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (2009).

PALABRAS CLAVE: cine indio, estudios poscoloniales, estudios culturales, Bollywood, estudios sobre cine.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian literary and cinematographic narratives should be considered artistic representations that clearly show the progress of the Indian historical context where “the idea of India” (Kilkani 1994) is framed, offered by literary authors and film directors. Underlying both narrative discourses, the main concepts discussed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) are clearly identified. Thus, mimicry, interstice, hybridity, and liminality inevitably characterise the cinema produced in India as a cultural production that reflects, in the most prolific way, the ambivalence inherent to Indian cinematographic paradigms from its origins to the contemporary. In this line I should also consider the importance of the historical and social contexts where the development of Indian cinema takes place. Although it is indispensable to refer to a parallel evolution of both the literary and the cinematographic phenomena, and take into consideration that several novels have been and are being adapted into films, there is no question about the fact that the Indian cinema in its evolution has acquired specific characteristics that allow us to talk about an independent genre. As said, both artistic fields intermingle due to the nature of the Indian context and its historical progress. This is where the threefold approach –history, nation and narration (Bhabha 1990; Gopal 2009)– required to interpret and understand the literary texts also acquires significance and relevance in the field of Indian cinema. It is within this referential framework where the view I aim to propose is based.

When approaching the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent, an important synthetic exercise should be done. The threefold perspective previously mentioned should be considered when analysing any cultural construct which represents what political scientist Sunil Kulkani termed “the idea of India”, a diverse, heterogenous and complex entity as well as still a fairly distant and unknown context in the western part of the world, both geographically and culturally.

It is for this reason that I have structured this article tackling the social and the historical aspects that are inherent to the evolution of the cinema in India, which also goes parallel to the evolution of the literary, most specifically the narrative genres. It can be stated that both fields start their firm pace towards the contemporary in the 1930s, and more specifically after the Independence in 1947.¹

Taking the historical development as the chronological point of departure of the development of Indian narratives in English helps us to shed light onto the sphere of the cinematic production of India, which is considered among the so-called ‘other cinemas’ or ‘cinema of other countries’, with the marginality implied in these terms. It is at this point that the Indian cinema relates to the postcolonial discourse being characterized by concepts explained by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994). The fact that the colonial discourse accepts and negates any cultural

¹ Extensive information about the parallel development of the literary Indian English narrative and Indian cinema can be found in Carmen Escobedo de Tapia & Verónica Quevedo Revenga (2012).



paradigm framed within the postcolonial has placed the cinema produced in India in a marginal space in the academic world with a generalized stereotypical vision of it, or just acknowledging the prestige of directors that convey an image of India that the coloniser recognizes as different so as to identify that formulaic 'idea of India'. As Bhabha states, the coloniser wants to feel identified within the stereotypical view of the colonised because it is precisely through this vision that it proves and secures its power over 'the others'.

This explains the first examples of Indian cinema, which were mere adaptations that mimicked the colonial image of India, based on Indian novels written by English writers like *The Jewel in The Crown* (1966)² from Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* (1965-75), and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), which was adapted to the screen in 1984. A good example could be the analysis of the character McBryde and the episode of the Marabar caves in the second novel aforementioned. Bhabha explains how this character displays a sort of "oriental pathology" in his beliefs and scientifically justifies the lascivious and menacing condition of Indians. The stereotype of the lascivious orient, which Said extensively refers to in *Orientalism* (1978), vertebrates the narration of the episode of the Marabar Caves, which is accurately reflected in the film. Adela Quested accuses Dr. Aziz, an Indian, of having sexually abused her. According to Bhabha, this episode aims to reaffirm the British coloniser as white, European and English with the aim of condemning the oriental. Mc Bryde offers a negative characterisation of Dr Aziz as the common Indian, reader of pornography, sexually obsessed because of the climate and with an innate criminal nature. Though this interpretation could be discussed, through the example provided Bhabha links ambivalence and stereotype, and in this link lies the colonial fear towards the seditious, cruel, lascivious, and menacing native. These are the affective grounds on which the image of 'the other' is related to symbols like chaos and violence, and deploys the horror never explained nor understood in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

The truth is that the Indian cinema is as diverse and rich as the context in which it emerges. It is a space of ambivalence defined by an essentially Indian plural identity that has been conformed, as we shall see, throughout its development, which represents at the same time the change of the subcontinent in historical and social terms, thus justifying the need to consider the concepts of 'Nation', 'History' and 'Narration' that were firstly inferred through the thoughts of Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* (1990) and fully explained and illustrated by Priyampada Gopal in *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (2009).

The first examples of films related to Indian themes were undoubtedly tinted with what Bhabha termed 'mimicry', especially present in those directed and produced by the west and that made evident the urge of the coloniser to show the differences between colonised and coloniser so as to define their respective contrastive identities. The Indian becomes a menace for the British and produces

² I will refer to first edition dates so as to follow a chronological order within the article.



the most shrilling nightmares about the colonised. This is explained in Bhabha's work "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1984). He suggests that mimicry, the same as stereotypes, is related with the need to define the colonial subject by asserting the similarities, but also all the differences, because mimicry implies at the same time a contradiction in which both the similar and the different would be included.

However, if we try to search for examples of colonial imitation in the cinema (the same as in literature) we should dive into the space that lies between the emulation and parody that defines the 'reformed civilized native', becoming almost a caricature, as is the case of Dr. Aziz in *A Passage to India*. This explains how mimicry becomes a menace, as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* implies when, in front of a group of black people in Africa states: "The thought of their humanity –like yours– the thought of your remote kinship with the world and passionate uproar. Ugly" (51). The fear of the similar without being similar is here implied that leads to being rejected. It is what Eric Strokes (in Sen 2002) referred to as the "magnetic power of the periphery that distorts the natural development of the British character" (xxv). This explains the reason why the first examples of films about India were mainly based on British novels, as we have previously said, where the characters were meticulously defined and differentiated in terms of coloniser and colonised, and offered stereotypical images of not only the Indian subject, but also of the Indian landscape, like Walt Disney Productions animated film *The Jungle Book* (1967) or that of US director Steven Spielberg, *Indiana Jones and the Doomed Temple* (1984). Even adaptations of the first Indian novels written in English like M.R. Anand's *Coolie* (1936) or R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) show a total deviation of the true idea of India and the identity of the Indian subject trying to adapt the Indian reality to a western imaginary, proving the ambivalent space in which the origins of Indian cinema was placed.

As time went by, productions moved from the fear of showing India as a menacing colonised location to gradually exalt its true history and mythology. In this sense, it is worthwhile mentioning historical films like Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), or *A Train to Pakistan* (1998), directed by Pamela Rooks, a film adaptation of the novel by Khushwant Singh (1956) in which a beautiful love story in the midst of the horrible episode of Partition is narrated; or the animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*, directed by Nina Paley in 2008, where I find the influence of the traditional Sanskrit epic of *The Ramayana* in contemporary times.

These productions of international impact go parallel to Indian productions of Indian directors who have portrayed, sometimes very naturalistically, the image of India in its diversity: the pre-colonial and the colonial, the mythical past, the contemporary times, the modern megalopolis and the remotest villages lost in the vastness of rural India. Though the origins of cinema were linked to the coloniser, the Indian cinema would soon start its own development, offering the multiple representations of India, challenging a claim for independence that in little more than a century has produced films essentially Indian that conform it as a genre of its own.

I will offer a panoramic view of the development of the genre in relation with the threefold perspective –History, Nation and Narration– where it should be



framed, because no idea of India would be faithful if it were not narrated in terms of the concept of a nation with its historical, social and cultural wealth. It is relevant to underline that the development of cinema in the subcontinent is of most interest to Postcolonial Studies, because it exemplifies what Mihir Bose (2007) considers:

one of the many cracks in the system of “apartheid” that the British colonizer imposed on India and that favoured the accessibility of the population to cultural products that in other colonized contexts like Africa, for instance was not possible until the achievement of Independence during the decade of the sixties and with a production and distribution strongly censored and controlled by the governments. (40-41)

This was not the case of India since it got hold of its own path and soon started a firm independent national industry, setting the basis of a system that in its most popular productions resembles Hollywood. Indian productions can be considered a true representation of the distinctive characteristics of the subcontinent, its multiple cultures, the symbiosis of the past and the present, the influence of the myths of *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* together with the social reality in-between wealth and poverty, fusing a cultural legacy of words, music, dance, and art in general. Accordingly, the development of cinema in India has not been homogeneous nor monolithic. It would be too reductionist to set a division like experimental films and popular films in regional languages (such as Bollywood, Tollywood...), since there is not just one popular cinema, but as many as vernacular languages exist.³

Different periods can be distinguished that are related to issues like the exhibition and reception of films. The relationship between history-nation-narration is the frame for that development, since it equally represents the diverse social conditions that characterised the subcontinent all through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. During the period of silent cinema, foreign films were frequently projected in the most luxurious cinemas of the cities. Actors like Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd were on the screens for the enjoyment of the wealthy and upper castes of the Indian society of the times. On the other hand, films in Hindi (produced in the region of Mumbai, with a specific economic development and consumption of cinemas) would be mostly projected in the marginal cinemas of the cities. These first examples included a high level of acrobatic content, and they were exhibited in the open air, both in the cities and in villages. Sometimes they included drama representations. An example of this stage would be the showman Abdullaly Esoofally, who brought cinema to Birmania, Singapur and Indonesia, as well as to most parts of India. He would travel with a projector, a tent and a portable screen from 1901 to 1907. Later some national companies would buy the cinemas

³ I should refer here to the work and research on Indian cinema by Rachel Dwyer and Vijay Mishra, which widely contribute to the knowledge on the subject.



located in the wealthiest parts of the cities to offer entertainment for the upper castes; this way, the cinema would gradually become a national means of entertainment.

Likewise, its progress reveals an evolution of tastes and aesthetics. In the period of silent cinema, it was frequent to find mere imitations of western productions. As the genre evolved, and since the introduction of sound, an eminently Indian aesthetics with a true independent identity was conformed, where the presence of music and dance were and are inherent elements of the filmic narrative. All these elements caused a fragmentation of the main narrative and, in turn, would cause a dislocation on the western spectator, but in the case of Indian cinema they become natural, showing the great variety of ingredients that conform Bollywood films and that represent the true nature of the Indian context. The term Bollywood comes from the fusion between Bombay and Hollywood as major representative of the cinematographic industry of the west. This is of essential interest because it proves the rethoric and dialectic implied between the west and the east (the coloniser and the colonised), between the excessive mercantilism of the west and a country fully characterised by spiritualism, or the confrontation between First World cinema and Third World cinema. These oppositions are, as Bhabha (1994) argued, related to the need of the west to feel different from the east, but also to show the need of the colonised to redefine their identity in terms of that ambivalent space that I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

ORIGINS: SILENT CINEMA

How did cinema reach India? Globally, it was in the Grand Café in the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris that the first film was projected in December 1895. Few months later, in July 1896, a selected audience at the Watson's Hotel in Bombay enjoyed the same repertoire that the Lumière Brothers introduced in France. Maurice Sestier, who oversaw taking the pioneer films to Australia, had to stop at Bombay. It was then that cinema starts its evolution in India as a popular entertainment for an increasingly urban population. For a time, only foreign films were projected, in connection with the literary sphere and related to the feeling of imitation implied in the concept of mimicry already explained. Soon the process of inscribing their own identity in the cinematographic narrative moved pioneering Indian directors to claim for an independence. Save Dada (Harischandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar) was a photographer who recorded some silent films with a camera he had imported from London, and he projected them in the open air. His most acknowledged production was *Wrestler* (1899), where he told the story of two famous Indian wrestlers: Pundalik Dada and Krishna Nahvi. Other examples like *A Man and his Monkeys* (1899) or *Local Scenes: Landing of Sir M.M. Bhownuggre* (1901), showed a local character. During this first period it should also be highlighted the production of Hiralal Sen and his brother Motilal in Calcutta. They produced a version of *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* (1899) which has been lost, and they filmed the first commercials. It would be in 1912 when *Pundalik*, the first film of fiction with an authentic Indian theme, was produced by Ramchandra Gopal Torney; it was based on the life of a saint.



The First World War gave a great impulse to the cinematographic industry in India. This reduced the possibility to import foreign films. The industrialization of the country attracted many people into the cities who were eager to enjoy new ways of entertainment and were in search of local images that the cinema could offer. Big entrepreneurs decided to invest in this new means of expression. There was a move from a handicraft production to the creation of the first studios in the twenties. These were small, but they already had two or three rooms with curtains to blur the light, as well as a separate laboratory for post-production tasks.

Throughout the twentieth century there was an increase from a 15% of the market that Indian productions could control to absorb the majority of the showtimes in the local cinemas in the forties. The Indian cinema that was aimed for an exclusive Indian audience, though more expensive, was notably more profitable; this would contrast with the marketing rate that national cinemas could achieve in the rest of the world at that time. After Independence, it reached unbeatable rates: from 251 productions in 195 to 300 in 1960, 400 in the seventies, 719 in 1980, and, three years later, 763. It is currently estimated that the annual production of Indian cinema has risen to 900 films. From the beginning of the twentieth century up to the contemporary times the Indian cinema production has increased and has gained international recognition and impact (Armes 117).

Dadasahed Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870-1944) is considered the father of Indian Cinema. He came from a family of intellectuals and, since he was very young, he showed great photographic and creative talent. Inspired by *The Life of Christ* (1910), he made films about Indian deities like Rama and Krishna. He lived in London, where he learnt more elaborate film techniques, and when he returned to India he produced the first experimental film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1912), which showed static shots and an episodic structure, being a clear referent for Satyajit Ray. Phalke would set the basis of 'the studio system'. His home was turned into a studio; its surroundings served the purpose to recreate very diverse scenarios. He is considered a master of special effects and he expertly used the wealth of Indian mythology. Examples are *Dahan* (1917), inspired in *The Ramayana*, *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1914), *Shiri Krishna Janma* (1918) and *Kalia Mardan* (1919). He enthused many entrepreneurs in Bombay who invested greatly in Indian cinema. These productions run parallel to the historical moments where they were framed. These were the times when Gandhi would start his political and social action in India and the winds of a nationalistic upsurge began to blow, favouring the role of both literature and cinema as decolonising tools claiming to recover the true identity of a country that had been subject to British imperialism since the nineteenth century.

Another influential figure of the 1920s was the Parsi director Jamshedi Framji Madan, who would contribute to the development of the cinema by incorporating many traditions from the Parsi theatre, like the historical romance melodrama and mythology. His productions were mainly foreign titles and noticeably of a European character so as to attract the upper castes of the society. Those were high quality productions in which Hindi mythology and show would intermingle. It was the first time a woman was enrolled as an actress, Patience Copper, of Anglo-Indian origin.



A good example of Madan's art would be *Nala and Damayanti* (1920), based on *The Mahabharata*, where he tried Hollywood lights effects and techniques. In 1919 he founded Madan Theatres Limited, a company that had great influence during the twenties and the thirties. Later, his son would widen the themes used, including from popular stories of Arab origin to contemporary love stories, as is the case of *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra* (1931).

Another significant name of the time was Diren Ganguly (1893-1978), born in Calcutta, who wrote a script in 1920 where the Indians who had lived in England for a time were satirised. He criticised their pseudo British ways with which they would try to mimic Europeans, as well as the conservatism of some Indians. An example could be *Bhelta Pherot (Return to England)* (1921), which was produced by the newly found Indo-British Film Company.

Other relevant figures during this period that would set the basis of its evolution were Debaki Kumar Bose (1888-1975), who was a fanatic of the theme of love, as reflected in the script for *Flames of Flesh* (1930), and Chadulal Shah (1898-1975), who produced films with English titles, like *Typist Girls* (1926), *Educated Wife* (1935), and his great success, *Gunsandari (Why husbands go Astray)* (1927). In this last film, he tackled for the first time the social theme in Indian films in which the roles of men and women were equalled.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, Indian cinema clearly illustrated the historical moment the nation was undergoing. The same as in the literary sphere, the basis of a later development was set. The clash between the Indian and British cultures was made evident through the films produced, where the mythological past was used in an attempt to reject the coloniser and as a claim to achieve a new identity. The thematic trends proved the criticism that was originated from the nationalist rise that was backed up by Mahatma Gandhi as a political and social leader, and by writers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore in his work *Nationalism* (1917). Social themes appeared on the screen, showing a stern reaction and criticism not only towards the coloniser but also the colonised. Indian intellectuals started to take conscience of the many consequences the colonisation had brought into the country, and filmic and literary narrations showed the transference from the colonial to the postcolonial.

THE ARRIVAL OF SOUND

The arrival of sound caused a great impact on Indian cinema. The 1930s could be considered a landmark in the evolution of both literature and cinema in India. If it is true that the arrival of sound allowed for the improvement of films, with the inclusion of musical shows full of fantasy mixed with simple technique, it also originated a complex situation. Being a country where there was a great illiteracy rate and at the same time characterised by polyglossia, the films had to be subtitled in several languages: Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and Marathi. In some cases there were even two shifts for actors of different languages so as to maintain the same stage and musical shows.



Two trends were originated; on the one hand, the so called 'All-India Movie', which was produced in Bombay with great budgets and aimed at an Indian audience, and, on the other hand, local productions in other vernacular languages (Armes 110). One of the main directors during this period was Vandruke Shantaram (1901-1990), who produced films with mythological themes in Hindi and Marathi, like *Ayodhyecha Raja (The King of Ayoda)* (1932) or *Amor Jyoti (Eternal Flame)* (1936), in which the role of the woman is emphasised; other films deployed social themes in which social conventions were analysed, while others tackled the Hindu-Muslim confrontation, and religious radicalisms are examined in films like *Amritmantha* (1934).

The Gandhian Era (1930-1947) set the basis of Modern India in many spheres of life. It was a time of social turmoil that triggered a revolutionary trend in artistic forms like the literature and the cinema of the period, which set the pave for independence in search of a new identity that would emerge from the need for self and collective reaffirmation in the transition to the postcolonial. B.N. Sircar and P.C. Barau (1903-1951) worked together in the production of films which would try to recover the myths of the past in terms with this need to claim for an authentic Indian identity. *Devdas* (1935) narrates the story of love between Krishna and Radha. It is still the more covered in the history of Indian cinema.⁴ This first version proved the art of the directors who managed to turn social themes into romantic melodramas together with the most advanced techniques of the times.

The Bombay Talkies Studios, one of the most important film companies was founded by Himansu Rai and his wife Devika Rani in 1935. Many important actors like Raj Kapoor were trained in the company. The west provided new techniques that would contribute to give shape to films that represented the religious panorama of India. Soon the social themes actually became social criticism, representing the idea of a hybrid India in search of its identity within the ambivalent space that the postcolonial period had created in its transformation from the colonial. An example could be *Achhut Kanya (The Untouchable Girl)* (1936) and Ashok Kumar, the so-called sponsor of Indian cinema and the protagonist in the film, which tells the love story between an untouchable woman and an upper-caste man, mirroring this historical moment when Gandhi was fighting for radical changes in certain social traditions. The theme of novels like *Untouchable* (1935) or *Coolie* (1936) by M.R. Anand evince the parallel development of both narratives in consonance with the historical development of the Indian nation, gathering, once more, history, nation and narration. In this period the arrival of playback in 1937 reaffirmed the musical character of the Indian cinema as one of its most significant characteristics since it allowed the actors and actresses not to be necessarily singers.

⁴ Later versions of the film were released in 1955 and 2002.



Independence in 1947, intellectuals and activists like Gandhi or Rabindranath Tagore and Jawarhalal Nehru, among others, achieved their dream of a free India, but the aftermath was not what they expected. The social atmosphere was agitated by the continuous Hindu-Muslim confrontations ultimately causing Partition, one of the most tragic episodes in the history of the subcontinent, which led to the wreckage of Gandhi's fight during the first half of the twentieth century. India was immersed in social chaos that ended up with Gandhi's murder in 1948. Democracy was established, but Indian identity had been shaken to the roots and there was the need to restore the new 'idea of India' as a free country. Actually, democracy in India was influenced by the feeling of a united nation provided the impulse for achieving Independence had been shattered, but it was time to recover the Indian self by restoring the past in order to explain the chaotic present. In this historical framework, the experimental cinema and Bollywood appear. Up to that moment, as formerly stated, cinema was mainly an entertainment mainly based on fantasy and rhetoric, but after the achievement of Independence the social themes became the main tool to fight the reality of the moment: the power of control, hunger, and the change of moral values that appear with the new postcolonial identity of the Indian subcontinent after 1947. The concept of nation acquired relevant meanings frequently contrasting good and evil or the urban life as the locus of western materialism full of negative connotations as opposed to the essence of the 'Indian self.'

The 'Golden Age' of the Indian cinema comes with Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) as an icon of the experimental cinema. He is the most internationally acknowledged Indian film director. His films depict a great variety of the Indian society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in comedies like *Parash Pathar (The Philosopher's Stone)* (1957), romances and musicals like *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne (The Adventures of Gopy and Bagha)* (1969), documentaries and even adaptations of Rabindranath Tagore's works. His creativity represents an intellectual fusion between the western and eastern artistic filmic forms. He analysed the philosophical pillars of the Indian culture while introducing the concepts of democracy, liberalism and social and gender equality in Indian films (Armes 231). He is best known for his *Trilogy of Apu: Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959). The trilogy enhanced the contrast between modernity and tradition and showed how this affects the son of a Brahman growing into adulthood. Later, his films explore orthodox Hindu values and analyse deeply the psychology of the characters; rural India is an important aspect of his films, together with fantasy, humour and women issues.

Ray's art greatly differs from Indian popular cinema, as Armes (1987) argues, because of its peculiar narrative structures and concentration on details based on western techniques, as well as his concept of rhythm and the soundtracks he himself composed. Music has a cathartic purpose in his films, but it never overcomes the power of images. Ray has been considered a master because of the depiction of his characters, authentically human and vulnerable, absolutely accesible for the audience. This "compassionate image" (8) he offers, according to John Kenneth Muir (2006), makes Ray a world reference as a film director.



The aesthetics of Bollywood would be of great contrast. Significant directors were Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt or Raj Kapoor, but Mehboob Khan, of Muslim origin, should be highlighted. He produced one of the most influential Indian films: *Mother India* (1957). It portrays the fight of a mother who has to kill her own son to save the daughters of the community. The social reality of the time –contrary to many Bollywood romances located in the rural past– incorporates elements of modern India. It tells the story of an old mother who foresees the future of a nation. It was the first Indian film submitted for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1958, and it is probably one of the most accredited both in India and abroad. Its musical shows gained popular success. Full of Indian symbolism, the film belongs to a popular tradition also present in other artistic fields like painting and literature, where the nation is represented as a woman, specifically a mother. This is a clear symbol of an anti-imperialistic and nationalistic movement that used the image of a woman as the map of the Peninsula. In literature, the novel *Anandamath* (1882) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, represented the Indian nation as Goddess Durga, killing demons as she rides a lion. In *Mother India*, the strength and courage of the protagonist, Radha, is emphasised over the vulnerability of her husband, who loses his arms and, consequently in symbolic terms, his masculinity.

If the two representative trends of this period are compared through Ray's trilogy and *Mother India*, it can be concluded that they entail similar thematic elements. Both tell the story of a poor family that has to overcome different ordeals that increase their poverty. In both narratives the audience is aware of the force of nature through torrential rains that destroy their homes and children who die of hunger or because of natural disasters. Both portray costumbrist scenes like festivals and weddings or daily work. In *Mother India* these are the excuse to include dances, music and songs that contribute to the narrative. Ray offers sober images, emphasising more static and general shots between episodes and avoiding digression from the main narrative. *Mother India* stands as a paradigm of how popular cinema is influenced by popular dramatic forms, among others.

By the end of the 1950s, popular cinema in India had already settled. In 1969 Amitabh Bachchan arrived in Bombay and he changed the history of Indian cinema. His film *Zanjeer (Shackles)* (1973) was a success and represents the general social discontent with the government of those times, criticising corruption and bureaucracy. It starts the police genre, where action would be given more relevance than musical shows and where the protagonist turns from a traditional hero into an antihero who feels responsible to fight the underworld of corruption.

During the 1960s and the 1970s the evolution of the Indian cinema would show the 'idea of a modern India' with the fusion of western and Indian elements. Gopaldas Parmanand Sippy appears with his film *Sholay* (1975) gives birth to the 'masala curry western', a kind of Indian western which mixed dance, music, songs, and features of the Hindi film with the typical ingredients of westerns.

The decade of the 1980s was not very productive for the cinema globally due to the appearance of television and the video. In India, the audience preferred to stay at home rather than risk their health in theatres or cinemas that were considered



infectious focuses. Piracy seriously damaged the film industry too, which would witness the emergence of big complexes and cineplexes.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, films like *Devdas* (2002), directed by Sanjai Leela Bhansali, together with actress Aishwarya Rai, helped to make Bollywood profitable again. It is worthwhile mentioning *Lagaan* (2001), starred by Aamir Khan. This film presents a simple argument with the contrast between two cultures: the Indian and the British. The film takes place in the Victorian period in line with the fluidity of a neo-Victorian wave that also takes place in literature (Llewellyn 2010). The high budget allowed for high-quality techniques and dances perfectly synchronized, showing a hybrid style. The final outcome was a natural presentation of the argument that made the film a great success both in India and the west.

CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

Nowadays, films gather the diversity of India through the influence of the classical epics of Sanskrit with recurrent themes like maternity and revenge or trying to maintain the traditional values that conformed the social hierarchy of India. This influence is also felt in the narrative structure of films, often with digressions that make Indian films too long for the western audience. The influence of theatrical forms is also present, with an episodic structure, an emphasis on performance over realism and the introductions of traditional music like the *sangeetas*, a mixture of instrumental music, song, dance and humour, elements that come from the classical theatre and the Parsi theatre. The influence of the west is also felt in the musical parts of the films. These are recorded from different angles, with zooms or quick movements that oscillate at the rhythm of the music, simulating western musical videos and breaking with the dramatic elements of traditional Indian films.

More modern perspectives like the New Indian Cinema appear which aim to break with the traditional Bollywoodian aesthetics. The themes show the 'idea of a contemporary India' where the west has been assimilated, but the tradition and the true essence of India as a diverse multilingual country is evident. Films are recorded in English, but also use other languages and illustrate the contemporary Indian middle class. Examples can be Dev Benegal, who produced *English, August* (1994), an adaptation of a novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee.

Among more globalising perspectives, Indian directors like Pradip Krishen and Aparna Sen (who is also an actress) can be mentioned. They aim to represent the cultural contrast and generation gap in modern India, and they express the multiple ambivalent emotion of diasporic souls with the inclusion of various tongues and different perspectives of the world. During the first part of the twenty-first century, Bollywood seems to have turned to English and has done away with its dependence on music and dance in favour of more realistic and less tragic stories. However, English and Hindi –Hinglish– fuse together in the dialogues as a proof of the reality of contemporary India, which has come to integrate the Indian self and the inheritance of the British colonisation. This encounter has conformed the



'idea of India today' as a transcultural society, that at the same time keeps to the essence of a diverse India with a national sense that gathers the plural identities of the subcontinent, which has turned glocal too.

This historical, social and cultural panorama frames the stories of contemporary directors. An example of New Millennium Cinema is *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (*No Second Chance*), directed by Zoya Akhtar in 2011. Its argument deploys the cultural hybridism and the importance of money in the contemporary global scenario, the strong influence of technology among the young generations, the change of traditional ways of living and social relationships, etc. Its main song, "Señorita", was performed by a Spanish flamenco singer, soon became a great global success. We can here establish a parallel with novels like *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga, which has recently been adapted as a film for Netflix (2021). The social image of a new India is clearly represented with stern irony and criticism, with the western evils of materialism and consumerism especially affecting the new generations. The same idea was previously portrayed in the novel *Q & A: A Novel* (2005) by Vikas Swarup, which inspired the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), directed by Danny Boyle, where we can find the reminiscence of a Bollywoodian spirit in the final musical performance, being at the same time an example of the transcultural essence of contemporary India.

During this period, the strength of Bollywood music mixes with a narrative rhythm that comes from the west. The concept of a dislocated home, global economy, and the new transcultural identity are mainly reflected in the films produced by best known diasporic directors like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta and Gurinder Chadha who were born in India, but now live in the US, UK or Canada. They portray the Indian life and customs as well as use more universal and western themes and aesthetics. These directors often illustrate the life of Indian immigrants in western contexts that represent the double soul of the immigrant, parallel to the hybrid Indian self. Their films mainly keep to a similar aesthetics, and they use imagined colourful, often symbolic scenes. Music and dance with clear Indian reminiscence gain importance, but contrary to popular cinema, they also use realism in the form of a party or a quiz contest, as spiritual cathartic moments in the film.

Gurinder Chadha tackles in *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) issues related to gender and family conflicts, urging the Indian women who live in the west to make their own decisions and fight for their own dreams. *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), adapted from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), stands as an example of fashionable versions of the Regency period in the filmic narrative. She aims to show that not all weddings are arranged in India and true love can win. This is also one of the themes in the novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth, recently adapted as a Netflix series (2020), which emphasises the force of love against deeply-rooted social and religious traditions, as well as the endemic conflict between Hindus and Muslims in a contemporary society that inevitably assimilates the past and the present. Social criticism is part of Deepa Mehta's narrative in her trilogy *Earth* (1998), *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005). The first is one of the most beautiful films on the theme of love during Partition; the second deals with homosexual love between two women; and the last one criticises the strict situation imposed on widows in India, especially in



today's rural areas. The three films stand as examples of the social critical insight that characterises Mehta's productions.

CONCLUSION

Indian cinema proves to be an all-encompassing source of inspiration to exemplify the strong link suggested by the threefold perspective History, Nation and Narration. Through its fruitful evolution, it seems to have aimed at depicting an authentic 'idea of India', free from a passionate exaltation of the contextual stereotypical elements that might have always been attractive for a western audience. Indian film directors offer a kaleidoscopic and unsterotypical representation of India. The perspective that they include in their productions provides a critical insight to 'the idea of India', which in its historical, social and cultural progress has come to be what it is nowadays. They have managed to be faithful to themes that are inherent to a diverse culture that has moved from the past to the contemporary and displays a plural identity that has resulted from the intermingling of an ancient civilization and a history of invasions, especially the western influence inherited after two hundred years of British colonisation.

There are positive and negative implications to this, but the truth is that the historical development of the subcontinent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has allowed Indian cinema (and literature) to acquire international recognition, becoming a genre of its own far from the mimicry and liminality proclaimed by Bhabha. The evolution that has taken place up to the contemporary times also enhances the importance of the concept of time, where the past and the present of a nation fuse together, so as to offer an 'idea of a contemporary India' which, as has been proved, reaffirms the wealth of the hybrid diversity that conforms the ambivalent context where cinematographic (and literary) narratives emerge.

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ANTI-CASTE AESTHET(H)ICS IN CONTEMPORARY DALIT CINEMA: THE CASE OF *ASURAN* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream Indian cinema has failed to denounce the social realities of casteism, depict diversity and vindicate inclusion. However, the advent of globalisation and new modern media and social platforms have contributed, not only to reinventing the very dynamics of cinema production and consumption, but also to developing new film genres that dare to question and counter hegemonic ideologies and aesthetics. This is the case of Dalit cinema, a movement of visual creative art made by Dalit film-makers with a view to embodying and dignifying Dalit subjectivities and inspiring socio-cultural criticism and resistance. The main aim of this paper will be to show how Dalit films like Vetrimaaran's *Asuran* strive to oppose the dominant aesthetics of stereotypical representation, thus denouncing casteist images and even developing innovative or subversive anti-caste aesthetics which prompt spectators to get involved in the ethical issues put forward and can in turn be labelled as anti-caste aesthet(h)ics.

KEYWORDS: Dalit cinema, Mainstream Indian Cinema, Casteism, Anti-Caste Aesthetics, *Asuran*.

ANTI-CASTA ESTÉTICA-ÉTICA EN EL CINE CONTEMPORÁNEO DE LOS DALITS: EL CASO DE *ASURAN* (2019)

RESUMEN

El cine indio establecido no ha sido capaz de denunciar la realidad social surgida como consecuencia del sistema de castas, ni de describir la diversidad o defender la inclusión. Sin embargo, la llegada de la globalización y de los nuevos medios de comunicación y plataformas sociales ha contribuido, no solo a reinventar las mismas dinámicas de producción y consumo cinematográficos, sino también a desarrollar nuevos géneros filmicos que se atreven a cuestionar y contrarrestar la ideología y estética dominantes. Este es el caso del cine de los Dalits, un movimiento de arte creativo llevado a cabo por directores Dalits con el objetivo de representar y dignificar la subjetividad Dalit e inspirar y alentar la crítica socio-cultural y la resistencia. El principal objetivo de este artículo será mostrar cómo, a través del uso de técnicas audiovisuales y cinematográficas innovadoras, películas Dalits como *Asuran*, dirigida por Vetrimaaran, se afanan por oponerse a la representación estereotípica favorecida por la estética dominante, denunciando imágenes casteistas e implementar una innovadora, e incluso en ocasiones subversiva, estética anti-casta que incite a los espectadores a implicarse en las cuestiones éticas que plantea, y que por consiguiente permita calificarla como estética/ética anti-casta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: cine Dalit, cine dominante indio, casteismo, estética anti-casta, *Asuran*.

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MAINSTREAM INDIAN CINEMA AND CASTE

Indian cinema is, without doubt, the single largest medium of communication with the masses, and nearly twelve million Indians watch films in cinema theatres on a weekly basis (Butalia 1984: 108). The Indian film industry, popularly known as Bollywood (although, to be more precise, this term specifically refers to the globalised Bombay/Mumbai-based film industry), is the biggest in the world, as it produces approximately one thousand films every year. Since its very origins in 1930s, mainstream Indian cinema has tried to deal with the problems and multifarious aspects of Indian society, one of the most complex in the world as regards language, religion and culture. However, as many Indian critics have pointed out (see, among others, Edachira 2020, Yengde 2018 and Vidushi 2015), it is also undeniable that mainstream Indian cinema has been, on the whole, responsible for avoiding putting its finger on many thorny issues with a view to encouraging and sustaining the privileges of the dominant castes.¹ To quote the words of Jiya Rani, a Dalit Indian journalist (in Pal 2019), “the mainstream media is not for the poor, not for the oppressed. It has carved its kingdom out of loyalty to the powers, to bureaucracy, to domination.” Caste, a peculiar and deeply ingrained attribute of Indian society is, often, played down as a theme by assimilating it into other categories such as ‘the poor,’ ‘the orphan’ or ‘the hard-working common Indian.’ The same is true of secularism: in most Bollywood films, Muslims are systematically ‘othered’ while Hindu-Muslim relationships are toned down to enhance a positive image of India as a liberal and non-denominational country (see Chadha and Kavoori 2008).

It could therefore be argued that, as a national project, mainstream Indian cinema has failed, not only to denounce the social realities of casteism, but also to depict diversity as regards class, religion and gender dynamics, and thus to vindicate inclusion. Instead, Bollywood films illustrate and advocate the attitudes and beliefs upheld by the dominant upper castes, while often turning a blind eye to the gross violations of human rights and democratic rules that are perpetrated against the rest of the population in the country on a daily basis. Moreover, to rely on Yengde’s term (2018: 3), the “Brahmanish” operations of India’s Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) have only contributed to further preserving this inequality. After Indian Independence, and mainly through the formation of the CBFC in 1951,

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¹ The Hindu caste system, also called *varna* caste order, divides society into four main castes or *varnas* (*Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishya* and *Shudras*). Those who fall out of this system because of their inferior and polluting status are ostracised as outcastes (the *untouchables*, nowadays called *Dalits*) and considered outside the *varna* system. The *upper castes*, also known as *twice-born* and *caste Hindus*, are the three first groups mentioned: The *Brahmins* (religious and intellectual elite), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors and aristocrats), and the *Vaishya* (merchants, landlords and tradesmen).



the Indian film industry strove to celebrate a conservative nationalism by forging the celebratory image of the country as a primarily agrarian society, loyal to the nation as embodied in its armed forces and deeply-rooted Hindu religious beliefs. This explains why mainstream Indian cinema became conspicuously escapist: by obliterating subaltern voices, these films managed to display a false utopian vision of Indian society that downplays caste inequalities, has very little to do with the reality of the great majority of the population, and by extension prevents Dalits from having their say in mainstream culture.

THE REPRESENTATION OF DALITS IN BOLLYWOOD MOVIES

Pre-Independence Indian films, such as *Chandidas* (1932), *Devdas* (1935), *Malapialla* (1938), *Dharmatman* (1935) and *Achnut Kanya* (1936), to mention but some, dealt with caste-related issues, mainly as a result of the anti-caste movement triggered off by intellectual B.R. Ambedkar. As Vidushi explains (2015: 126-132), although some post-Independence movies also tackle caste discrimination, their number is, by far, very limited and, with the exception of recent films such as Sanjiv Jaiswal's *Shudra: The Rising* (2012), which openly deals with the Dalit fight for their rights and self-respect by describing in great detail the deaths and ignominious deprivation suffered by a number of them to ultimately uphold rebellion, most of these films often offer a restricted and biased treatment of Dalit issues. To give an example, discrimination and violence against Dalit women in particular has been widely showcased, but mainly because the figure of the good suffering woman is a most commercial Bollywood trope. Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), which tells the story of an orphaned Dalit baby girl who is adopted by a Brahmin couple and must consequently suffer the rejection of the community in which she lives, and Shyam Benegal's trilogy – *Ankur* (1974), *Manthan* (1976) and *Nishant* (1975) – which denounces how the powerful upper castes dominate and humiliate Dalits, all the more so if they happen to be women, could be two cases in point.

Honour killings as a result of inter-caste romantic love is another common subject of Bollywood films featuring Dalit characters, as can be seen in Rajkumar Santoshi's *Lajja* (2001) and Priyadarshan's *Aakrosh* (2010). *Lajja* brings to the fore the plight of all women in India, and Dalit ones in particular. The fact that the names of the four main female characters (Maithili, Janki, Vaidehi and Ramdulaari, this forth being a Dalit woman) are all versions of Sita, the ideal Hindu woman's name, makes it clear that, in spite of all differences, they are all on an equal footing. However, it is Ramdulaari, the Dalit woman, who is ultimately raped and killed by the landlords so as to prevent her son's marriage with an upper-caste woman. For its part, *Aakrosh* tells the story of a murder inquiry into the deaths of three medical students who are killed because one of them tried to elope with an upper-caste girl.

On the whole, although most of these films seem to try to generate sympathy for the Dalit cause, they mainly focus on exceptional individuals who accordingly deserve a better life, rather than openly questioning social exclusion and speaking



in favour of substantial changes. A good example of this could be Shekhar Kapur's box-office success *Bandit Queen* (1994), which features the real life of Phoolan Devi, an extraordinarily brave and daring Dalit woman who was sexually abused repeatedly by the upper-caste landlords in her village. Finally, another popular trope in Bollywood films is that of the upper-caste man (again, an exceptional individual) who strives to improve the living conditions of his nearby downtrodden Dalits. Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* (2001) and *Swades* (2004) could very well serve as illustrations. *Lagaan* tells the story of a small village under the British rule where farmers, due to drought, cannot possibly give part of their crop in order to pay a tax called *lagan*. The upper-caste protagonist will help them all –Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and a Dalit called Kachra, which literally means 'garbage'– to come together and make up the cricket team that will beat that of British soldiers who, having lost the bet, will be obliged to cancel the payment of taxes for the next three years. As regards *Swades*, it is about an upper-caste educated man working in the United States who returns to the Indian village where he was born. A convinced supporter of democracy, he tries to fight against casteism by sponsoring, among other things, the screening of a film for the entire community, Dalits included.

As to whether these films have actually contributed to changing people's minds as regards the myriad injustices perpetrated in India with a view to preserving the caste system and the old-time discriminatory beliefs that it enforces, the answer is still no. Actually, famous Indian actors and actresses often endorse good causes (women's rights, animals' rights and the like), but seldom denounce caste oppression. Generally speaking, Bollywood films have cultivated and promoted the myth of an open and diverse country, while systematically skewing and shunning the evidence of pervading reprehensible socio-political atrocities.

THE EMERGENCE OF DALIT CINEMA AND ANTI-CASTE AESTHETICS: THE CASE OF *ASURAN* (2019)

In order to denounce the injustice of misrepresentation (if any), an ever-increasing number of Dalit voices have been raised in the fields of literature, social activism and, more importantly, cinema.² It is clear that the enormous amount of

² Some of the most well-known contemporary Dalit authors and activists are: Namdeo Dhasal (Marathi), Meena Kandasamy (English), Bama (Tamil), Urmila Pawar (Marathi and English), Baburao Bagul (Marathi), Jatin Bala (Bengali), Ajay Navaria (Hindi), Baby Kamble (Marathi), Imayam (Tamil), Manoranjan Byapari (Bengali), Raja Dhale (Marathi), Dev Kumar (Hindi), Devanur Mahadeva (Kannada), Siddalingaiah (Kannada), Goyu Shyamala (Telugu), P. Sivakami (Tamil), Omprakash Valmiki (Hindi), Debi Roy (Bengali) and Yashica Dutt (Hindi). As far as Dalit film directors are concerned, Neeraj Ghaywan (Hindi), Subodh Nagdeve (Hindi), Nagraj Manjule (Marathi), Pa Ranjith (Tamil), Shavanas K. Bavakutty (Malayalam), Mari Selvaraj (Tamil) and Divya Bharathi (Tamil) could be mentioned. Among musicians, Punjabi folk, rap and hip-hop singer Ginni Mahi, and Hindi rapper Sumit Samos deserve special mention.

capital that filmic techniques, production and distribution demand have prevented Dalits from playing a relevant role in this domain, and this in spite of the fact that they have always been part of the industry as labourers. Moreover, as was argued before, Dalits in films are often reduced to victim figures and, to make matters worse, these roles are almost always played by non-Dalit actors, such as Saif Ali Khan, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi, to give but some well-known examples. This being said, it is also true that the advent of globalisation and new modern media and social platforms have contributed, not only to reinventing the very dynamics of cinema production and consumption, but also to developing new film genres that dare to question and counter hegemonic ideologies and aesthetics. This led, without doubt, to the emergence of an explicitly Dalit cinema, which Yengde describes as

an act of defiance leading to a sustained cinematic struggle. [...] a celluloid movement of visual creative art, made by Dalit film-makers, *relating* to Dalit subjectivities, inspiring socio-cultural criticism, [...] a universal monument of time and space. (2018: 1; emphasis in original)

The main aim of these film-makers will be, according to Edachira (2020: 1), to bring to the fore “the unconscious of caste” that had previously remained hidden and, which is even more important, to create new expressive means that can arouse affective responses among spectators. To put it differently, they will implement two different kinds of processes: one of *denunciation* of dominant casteist images, and one of *innovation* of ground-breaking anti-caste aesthetics that can alone affect the medium itself. These processes, Edachira goes on to argue, will accordingly prompt spectators to question conventional practices and, even more importantly, ponder the implications and ethical dimension, at once political and poetic, of the often unquestioned caste system. Bearing this in mind, it is my contention that anti-caste aesthetics should therefore become *anti-caste aesthet(h)ics*.

Asuran, a 2019 Tamil-language action drama film written and directed by Vetrimaaran and produced by Kalaipuli S. Thanu under his production banner V Creations, is a clear case in point. Based on Poomani’s novel *Vekkai*, published in 1982 and translated into English thirty-seven years after its writing as *Heat* by N. Kalyan Raman, this film also goes beyond the mere portrait of a child murderer in order to explore the rather more complicated landscape that surrounds the murder. Violence is here depicted as culturally inherited, as the ultimate consequence of the unfair and degrading power dynamics prompted and perpetuated by casteism.

The film starts with a man in his mid-forties and a young boy wading across a river and carrying homemade bombs, sometime in the period of 1960s to 1980s in Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu). Meanwhile, a woman, a man and a young girl are hiding from the police in a different part of the village. The voice of an external narrator soon informs in a flashback of all of their identities: the man is Sivasami and the boy is his son Chidambaram; on the other hand, the woman, man and child are Sivasami’s wife Pachaiyamma, her brother Murugesan and daughter Lakshmi respectively. This narrator also says that this couple had an elder son, Velmurugan, with whom Sivasami had a much closer relationship, and that they



were, like most inhabitants of Thekkoor (meaning southern village), a family of Dalit farmers. Narasimhan was an upper-caste landlord from Vadakoor (meaning northern village) who desperately wanted Sivasami's land to build a factory on it. The family, especially Velmurugan, were not at all interested in selling. One day Narasimhan's sons tried to dry up their well, Pachaiyamma did her best to stop them and was consequently attacked, and Velmurugan injured these men in response. He was arrested, and in order to get him released Sivasami had to humiliate himself touching the feet of every male of the landlord's village. As soon as Velmurugan knew about this, he beat Narasimhan with a slipper when the latter was on his own in a public toilet. In revenge, Narasimhan's henchmen lynched and beheaded Velmurugan in the presence of his younger brother, who would take it upon himself to kill Narasimhan one year later to avenge his family. Sivasami managed to cut the lights to help his son escape, told the family what had happened and fled with him. At this moment the film moves back to the present. Kariyan, Narasimhan's most ferocious henchman, is told to lead a group of hunters to track them down.

When he is about to kill Chidambaram, Sivasami steps in and bravely defeats all of them but kills none. It is when father and son are trying to recover that Sivasami explains why he finally decided to spare their lives. Being only a youngster, Sivasami recounts, he became the most famous and knowledgeable moonshine brewer, and thus one of the most appreciated servants of Viswanathan, a powerful landlord. Feeling sorry for Pandiyan, one of Viswanathan's distant relatives, Sivasami convinced his master to employ him as an accountant. Meanwhile Murugan, Sivasami's brother, and Seshadri, an upper-caste communist lawyer, were trying to reclaim for their Dalit community the land that the landlords had taken from them in the past.³ Sivasami fell in love with Mariyamma and, when he gave her sandals as a token of love, Pandiyan felt offended and, displaying his injured caste pride, forced her to walk with them on her head in front of the whole village. On knowing this, Sivasami retaliated by also hitting him with sandals and beating him and his men up, which infuriated Vishwanathan, who told him off in public. One night, before the meeting that was being organised by Murugan to address the other labourers was held, they were told that their lawyer had been arrested. Sivasami went to get the papers authorising the meeting, and when he returned he found out, much to his desperation, that his brother and the other villagers had been killed by Pandiyan and his men, while Mariyamma and many others had

³ *Asuran* denounces the usurpation of Dalit land that has taken place for so long in India. As Ilangovan Rajasekaran (2021) explains, the British government, with a view to improving the situation described by an 1891 report on the subhuman living conditions of Pariahs – Dalits nowadays – submitted by James H.A. Tremenheere, at that time Acting Collector of Chengleput, passed the Depressed Class Land Act 1892, whereby 12 lakh acres of land were assigned for distribution to the 'depressed classes' of the Madras Presidency in an attempt to empower them socially and economically. However, to this day and as this film shows, much of this land is in the hands of non-Dalits, and the struggle to reclaim it has not been very successful.



been being mercilessly burnt alive inside their huts.⁴ In revenge, Sivasaami killed Vishwanathan, Pandiyan and all their henchmen. Sivasaami then tells his son that he fled the village and ended up working as a farmer for Murugesan.

On hearing what he had done to avenge his family, Pachaiyamma, Murugesan's sister, fell in love with him. Sivasaami surrendered to the court, was given a light sentence on the grounds of self-defence, and soon afterwards married Pachaiyamma. After listening to this, Chidambaram radically changes his mind and starts understanding and admiring his father. After having a short encounter with his wife and daughter, Sivasaami visits Seshadri and asks him for help. The lawyer agrees to do so providing that he and his son turn up in court the following day. When they both enter the court premises, they realise Narasimhan's men are already there trying to ambush them, which forces them to flee. Sivasaami eventually agrees to sell his land to protect his family from Narasimhan's violence. In spite of this, the landlord's men violate the agreement and abduct and torture Chidambaram. Sivasaami cannot take this anymore and kills and injures many of Narasimhan's relatives and henchmen. Murugesan and the rest of villagers arrive armed and fight against Narasimhan's men. In the end, both villages decide that the conflict should cease in order to prevent a lethal caste clash. Sivasaami finally agrees to go to jail to protect all of his family, and Chidambaram in particular. The film ends with Sivasaami smiling at his family and telling his son to study hard so as to be able to stand up against oppression before he definitely enters the court.

Several are the strategies that *Asuran* uses to denounce casteism and promote anti-caste aesthet(h)ics. To begin with, it is its genre unpredictability that makes the film different. *Asuran* is neither a heroic tale –Sivasaami is depicted in the first part of the film as a wimpy drunkard who has renounced his role of *bonus pater familias*– nor a revenge drama –unlike revenge dramas, which end with the killing of the enemy, this film ends up rejecting outright revenge and advocating instead the importance of education to overcome casteist obstacles and achieve freedom. It is, to quote Yogesh Maitreya's words in *Firstpost*, “the rebel biopic of an entire community, who from being called untouchables have recently shed their victimhood; who've adapted democratic means and asserted that with education a world with justice, fraternity and liberty is possible.” *Asuran* plays with the unconscious feelings and expectations of the audience. If, as Wankhede affirms (2020), in mainstream Indian cinema “the possibility that the Dalit character [...] may enter to transform the terrible social structure by ‘fist of fury’ or by philanthropist grace is not an admissible topic,” *Asuran* eventually bestows Sivasaami with outstanding skills, grace and humanity, in a word, with the credentials of the prototypical Bollywood hero who has the power to make changes. Actually, the second part of the film offers a drastically different

⁴ This arson fire no doubt brings to mind the notorious 1968 Kilvenmani massacre, in which forty-four Dalit agricultural labourers were locked inside a hut and burnt alive to teach their community a lesson, and which Dalit author Meena Kandasamy would denounce years later in her polemical novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014).



portrait of Sivasami, both as a loving husband and father and a brave and fearless warrior who is nonetheless reluctant to kill his adversaries. As a result, spectators find it difficult to classify the film generically and are thus forced to think outside the box and beyond their comfort zones.

Secondly, the film strives to transcend language barriers so as to reach a wider spectatorship through the use of subtitles in English and remakes (*Asuran* is currently being adapted in Telugu as *Naarappa*, starring Venkatesh and directed by Srikanth Addala), and a big circulation through large-scale national theatrical release—it was planned to be released in October 2019, coinciding with the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti and the weekend of the Vijaydashami festival in India—and the use of media platforms as Amazon Prime. Moreover, this film partakes of the interest that many Dalit film-makers show when highlighting the politics of naming: the choice of ‘asuran’ (meaning ‘demon’) is by no means accidental: contrary to what is expected from a Dalit man (submissiveness, impotence, marginality), Sivasami is finally endowed with the strength and energy of a supernatural being capable of channelling them according to his own will. By attributing this label to a Dalit, a new dimension is given to this term, which stops having an exclusively negative meaning in order to encapsulate instead the superiority and resilience of a survivor who refuses to imitate the cruelty of those who want to destroy him.

The use of sound and music, and by contrast the irruption of deafening silence to emphasise the intensity of emotions and the loquacity of death, also deserve special mention. Silence embodies, to quote Edachira again (2020: 6), “the unnameable, [that] which cannot be brought into language as sound.” Not in vain are some of the most heart-breaking scenes of the film devoid of any music. By contrast, those in which Sivasami brings out the warrior in him are accompanied by a song whose lyrics once and again encourage him to rise, that is, to keep on fighting and resisting: “Rise! Against all odds. [...] Rise! To hunt them down, hunt them till they howl in pain, rise to agitate, to annihilate, make them tremble in fright”; “Rise Asuran! Rise Asuran!” (01:11:32-01:15:56; 01:46:07-01:48:32; 02:08:50-02:11:14) Paradoxically, some of these violent fight scenes are slow-motion ones, as if the camera’s low speed were trying to further magnify Sivasami’s courage and determination. As regards the soundtrack album and background score, they significantly aim to interweave the local and the global, thus countering the assumption that Dalit productions are parochial and unable to appeal to an international audience. In an interview with *The Times of India*, the composer, G.V. Prakash Kumar, affirmed: “*Asuran*’s music will be rooted, with raw folk being the dominant element, with earthy songs. But the approach is international. The thought process was about mixing folk and world music; the voices will be folk, but the instrumentation will have an international flavour, like using an electric guitar with this raw folk.”

Symbols also play a significant role in the film. For example, the wild pig that enters Sivasami’s field becomes a subtle but crucial subtext as it brings to light the power relations between the characters. Both Sivasami and his elder son try to capture it, but the pig finally manages to escape crossing into Narsimham’s field, which is surrounded by an electrified fence. A very different fate awaits Sivasami’s dog: in its chase after the trespasser, it gets electrocuted and finally dies (00:17:05-



00:19:56). As Maitreya suggests in *Silverscreen India* (2020), “the barbed wires stand as the symbol for untouchability, which a wild/stray animal can cross but not men from Dalit community nor their pets.” Furthermore, the dichotomy pig vs. dog could be interpreted as signalling the clash between the immunity of unjust and brute forces and the vulnerability of decency and marginality. Velmurugan’s missing head also denounces the extreme violence inflicted on Dalits. Narasimhan orders to cut his head off because he doesn’t want his family to even find his body to cry over.

The Dalit body consequently signals the public realm subjected by violence. Although Sivasami and his wife finally find Velmurugan’s mutilated body, completely naked and eaten up by dogs, they cannot even file a complaint: till the head appears, this is an unidentified body, not their son’s body. Not only has the landlord taken their son’s life, but he has also deprived him of his identity, his dignity, and his family of their right to wake him properly; Velmurugan has been reduced to the sheer physicality of an abject body. Slippers can also be seen as a symbol of all the privileges that the upper castes enjoy and refuse to share with the lowest; when a Dalit person dares to claim the same rights in the name of the democracy the country so often flaunts, s/he not only has to face scorn and humiliation but also has to pay too high a price, namely, to lose what is most precious to her/him, the ones s/he loves. On the other hand, slippers can also be seen as encapsulating the power of the wretched of the earth, to rely on Frantz Fanon’s well-known expression, to defy the structures that oppress and degrade them. And the same could be said of the home-made bombs that Chidambaram so carefully carries with him: however destitute they may be, Dalits still have the power to undermine the system that crushes them from within. Colours also contribute to highlighting contrasts: whereas upper-caste men often wear white, which clearly points to their privilege status, Sivasami’s turban is blue, popularly considered the colour of Dalit liberation (Edachira 2020: 11). Last but not least, the final close-up of Sivasami’s smile symbolises the ultimate acquisition of moral authority and meaning in the life of this warrior, who has dared to defy casteism and firmly demand a dignified life for him and his peers.

In addition to reconceptualising the notion of the hero, women characters are also depicted beyond well-known cinematographic stereotypes. In mainstream Indian cinema, subaltern female characters often fall prey to humiliation. In contrast, the double face of archetypal female characters only seems to describe some upper-caste women. According to Yengde (2018: 12), this archetypal woman figure is “frequently presented as loyal, fasting for the welfare of her husband, but she is also overtly dramatic, deceitful, conceited, a scaremonger and a cheat who is very competitive with other female characters.” This is a prototype that has very little to do with the reality of most Dalit women, nor with their representation in Dalit films, which often resists both victimhood and glamour.

Contrary to the archetypes described before, in Dalit cinema Dalit women are shown as forthcoming, assertive, full of energy and agency, capable of defying the system and fighting for their rights with self-respect and dignity. The heroines in Neeraj Ghaywan’s *Masaan* (2015, Hindi) and Shavanas K. Bavakutty’s *Kismath* (2016, Malayalam) could be given as examples. This is also, no doubt, the case of Mariyamma, who dares to defy her family to marry Sivasami (they preferred



a farmer to a brewer) and proudly wears the sandals he gave her on her way to school, and of Pachaiyamma, who chooses Sivasami as a husband on account of his courage, faces up to the landlord's men when they want to deprive her family of water (00:23:40-00:24:36), and unconditionally sides with her husband when things go wrong and he must flee with Chidambaram, fending for herself and their young daughter with the help of her brother.

In keeping with Edachira's contention (2020: 2) when describing the innovative character of contemporary Dalit films, it could also be asserted that *Asuran* strives to demonstrate that caste is strongly embedded in the sensorial regime, and that sensorial regimes are in turn closely linked to aesthetics. Dalits are the former untouchables and have consequently become a 'touchy' subject for Indian cinema, one that, as Edachira goes on to argue, "either it resolves itself within a Gandhian (religious/cultural) or a Nehruvian (statist) paradigm but never ethico-politically" (2020: 6). If 'touch' means 'to bring a bodily part into contact with, especially so as to perceive through the sense of feeling,' it can also suggest 'to concern oneself with' (*Longman Webster English College Dictionary*). Furthermore, it is a fact that, without any actual physicality involved, films can 'touch' their audiences and arouse all sorts of feelings in them. As regards Dalit films like the one under analysis, their innovative subversion lies, above all, in their interest to touch spectators and reach out to the other through the use of affective anti-caste aesthetics. To put it differently, they strive to emphasise Dalits' humanity, that is, to express the unnameable, to turn into a presence what had so far been an absent entity to the audience's sensory reality. Although some minor differences can be noticed among Dalit films, mainly on account of the Indian states in which they were made and their respective cultures and speaking languages (above all Hindi, Marathi, Tamil and Malayalam), it could be argued that, on the whole, they all deal with the same important issues.

Unlike other popular films that exclusively focus on the negative aspects of Dalits' marginal life and humiliation, *Asuran* takes pains to also showcase their struggles, love relationships and affection for one another. It is solidarity that brings Dalits together: when Sivasami apologises for causing their relatives trouble by asking them to hide his wife and daughter while he and his son run away, the one he addresses merely replies "No needs for thanks between us." Moreover, given the fact that Dalits are not only untouchables, but also unhearables and unseeables, the use of affective anti-caste aesthetics allows the film to make them touchable, audible and visible, in a word, human, which significantly questions the sensorial regime of caste. However, it must also be noticed that, although cinema is an audiovisual medium and, as was argued before, sound and music play a very important role in films, it is the sense of sight, and particularly the gaze, that is often privileged over the rest of senses. Hence the importance of on-screen visual elements, such as lighting, framing, composition and camera motion and angles, and even the occasional inclusion of visual items belonging to a different ontological level.

Accordingly, Dalit films like *Asuran* aim to cultivate what Edachira (2020: 3) labels as "an oppositional gaze as well as a 'look' which cares." To start with, the film at one point dares to call the spectators' attention towards the sheer artificiality of the medium: the voice over narrator explains that Sivasami's landowner wants to



build a cement factory on the former's land by juxtaposing drawings and sketches of the project with real images of the village (00:12:05-00:13:18). Reality and virtual reality conflate. Lighting often echoes their terrible situation, as dark scenarios are omnipresent in the film. Framing also seems to take sides with Dalits. To give but one example, when Sivasami is made to confront his landlord at the Council meeting, the latter's hazy face is on the left, whereas Sivasami's sharp image occupies the right part of the frame. Similarly, the policeman who refuses to let them file a complaint when his son Murugan disappears is sitting on a chair on the left hand side of the screen while Sivasami stands up on the right. Whereas right and left clearly seem to mean right and wrong, the fact that it is Sivasami who is on his feet clearly highlights his pride and decency, in opposition to the corrupted policeman's comfortable submission to those holding power.

Although the use of high angle shots often contributes to depicting them as helpless tiny specks at the mercy of forces they cannot possibly control, as when father and son flee the village to escape the landlord's men's revenge, it is also true that the film contains a significant number of scenes in which the members of this Dalit family take up the whole screen while openly showing affection towards one another. To mention but some, a close up of Sivasami's face reveals his suffering when his son Murugan returns home badly beaten up by the landlord's men (00:32:00-00:32:12); another shows him crying as he remembers his wife and exclaims, "Where have you gone, sweetheart?" (01:06:01-01:06:34); another highlights Pachaiamma crying over her missing elder son (00:46:11-00:46:13); a long medium shot shows Sivasami and his wife lovingly embracing Murugan's beheaded body (00:39:60-00:42:15), and later on another similar shot showcases Pachaiamma caressing her younger son as he lies down on her lap (00:47:25-00:47:54).

Special attention deserves as well the section of the film in which, in consonance with the widely celebrated Bollywood love scenes, Sivasami and Maariyamma happily dance in the rain surrounded by lots of smiling children while the camera follows all their movements to always keep them centre stage and, last but not least, the shot/reverse shots Sivasami/ Pachaiamma/ Sivasami/ Chidambaram/ Sivasami which, together with Sivasami's advice to his son at the very end of the film, endow the former with the prominence and moral authority of an unquestionable hero (02:15:28-02:15:58). The verb 'rise' is again mentioned by Sivasami, but this time to prevent Chidambaram from living in hatred: "if we have education they can never take it away from us. If you really want to win against them, study [...] and become a powerful man. But when you have the power, don't do to anyone what they did to us. It's easy to deepen hate but we must rise above it." It is in Sivasami's final message that lies his superiority. Revenge is never the answer, but salvation lies exclusively in their hands, in their capacity to overturn the injustices concomitant with the caste system through education.



CONCLUSION

Unlike mainstream Indian cinema, whose main aim has always been to perpetuate and celebrate the status quo, Dalit films strive to question and deconstruct it. It is undeniable that caste inequality can only be undermined with a common Dalit discourse of resistance. The emergence of anti-caste movements in the 1960s and 1970s, together with the subsequent growth of Dalit literature, greatly contributed to strengthening the links between these oppressed communities. Yet, since the political very often overpowered the literary aesthetics, Dalit literature mainly remained for several decades as an alternative, rather than an opposition, to mainstream literature. As the analysis of *Asuran* has shown, when it comes to discussing Dalit cinema, the ever-increasing use of anti-caste aesthetics has not only questioned mainstream cinema, but has also affected the medium itself through the implementation of an affective expressive aesthetics that is at once political and poetic, and in turn mainly concerned with bringing to the fore all sorts of ethical issues. Hence my use of the term *aesthet(h)ics*.

By challenging upper-caste prejudices and the different forms of oppression that these inevitably bring about, Dalit films like *Asuran* have departed from traditional forms of art in order to launch an unprecedented campaign against hegemonic caste privileges. Not only have they incorporated formerly unrecognised identities into their subject matter, but they have also introduced and encouraged a new aesthetic paradigm, which can by no means be detached from its militant questioning of pale skin, caste supremacy and the biased pronouncements by Indian elites. This, together with the fact that modern media has reinvented the mechanisms of film-making by developing new genres that have challenged traditional film-making norms, has strengthened the cinematic presence of Dalits in the Indian film industry.

It is also true that there is still a long way to go before it can be affirmed that Dalit-directed films are prominent in the Indian filmic scene. Indian film criticism has widely proved its elitism by systematically turning a blind eye on the social restraints and injustices of casteism and Indian society in general. To rely on Walter Benjamin's words (2008: 329) by means of conclusion, given the fact that the politics of sanctioned denial have become "the political position" of Indian cinema, the only way in which this phenomenon can be countered is by making sure that "the political position being transformed –as if on its own– from a deeply hidden element of art into a manifest one." Dalit cinema's ultimate target should be to aspire to become a new kind of socially conscious cinema that somehow straddles commercial and art cinemas, and by extension partakes of an empowering new mainstream filmic culture. Resistance and engagement have always been the prerogative of committed art, whose potential and possibilities are consequently unlimited. As artistic and ethical constructs, Dalit films have not only the ability to bring to the fore Dalit oppression, but they can also contribute to changing the rigid Indian social fabric by openly denouncing and undermining long-time enforced caste dogmas and aesthetics.

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AN ERA OF DARKNESS: SATYAJIT RAY'S ANTICOLONIAL PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Satyajit Ray's films are enriched with ideological concerns and engage with the issues of colonialism and the crisis of nationhood. His post 1970 films present an artist's anguished response to the betrayal of the Nehruvian dream and to the anachronism of his own cherished values. It was also in this period that Ray turned to India's colonial past and critiqued the dynamics of power relations. This essay studies how *Shatranj ke Khilari (The Chess Players, 1980)* assesses the reasons for colonization of India and its culture by the Britishers and how, in *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder, 1973)*, he criticized the Raj, the mercenaries and the complexities in Indian society where he denounces the Bengal Famine of former times.

KEYWORDS: Empire, Orientalism, Feudalism, Bengal Famine.

UN TIEMPO DE OSCURIDAD:
EL PROYECTO ANTICOLONIAL DE SATYAJIT RAY

RESUMEN

Las películas de Satyajit Ray muestran su perfil ideológico e interpelan a las temáticas del colonialismo y la crisis de nacionalidad. Las películas que dirigió después de 1970 muestran la respuesta ansiosa que suponía la traición a los valores de Nehru y el anacronismo de los valores que Ray consideraba necesarios. En este período Ray también investigó el pasado colonial de India y denunció la dinámica de las relaciones de poder que existieron. Este ensayo estudia cómo *Shatranj ke Khilari (Los jugadores de ajedrez, 1980)* evalúa las razones culturales por las que India fue colonizada por Reino Unido y, en *Ashani Sanket (Trueno distante, 1973)*, critica el Raj, los que cometieron crímenes despiadados y las complejidades de la sociedad india de la época, arremetiendo especialmente contra las condiciones que desencadenaron la Hambruna en Bengala.

PALABRAS CLAVE: imperio, orientalismo, sistema feudal, hambruna en Bengala.



INTRODUCTION

As India became increasingly crucial to British prosperity, millions of Indians died completely unnecessary deaths in famines [...] a result of what one can only call the British Colonial Holocaust. (Tharoor 176)

Satyajit Ray's films are almost invariably concerned with man's viable connection with his society, his world, his universe. They advocate not the self's mindless submission to contemporary society but a new alignment between them. His heritage might have contributed to this libertarian stance. Belonging to a family with strong links to the Bengal Renaissance, Ray inherited the worldview of a class deeply committed to the European Enlightenment philosophies of progress. Expected therefore is the progressive, secular, cosmopolitan, liberal-humanist ideal of his work. Ray made a novel attempt to define the *modern* as a special hybrid discourse by combining Western liberal ideas and traditional Eastern values. In Ashis Nandy's words, Ray "lived with a plurality of selves, and a part of him was as deeply Indian as a part of him was Western" (43). Ray's self-confessed credo is to present "not just single aspects of our life today, like contemporary politics, but a broader view of Indian history" (Roy 310). Hence his persistent efforts to describe the making of a nation as it emerges from its feudal and colonial past, and embraces modernity to become a new, hybrid postcolonial society. Amartya Sen rightly asserts that "Satyajit Ray insists on retaining the real cultural features of the society that that he portrays, his view of India [...] is full of recognition of a complex reality with immense heterogeneity at every level" (129). His India, remarks Judith Brown, was conceived as a "composite nation that included a great diversity of peoples and reflected a many-layered sense of 'being Indian' that grew out of the subcontinent's long history of dealing with outsiders" (28). Ray's idea of the *modern* in this context does not envisage a complete rupture with India's past but an evolution of the nation's present from its traditions, the dynamic interplay of the past and the present. Despite the partition of India in 1947, he retained his vision of a national identity born of diversity and sustained by tolerance and secularism.

Ray's initial enthusiasm for western modernity begins to evaporate as he faces up to an increasingly disillusioned post-independence India hostile to his Renaissance values of progressiveness, idealism and individual integrity. He perceives the canker of inexorable materialism eating into the foundations of long-cherished ethical values:

Looking around me I feel that the old values of personal integrity, loyalty, liberalism, rationalism, and fair play are all completely gone. People accept corruption as a way of life, as a method of getting along, as a necessary evil. (qtd Robinson 1989: 340).

Incisive is Ray's insight that consumerism begins by blunting sensibility and ends up by smothering conscience: "In acquiring material comforts you grow numb with placid acceptance. Maybe you resist in the beginning. But the internal and external pressures crowd to a point where you learn to overlook the moral decline they spell" (qtd Robinson 1989: 340). A brooding skepticism shrouds his



post-1970 films that present a post-Nehruvian India plagued by unemployment and corruption. In his essay “Problems of a Bengali Film Maker” (1958), Ray spells out his ideological stance by asserting that the authentic Bengali/Indian filmmaker “must face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them, and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema” (qtd Cooper 5). He thus made a novel effort to negotiate between cinema and society, the symbolic and the material. Ashis Rajadhyaksha quite rightly argues that in the 1960s and 1970s, Ray shared with most Indian artists of his generation “the classic liberal nationalist discomfort [...] when the ‘Naxalite’ Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) appropriated for itself the whole voice of radical change” (qtd Cooper 6). Ray’s middle-class protagonists, all victims of this dehumanizing rat-race, struggle to hold on to their liberal values. *Aranyer Din Ratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1970) and the succeeding Calcutta trilogy (namely *Pratidwandi*, *The Adversary*, 1970; *Seemabaddha*, *Company Limited*, 1971; *Jana-Aranya*, *The Middleman*, 1975) highlight the disoriented middle-class youth, corrupt urban culture, bureaucratic bungling, and insidious neocolonialism. These films present an artist’s anguished response to the betrayal of the Nehruvian dream¹ and to the anachronism of his own cherished values.

It was also in this period that Ray turned to India’s colonial past and critiqued the dynamics of power relations. Ray’s first serious script, interestingly, was based on Rabindranath Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) in 1946, a film he subsequently made in 1984. He also wrote scripts based on two anticolonial short stories by writers committed to communism: Manik Bandyopadhyay’s “Bilamson” (“Williamson”) and Subodh Ghosh’s “Fossil”. These two short stories portrayed the nexus between the British colonialists and Indian feudalists. Subodh Ghosh’s “Fossil” (1940) and “Bilamson” (1943) were allegories representing the establishment and perpetuation of British colonialism in India and anticipated Ray’s major work *Shatranj ke Khilari* (1980). “The notion that the decadent representatives of feudal India sustained colonialism”, contends Chandak Sengoopta, “was central to contemporary communist doctrine and propaganda” (8). Ray’s films are hence not simply concerned with liberal humanist values, as it has been often alleged, but are enriched with ideological concerns and engage with the issues of colonialism and the crisis of nationhood.

¹ Nehru visualized a progressive, secular, pluralistic but tolerant, industrialized, democracy. India’s modernity was reflected in its fusion of past and present and its assimilation of divergent traditions yet remaining a unified whole.



THE MARCH OF THE EMPIRE:
SHATRANJ KE KHILADI (THE CHESS PLAYERS), 1980

The regions of Bengal and Oudh hold high importance in the Indian history. Whereas the Bengal renaissance witnessed a revival of the socio-cultural and intellectual domains during the British raj, Oudh has its own share of popularity in the fields of arts, music, and Urdu poetry. These two regions are also abundantly important in context to the British colonialism in India. Sutanuti, one of the three villages, which were merged to form the present-day Kolkata, was also the first site which came into the East India Company's possession in 1690. (*India Today* 2018) Whereas Siraj-ud-Daula's defeat at the hands of Robert Clive in the Battle of Plassey (1757) opened way for the territorial expansion of the Company in India, Oudh was its last annexed territory in 1858. As Reena Dube astutely observes, "these two historical sites mark the beginning and, in a sense, the culmination of the discourse of empire building" (14).

An understanding of these two culturally diverse regions is crucial for one to approach Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players* (*TCP*) (1977). The movie's plot covers the Oudh region through which Ray weaves the colonial narrative of India. *TCP* is an adaptation of the great Hindi writer, Munshi Premchand's short story, *Satranj Ke Khilari* (*The Chess Players*, 1924). It can be added that Ray put at stake his glorious career by making a film in Hindi and going beyond the Bengal since this was his biggest budget film. Often critiqued for his strong Bengali affiliations and roots, this film reflects Ray as a national filmmaker, not limited to any particularistic region/culture. Joan Mellen lauds Ray for his brave effort in coming up with "a Hindi-Urdu language that was not as familiar to him as the Bengali language, in tribute to a writer (Premchand) who was not part of the Bengali intelligentsia" (1978). The outcome of such a venture turned out to be a surprisingly successful "film that has remained pretty much unparalleled in the world of cinema, showing one of the most important chapters in imperial Britain's conquest of India through the eyes of Ray the detached historian" (2017).

Ray's creative imagination was certainly ahead of his times, and he used its power to make audience see the unseen, or the hidden yet stark realities of life; in the case of *TCP*, the British takeover and the colonial life in India. He offers a lens to look at and assess the reasons for colonization of India and its culture by the Britishers. His critique of the feudal system in India and the way it inflected, in fact, heightened and legitimized injustices over the subalterns, not to forget their own overindulgence in merry-making and all sorts of luxuries, make them completely oblivious of the lurking threat in the form of the Britishers. Perhaps, *TCP* could be seen as Ray's thoughtful attempt to drive home the point of national consciousness and its importance for decolonization. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi made a clarion call that "home rule [independence] must be grounded on the control that leaders and citizens exercise over themselves" (52). The abeyance of this self rule in *TCP* has obvious reasons. It would be wrong to approach the movie with the popularized view that the Oudh elites failed to protect the kingdom and their subjects due to their immersion in apolitical activities. However, a point can be made in context



to the overall feudalist structure and their approach to the British colonial rule in India, which often gave the elites good returns in exchange of their submission to it. The element of individual responsibility to protect and safeguard his/her land, as advocated by Gandhi, finds no place in Ray's movie, which reinstates the resolute blindness and rationality of many feudalists during the British colonial period.

Ray gives an ironical start to the movie. The audience is introduced to Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali playing the game of chess and deeply engrossed over their next move in the game:

Look at the hands of the mighty generals deploying their troops on the battlefield. We do not know if these hands ever held real weapons. But this is not a real battle where blood is shed and the fate of empire decided. (00:00:24-00:00:43)

The close focus of the camera and the voice over on the hands are strategically important as they immediately render the centrality of battlefield in the movie. Hands symbolically stand for attack and defense mechanism in battlefield, and, the weaker ones, meet a tragic fate. Also, it needs to be added that hands, particularly those of the colonized ones also played increasingly vital role in shaping, strengthening, and proliferating the British empire across the world.

Similarly, the game of chess stands as a metaphor for the movie's plot. The unfolding of events with every move in the game (un)make characters and their destinies in context to the British rule in India. These characters also represent a marked tension between colonialism and nationalism, which get exhibited in the case of Wajid Ali Shah and General Outram on the one hand, and Meer and Mirza on the other. It is important to comment here on the structural narrative differences that is found in Ray's adaptation of Premchand's story "Satranj Ke Khilari" (1924). Whereas Premchand's story is delimited to the tussle between the native elites of Oudh region, Ray heightens the tension by adding the characters of Wajid and General Outram to the movie's plot. Reena Dube points out:

The metaphor of chess playing is central to the historical debate about Awadh. Premchand used the playing of chess by Comic Representations of Indigenous Enterprise the two nawabs to signify lack –the lack of indigenous enterprise and the absence of political engagement and patriotism. For Ray, chess is the perfect strategic vehicle to explore and debunk the British colonialist claim that the impulse for enterprise, innovation, and scientific experimentation belonged wholly to the West. (130-31)

Commenting on the use of the chess players in the movie, Ray defined it as a "political event shown in a documentary fashion and running parallel to a short story. In this context, Mellen argues that for Ray, such a plot said "was the only way the political story could credibly be told in a fiction film. You don't see the chess players in conjunction with the King or the British, but why must you?" (1978). It is for this reason it makes sense to approach the movie without any preconditioned notions.

The political outlook of the movie is enmeshed with the fate of Oudh's freedom from the British. The warning of the movie's narrator in the opening scene



is indicative of a lurking threat ahead: “save your King, for if the King is lost, the battle is lost” (00:03:33-00:3:35). Undoubtedly, the movie’s plot is charged with political contestations plaguing Oudh. It also reflects the culpability of the feudal class in failing to defend their kingdom from Britishers due to their immersion in games, arts and music, which ostensibly define the Oudhi culture. Unfortunately, this provided an alibi for the Britishers to intrude and finally annex the region. For example, the prologue to the movie has a scene in which we come across the British colonizer in Wajid’s court. The voice over informs us of Wazid’s obsession with his crown, which he had once sent to the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. Subsequently, a letter being written by Lord Dalhousie is being read out:

The wretch in Lucknow who has sent his crown to the Exhibition would have done his people and us a great service if he had sent his head in it –and he would never have missed it. That is a cherry which will drop into our mouths one day. (0:07:24-00:7:41)

The political and economic exchanges emerge out forcefully in the prologue scene in which Nawab Wajid is found asleep on the throne. Right next to him is a cake with Oudh’s name inscribed on it. General Outram arrives and wakes up Wajid in an angry mood. To pacify his anger, Nawab Wajid cuts a piece of the Oudh cake and offers it to the General, who happily eats it and walks off. The narrator then concludes the prologue: “Poor Wajid! If only you knew what was in the mind of the Resident of Lucknow, General Outram.”

The politically charged prologue renders a historical framework through which to analyze the movie and “to educate,” the audience, to use Andrew Robinson’s terms (221). In Robinson’s framework, the seven-minute prologue becomes a medium through which “the (Indian as well as the Western) audience’s widespread ignorance of the facts of the relationship between the British and Oudh in the century leading to the Annexation –in India as much as elsewhere” could be addressed (6). Darius Cooper views the events in the prologue as “mocking commentary” and “the lush visuals,” which systematically “constitute a cultural attack on Oudh’s elite itself and lay bare the hollowness of its elites and of their brand of native nationalism” (202). The movie maps the trajectory of the hollow nationalistic consciousness of elite Indians and provides an open space to relook at the historical dimension of the British colonialism in India. *TCP* is unique because it refuses to assign sole responsibility for the colonization to the colonizers. Commenting on the comparative lens rendered by the movie to examine the British colonialism, Joan Mellen argues that “the aristocrats, the King, the court ministers who have lined their pockets at the expense of the people –all share responsibility for the country’s loss of independence” (1978).

The game of chess also triggered a loss of interest of Mirza in his wife. His wife Khurshid, therefore, calls it a “stupid game” (00:29:28), and reprimands her stating, “you only care for that game. You love that game more than you love me” (00:30:05). Reversely, Mirza tries his best to appease her by replying, “how can you say that? I left the game because you called” (00:30:15). In fact, he goes on to assign his interest in chess with a logic that ever since he started playing chess his “power



of thinking has grown a hundredfold” (00:30:30). In one such scene, Khursid’s aversion to the chess makes her hide the chess pieces. Meer and Mirza are led to believe that the pieces have been stolen by some thief and as the shops are closed Mirza decides to borrow the chess from his lawyer. Their search for the chess takes them to the lawyer only to find him in coma. Finding a chess in the ailing lawyer’s room, they start playing it only to stop it soon due to the lawyer’s sudden demise.

On their way back, they hear a drummer announcing the march of the British forces through Lucknow to Oudh. This hints at a possible annexation of Oudh soon, but the indifferent attitude of both the Nawabs puzzle and lend some humour to audience. Meer’s rubbishes off the announcement of the drummer with a question “Mirza Sahib why do people spread rumors?” (00:54:01). At this point, the political life gets lost in the personal interests. In fact, Meer’s immediate concern right now is to make use of the glorious day: “What a glorious day, yet we have to spend it in idleness” (00:54:20-00:54:24). Mirza replies, “Meer Sahib, for every problem there is a solution. One must know where to seek it” (00:54:28-00:54:32).

Reena Dube situates the theme of “idleness” within the cultural realm of Oudhi. She argues: “[W]ith this reversal chess becomes the realm of work, and the public-political events of Awadh become the realm of idleness” (154). The pervasive issue of *idleness* in the movie can be seen as a political satire, not only on the elite’s sense of nationalism, which was surprisingly missing, but also on the overall socio-cultural life of Oudh as found abundantly in the rich folklore. Abdul Halim Sharar sums up the Oudhi/Lucknowi culture with the famous proverbial joke of two friends waiting for a train on a railway platform (Sharar 194). Surprisingly, when the train arrives, they tell each other “After you. “No, after you” (194), and in this overt display of gentlemanly courtesy, the train departed, leaving them both on the platform. Sharar argues that this extreme display of good mannerism caused huge dent to the Nawabs and the Oudhi people, and, ultimately, resulted in its annexation by the British. Dube examines these problematics of the Oudhi elites and their concomitant failure to protect the kingdom, not totally located in their focus on the chess game, rather, in their openness, warmth and gentle mannerism. The fact remains that there was no place for gentlemanly behavior in the entire colonial enterprise. It was mostly a game of Othering with all the rules distorted and manipulated to favour only the Whites. The British Empire was notorious for decimating the trust of the colonized wherever they went. Their politics was based on rationality, which was diametrically opposed to the political outlook in India.

The use of rationality underpinned with deceit and misconstruing the truth reinforces Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism to examine the hegemony that the West exercises over the East. Said, as we know, is singularly interested to show “how the will to examine Orientalism” and “how the will to exercise dominant control [has]discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy, and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value and knowledge” (216). Whereas Leela Gandhi sees “Orientalism as a discourse which invents or orientalizes the Orient for the purposes of imperial consumption” (88), Alexander Macfie argues that the creation of the Orient involves a process of the creation of a series of stereotypical images, according to which “Europe (the West, the ‘self’) is



seen as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, virtuous, normal and masculine, while the Orient (the East, the 'other') is seen as being irrational, backward, despotic, inferior, depraved, aberrant and feminine sexually" (2002: 8). Seen in this context, the movie posits a perfect space to rethink colonialism as a game, which could only be countered, not through delicate mannerisms or goodness, rather with a strong focus on the ability to see through the moves/motifs of the British.

The failure of Awadh rulers to keep an eye on the changing pulse of the politics ostensibly resulted in their oppression and colonization. According to Dube, terms such as "misrule' and 'maladministration' were used ad nauseam by colonial administrators to justify the Company's annexation of Awadh. Nationalist historiography and literature concurred with the British, with the important exception that the terms of nationalist critique were that Awadh lacked patriotism and a passion for politics" (96-97).

The last scene of the film explicitly brings out the element of betrayal. Meer cheats Mirza by positioning his piece in a favourable position, which ostensibly results in Mirza's loss, and a heated altercation between the two friends. This scene is equally suggestive of betrayal of relationship between the East India Company and India. The Company, which we all know, arrived in India for business operations ended up with a subsequent colonization of Indians. It is here that the character of Nandlal attains greater significance. Nandlal, a guest of the Nawab, is a Hindu teacher, and, also, happens to be the accountant for the British administrator, Mr Collins. It was Nandlal who taught Meer and Mirza the game of chess, with an added warning that "we may have invented the game, but it's the British who have taken it up." (00:19:08) The juxtaposition of this warning scene with the movie's last scene where Mirza picks up a chess piece and announces, "[m]ove over, Minister. Make way for Queen Victoria!" (01:53:02), points to the fact that rule of the game has changed and, that, in the game of power, friendship, loyalty and trust do not find any place.

This climax is also important for making us understand the projection of the Nawabs as effeminate characters. To see the movie only as a critique of feudalism or the elite Nationalists incapable of fighting against the Britishers would be a sweeping generalization since *TCP* subverts the historiography by leaving audience with powerful questions to think over. One can only dig out meanings if s/he engages with the plot thoughtfully. In fact, the scathing criticism that Ray continues to receive for the projection of the Nawabs in negative shade only lies in the inability or vested disinterest to understand Ray's motifs behind such a narrative. Likewise, Rajbans Khanna's critique of Ray is also symptomatic of such an imaginative failure. Responding to Khanna's critique of the movie to fabricate the nationalist history, Ray contends forcefully in his piece published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (31 Dec 1978):

One of the most famous Indian journalists of the period, Girish Chunder Ghose, wrote in his weekly, *Hindu Patriot*, a few days before the Annexation: 'If Oude is misgoverned, if the King of Oude is a voluptuary and a puppet, if the Minister is a harpy, if the zamindars of Oude are graceless malcontents, we ask, where are the



proofs of this lamentable state of things? If a tithe of what is written and said about Oude and its government were true of that country and its governors, then society should not have existed there for a day... and a revolution more terrible than the French Revolution would have, despite the presence of the British troops, marked the progress of events in that country. (1978)

Ray accepts that his attempt in the movie is to juxtapose a story about “two chess playing jagirdars in Wajid’s Lucknow, with the historical event of the Annexation where the protagonists are Wajid and Outram” (1978).

INGLORIOUS EMPIRE: *ASHANI SANKET (DISTANT THUNDER, 1973)*

Ray himself remarked that, in *Shatranj* (1980) he was “portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides. You have to read this film between the lines” (qtd Robinson, “Introduction,” 1989: 12). While he has been accused of being soft towards British colonialism in *Shatranj*, Ray is unscathing in his critique of the Raj, the mercenaries and the complexities in Indian society in *Ashani Sanket* (1973). *Ashani Sanket* is Ray’s cinematic adaptation of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s tragic tale of the man-made Bengal famine of 1943, a seemingly forgotten Holocaust, ostensibly a result of Britain’s war with Japan. Ray thus screens India in the different phases of her subjection right from 1856 to 1943. Bengal, unlike other provinces of India, had to undergo a traumatic period in the 1940s, during the World War II. The British callously disregarded and even facilitated the starvation deaths of 3-5 million people in rural Bengal. While ironically India was very significantly supporting the British war effort with over 3 million troops (after again being denied independence after its WWI support), Winston Churchill exported food from India that was desperately needed domestically, and even barred other countries who were ready to send aid to India from doing so. This after a series of famines under the British Raj, such as one in 1770 that decimated 1/3 of Bengal’s population (10 million people) and that was intensified by the greed of the East India Company.

Amartya Sen has demonstrated quite convincingly in *Poverty and Famines* that the deaths in the 1943 famine were caused by British policies and not by any drastic slump in food production. While the famine killed millions, with agricultural labourers forming by far the largest group of those killed”, asserts Sen, “Bengal was producing the largest rice crop in history in 1943 (77-78). The war disrupted the economic system of Bengal and Burma in many ways, including its concentration of a privileged workforce in Calcutta and other cities. The network of supply and demand collapsed under the impetus of the profit motive. Free enterprise, in the form of speculation unchecked by a corrupt state government divided against itself and an indifferent British Raj, was the main cause of the Famine. Paul Greenough



explains that “[r]ice which ordinarily flowed in non-commercial exchanges between cultivators and their dependents [and] began to veer into the commercial channel, and a much larger proportion than usual of the stored rice supply fell into the hands of outsiders” (212). There was speculation on all sides ranging from the humblest cultivator to the richest Marwari merchant in Calcutta fattening himself on every kind of business generated by war.

Human greed for money cruelly dissolved the web of unenforceable obligations binding landlord to peasant, essentially feudal in nature, leaving the peasants starved. Madhusree Mukherjee sums up the grim situation in Bengal quite adroitly:

By the spring of 1943 almost all the machine-milled rice seems to have ended up with the government and its agents, as well as some part of the hand-milled rice. A district official would subsequently tell the commission investigating the famine that even the larger landowners had very little rice left early that year: “Whatever stock was available had been bought up at fantastic prices by military contractors and speculators. (96)

London ate India’s bread while India starved, and in 1943 nearly four million Bengalis died. It was their own fault, according to the odious Churchill, for “breeding like rabbits” (Limaye 1). Collectively, these famines amounted to a British colonial holocaust. Greenough has compared its impact on Bengal to that of the Depression on the industrialized world in his book *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*. Its roots went deep into Bengali society. With a rising population and declining production Bengal was no longer self-sufficient in rice and depended upon imported rice from Burma. With the fall of Burma in March 1942, all imports stopped abruptly. Rice-traders and speculators were alert to the meaning of food shortages in Chittagong and Midnapur, and wholesale grain prices continued to rise. The Bengal ministers played down scarcity and minimized the reasons responsible for high prices, hoping to avoid blame as well as public panic. Price controls had been delayed and then failed because the Bengal government had no buffer stocks to influence market prices.

Ashani Sanket is set in a poor rural Bengali village where most people are illiterate and even unaware of the war going on in the other side of the world. In the beautiful opening scene Ananga and her friend Chutki are fascinated by the flying jets which hardly mean anything more to them than a distant thunder. They are not even aware that those jets are flying to war. Ananga and her husband Gangacharan are the newer inhabitants of the village and belong to the respectable Brahmin class. A pseudo-scholar, Gangacharan is to the ignorant villagers a priest, doctor and teacher rolled into one. The villagers literally worship him, and provide him food, clothes and other day-to-day necessities as tokens of gratitude. He confidently asserts to the villagers that “[o]ur king is fighting the Japanese and the Germans” (00:32:22-00:33:25). He has heard that a place called Singapore has fallen to the Japanese and, unaware of its geographical location, enlightens the villagers that Singapore is located somewhere in the other part of Bengal. The first glimpse of impending



doom is seen in the form of a wizened old Brahmin gentleman who walks in from the neighboring village with news of a scarcity of rice, seeking a hearty meal for himself in turn (00:30:07-00:32:20). The crisis spreads like wildfire, and the village grocer announces that he does not have a supply of rice. Prices of all other food items soar in no time and soon they become unaffordable. Gradually the innocence of the village begins to crumble before Gangacharan and Ananga's eyes. The men worry at first, and then stoop to looting and rioting. The women are forced to hunt for snails from the pond and eat them, or to walk miles into a dense forest to dig up wild potatoes. Hoarders try to take advantage of the hunger of the poor villagers; some women are forced to sell more than their souls to lusty men in return for a meal. Gangacharan now realizes that people's reverence takes a backseat in the face of insatiable hunger, and that he himself has been reduced to a commoner, hunting for a fistful of rice.

Starvation engulfs the village and gradually strips the villagers off their humanity. There is a riot over rice at the local market; Biswas, the wealthiest man in the village lives amidst constant threats from the robbers. Chutki gives herself over to the scar-faced man at the local kiln for a bag of rice and flees with him to the city for food. The first boon Goopy and Bagha ask from the King of the ghosts in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969) is food. The clapping of their hands immediately dished out to them the meal that they desired. In *Ashani Sanket*, food was becoming scarcer as the price skyrocketed far beyond what was affordable and, in the end, there just was not any left. The film presents grim vignettes of the hands of the starved men and women praying for rice while their agonies rent the air. These events also bring about a more positive change in Gangacharan and Ananga. Gangacharan, who was arrogant and pompous, learns that he had lived his affluent life at the cost of the villagers. He becomes aware of the sacrifices others have made for him and that in this tragic ordeal there are no inequalities. Suffering and starvation erase all class and caste distinctions. The horrific turn of events arouses in them social responsibility.

Ray presents the horrors of death by starvation through an untouchable girl, Moti. A resident of Gangacharan's previous village she arrived as a welcome visitor to their house earlier as one whom they must not physically touch, by mutual consent. At the end she drags herself back to them for help, her eyes glazed for lack of food, and collapses under a tree. When Ananga offers her food in the shape of arum root, which is all that she has, the girl is unwilling to touch either it or the hand that brings it. She manages to raise her own hand feebly with four extended fingers to show she has not eaten for four days. The taboo of untouchability remains implanted in her psyche even at the point of death. As a death wish she feebly requests fish curry, a symbol of Bengali prosperity, which she could hardly have afforded even in times of plenty. Moti's plight compels Ananga to touch her; Gangacharan too abandons taboos and readily picks up the girl's hand to identify her pulse, but she already lay dead. Breaking yet another taboo, Gangacharan gives the corpse a proper cremation rather than leave it for the jackals to consume (01:27:40-01:34:54). In the context, this action is heroic; but this is heroism on the brink of extinction. Gangacharan thus finds his place in the lineage of Ray's protagonists whose integrity remains unshakeable and conscience infallible.



The final unforgettable shot, where the sheer scale of the holocaust is brought home to the audience, sends a shiver down the spine even on repeated viewings (01:35:12-01:35:50). The silhouettes of Bhattacharji and his family can be seen approaching, returning to their house, trailing a family of dependants. Amidst this situation, Ananga announces her pregnancy. Gangacharan's radiance gives way to consternation as he looks on the approaching people in the distance and the impending doom that awaits them. The camera turns to the silhouettes of dozens and then hundreds of starving people (01:36:10-01:36:30). The title card displays that 5 million died of starvation because of this man-made famine of 1943 (01:36:48-01:37:00). *Ashani Sanket* is a portrayal of the horrors inflicted on rural Bengal by the wartime famine, and of Gangacharan's new questioning of caste restrictions and privileges. The village is shown as a happy place before the onslaught of the crisis, but as soon as the famine arrives, people begin to lose all sense of proportions. It is this realization –that such a sudden, radical and unthinkable decline of human values can actually happen in the face of decimation– that truly sets *Ashani Sanket* apart as an understanding of the great famine of Bengal, and of the vulnerability of the human spirit.

CONCLUSION

Ray's cinematic representation of Indian history begins with *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (*The Chess Players*) in which feudalism is pitted against colonialism as the British seek to annex the northern Indian province of Oudh in 1856. He deliberately chose an event of the distant past and used all his cinematic strategies to invoke the pastness of the past. As major players, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and General Outram might see themselves as the makers of history. But they are also chess pieces moved by the economic expansion of the East India Company and the larger dictates of Queen Victoria. The landlords Meer and Mirza are blind to historical change and represent the sophisticated decadence of the land-owning class of Lucknow. *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958) is akin to *Shatranj ke Khiladi* as it too presents, quite elegiacally, the passage from the old to the new. The old feudal order is replaced by the merchant middle class. The feudal landlord Biswambhar Roy is aware like Nawab Wajid that he represents a fading culture and cannot withstand the historical forces of change.

If *Shatranj ke Khiladi* presents the East-West confrontation, *Charulata* (1964) presents fusion. Set in 1879, India is now a part of the British Empire. Culture as an independent, purist entity is no longer tenable. Old authenticities, stabilities, and certainties collapse; hybridity based on assimilation and interlocking takes over. *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1984) is a perfect presentation of an inter-communal discord interwoven with cross-cultural interactions. Uncontrollable native agitation and the practice of Swadeshi and boycott represent a challenge to the racist British government. *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973) delineates the mass starvation in Bengal in 1943 as a result of Britain's war with Japan. Starvation and famine affect everybody irrespective of his/her position in the caste hierarchy. India, on Ray's canvas, thus travels a long way from 1856 to



1943, from colonization to pre- Independence. Ray's "history films are attempts", observes Ben Nyce, "to remind his Bengali audiences of the glories of the Bengali past; their goal is to establish a sense of national identity in the face of the enormous influence of the West" (4-5).

Ray's consistent anti-colonial stance never interfered with his cultural cosmopolitanism or his readiness to criticize various aspects of indigenous life and culture. Tagore and Ray, the two most iconic figures of cultural syncretism and humanism, were always eager to embrace useful or valuable aspects of Western culture but were "critically open" and opposed the "serious asymmetry of power" involved in colonial rule (Sen 119, 124). "The sharpest revelations of the truth in cinema", believed Ray, "come from the details perceived through the eyes of artists" (Ray, *Deep Focus* 2011: 38). The "sensitive artist's subjective approach to reality" was of prime importance to him, and this was true "as much of documentaries as of fiction films" (2011: 38). While British writers were primarily interested in the "more exotic and sinister aspects of India in what were basically stories of mystery and adventure" (2011: 73), barring Kipling to some extent, none could unravel the "vast, too complex, too multilayered" (2011: 73) realities of India: "The upshot was that, the effort of memoirists, Indologists and historians notwithstanding, India remained a nebulous entity to the West; a vast amorphism that refused to take on a semblance of the familiar" (2011: 76). It was Ray's endeavor to explore the myriad densities and complexities of India to the world, the ascendancy of the colonizers and the multiple forms of annexation and exploitation, the thousands of disparities in behavior, habits, rituals, dress, topography, language, etc. underlying the broad cultural pattern that is India. At the same time, he acknowledged the inscrutability of the subcontinent, asserting that a "true understanding (of India) will take time" for "cows are still holy here, and God is still a phallus" (2011: 91).

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BELIEVE ME, DO NOT BELIEVE ME: JHUMPA LAHIRI AND THE ROYAL FAMILY OF OUDH

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ABSTRACT

In *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) Jhumpa Lahiri gives voice to Boori Ma, a durwan (door-keeper) who chronicles about the easier times she enjoyed before deportation to Kolkata (previously known as Calcutta, India) after Partition of 1947. Lahiri plays with the word *real* implying that Boori Ma's stories could be deciphered as real or not. Boori Ma's fictitious life resembles the one of the Royal Family of Oudh, which Lahiri seems to be inspired by. Foreign correspondents (Kaufman, 1981; Miles, 1985; Barry, 2019) did not question the veracity of this family's life story. In the present article, the two stories are compared: a literary and a *real* one. It is our intention to prove that traumatic experiences, such as Partition, cause subjects to imagine an alternative life; strategy which is unconsciously activated to heal trauma (LaCapra, 1999; Mookerjee-Leonard, 2017). The latter is what western journalists and readers failed to acknowledge.

KEYWORDS: Partition, Trauma, Literature, Journalism.

CREÉDME, NO ME CREÁIS:
JHUMPA LAHIRI Y LA FAMILIA REAL DE OUDH

RESUMEN

En *Intérprete del dolor* (1999) Jhumpa Lahiri da voz a Boori Ma, una portera que cuenta a quien quiera escucharle sobre las comodidades de su vida antes de ser deportada a Calcuta tras la Partición de 1947. Lahiri juega con la palabra *real*, lo que hace que el público lector se cuestione la veracidad de las historias de Boori Ma. Este personaje tiene un paralelismo con el de la familia real de Oudh en la que parece haberse inspirado Lahiri. La prensa internacional (Kaufman, 1981; Miles, 1985; Barry, 2019) contribuyó a que el público occidental no cuestionara la historia de esta familia. En este artículo se comparan ambas historias, una literaria y otra *real*. Se pretende demostrar cómo experiencias traumáticas, como es el caso de la Partición, hacen que los sujetos, inconscientemente, proyectemos vidas alternativas para así sobrellevar el trauma (LaCapra, 1999; Mookerjee-Leonard, 2017), y cómo, tanto la prensa occidental como el público lector no reparó en este hecho a la hora de analizar ambas historias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: partición, trauma, literatura, periodismo.



In “A Real Durwan,” short story included in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri gives voice to Boori Ma, a durwan (doorkeeper) who chronicles about the easier times she enjoyed before deportation to Kolkata after Partition of 1947. No one doubts that she is a refugee because of her accent, and, at the same time, no one is sure about her litanies. She recalls being a landowner in her past life, with a two-story brick house, who ended up crossing the border with just two bracelets on her wrist. Now she sweeps the stairs, with a broom as her most precious possession, newspapers which make the function of a bed, and with her life savings tied to her sari’s hem. Lahiri plays along the short story with the word *real* implying that Boori Ma’s tales could be real or not. The residents of the flat building seem to like Boori Ma until she is accused of robbing the stairwell’s basin. She implores everybody to believe her, leaving the reader with the feeling of believing, or not, not just her innocence, but her life stories. Boori Ma’s fictitious life resembles the one of the Royal Family of Oudh, which Lahiri seems to be inspired by.

The supposedly *real* story of the Royal Family of Oudh began when Wilayat Mahal announced herself as Begum of Oudh on the platform of New Delhi’s train station in the early 1970s. The Kingdom of Oudh was, as we will further see, a princely state in the Awadh region of North India that no longer exists due to annexation by the British in 1856. The Begum declared that she would stay in the train station until her properties were restored to her. She settled in the V.I.P. waiting room, together with her two children, Prince Ali Raza and Princess Sakina, for a whole decade. People doubted about the truthiness of her status, as tenants do with Boori Ma’s one. Thanks to the propaganda broadcasted by foreign correspondents (Kaufman, 1981; Miles, 1985; Barry, 2019), western readers demanded a solution to the injustice committed with Wilayat. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ended up accepting the family’s claim and granted them a 14th century hunting lodge known as Malcha Mahal, in the Chanakyapuri area of New Delhi.

In the present article these two stories are compared: a literary and a *real* one. Our thesis is that traumatic experiences, such as Partition, cause subjects to imagine an alternative life to heal trauma (LaCapra, 1999; Mookerjea-Leonard, 2017), fact that western journalists and readers seem to have failed to acknowledge. Since Jhumpa Lahiri may have been inspired by the Royal Family of Oudh’s case when writing “A Real Durwan,” let us analyse what took Wilayat Mahal to declare herself as the Begum of Oudh, to later study how traumatic experiences unconsciously play an important role in the subjects’ imagination, to then exemplify the latter in Lahiri’s story “A Real Durwan.”

In the early 1970s, Wilayat Mahal and two of her children, Cyrus and Sakina, whom she referred to as Prince Ali Raza and Princess Sakina, arrived at New Delhi’s train station claiming to be the Royal Family of Oudh. The Begum demanded recognition and accommodation suitable to their noble status. They stood for days at New Delhi’s train station platform until they accommodated themselves, together with their watchdogs and servants, in the railway’s V.I.P. waiting room. This space became their home for almost a decade. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, pressured by a possible Muslim revolt ignited mostly by western journalist who let the world know about this presumably Royal Family situation, offered them Malcha



Mahal, a 14th century palace in New Delhi, where there was no electricity, no running water, but telephone connection. The latter allowed the family to have contact with journalists overseas who contributed, as mentioned, to spread the legend.

The palace, built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq, a Muslim ruler of the Tughlaq dynasty (1351-1388), is nowadays, after the deceased of the so-called Royal Family of Oudh, a tourist attraction to visit. This Indian space, with history, or story as we will try to prove, embedded within its bricks, is now advertised, mainly to international tourists, for having been the home of the so-called *Royal Family of Oudh*. It is said to be a haunted place due to the stories built around this peculiar family, particularly by western journalists such as Ellen Barry (*The New York Times*, 2019), James Miles (*Los Angeles Times*, 1985), Michael T. Kaufman (*The New York Times*, 1981), Jonathan Broder (*Chicago Tribune*, 1985), Elizabeth Bumiller (*The Washington Post*, 1986) or Tim Sullivan (*The Seattle Times*, 2004), among others. It is our claim that what haunts the place is the trauma of Partition which permeates physical and bodily entities, those of the palace itself, and of Wilayat Mahal. Trauma is what makes us, human beings, unconsciously imagine alternative lives to deal with traumatic experiences, since, as Dominick LaCapra highlights, trauma “is a shattering experience that distorts memory” (2009: 61).

Wilayat Mahal considered herself the Begum of Oudh, and the international press contributed for decades to make readers believe of the real existence of the Begum. Not until 2020 did Devanshi Patel accuse western journalists of exoticizing, once more, India. In “The Jungle Prince and the Western Gaze,” Patel underlines how “foreign journalists amplified these fabrications” (2020). Journalists Michael T. Kaufman (1981) and Ellen Barry (2019), among others, provided western readers with the exoticism they were looking for. By *exoticizing* the Orient, journalists contributed to perpetuate the image of India as a country full of Royal Families, palaces, servants, nawabs and harems, as in *The Arabian Nights*. That only western correspondents were allowed entrance in the palace, home to the Begum, explains how, following Indian journalist Saeed Naqvi, there was not an acute historical approach which would have proved these journalists wrong: “[h]ad an Indian journalist been allowed access, he or she might have found discrepancies in the family narrative earlier” (in Patel 2020). He calls for single facts, that is, for example, that the so-called Royal Family of Oudh was of Sunni Muslim descent while the Nawabs of Oudh were historically Shia (Naqvi 2019). Western journalists seemed not to be interested in historical facts but in crafting the Begum and her children as objects for the western palate. It is in 2019 when Ellen Barry, after years of research, claims at the end of her article, that the Begum was to be seen as a Muslim housewife who was forced to leave her home in Lucknow and was determined to get all her belongings returned. She finally acknowledged that Partition is what drove Wilayat into a psychotic breakdown. Nevertheless, forty years of international journalist chronicle about the eccentric Royal Family of Oudh failed to associate that this family was a physical representation of the trauma behind Partition.

To understand what Barry calls one of New Delhi’s great mysteries (2019), known to western journalists but not to Delhiites themselves, we need to draw a picture about the history of Oudh. Awadh, anglicized as Oudh, was a historic region



of Northern India, which now constitutes the north-eastern part of Uttar Pradesh (state in the northern part of current India), and which was occupied by Muslim invaders in the 12th century, becoming part of the Mughal empire in the 16th century. British became interested in Awadh in 1760 and after 1800 their control exceeded. In 1798 Nawab Saadat Ali Khan was crowned by Sir John Shore, and, as a manifest of gratitude, the nawab gave half of Awadh Kingdom to the British. In 1818 Oudh state declared itself independent from the rules of the “Great Moghul” and it was annexed as Oudh by the British in 1856. This angered Indians, contributing to the Indian Mutiny (1857-1858). Wajid Ali Shah was the last ruler of Awadh who in 1856, before the mutiny, left to Metiabruz, in Kolkata, with part of his family, which included the chief Begum and other members of the harem. Hazrat Mahal, whom it is said to be his favourite, stayed in Lucknow and played a leading role during the 1857 sepoy revolt. She claimed her son, Birjis Qadr, the Wali (ruler) of Oudh, but it was rejected by the British. The Begum escaped to Nepal, and Wajid Ali Shah was survived by many of his children. In 1877 the British controlled the Oudh region and together with Agra became “the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh.” After India’s independence in 1947 that territory became part of Uttar Pradesh. Begum Wilayat Mahal’s husband, who pre-deceased her, is said to be one of Wajid Ali Shah’s descendants (Barry 2019). Inayatullah Butt, Wilayat’s husband, was in fact a government official, who worked as the register of the University of Lucknow, and not until his death did it occur to the Begum to claim social and economic compensation for their royal ancestry.

Ellen Barry, South Asia bureau chief for the *New York Times* (2013-2017), received a phone call from Cyrus, Prince Ali Raza, in 2016, inviting her to visit Malcha Mahal. Many journalists, mostly American, had been invited before to the decayed palace, where Cyrus would inform them about the injustices committed towards his family. Michael T. Kaufman, journalist for the *New York Times*, wrote back in 1981 how the Begum claimed what was hers, “what was wrongfully taken from us” and how “we never accepted British hegemony, and the best they could do was make deals with some offspring of the nawab’s concubines.” Barry developed a friendship with Cyrus, the last remaining member of the family, and not until his death did she piece together the family’s history, coming to the conclusion, in 2019, after four years of research, that they were not the Royal Family of Oudh. With the article “The Jungle Prince of Delhi,” published in *The New York Times* (2019), Barry became 2020 Pulitzer Prize finalist in Feature Writing.

In 2019 Barry went to Lucknow (in Uttar Pradesh), where the family had previously lived, where neighbours remembered them but not as the Royal Family they considered themselves to be. Thanks to Shahid, Cyrus’ brother, who lived in Bradford, Barry was able to prove that Cyrus was in fact Mickey Butt. Shahid confirmed that his mother, Wilayat Mahal, was a housewife, and how when his mother claimed to be the Begum of Oudh, he did believe her until he was old enough to realize the fictitious life his mother had constructed upon them and upon herself. He left, and so did his other brother Salahuddin Zahid Butt. The latter migrated to United States. He died in 2017 but Barry interviewed his wife Selma who agreed that her mother-in-law had a mental disorder. The plain story is that



after Partition, Wilayat Mahal and Inayatullah Butt had to decide about staying in India or moving to Pakistan. Wilayat did not want to leave India but was forced to do so by her husband. She was confined to a mental hospital in Lahore where she received electroshock therapy. It was after that, and once her husband died, when she returned to India and her first stop, now as the so-called Begum of Oudh, was New Delhi's platform train station.

This story has nothing to do with the narrative of enchantment and mystery the international press gave echo to. There is no fairy tale ending either, even though Cyrus, when informing the press about his mother's death, tried to exoticize it by adding fictitious glamour to her suicide. It seems that Wilayat, unable to bear her life situation, killed herself by ingesting a poisonous drink mixed with crushed diamonds back in 1993. Cyrus, the last member of the made-up Royal Family of Oudh, died in 2017 due to dengue fever, his unclaimed body buried in a grave marked with a stone that says DD33B. The aftermath of this traumatic life is that Cyrus' brother Shahid recognized to Barry not knowing if he was Indian or Pakistani, and Cyrus, on the other hand, was buried even without a name on his grave, that is, both deprived of their identity. They all suffered the consequences of their mother mental illness caused by the traumatic effects of Partition. The international press should have acknowledged this when broadcasting the news about the Royal Family of Oudh.

Wilayat's storytelling is an example of what Gabriele Schwab defines as a testimony "necessary for healing trauma" (2010: 48). Her tale was a narrative which dealt with the paradox of telling what she could not tell, not to herself, not to her children, not to the press, that of Partition. Urvashi Butalia highlights how "[t]he political partition of India [in 1947] caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or since have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly. In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan" (2000: 3). More than ten million refugees crossed the western border which divided the historic state of Punjab: Muslims travelling to Pakistan, such as Wilayat, and Hindus and Sikhs east to India. Urvashi Butalia reminds us in *The Other Side of Silence* (2000) how the way people choose to remember their history is as important as what we may consider historical facts (8).

Nonetheless, historical facts are also interpretations of a given person. It was on June 3, 1947, when the plan to partition India was announced. A vast number of letters were received by the All India Congress Committee (AICC) concerning people wanting to know what would happen to them: "What will become of us, they asked. We believe India is to be partitioned: where will we go? *How* will we go? What will happen to our jobs? If we have to move, will we get our old jobs back in the new homeland? What will happen to our homes, our lands, if we have to move?" (Butalia 2000: 55, italics in the original). These concerns, together with the consequences of Partition, and its nowadays ramifications are what the story behind the Royal Family of Oudh and Lahiri's short story "A Real Darwan" gather.

There are many aspects of Partition that remain invisible, but as we see within a contrapuntal reading of both stories, the one of the Royal Family of Oudh, and Lahiri's "A Real Durwan," there is a clamour of voices that want to be



heard, particularly, the ones that have been marginalized by society, in this case, Wilayat and Boori Ma. Butalia underlines that “[m]any historians have spoken of how selective amnesia and memory are at the root of the relationship between human beings and their history” (2000: 277) and how historiography is a technique which attempts to dissipate amnesia and work on memory. Without a doubt, in the history of Partition, the stories of women, children, castes, and many other have been silenced. Barry slightly mentioned it when writing about the Royal Family of Ouhd, nor did the international journalists who wrote about this family for forty years. Lahiri, perhaps inspired by this story, contributed to voice a subaltern character victim of Partition.

When approaching both texts, a literary and a *real* one, we need to be aware of the trauma that is behind them, that of Partition. It implies, as we already know, more than a simple geographical division. It refers to “people separated overnight, and friends became enemies, homes became strange places, strange places now had to be claimed as home, a line was drawn to make a border, and boundaries began to find reflection in people’s lives and minds” (Butalia 2000: 285). Subjects had to redefine themselves and many of them were clustered in a limbo, as the one Wilayat, her children, and Boori Ma had to inhabit. Fiction allows us to understand such a traumatic experience where empathy is crucial both in writing and reading. As scholar Andrea Llano Busta claims, thanks also to interdisciplinary approaches, such as the one we are here employing, we can move “from a purely historical standpoint to one that prioritized the human dimension of the matter” (2019: 46). Through fiction, Lahiri allows Boori Ma to challenge “hegemonic discourses by drawing attention to the emotional sphere blatantly ignored in historiography” (Llano Busta 2019: 46).

Lahiri also employs LaCapra’s empathic unsettlement technique (2001) as she establishes a mode of writing that allows the reader to feel an affective bond with the victim, Boori Ma, without allowing for (over)identification with her (LaCapra 2001: 79-79). This technique helps the reader to acknowledge the represented other and that understanding the other can never be complete, as Emy Koopman suggests (2010: 237). Nevertheless, Lahiri offers a writing, and, with it, a reading which enables “an affective approach without making identification implausible” (Llano Busta 2019: 53).

Antonia Navarro Tejero adds how “[t]he partition narratives of South Asian authors are testimony to the fact that women of all ethnic and religious backgrounds were the greatest victims of the newly created border between India and Pakistan in 1947” (2019: 44). And this is the case of Wilayat and Boori Ma. Lahiri succinctly addresses the violence of Partition when writing the historiography of Boori Ma. The rhetorical apparatus employed dehumanizes this character who had lived an accommodated life before Partition to end up as a *durwan* with a broom as her most precious possession, first within a household, to later be thrown out from it. Karin Möller underlines how “Lahiri makes Boori Ma carry injustice as an allegorical weight, that is, she is of course powerless to alter the sad historical fate of vast numbers of domestically subaltern women, but she is allowed to leave her trace in the story in a manner that determines its ironic significance” (2008: 67). This irony is constantly present along the story, with the repetition of the sentence “believe



me, don't believe me" which at the end of the story becomes "believe me, believe me." Lahiri presents a riddle that we need to solve along the story. By repeating the imperative "believe" uttered by the main character, the author pushes the reader to understand that what Boori Ma was telling was the truth. This sixty-four-year-old character, "with a hair in a knot no larger than a walnut, and she looked almost as narrow front as she did from the side" (70) lived before deportation with her husband and four daughters in a two-story brick house. From that past she just has the skeleton keys, two bracelets and her life savings tied to her sari's hem. To whom she encounters along the household stairs, she describes in detail the delicious menu of one of her daughter's wedding: rice cooked in rosewater and pewter bowls for the wedding guests to wash their hands, among many other delicacies. She tells her neighbours, particularly Mrs. Dalal, the wife of a wholesale distributor of plumbing goods, and Mrs. Misra, the only one in the building with a telephone, that her feet, before Partition, "touched nothing but marble" (71). It was back in her past when she tasted a life of luxuries, which contrasts with the life she now lives, where she is practically invisible for the building's residents.

Because of her accent none of the neighbours doubt about her being a refugee: "the accent in her Bengali made that clear" (72). But they do not believe about her wealthy past status because of the misleading recurrent facts she keeps telling, such as that she crossed the East Bengal border "with the thousands of others, on the back of a truck, between sacks of hemp" (72). Other days she would say that she had come to Calcutta [Kolkata since 2001] on a bullock cart. When asked ironically about which was the real means of transport which took her to Calcutta from Bengal, she would reply that there was no need to demand specifics. There is a story within a story where the external one, and, thus, the less relevant, is full of specifics about how Mr. Dal brought two basins to the building, and because his wife did not want the two of them at home, they put one in their house and the other one in the basin. Mr. Dal was being promoted and to celebrate it he took his wife on vacation. The latter, together with the basin, had consequences since the women in the neighbourhood became jealous and decided to plan renovations of their own: "One decided to barter a stack of her wedding bracelets and commissioned a white-washer to freshen the walls of the stairwell. Another pawned her sewing machine and summoned an exterminator. A third went to the silversmith and sold back a set of pudding bowls: she intended to have the shutters painted yellow" (80).

If we leave aside the specifics, as Boori Ma requests, "Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf?" (72), and we analyse the internal and most relevant story, we can see that "she is the victim of changing times" (72), as Mr. Chatterjee, a neighbour who stop reading newspaper since Independence, recalls. Like "thousands of others" (72), she left her life back in Bengal and moved to Calcutta. Lahiri gives the reader hints to resolve the riddle as she gives voice to the female neighbours who excuse Boori Ma for her contradictions since "she probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family" (72). We need to decipher the reasons why she is no longer with her family. Partition in 1947 is the answer, for it saw thousands of people split according to religion. Ironically, the basin, symbol for religious rituals of cleaning and purity, placed by Mr. Dal in the



building's corridor contributes to accentuate these changing times Mr. Chatterjee refers both at the beginning and at the end of the short story.

The changing times at the beginning refer to Partition and its oblivion. Meanwhile, at the end of the story, Mr. Chatterjee highlights that people's need to wash the past and offer a new face constitutes a new reality. As he states in the story, "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*" (82, italics in the original). The basin and the refurnishing of the building washed the building's past and pushes Boori Ma, who reminds them of Partition and its aftermath, to the building's rooftop. She becomes like a witch with a broom that nobody wants to see any longer. It is as if with the disappearance of Boori Ma, the grief of Partition vanishes. This is the hypocrisy that Lahiri is in our opinion criticizing, since we cannot simply forget what Partition caused. As Butalia acknowledges "it exists privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan" (2000: 3). The only way we can begin to understand what Partition was, Butalia highlights, is by looking at how people remember it (2000: 10). Boori Ma needs to voice, even altering what really happen, what she went through.

Herstory is part of her identity, and once she climbs to the rooftop because there is no space for her in the building stairs due to the refurnishing she is disposed from her past, as she is not able to voice it. It is then when she leaves the private space and becomes a flaneuse who wanders around Calcutta. Not being able to share about her past with the neighbours she loses control of what she is. This loss is represented by Lahiri when in one of her walks Boori Ma loses her life savings and her skeleton keys. When she goes back to the building neighbours accused her of having informed robbers about the basin that was no longer there. She implores them to believe her, not just her innocence but also her, at times, misleading past. James Young reminds us that "[w]hatever 'fiction' emerge from the survivors' accounts are not deviations from the 'truth' but are part of the truth in any particular version. The fictiveness in testimony does not involve disputes about facts, but the inevitable variance in perceiving and representing these facts, witness by witness, language by language, culture by culture" (1990: 32).

CONCLUSION

These two stories, a literary and a *real* one, represent traumatic narratives which could be understood as restoring possibilities of healing and mending (Masterson *et al.* 2013: 2). Fiction disentangles, within a bibliotherapy strategy, bodies, and words from the traumas which hold them captive. With great success, Lahiri represents the unrepresentable. Literature proves then how, as Cathy Caruth, underlines, it is the appropriate medium to explain the unexplainable because it uses a language "that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (1996: 5). Wilayat had to fictionalize her life to voice the traumatic experience she had to go through, something that, unfortunately, took time for western journalists to see. Lahiri, who might be inspired by the story of the Royal Family of Oudh, makes a wink to



the western journalists who wrote about Wilayat. Mr. Chatterjee never opened a newspaper since Independence took place. This could be due to Chatterjee's grief, or it could be understood as a manipulation of how history is being written by historians and journalists alike. On the other hand, Boori Ma, lacking a proper mattress, uses newspapers to lie on. She does not read them but lies on top of them, and when the newspapers got wet due to the rain, her sari "smeared with newsprint ink" (81). When Boori Ma is deprived of her identity and she does not have any more the skeleton keys in her sari's hem, it is when the newspaper ink becomes visible. Wilayat is the outcome of western journalism and Boori Ma is Lahiri's. Nevertheless, if we pay attention to their real and fictional inner story, we realize that they are the aftermath of Partition.

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A READING OF SATYAJIT RAY'S *PATHER PANCHALI* AND *AGANTUK* AS SUBTEXTS OF FICTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*, 1955) and *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*, 1991) and discusses the style of Satyajit Ray's filmmaking which combined the aesthetics of European verisimilitude with suggestive symbolism based on conventional Indian iconography. The paper will concentrate on the authentic representation of a poor family in rural Bengal in *Pather Panchali* and the urban setting, in his last film *Agantuk*. The main aim is to explore how the detailing of the shots and the dialogues in these films engage in the ethnographic study of the Bengali society through these cinematographic fictional narratives.

KEYWORDS: Satyajit Ray, *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*), *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*), Bengal, Fictional Ethnography in Film.

PATHER PANCHALI Y AGANTUK, DE SATYAJIT RAY,
COMO TEXTOS DE ETNOGRAFÍA DE FICCIÓN

RESUMEN

Este ensayo estudia *Pather Panchali* (*La canción del camino*) (1955) y *Agantuk* (*El extraño*) (1999) y detalla el estilo cinematográfico del director indio bengalí Satyajit Ray, que combinó estilo europeo con un simbolismo basado en iconografía típica india. El trabajo se centrará en la representación de una familia en un entorno rural, en *Pather Panchali*, y en un entorno urbano en la última película de Ray, *Agantuk*. El objetivo es señalar los planos y los diálogos que permiten que estas películas puedan ser consideradas estudios etnográficos de sociedades bengalíes en narrativas de ficción cinematográficas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Satyajit Ray, *Pather Panchali* (*La canción del camino*), *Agantuk* (*El extraño*), Bengala, etnografía en ficción cinematográfica.

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Akira Kurosawa once remarked, “not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon” (qtd Jasper 126). Satyajit Ray, who can be simultaneously described as a visionary, film director, scriptwriter, music composer, author, graphic artist, editor, lyricist and undoubtedly much more, had penned on filmmaking, focusing especially on the predicaments faced by Indian filmmakers. In 1948, even before he had started shooting for his first feature film, *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*) (1955), he lamented the state in which Indian cinema then was, and wrote:

What the Indian cinema needs today is not more gloss, but more imagination, more integrity, and a more intelligent appreciation of the limitations of the medium. [...] What our cinema needs above everything else is a style, an idiom, a sort of iconography of cinema, which would be uniquely and recognisably Indian. (1976: 22)

So, when Ray first conceptualised Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay’s novel, *Pather Panchali* (translated into English in 1968, and published under the title *Pather Panchali. Song of the Road*) as a film that he wanted to make, it could be expected that the audience would have an Indian story told in an essentially Indian way.

To the question by interviewers as to who had influenced him the most in his works, Satyajit Ray always mentioned the name of Robert J. Flaherty amongst others (1976: 54). Flaherty, who is commonly regarded as the ‘father’ of both documentary and ethnographic films, was the first director whose documentary film, namely *Nanook of the North* (1922) witnessed considerable commercial success. The film combined the elements of both drama and documentary, thus paving the way for the development of the genre of filmic ethnography. As early as 1957 and ’58, critics like Robert F. Hawkins and John Updike drew parallels between Flaherty and the element of fictional ethnography in Ray’s technique of filmmaking, which was characterised by precision in observation and focus on grounded reality. After Venice Film Festival in 1957, Hawkins wrote about how Ray’s “direct yet poetic observation of the human scene recall[s] the best work done [...] by Flaherty.” While writing for the *Harper’s Magazine* in 1958, Updike included *Pather Panchali* “in the great tradition of documentary carved out [...] by our own Bob Flaherty.” Ray’s fictional ethnography lies in the way he chronicles Bengali life with the precision of a documentary film that is enhanced with the art of storytelling.

Ray is a patient, observant insider insistently documenting the micro-narratives of ordinary individuals and their day-to-day struggle. His camera is sometimes the invisible observer, like in the sequence of the rainy season in a Bengal village in *Pather Panchali* (01:33:08-01:40:10), and sometimes a participant in the story, like in the shooting of the dance ritual by the Santhals near the end of *Agantuk* (01:49:34-01:54:04). The dynamics of the power structures involved in the observer-observed relationship dissipates in Ray’s films as he plays the role of both insider and outsider. Gregory Bateson, the interdisciplinary scientist, who challenged the way conventional anthropologists observed and recorded their subjects, remarked:



They [scientists and anthropologists, whom Bateson called the Functional School] have described the structure of several societies and shown the main outlines of the pragmatic functioning of this structure. But they have scarcely attempted the delineation of those aspects of culture which the artist is able to express by impressionistic methods. [...] Evidently then the emotional background is casually active within a culture, and no functional study can ever be reasonably complete unless it links up the structure and pragmatic working of the culture with its emotional tone or ethos. (2)

Ray's films potentially lend themselves to be understood as ethnographic fiction as he artistically captures the whole emotional tone or ethos of a society in a manner that goes beyond the mechanics of formal, organized anthropological research. In this context of depicting a society, the detailing of a scene he was shooting, as the director himself told us, was of paramount importance to him: This is Indian tradition. It's very, very important the presence of the essential thing in a very small detail, which you must catch in order to express the larger thing.

This is in Indian art, this is in Rajput miniatures, this is in Ajanta, this is in Ellora, this is in the classics, in Kalidasa, in *Sakuntala*, in folk-poetry, in folk-singing. This is the the essence, I think (1970: 120).

Pather Panchali tells us the story of a rural family neck-deep in poverty set in one of the villages of Bengal, where the little boy Apu is born and starts to develop his first sensibilities of responses to the world around him. His sister Durga dies in a devastating monsoon that wreaks havoc at the poor hut, and his Auntie Indir Thakrun is cruelly left at the mercy of nature to die alone in the forest. His parents Harihar and Sarbojaya finally leave their village. Ray's first film turned out to be an artistic expression, with powerful images of humanity and created with an exemplary economy of means.

The oeuvre of Ray's films expanded over four decades, from 1950 to 1990, coinciding with the transition of the Bengali society from an agricultural economy to a capitalist culture. If all his thirty-six films were read as one single text, they would offer a remarkable fictional ethnography of the shift in Bengali society from agrarian culture to bourgeois values. His last film, *Agantuk*, much unlike his first, is a tragic story of an Uncle who comes back to visit his niece and her family after thirty-five years of absence, while he went globe-trotting and was engaged in anthropological research. It is often considered to be Ray's own commentary on the sorry state of affairs with human life and humanity, akin to Rabindranath Tagore's last essay, *Crisis in Civilisation* (1941), written during the distressful times of World War II. Through Manmohan, the protagonist, Ray asserts that it is experience and conventional textual education that have put mankind in a situation where he constantly corrupts and mutilates himself despite all the sophistication of civilisation. The inevitable and ominous question with which the audience leaves the theatre is what, then, civilisation is. From the nuanced portrayal of the human condition in rural Bengal in *Pather Panchali*, Ray's films traversed a long way into the classy drawing-room of a refined Bengali middle-class family in the heart of the city in *Agantuk*, and the narrative of fictional ethnography comes a full circle, as this man must return to the



remote village of the Santhals in Shantiniketan to live under non-urban conditions, which he considers nobler than that of an erudite urban gentleman.

The gradual but stark transformation in the emotions and responses of characters to events around them from the early 1950s to the late 1980s is evident in the way Sarbojaya, in *Pather Panchali*, expressed her disgust at Indir Thakrun's pleading for a new shawl (00:29:44-00:30:08) or in the way Sudhindra, in *Agantuk*, questions the credulity of the Uncle when the latter offers no plausible motive for his sudden visit (00:03:23-00:08:12). The subtext of his films holds a mirror to the collective consciousness of the society, especially the Bengali society in West Bengal. However, while they bear unmistakable stamps of the times in which they were made, Ray's films undeniably depict human emotions that are universal, and that is precisely where the complexity of his craft lies. The intricate detailing of the inanimate objects on the set were of utmost importance to the director, who was determined never to make a compromise on either the mood of the scene he was filming or the ethos of the story he was telling. Amaresh Misra, while elaborating on the techniques used by Ray, comments:

[I]n them [Ray's films], elements of 'concrete setting' and 'open space' fused to form a living environment [...] In this, technical elements too took on a new role: the camera for instance by literally waiting for the 'texture' of a setting to unfold before moving on, in a very measured tempo, to link the inanimate objects, symbols, etc, with the actions of the character ensured that aspects of 'information' filling up the environment would throb with a life of their own. (1052)

In this context, one might recall the sequence in *Pather Panchali* that portrays natural elements with a movement of the camera which can be likened to a little boy running through the village paths: the dragonflies and the water-skaters scouting the twigs growing in the pond (01:33:08-01:34:42), and then finally the camera moving on to capture the scene where the bald-headed villager becomes alert of the onset of the rainy season when the first raindrop falls on his pate (01:37:14-01:37:47). This entire sequence of "grey humid stillness" (1976: 34), as Ray himself described it, accompanied by Ravi Shankar's sitar music as the background score, heralded the monsoon not only in the village of Nishchindipur on screen, but also in the imagination of the audience. Mahdi Chowdhury rightly points out that "Ray's genius lay in his ability to capture an ethnographic portrait of Indian village life."

Without dialogue or movement of the characters, Ray induced the desired temper in his audience for the playfulness of Apu and Durga drenched in the first monsoon rain (01:37:49-01:40:10), and yet the heightened pathos, that is the very essence of the film, was not entirely whisked away. As Ray was always pressed for funds during his shooting of *Pather Panchali*, he had to balance this new form of cinema in the India of the 1950s with other modalities of shooting. Ray talks about these conditions stating:

It was very unpleasant. It meant, for one thing, that we missed the rainy season, and we had to shoot the rain scenes in October. Throughout the rainy season we



had no money. It meant going to the location every day with the entire crew and cast and just waiting. There were days and days of waiting and doing nothing... We would keep looking at the sky and at little patches of cloud which wouldn't produce any rain. (qtd Robinson 84)

Ray was so intent to capture the scenes in their true natural setting that he would rather undergo this ordeal than shoot the film in a studio setup. He had deplored the habit of Indian filmmakers of "shooting indoors in a country which is all landscape" (1976: 23). Given the times in which his first film was made, Ray was doing ground-breaking work: no one in Indian cinema till then had ever thought of either portraying the tatters of a penniless family without embellishment and gloss nor did anyone here ever fancy of casting an eighty-year-old woman without a semblance of makeup. However, he was careful not to cross the fine line between romanticising poverty and the aesthetics in the portrayal of it. I quote from an interview given by Ray in 1981 to *Cineaste*:

Cineaste: Some critics feel that you romanticize poverty, that the poverty and misery in your films never becomes ugly.

Ray: I think that *Pather Panchali* is fairly ruthless in its depiction of poverty. The behaviour of characters, the way that the mother behaves towards the old woman, is absolutely cruel. I don't think anyone has shown such cruelty to old people within a family. (1982: 29)

Ray's work, especially because of the choices he makes in casting and because of the experiential manner in which he takes the shots, becomes ethnographically important. Interestingly enough, *Pather Panchali*, as Andrew Robinson tells us, never had a proper script (76). Ray began imagining the film shot by shot, in intricate detail, while he was travelling by ship from London. Since early 1952, he started to sketch the most important shots in black ink, and he kept in his head the dialogues of the film, most of which were taken from Bandyopadhyay's novel. As he started shooting the film in the village in Boral, miles away from Kolkata, Ray took field-notes from what he observed: the conversations of the rural folks, their way of dealing with life in utter poverty, their responses to natural events like the rainy season, the way a death in the family affected the people in it and so on. Much of these observations were imbibed into the shooting of the film, as Ray wanted to ensure that he portrayed the Bengali rural life in its authentic detail. Ethnographic studies in recent times, as George Marcus tells us, has stretched beyond the conventions of formal, trained fieldwork:

Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the "local" and the "global," the "lifeworld" and the "system." (95)

As the camera observes the minute detail of the characters and the setting with precision, Ray's films offer us a perspective into the Bengal of his times through



the narration of micro-stories. Later, in 1957, after he had completed the film and it was received with accolades both in his home country and abroad, he wrote:

I chose *Pather Panchali* for the qualities that made it a great book: its humanism, its lyricism, and its ring of truth [...] The script had to retain some of the rambling quality of the novel because that in itself contained a clue to the feel of authenticity: life in a poor Bengali village does ramble. (1976: 33)

The adaptation of the novel, which was “a kind of encyclopaedia on Bengali rural life” (1976: 33) was not a linear task that Ray had undertaken. Ray had spoken about the complexity of the problem in adapting to film a novel that abounds in long, exquisite descriptions of the village landscape:

You had to find out for yourself how to catch the hushed stillness of dusk in a Bengali village, when the wind drops and turns the ponds into sheets of glass, dappled by the leaves of *saluk* and *sapla*, and the smoke from ovens settles in wispy trails over the landscape, and the plaintive blows on conchshells from homes far and near are joined by the chorus of crickets, which rises as the light falls, until all one sees are the stars in the sky, and the stars that blink and swirl in the thickets. (1982)

The sketches of the characters and settings that Ray made in his notebook are now available in print, namely, *The Pather Panchali Sketchbook*. It shows how Ray collected detailed field-notes from his expeditions in the village of Boral and from the conversations of the villagers there. His camera thus acts as a character, as it observes life in minute detail while at the same time participating in the scene it is filming. Ray, by means of his creative imagination, improvised Bandyopadhyay’s fictional narrative in a manner where the characters on screen played their parts, uninterrupted, as members of that social group in the village. *Pather Panchali* thus reflects the genuine ethos of rural Bengal and capture the great humanist experience, making the film a fictional ethnographic study on the villages of Bengal during the middle of the twentieth century. It may be mentioned here that the film won the “Best Human Document’ award in 1956 Cannes Film Festival, an improvised award that was never given to any other film before or since (Chowdhury).

Ray relied heavily on the interplay of contrasts that focused on the carefully calculated refinement of certain fundamental sequences. Three such instances which may be brought to the fore in this context constitute in the situation where Durga tries to amuse her Auntie Indir Thakrun with a fruit stolen from the neighbour’s orchard, and her mother Sarbojaya reprimands her for the very act of stealing (00:07:51-00:08:49). The second scene is where Apu and Durga almost dance away gleefully through the village paths and are brimming with the ecstasy of life as Indir Thakrun dies (01:17:15-01:19:43). Thirdly, the scene where Harihar, on returning home after several months, contentedly hands over the gifts to Sarbojaya only to find that his daughter has died during his absence (01:51:10-01:55:25). In *Pather Panchali*, the audience first sees Sarbojaya bemoaning the death of her daughter only months after her actual demise, when her husband returns home (01:54:33-01:54:55). The delayed response of the mother displays the resilience of the woman



who was in charge of keeping the family together with the little means she had had in the absence of the husband in the household. There are various moments in the film which can be cited as examples of Ray's unique way of capturing emotive responses. Namely, in the sequence where Sarbojaya's wailing is expressed not by her own voice nor by any human voice, but by the high-pitched notes of the tarshennai (a musical instrument very similar to an esraj). Throughout this sequence, high notes of the tarshennai played by Dakshinaranjan Tagore in raga 'Patdeep' run as the background score. It was Ray's idea to shoot the scene in this way, and none other than Ravi Shankar selected this particular raga to be played. The music invested the scene with far more potency than any word or wail possibly could. This scene is an example of the ethnographic study of the space between great historical events and the realities that the director/ethnographer is faced with in the field.

As Michelangelo Paganopoulos points out:

Anthropologically, Ray's world cinema anticipated the "third space" of ethnographic imagination, in-between great historical events and grounded truths picked from the field (389).

This ethnographic study is clear in his last feature film, *Agantuk* (1991). The main difference is that *Agantuk*, unlike *Pather Panchali*, relies heavily on dialogue. *Agantuk* has only two musical sequences: one, when Anila sings a Tagore song for the guests in her house and the other when the Santhal tribes put up a dance-show for the Uncle. Darius Cooper has written about Ray's last three films, pointing out:

In Ray's 1990s trilogy [*Shakha-Proshakha (Branches of the Tree)* (1990), *Ganashatru (An Enemy of the People)* (1989) and *Agantuk*], the spoken word becomes the most prominent "signifier of the social, political and cultural struggle" in which his characters are embroiled. The "words and propositions" expressed by the speakers "change their meanings according to the positions the characters are shown holding" either at the center or at the margins; and it is in "reference to their positions" and through their utterances that Ray finally makes his characters arrive at their own meanings of being and becoming. (219-220)

One is rather tempted to dub the film a discourse on what is civilization, particularly because of a long sequence where Sudhindra's friend, Prithwish, engages in a diatribe with Uncle, Manmohon Mitra (01:15:55-01:30:50). In one of the reviews of the film published in *The New Yorker*, shortly after Ray's death in 1992, the reviewer wrote that it was "a modest picture, a graceful domestic comedy made in a serene, leisurely classical style" (Rafferty 79). Manmohon narrates the experiences of his travels and the times he has spent with the indigenous tribes of India and the United States at various points of time in his life during the long thirty-five years of his absence. In doing so, he expresses his personal opinions on matters ranging from the true definition of science and the misuse of technology to religion, caste, creed and finally on the question of the nobility of the savage. Critics have written at length on the anthropological calling which refers to the auteur himself:



The four decades of the uncle's absence echo the four decades of the director's work. For those familiar with Ray's films, the opening sequence of *Agantuk* feels as if the boy-trickster Apu, from his world-famous debut *Pather Panchali* ('Song of the Little Road', 1955), grew up into an 'anthropologist'. [Ray is described] as an *auteur* whose work not only critically reflected upon the history and society of his time, but recontextualized 'India' within our globalized world society. (Paganopoulos 372)

However, while making the Uncle mirror the persona of Ray himself more than any other character in his films, Ray never departed from the authentic representation of Bengali culture and ethos. In the film, Manmohon Mitra decided to give up his plans of joining art school when he came across a foreign magazine which featured an astonishing painting of a bison by the cave-dwellers of Altamira from some 2000 years ago. Both Manmohon and Ray share a keen anthropological interest that is conspicuously reflected in the former's travels among the indigenous tribes in different parts of the world and the latter's unique art of filmmaking that blends documentary and fictional film through thick descriptions and conversational narratives. Both men denounce specialisation in formal academics and seek knowledge with an unmatched openness of mind in realms as varied as technology, social sciences and arts. Andrew Robinson aptly comments that, in *Agantuk*, "Ray made the equivalence between himself and the main character so plain that there could be no doubt (355-356)." It may be argued that his last film was an attempt on his part to fulfil his wishes of anthropological travels and research through the character of Manmohon, who is portrayed as an anthropologist in the film. Like Manmohon, Ray also presents to his audience the field-notes that he picks up from the ground reality of the characters he is portraying, and this is what makes his films a veritable register of ethnographic study of Bengal.

One may begin to elaborate on the point of accurate detailing of the representation of Bengali culture by starting to talk about the setting of the film. Most part of the film is shot inside the Bose household, a quintessential Bengali middle-class family in an urban area, where the gentleman husband holds an honourable position in an organisation, the wife keeps the house with two domestic helps under her command, and the child is a regular school-goer. Sudhindra perfectly fits the Bengali notion of a 'bhadralok': he is learned, earns a handsome salary, is caring about his wife and son, and has the essential quality of what Ray calls "social diplomacy"¹ (00:40:24-00:40:30) that is the hallmark of Bengali middle-class culture. The wife, Anila, is educated, polished and cultured, yet humane and down-to-earth, cherishes her husband, and responsibly carries out her duties towards her family. Her manners are measured so as to reflect the strength of her personality and yet not show arrogance. The son, Satyaki (Bablu is his nickname), is a happy, delightful

¹ Ray added subtitles in English to his own films. The Bengali 'bhadralok' or 'gentleman' necessarily is characterised by what in Bengali is called 'samajik chokkhulojja' (00:40:24-00:40:30), which does not have a literal or parallel English word. Ray translated it as "social diplomacy," and I follow his description.

child. His actions never fail to illustrate the curiosity and sensitivity in his nature. Characters like Sudhin, Anila and Satyaki were common among the Bengali gentry in the 90s Kolkata. In his 1970 interview with Folke Isaksson, Ray mentioned:

[Y]ou have to have the backing of your own culture very much. Even when I made my first film the awareness was there. I had a Western education, I studied English, but more and more over the last ten years I have been going back and back to the history of my country, my people, my past, my culture... (1970: 119)

As time elapsed, this journey of going back to his own roots became an emphatic motif in Ray's works. For instance, while shooting the sequence of the tribal dance towards the end of *Agantuk*, the camera becomes almost possessed by the rhythm of the dancers during the ritual celebration. Simultaneously, the character Anila becomes a tool in Ray's ethnographic research, as she, with encouragement from her husband, eventually participates in the dance with the Santhal tribes (01:49:34-01:54:04) and brings herself closer to "become like a savage" and feel "closer" to the Uncle (01:38:36-01:38:43).

The change of heart in Sudhin, who was previously suspicious of the Uncle, may be interpreted as Ray's allegiance to the anthropologist who is trying to live a life close to nature, like that of the tribals. Just like a practising ethnographer grounds his study on the field-notes he has taken, Ray picks up the characters of his film from the people he meets and observes. His portrayal of people is realistic because he does not add traits to his characters or mould them in order to suit the purpose of his story; rather he fashions his stories the way they might happen with the people he sees around him. That is one of the main reasons his films can be read as a subtext of fictional ethnography.

Moderation in manners as well as in décor was the distinctive feature of a learned Bengali family (what in Bengali is called 'bhadra samaj') living in the 90s Kolkata. The rare and valuable collection of art that Sudhindra's father owned points to the opulent heritage of the family. The family friends, actor Ranjan Rakshit and his wife Chhanda, or Prithwish Sengupta, who is a barrister, serve their roles not only as foils to the Bose family, but also are typical portrayals of the Bengali gentry. Through the portrayal of these characters, Ray makes a strong commentary on such people in society who are egotistical and conceited. The characters and the setting bespeak an essentially Bengali culture of a certain section of the society during the times in which the film was made. V.S. Naipaul, the Noble Prize-winning author, placed the art of Ray and that of Kurosawa in the same high standing, and fittingly observed:

They are not, like the Americans, looking for a property. They are doing on film what the old novelists of the nineteenth century did. They are describing their societies, their cultures, in the modern medium. Their work hangs together; it's about their view of the world, being given in different ways at different times. (109)

Another important aspect of *Agantuk* is the pun implicit in the dialogues. Many pivot on words in Bengali, and a Bengali man, with the depth of erudition and



wit like that of Manmohon, often did engage in such play of words in his everyday life. Interestingly, Ray invests only Manmohon's dialogues with such puns, and not that of any other character in the film, thus remaining truthful to the society and culture he depicted in the film. I will focus on three instances to prove that Ray here studies ethnographically the middle class of urban Kolkata.

Firstly, when Manmohon shows coins from different Western countries to Satyaki, the little boy is both happy and amazed to be able to touch and see such things presumably for the first time in his life (00:25:01-00:25:46). As Satyaki moves to hand them over to Manmohon, he refuses to take them back, explaining that he had been to those countries of which these coins are currencies, but he is not a numismatist, and so he is gifting Satyaki these foreign coins. In his dialogue, he uses the word 'mudradosh', which is a Bengali word for 'mania, or peculiar habit'. But there is more to it than literal translation. In Bengali, the word 'mudra' separately means 'currency' and 'dosh' may refer to either a 'mistake' or, sometimes, a 'bad habit'. So, only a Bengali with fair knowledge of the language would be able to appreciate the play of words latent in the dialogue.

Secondly, in the drawing-room sequence (01:09:40-01:11:53), where Sudhin, Anila, Prithwish and Manmohon are present, tea is served with tasty home-made biscuits, and it is a common habit of male friends in a gathering like this to light a cigarette while relishing the hot beverage. Yet it is a prominent custom among Bengalis, or for that matter, among Indians, to not smoke in front of elderly persons; smoking in the presence of one's elder or superior is conventionally considered a mark of disrespect. Manmohon, with his liberal thoughts and original ideas, and with such varied experience of spending time with different sects of aborigines in India and in the US, is, of course, beyond such orthodoxy. He openly urges Sudhin and Prithwish to smoke a cigarette, if they want to, and adds a witty rejoinder, saying that he does not believe "in this show of respect in front of elders," and that if they "don't count [him] as an elder, [he'll] certainly not sit in judgement" (01:10:36-01:10:46). Again, Ray plays here with words. Manmohon, in Bengali uses the word 'guru', meaning teacher or elderly or priest and chief or important, in an alliterative manner. His words literally could be translated as follows: if they do not regard him as 'guru', it is not a 'gurutaro' (here meaning 'grave' or 'serious') offence. The remark is evidently a subtle hint at the identity and credibility of Manmohon that Sudhin and Prithwish harbour in their mind. Though Sudhin tries his best to hide his suspicion under the garb of social diplomacy, frequently his words or manners betray him. Manmohon, with all his intelligence and experience, can easily sense the disapproval, and handles the awkward situations with the tactful use of wit. These play on words and display of wit were not uncommon in a learned Bengali household and so they represent the manners and mannerisms of a section of the society whose story Ray was telling.

Thirdly, there is another pun, rather inter-lingual, in the reference to the acronym NASA which connects to 'nesha', the Bengali word for 'addiction'. As I have pointed out earlier in this essay, the long diatribe in which Prithwish engages against Manmohon is replete with many shades of ideas on what civilisation is. Manmohon rhetorically compares the *progress* of the man sitting in a privileged position within



the luxury of plush interiors and pressing a single button to remotely obliterate whole cities with the *progress* of the tribal warrior who fashions his weapons from natural elements and depends on his own instincts to protect his men (01:28:40-01:29:01). As Prithwish prods him to express his opinion on the advancement in science and technology by NASA, his caustic remark pivots on the word 'nesha', a conspicuous hint at the addiction, used here in all its negative connotation (01:17:45-01:18:22). He refers to the so-called *civilised* men, to the *progress* of science and technology. The necessity of such technologically acclaimed *feats* is juxtaposed against the essential skills for survival (hunting, fishing, farming, weaving, pottery among others) that indigenous tribes have developed over centuries without formal education. Manmohon cites the examples of the Eskimo who builds his igloo with two different types of ice according to the purpose of specific areas, or the tribal people who build a hut with mud, leaves and thatched roof as the shelter for their folks (01:24:48-01:25:56). He goes on to say that erecting a hut is no less a technical achievement than the accomplishments of NASA. Like in the previous two examples, no subtitle can ever do justice to the allusion loaded in the use of the word 'nesha' in connection with NASA, an epitome of modern technological progress. Despite such linguistic interplay in the Bengali language, what makes Ray's films universal in their appeal is the sensitive treatment of human emotions, which audience from any part of the world can relate to. Robin Wood, the influential film critic, while speaking of the reception of Ray's films among Western audience, wrote:

In terms of general subject-matter Ray's films usually deal with human fundamentals that undercut all cultural distinctions [...] When a specific cultural peculiarity does play a part in the narrative it often becomes evident that the attitude to it encouraged by the film as a whole, is not all that far removed from our own. (7)

Early in 1992, the Academy of Motion Pictures awarded a special Oscar to Ray in recognition of his "rare mastery of the art of motion pictures and for his profound humanitarian outlook, which has had an indelible influence on filmmakers and audiences throughout the world" (Sengoopta 247). Shortly thereafter, speaking to the *Time* Magazine from his hospital bed, Ray made perhaps the most apt remark about his own films:

The most distinctive feature [of my films] is that they are deeply rooted in Bengal, in Bengali culture, mannerisms and mores. What makes them universal in appeal is that they are about human beings. (1992)

Writing about Satyajit Ray's films in 1996, Amartya Sen argued that the sense of humanism that pervades all of Ray's films essentially calls into question the fixed cultural notions of Western modernism:

These approaches share, to varying extents, a well-articulated "anti-modernism," rejecting, in particular, "Western" forms of modernization, which Chatterjee [Partha Chatterjee, in his book, *The Nation and its Fragments*] contrasts with the preferred form of what he calls "our modernity." Sometimes the defiance of Western



cultural modes is expressed in India through enunciations of the unique importance of Indian culture and the traditions of its communities. (28)

Ray's ideas, as Sen rightly opined, even today are central to the great cultural debates current in the literary and intellectual circles of the present day. Ray's films are situated at a very interesting juncture of his culture as an Indian gentleman, the Western education he was initiated into at Shantiniketan and his own identity as a Bengali. Ray's ideas, his philosophy, his humanism, and the expression of his art drew heavily upon Tagore's ideals and teachings. Time and again, Ray had referred to the 8-line poem, now famous, that Rabindranath Tagore wrote for Manik (Ray's pet-name), when his mother took him with her to visit the poet in Shantiniketan and he pleaded with Tagore to write something in his new autograph book (*Jokhon Chhoto Chhilam* 36-37). The poem reflects on the vanity of the great expeditions of the poet to the distant lands, the faraway mountains and the far-off oceans, while the exquisite beauty of the single drop of dew on a blade of grass: "a dewdrop which reflects in its convexity the whole universe around you" (1970, 120), next to his home remain undiscovered to him. In 1991, in the last English article that would be published before his death, Ray commented on the significance and relevance of this small poem to his work in particular and to Indian art in general,

Santiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am. As a film-maker I owe as much to Santiniketan as I do to American and European cinema. And when I made my first film, *Pather Panchali*, and embellished it with rural details which I was encountering for the first time, Tagore's little poem in my autograph album came back again and again to my mind. (1991)

It is fascinating to note that Ray wrote this for *The Guardian* on the occasion of the fiftieth death anniversary of Tagore, shortly after shooting the penultimate sequence of *Agantuk* in Dopukuriya, a Santhal village on the outskirts of Shantiniketan, where Ray used to sit and draw buffaloes as a young art trainee. Of Tagore and Ray, Madhabi Mukherjee, the eminent actor who was the heroine of Ray's *Charulata* and probably also his unfulfilled love interest, had once said: "They were the two great titans of our cultural life" (29). The syncretism of the East and the West, that is the essence of Tagore's works and philosophy, is also profoundly reflected in Ray's cinematic endeavours. As he himself mentioned, he was "in a way a kind of product of East and West" (1970: 119). Ray, like Tagore, collected his 'field-notes' from the people he met around him and the places he went to. His artistic forms of representation took a step forward from Tagore, as he took to cinema.

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SNAPSHOTS OF INDIAN OTHERNESS IN APARNA SEN'S CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Aparna Sen turned to film directing in 1980 after a highly successful career as an actor. Her debut film, *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) highlights the loneliness of an elderly Anglo-Indian woman. One of her best-known films outside India is *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002), in which an upper caste Hindu woman saves the life of a Muslim stranger in an act of personal commitment with the Other. In *15 Park Avenue* (2005), a film that focusses on schizophrenia, Sen shows how the female members of a family struggle to cope with mental illness. In this article I discuss how Sen explores different ways of being Indian in these three films and how she draws attention to values such as personal commitment and tenacity in the face of disability, ageing and communalism.

KEYWORDS: Aparna Sen, Otherness, Disability, Ageing, Loneliness, Commitment, Indian-ness.

RETRATOS DE LA ALTERIDAD INDIA EN EL CINE DE APARNA SEN

RESUMEN

Aparna Sen se inició en la dirección cinematográfica en 1980 tras una larga carrera como actriz llena de éxitos. Su primera película *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) pone de relieve la soledad de una mujer angloindia entrada en años. Una de sus películas más conocidas en el extranjero es *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002) donde una mujer hindú de la casta alta le salva la vida a un forastero musulmán en lo que representa un claro acto de empatía con el Otro. En *15 Park Avenue* (2005), una película que se centra en la esquizofrenia, Sen demuestra la lucha de las mujeres de una familia para hacer frente a esa enfermedad mental. En este artículo analizo los diferentes modos de ser indio/a que Sen explora en estas tres películas mediante valores como el compromiso personal y la tenacidad frente a la discapacidad, el proceso de envejecimiento y el sectarismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aparna Sen, alteridad, discapacidad, envejecimiento, soledad, compromiso, identidad india.

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In her 1997 article, Brinda Bose remarks on Bengali filmmaker Aparna Sen's reluctance to be regarded as a feminist social reformer even though her films have a decidedly gendered perspective. A certain distaste for the negative connotations surrounding Western notions of feminism in light of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1984) astute reading of what the "Indian woman" might mean for foreign audiences, viz, helpless victims of patriarchy, dowry deaths, forced early marriage, banishment to widow ashrams and so forth, may have led Sen to wish to distance herself from any overt political agenda in her films. Roy and Sengupta (2014: 56) claim that Sen portrays her women characters as "having complex reactions to the society around them [and] takes into account specificities in their circumstances such as class positions, family backgrounds and interpersonal relationships". Bearing in mind this apparent anti-feminist stance, Bose claims that "the key to understanding Sen's films, perhaps, is to accept that they are explorations, rather than pronouncements" and I subscribe to this view of her films as "reflections of [...] society" (1997: 320) or, as I prefer to call them, snapshots of Indian otherness. Sen seeks out those people who have been marginalised in, or completely left out of, mainstream cinema like the elderly, the mentally disabled and India's permanent Other: The Muslims and does not shy away from creating positive male characters. As Bose points out, "despite being a woman filmmaker she does not always need to take 'the woman's point of view'" (1997: 326).

Aparna Sen turned to film directing in 1980 after a highly successful career as an actor. Since her debut film, *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), her work has often dealt with the theme of loneliness in contemporary Indian society. In *15 Park Avenue* (2005), a film that focusses on schizophrenia, Sen shows how the female members of a family struggle to cope with a stressing illness that forces Meethi, the character played by Konkana Sen Sharma, to live in an imaginary world. The link between these two films is precisely the incredible loneliness that can rule the lives of women. In the case of the early film the Anglo-Indian teacher, Violet Stoneham, befriends a young couple who will end up abandoning her when they no longer need her. In the 2005 film, Anjali, played by Shabana Azmi, appears to be a dominating, assertive university professor. Anjali takes care of her troubled younger sister and elderly mother and manifests a great deal of strength and courage, which in fact hides a deep sense of guilt and frustration. Sen herself calls for "a diverse, secular India" as "the citizenry that we see [in the cinema] is a very selected citizenry and I object to that." (Hand 2020: 122 & 128). In what is possibly her best known film outside India, *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002) Sen focuses on the personal commitment to a complete stranger—but another human being—which ridicules the refusal of radical Hinduism to acknowledge the humanity of their fellow citizens. In this article I

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discuss the similarities and divergences of these three films with their focus on India's forgotten people and play tribute to the work of this highly imaginative and brave film director who is not afraid to shun stereotypes and show women in both a positive and negative light.

AGEING AND LONELINESS

36 Chowringhee Lane tells the story of Violet Stoneham, an Anglo-Indian teacher, now approaching retirement age. She is single, she lives alone with her cat, rather curiously named after the Shakespearean character, Sir Toby Belch, and her only brother is now in an old people's home. Her other relatives have moved overseas so Violet is very much alone in the world as her brother is incapable of relating to his sister in any meaningful way. Aparna Sen highlights the immense vulnerability of this woman, significantly making her a member of the Anglo-Indian community, people who never really fitted into either the Raj ethos or, after independence, postcolonial India. The Anglo-Indian writer Irwin Allan Sealy describes them as being "a distinct group of Indians, for all practical purposes a caste, existing in as yet easy proximity to the colonizing race, and distinct from the remainder of the population" (2017: 24). Violet only speaks English, which seems somewhat hard to believe but here perhaps Sen has wished to isolate her as much as possible from mainstream Bengali life.¹ Violet is admirably played by Jennifer Kendal² who endows her character with enough fragility to evoke pathos in the viewer. She befriends a young couple who need a place where they can be together on a regular basis as they are tired of snatched kisses in taxis and clandestine meetings in cafeterias. Violet used to teach the girl Nandita so she is more than willing to allow them the run of her flat while she is at school. It soon becomes painfully obvious that they are abusing her good nature and taking advantage of her loneliness. During Miss Stoneham's first meeting with the Indian couple, the audience learns that the house has not changed in fifteen years and Aparna Sen shows the shabby flat as being immersed in shadows and –by extension– the past.

Critics of Sen's films have not explored the plight of elderly people that this film highlights as they have honed in on the ethnicity of the main character while disregarding her age but clearly Miss Stoneham represents those members of society that, despite having "plenty left to offer society [are] shunted aside and made invisible (Oró-Piqueras 2016: 200). In her discussion of contemporary fiction, Oró-Piqueras claims that "far from approaching ageing as a unidirectional process, [it] contributes to present the multiple factors that make ageing such a complex as fascinating human

¹ In an interview Sen claimed that Anglo-Indians "could speak a smattering of Hindi –a very sort of pidgin Hindi. But they knew what the bazars were like" (Hand, 2020: 121).

² Kendal herself, although born in England, spent her childhood in India and so incarnates to perfection the plight of this somewhat misunderstood community. For further information about Anglo-Indians see Charlton-Stevens 2016; Sealy, 2017 & MacDonald-D'Costa, 2019.



experience as any other” (2013: 48). She goes on to say that “literature contributes to present the ageing process as multiple and humane through the different points of view and discourses that conform a literary text” (ibid) and her words can be equally applied to contemporary film and the portrayal of Violet Stoneham. Ageing can be explored by observing the following areas: health and physical functioning, interpersonal relations, and lifestyle and engagement (Washburn & Williams, 2020: 3). Violet appears to be in good health and even when the lift breaks down, which happens frequently, she can climb the stairs to her flat without too much effort. At the beginning of the film, she is seen teaching Shakespeare to a group of unenthusiastic female pupils and it is clear that her passion for the Bard fills her empty social life. The comfort that this woman derives from his plays keeps her spirits up. The overall mood of the film is a poignant one as Violet is seen to be quite alone despite the regular contact with her students, her weekly visits to her brother and the correspondence she receives from her relatives abroad. These are the coping strategies that give her a sense of control over “the day-to-day challenges of age-related changes” (Washburn & Williams 2020: 3).

Violet believes that the new friendship that has sprung up between her and the young couple is based on real affection but the viewer can observe how unfeeling they are through the conversations they have –some in Violet’s own flat. The fact that they speak in Bengali –the film provides subtitles– and with Violet they speak English highlights her outsider status. Violet is not meant to represent all the Anglo-Indians but she is a good example of their awkward in-betweenness, despised by the British during the Raj and mocked by the Indians for trying to be “so English”, which actually dooms them to what Sealy calls “a life of imitation” (2017: 25). We are shown various scenes of Violet at home by herself in her rather gloomy flat reading the letters she receives from her nieces and her friends who live abroad. Her niece, Rosemary, urges her aunt to join her in Australia but Violet muses aloud, “Why leave a place you’ve known all your life?” (01:37:37). The question remains hanging, to what extent does she really know India? Her clothes, her poor linguistic skills and her deference to British customs and values all single her out as an Anglo-Indian. Moreover, “home” for Anglo-Indians was England, “the country they had never seen was the source of all that they valued” (Sealy 2017: 25). Miss Stoneham’s idea of “home” is deliberately ambiguous. Following Homi Bhabha, she is an “unhomed” subject who dwells in a border zone, “as though in parenthesis” (9).

As her relationship with the courting couple progresses, she becomes the visitor who is obliged to ring the doorbell in order to be allowed entry into what, strictly speaking, is her home. After Nandita and Samaresh’s wedding they no longer need a hideaway, but on one occasion Violet forgets that she has the keys to her flat and patiently rings the doorbell to which only her pet cat meows a response; so deeply has she internalized her interstitial selfhood. Cassity points to Sen’s use of light and shadow in order to highlight Violet’s ambiguous position in Indian society (2001: 4), which I argue is due to her age and marital status, not only her ethnicity. The opening scene of the film shows Violet kneeling in a dark cemetery, leaving flowers at the grave of her boyfriend who was killed in the Second World War. In a later flashback the significance of this scene is made clear, which adds to the poignance of her ageing process.



As she does not live in an extended family, which would probably be the case for many elderly Indians, Violet cannot benefit from the status and respect accorded to grandparents and therefore her function within the family and community as a role model with the acquired knowledge and experience of a long life is denied her (Oró-Piqueras 2016: 195). As the film progresses, Violet is seen to be more and more alone in the world, which explains her readiness to invite the young couple to her home as she longs for some company. They humour her but have no qualms about using her bed in her absence. Violet continues to be deceived by their behaviour, fervently believing that they are friends and when the couple finally get married, she expects the relationship to continue. In one significant scene, Violet returns home rather earlier than expected and she finds the door wide open, because of the strong wind and due to the couple's eagerness to enjoy their newly found sexual freedom. Violet's quiet entry goes unnoticed by the young people, engrossed in their passion, but Sen's camera focuses on Violet's reaction and shock at seeing the activity that her former pupil is engaged in. She makes no noise but quietly withdraws until the appointed time of her usual arrival. What is intriguing in this scene and something that critics have failed to focus on is her decision to pretend that nothing untoward had happened. Whether this is due to a sense of puritanical disbelief –they cannot really have been doing this on a regular basis– or the recognition that her role in life is to tolerate whatever slights may come her way in order to retain some kind of human interaction. Had she banned the couple from the use of her flat, this would have sealed her fate as regards contact with the outside world and especially young people. García-Periago suggests that this “betrayal scene mirrors the storm scene in *King Lear* III.ii.) and the betrayal on the part of Lear's daughters” (2015: 6), reinforcing the connection between Violet Stoneham and Shakespeare's tragic hero. While Cassity claims that Sen grants Violet “heroic stature by identifying her with *King Lear*” (2001: 6) she also notes that both characters trust the wrong people and suffer for it.

Violet's teaching career is drawing to a close. She is soon to be relegated to an inferior role in charge of English grammar while her Shakespeare classes will be taken over by a much younger, highly qualified Indian woman. As García-Periago astutely notes (2015: 5), “it basically summarizes the situation in India, where Anglo-Indians are displaced and left behind, as if they were the living ‘ghosts’ of a forgettable past”. García-Periago's reference to ghosts reinforces the meaning of the shadowy scenes that Aparna Sen resorts to in order to portray her character's unhomely presence in contemporary India. Sen highlights not just the loneliness of Miss Stoneham but also the selfish arrogance of the young couple who fail miserably to empathize with the elderly woman's predicament and wish to be rid of her presence in their lives once she has fulfilled her mission. In the final scene, the viewer witnesses her realization that she has been discarded once she is no longer of any use to the newlyweds. She bakes a Christmas cake –another nod to her Englishness– and intends to leave it at their house as she had been told that they would be away on Christmas Day. When she arrives with the cake, she finds that the house is not empty at all as she had expected but full of guests enjoying a Christmas party, one that she had not been invited to.



She becomes again the outsider in the scene which shows her looking through the window and observing Samaresh, Nandita's husband, talking about the antique gramophone that Violet had given the couple as a wedding present. Her name is not even mentioned as Samaresh tells his friend that he came across the gramophone thanks to his being on the lookout for bargain objects. This scene underlines Violet's –and by extension elderly people's– invisibility as the party continues in full swing without anybody noticing the forlorn face at the window. The film ends with Violet walking home by herself across an empty square. The only people visible are herself and a dog who sniffs at the cake that she has decided not to leave behind. This final scene is a moving moment but at the same time it shows Violet's determination not to give up. She seems to find strength in her sadness and her quoting from *King Lear* "Pray do not mock: / I am a very foolish fond old man" (IV. vii), suggests that she has finally reached some kind of self-awareness. Cassity argues that "Violet Stoneham emerges as a tragic figure –betrayed and psychologically dislocated, yet with a strong and compelling voice and an unappreciated value" (2001: 3) but Sen's film can also be read as an ode to a dying community as Violet's brother passes away during the film and at the end she herself seriously considers leaving India to live with her niece in Australia.

COMMITMENT AND OTHERNESS³

The second film that I wish to discuss is *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002), often analysed as an example of cinematic romance, but my focus is on the personal commitment and evolution that the character of Meenakshi Iyer shows in the face of extreme danger. Ashutosh Varshney has studied the link between civil society and its structures and ethnic or communal violence. He has focused his analysis on the intercommunal relations between Hindus and Muslims in a selection of Indian urban areas, both cities where violence has broken out as well as those places where harmonious relations have prospered. He writes:

Rural India [...] was the site of less than four percent of all deaths and roughly ten percent of all Hindu-Muslim riots in India between 1950 and 1995. Peace was maintained not because of associations but because everyday civic engagement between Hindus and Muslims was enough to keep potential rioters away. In cities, however, such everyday engagement was not enough, and associations were required. (2002: 45)

It is this lack of everyday engagement that Aparna Sen highlights in her film *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002). Set in an unidentified part of rural India, the film is generally regarded as a brief but poignant love story that is played out against a backdrop of communal riots. However, I prefer to read it as an act of generosity and commitment

³ An earlier version of this section can be found in Hand 2013.

which saves a man's life. Meenakshi Iyer, a Tamil Hindu played by Konkona Sen Sharma (Aparna Sen's daughter), is travelling back to Kolkata with her baby son. The first part of the journey is done by bus and among her fellow passengers there is a professional photographer, Jehangir Chowdhury, known as Raja to his friends. Meenakshi's parents had requested Raja, played by Rahul Bose, to take care of her during the long trip as she is travelling alone with a child. The journey takes them through a predominantly Hindu area where a riot has erupted in response to the burning of a village –understood to be the work of Muslims– and a sudden curfew prevents the bus from proceeding. A group of Hindu extremists force their way onto the bus and demand the identity –read religious affiliation– of all the passengers. Meenakshi has only just discovered to her surprise and horror that Raja is in fact a Muslim but despite her initial rejection of him, she identifies him as her husband, thus saving him from certain death. Raja and Meenakshi are thrown together as the curfew prevents them from continuing their journey. Arguably, the second part of the film, with its emphasis on the understanding that compromise is the only answer and the growing bond of affection that is forged between the two, underscores Sen's message that this is the only way forward for India. She has stated that such a delicate issue as the Hindu/ Muslim rift has to be handled with kid gloves:

Scenes of communal hatred are not usually allowed in the movies [...] If you do portray it, then you are required to balance it out. And that's the sad part. In reality, it is not balanced. In the Bombay riots and in the Gujarat riots, it was all a pogrom against the Muslims. (Rajan 2002)

Commercial Indian films, especially those in Hindi, have tended to portray Muslims either as feudal characters, or as anti-national, terrorist, villainous, anti-social characters (Islam 403). Chakravarty reminds us that “the Indian Muslim [is] ‘the undecidable’, [...] whose loyalty to the motherland could not be counted upon and needed to be ritually re-affirmed” (Chakravarty 228). The othering of Indian Muslims in commercial cinema has erased their presence to the extent that Bollywood and even other regional cinemas feature remarkably few positive Muslim protagonists. In *Mission Kashmir*, (2000) directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, the chief police officer, SSP Inayat's outburst “Do I have to continually be suspect despite 21 years' service because my name is Khan rather than Deshpande?” (01:33:13) is a reminder of this undecidable status in which Muslim characters are so often cast. In *Mr & Mrs Iyer*, Aparna Sen's Raja represents a somewhat sanitized Muslim who in fact can “pass” as a Hindu –read ordinary, middle-class educated Indian.

Meenakshi and Raja spend the night together-but-separately in a disused lodge until they are able to catch their train on to Kolkata. The enforced intimacy obliges them to acknowledge and respect the cultural space of the Other. Raja is the liberal, representing India's modernity. Meenakshi, on the contrary, is an orthodox, strictly vegetarian, Tamil Brahmin, little used to questioning traditional ideas of impurity and caste. He tries to coax her into a discussion of the irrationality of caste in contemporary India but she refuses to enter into the debate. There is a kind of secondary message here as despite Meenakshi's post-graduate studies –an unfinished master in physics abandoned after marriage– she is still caught up in



archaic, myopic customs and beliefs. It seems to me that Sen is making a link between the kind of secular education that can create enlightened tolerance on one hand and the political and social harmony that can only come about through day-to-day interaction. The struggle is not between ordinary Hindus and Muslims but between liberals and extremists. It becomes increasingly clear during the final leg of their trip that something more than a simple friendship brought about by the unusual circumstances has been kindled between them. Whether a young woman with a small child in tow, knowing that her husband is anxiously waiting for her at the end of the journey, would take the plunge and throw in her lot with a man who, two days before, was a total stranger and to all extents and purposes a total alien to her life style is, I think, irrelevant to the ethos of the film. The highest hurdle has already been successfully overcome. She can enjoy his company, share his water, in short relate to him as a fellow human being rather than as “a Muslim.”

The bus scene is, to my mind, the crucial moment in the film as the passengers represent a kind of mini India covering a wide range of ages, social, linguistic, and religious differences, including a group of students, a newly-wedded couple, a woman with her disabled son, two Sikhs, an elderly Muslim couple, a group of boozy men as well as the two protagonists. The carefully chosen passenger list, the majority of whom are Hindus, depicts the Indian mosaic –perhaps rather too neatly– but Sen is concerned with the reactions of the passengers to the outrage perpetrated and in this sense she needs a cross-section of cultural and regional backgrounds. The extremists burst their way onto the bus in search of Muslims, forcing the men to prove their Hindu credentials in a humiliating manner. The scene reveals the cowardice of the Jewish passenger, who betrays the elderly Muslims in order to save his own neck and the only person who voices a protest when the old man and his wife are roughly and callously dragged off the bus is one of the young female college students. Sen doesn't portray the Indian male in a very flattering light. The Hindu men on the bus cower before the brute force of the extremists and the only act of defiance is that of Meenakshi, who sets aside her scruples in order to protect Raja, who otherwise would have suffered the same fate as the unfortunate Mr. and Mrs. Iqbal Ahmed Khan. It is in this brief but defining moment of danger when real practical humanism comes to the fore. The utter irrationality of the situation highlights the need to order one's priorities in a split second and have the courage to defend common humanity over and above particularities.

In the traditional wedding ceremony, it is the husband who bestows a new name on his wife but in *Mr & Mrs Iyer*, Meenakshi will be the one to give Raja a name thus giving him a new life. Unlike many other films on ethnic or communal violence where women are virtually absent from the political turmoil and often appear merely as the object of male desire, as in *Mission Kashmir* or even *Roja*,⁴ Aparna Sen's film places a woman centre stage. Her reaction to the situation –unknown to

⁴ *Roja* (1992), the first of Tamil director Mani Ratnam's terrorism trilogy, features a strong woman character but she fades into the background when the nationalistic fervour takes over the plot.



the other passengers who readily believe her lie— is an indication of the importance of the role of women as mediators and conciliators. Popular cinema still shies away from representing Hindu-Muslim romances and on the occasions when it does deal with this somewhat taboo area it opts for a high-caste Hindu male marrying a social inferior, either a low caste or a non-Hindu (Hand 2013). However, Aparna Sen's Brahmin heroine symbolically marries a Muslim, thus allowing the woman to step out of her culturally defined space in defiance of patriarchal norms of accepted behaviour. It is significant that on arrival in Kolkata, Meenakshi makes a point of introducing Raja to her husband as "a Muslim". The latter's brief but noticeable hesitation at discovering that his wife's protector is not a Hindu indicates the need for the real Mr Iyer to reach the same recognition of the Other as his wife.

DISABILITY AND REALITY

The third film directed by Aparna Sen that I will explore is *15 Park Avenue* (2005), in which she focusses on the pain of coping with a close relative with schizophrenia. I contend that she is also exploring the constraints that women have to bear in patriarchal family structures through an exploration of the concept of reality and normality, the latter already a buzz word in the current pandemic. Meethi, played by Konkona Sen Sharma, is the younger half-sister who is suffering from severe schizophrenia not brought on by the traumatic gang rape that we witness later on, but certainly aggravated by it. Her half-sister Anjali (Anu), played by Shabana Azmi, 18 years her senior so to all extents and purposes a second mother to her, is a successful professor of mathematics and an assertive, determined woman who devotes her life to caring for her sister even though this means that she must sacrifice her personal life for her disturbed sibling. Meethi attends college, finds a job as a journalist and meets and falls in love with Joydeep 'Jojo' Roy, played by Rahul Bose. The couple plan to marry but Jojo is warned that Meethi suffers from mild attacks of schizophrenia and will need constant care for the rest of her life. This is the moment when Meethi suffers the pivotal trauma that will upset her for good. She is gang-raped near the Bihar-Bengal border area where she was sent on an assignment by her employer. This shatters her completely and changes the lives of her family and her relation with Jojo, who shies away from her. Here Sen explores the workings of a schizophrenic mind as Meethi firmly believes that she is married to Jojo, has five children and lives in a house on 15 Park Avenue.

Indian cinema has not dealt with disabilities in any meaningful way in the sense of forcing the passage of new legislation.⁵ However, a film that made a large impact for its sensitive treatment of severe physical challenges, *Black* (2005) directed

⁵ I am thinking here of Ken Loach's debut work *Cathy Come Home* (1966), which drew attention to the homeless and encouraged the creation of Shelter, a charity for people in similar circumstances.



by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, tells the story of a deaf and blind Anglo-Indian girl and her teacher who himself later develops Alzheimer's disease.⁶ Aparna Sen's interest in mental illnesses or as they are referred to nowadays, psychosocial disabilities, and the fate of the marginalised has led her to explore schizophrenia in her work. In India there are currently three people per 1000 individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia and while it is more common in men, both genders with schizophrenia experience stigmatisation (Loganathan & Murthy, 2011: 569). Anita Ghai, the renowned disability rights activist has referred to the stigmatisation of people with all kinds of physical and mental challenges including psychosocial disabilities as "cultural devaluation" (2020) so any representation of what Parekh calls "the psychiatrically othered" (2007: 148) either in literature, the cinema or in the media can only help to make these people and their daily struggle more visible. According to New Zealand critic Jane Buckingham, disability "usually describes a condition of physical or mental impairment that limits a person's participation in social and economic activity" (420) and the World Health Organization has defined schizophrenia as:

a severe mental disorder, characterised by disruptions in thinking, affecting language, perception, and the sense of self. It often includes psychotic experiences, such as hearing voices or delusions. It is caused by a combination of interactions between genes, environmental triggers and imbalance in chemical reactions of the brain. (qtd Akundi 2019)

The film *15 Park Avenue* opens with the two sisters trying in vain to locate this enigmatic address, which shows how Anu is prepared not just to humour her sister but to try to gain access to the deep recesses of her mind in an attempt to cure her of these illusions. I see *15 Park Avenue* as not just a film that explores the pain and anguish of mental disorders, so often hidden away from public view in order to keep up appearances, but also as a questioning of what exactly is reality and what is *maya*. Clearly the gang rape is real and horrendously traumatic for the young girl but Anu also suffers as she blames herself for allowing Meethi to go to such a dubious area alone in the first place. In this respect Buckingham calls for more attention to the needs of women with disabilities as "isolation and vulnerability make them highly susceptible to divorce, abandonment and domestic violence" (423). She also remarks on the fact that "women with disabilities, particularly mental disabilities, become easy targets for sexual predation" (424). In the rape scene Aparna Sen clearly denounces the shocking impunity that surrounds many rape cases in India especially when men with political clout are the culprits. However, I would argue that her major interest in this film lies in her treatment of reality and the thin line that divides "normal" from "not normal", both social and cultural constructs which

⁶ There are of course other films that feature disabled characters. I will just mention Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998), based on Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, (1991) which is told from the perspective of an 8-year-old girl with polio. See Parekh (2007) for an enlightening discussion on Lenny's ability to cross class and religious lines precisely *because of* her disability.



render so-called disabled people, in particular women, “part of what makes people with disabilities an ‘other’ in their own country” (Buckingham 424). Current politics tells us that a falsehood or a fantasy can eventually become truth if it is asserted enough times. *15 Park Avenue* is the story of an alternative reality of a schizophrenic as we follow Meethi’s search for her home at a fictitious address where her imaginary husband and five children live. As Parekh points out: “Meethi’s ‘15 Park Avenue’ is a space of desires and possibilities; it is neither an escape nor a delusion, but another world that is as real as the one we tend to believe in” (2007: 151). Without wishing to downplay Sen’s powerful message about psychosocial disabilities, it is also true that people with disabilities from the middle classes are more likely to access educational and employment opportunities (Buckingham 428) so Meethi is more advantaged than a poor, low-caste person with her mental issues as regards entitlement to educational or employment opportunities.

Without a doubt, the ending of the film leaves the viewer with his or her mouth open as Meethi eventually finds her home and disappears from our world completely. So whose reality is Sen describing, ours or Meethi’s? Anu is portrayed as a tower of strength that keeps the family together despite her sister’s illness but her fortitude and courage do not prevent her from feeling pangs of loneliness at times and Aparna Sen has curiously, and I would add, unnecessarily, provided a love interest between her and Meethi’s new doctor. Meethi’s final almost magical disappearance—she literally goes up in a puff of smoke—lends credence to the theory that in fact Anu and Meethi are two sides of the same person. When Anu, the older sister finds her soul mate in Dr. Barua, Meethi finds her home and merges into that reality. So Sen’s film is actually querying whether the phenomenal world is real. *Maya* is that which seems to be something, but is actually something else, something illusive. Therefore, in order to break away from it, it is necessary to realize that it does not exist but how can one realize that the dream does not exist, from within a dream? This exercise in self-enquiry leads us—or in the film leads Meethi/Anu—to the understanding that we are all already liberated, and that understanding is itself the real liberation. Whether Aparna Sen actually meant us to read *maya* into her film is another matter. What is unquestionable is her rendering of a strong, powerful woman, Anu, who is seen to be even stronger when faced with the debilitating illness of her younger sibling. The two women, who may or may not be the same person, represent two sides of womanhood. On one hand, Anu is determination and intelligence while Meethi characterises frailty but at the same time imagination and sensitivity.

INDIA’S OTHERS

I claim that Aparna Sen aims at depicting women in both their strengths and their weaknesses. Through characters like Violet Stoneham, Meenakshi Iyer and Meethi/ Anu Aparna Sen portrays the tenacity of women and, at the same time, reveals their emotions and social vulnerabilities. Meenakshi Iyer and Raja Chowdhary finally go their separate ways, which responds to a moral code of conduct



but the very ambiguity of their action –can one forget one’s own cowardice, after all, Raja did nothing to save his fellow Muslim passengers from a heinous murder, or abandon one’s newly found passion so easily– draws attention to the unsolved problems regarding ethnic tensions that remain lurking in the background. Besides unsolved communalism, ageing and disability make up the issue of otherness and exclusion from the nation as part of the contemporary Indian experience (Buckingham 426). As Sheila J. Nayar pertinently asks: “But what about invisible modes of identification and representation that link outwardly divergent cultures and groups?” (14).

Aparna Sen’s cinema draws attention to these invisible modes of Indianness, in particular certain kinds of Indian women, by placing centre stage an elderly Anglo-Indian teacher, three times marginalised by age, by gender and by ethnicity; a schizophrenic woman, traumatized by a gang rape –sadly not an unusual occurrence in India⁷– and a Hindu Brahmin woman who is not afraid to allow common humanity to prevail over communalism and prejudice. Roy & Sengupta claim that Sen’s films highlight “women’s potential in multiple aspects of their lives [...] and negotiations with ethnic and regional identities and with physical or pathological conditions” (56). The three films I have explored certainly show just that but their conclusion that Sen’s “women follow a certain trajectory; from being emotionally vulnerable and impressionable they gradually claim agency for themselves” (57) is debatable. It is true that Meethi abandons any further stigmatisation and lives her own reality but Meenakshi is far from being “impressionable” although she takes a momentous decision that will clearly alter her worldview. Violet Stoneham seems far away from exercising any real agency as she is propelled into a possible migration by the realization that her professional life is over and she has become virtually invisible to the people around her. What Aparna Sen does in the three films I have selected is to force her viewers into unknown territory, that of India’s Others, those people who remain comfortably out of sight but who form part of the great Indian mosaic. Sen’s voice is a vociferous demand for social inclusion and the elimination of unhealthy, pernicious attitudes towards different ways of being Indian.

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⁷ One only needs to recall the horrendous gang rape that Jyoti Singh was subjected to in 2012. See, for example, Simon-Kumar 2014.



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SEXUALITY AND EVIL: LADY MACBETH IN THE INDIAN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF *MACBETH MAQBOOL* AND *VEERAM**

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ABSTRACT

An early Indian film adaptation of Macbeth, *Jwala* (dir. Vinayak, 1938) shows a Lady Macbeth that sides with Banquo against Macbeth, as if an evil female character were difficult to conceive in the Indian imagination. In 21st century film adaptations of Macbeth, *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2003) and *Veeram* (dir. Jayaraj, 2017), the female character is as evil as in the source text. Yet, neither Nimmi (Lady Macbeth in *Maqbool*) nor Kuttimani (Lady Macbeth in *Veeram*) is married to Macbeth at the outset of the film, the implication being an Indian married woman is incapable of such atrocities. In both movies, sexual drive becomes crucial in the course of events. By analyzing the role of Lady Macbeth in *Maqbool* and *Veeram*, this paper aims to show that these Lady Macbeths are as based on the play as on the role of the vamp (the evil woman) in popular Indian movies, since characters that are sexually driven are always condemned to death.

KEYWORDS: Lady Macbeth, Indian Cinema, Sexuality, Evil, *Maqbool*, *Veeram*.

SEXUALIDAD Y MALDAD: LADY MACBETH EN LAS ADAPTACIONES
CINEMATOGRAFICAS INDIAS DE *MACBETH MAQBOOL*
Y *VEERAM*

RESUMEN

Una adaptación india de *Macbeth* llamada *Jwala* (dir. Vinayak, 1938) muestra una Lady Macbeth que se une a Banquo en contra de Macbeth, como si un personaje femenino malo fuera difícil de concebir en la India. En las adaptaciones cinematográficas indias de *Macbeth* del siglo XXI, *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2003) y *Veeram* (dir. Jayaraj, 2017), Lady Macbeth es tan cruel como en la obra original. Sin embargo, ni Nimmi (Lady Macbeth en *Maqbool*) ni Kuttimani (Lady Macbeth en *Veeram*) están casadas con Macbeth al principio de la película, con la implicación de que una mujer india casada es incapaz de cometer esas barbaridades. En las dos películas, el deseo sexual contribuye de forma significativa en el desarrollo de los hechos. Al analizar el papel de Lady Macbeth en *Maqbool* y *Veeram*, este artículo pretende mostrar cómo estas Lady Macbeths están tan basadas en la obra como en el papel de la *femme fatale* del cine popular indio, ya que los personajes que tienen apetito sexual tienen un final trágico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Lady Macbeth, cine indio, sexualidad, crueldad, *Maqbool*, *Veeram*.

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Lokendra Arambam's *The Stage of Blood* (an Indian adaptation of *Macbeth* for the stage, 1997) includes a Lady Macbeth that is the protagonist's "alter ego/ conscience and is played by the same actor" (Trivedi 2005: 51). In an early Indian film adaptation of *Macbeth*, *Jwala* (dir. Vinayak, 1938), Lady Macbeth is not just the conscience, but even sides with Banquo against Macbeth, showing a major (and transgressive) reworking of the Shakespearean source, displaying her moral superiority, as if an evil female character was difficult to conceive in the Indian imagination. As Poonam Trivedi notes (2007: 148), the film *Agneepath* (dir. Mukul Anand, 1990) echoes *Macbeth* when the mother of the protagonist and mafia don Vijay Chavan (starring the well-known Amitabh Bachchan) states: "all the water of Bombay will not cleanse your hands" (01:09:28). The line alludes to act 5, scene 1 from the play when Lady Macbeth, completely undone by guilt and having lost her mind, sleepwalks through Macbeth's castle seeing blood on her hands and trying to clean it.¹ Yet, in *Agneepath*, the quotation and its implications differ from the source text. It does not refer to a woman trying to clean blood from her hands, but to a man. Besides, the protagonist's mother shows her anger and disagreement with her son's dealings via the re-interpretation of the line, behaving as the protagonist's alter ego. All these instances reimagine the character of Lady Macbeth completely, who, either functions as the protagonist's conscience or turns against him, seems to be the paragon of virtue and evil is not part of her nature. The idealization of female characters on the Indian screen (women as wives, mothers and sisters) clearly affected the representation of the Shakespearean character in the 20th century.

However, this essay argues there is a change in the depiction of Lady Macbeth in 21st century Indian film adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2003) and *Veeram* (dir. Jayaraj, 2016), and the female character is as evil as in the source text. But to make it work on the Indian screen, the Lady Macbeth in these 21st century adaptations is not married to the Macbeth character (the implication being an Indian married woman is incapable of such atrocities), so that sexual drive is one of the main mottos and sexuality is related to evil. In addition, elements of the vamp –the "naughty, sexually alluring" woman (Virdi 167) that is an Indian phenomenon– are included in these Lady Macbeths. This paper aims to show that these Lady Macbeths are as based on the Shakespearean character as on the role of the vamp in popular Indian movies, since characters that are sexually driven are always condemned to death.

According to Douglas Lanier, a Shakespearean adaptation should not be conceived in a "single, privileged relation to a Shakespearean text but rather in a multiplicity of relations to an ever-changing aggregate of adaptations" (Lanier 35) and traditions. Via the discussions pursued in the sections of this article, this essay then highlights how the Lady Macbeth figure is both indebted to Shakespeare's Lady

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¹ All references from Shakespeare are to the *Complete Works*, Ed. Stanley Wells *et al.*, 1986.



Macbeth and the figure of the vamp; the two traditions interact with each other in a unique combination. *Maqbool* and *Veeram* expand considerably the source text, adding female characters that were not present in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. According to Margaret Jane Kidnie, the source text is not a fixed entity, but undergoes a transformation. Along these lines, Linda Hutcheon claims adaptations are creative processes (2006: xii). Both *Maqbool* and *Veeram* transform the source text via their reworking of Lady Macbeth, and via the addition of new female characters –Sameera (Duncan's daughter in *Maqbool*) and Unniyarcha (a woman warrior who is part of a love triangle in *Veeram*) which were not present in Shakespeare's play to serve as either the antithesis to the protagonist or parallel figures. Even in the female characters added to the plot, the lack of sexuality –verging on the idealization of the female character (Sameera)– is rewarded, whereas sexual assertiveness is always punished. These 21st century Indian adaptations of *Macbeth* not only generate new understandings of the Shakespearean play, but also deal with controversial issues in Indian culture, such as sexuality.

INDIAN LADY MACBETHS: NIMMI AND KUTTUMANI

Vishal Bhardwaj and Jayaraj are two auteurs in Indian cinema, which “stands as a breed apart from crass commercialisms” (Burnett 55). In both cases, their cinematic venture with the Bard consists of a trilogy. Vishal Bhardwaj is the director of *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014), based on *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* respectively. Jayaraj is the director of *Kaliyattam* (1997), *Kannaki* (2002) and *Veeram* (2016), modelled on *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth*. Although part of the *auteur* brand, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* and Jayaraj's *Veeram* are very different reworkings of *Macbeth*. *Maqbool* is set in contemporary Mumbai, whereas *Veeram* is not set in contemporary Kerala, but in “ritual and folkloristic” Ellora (Venkiteswaran 81). Interestingly, the constant use of the handheld camera in *Maqbool* allows the spectators to see constant images of a contemporary Mumbai. The main locations in *Veeram* are Ellora Caves, where most of the action takes place.

The locales in the movie acquire epic proportions; they give the film a “sort of timelessness in which the protagonists acquire larger-than-life dimensions” (Venkiteswaran 91). While *Maqbool* revolves around the dealings of a mafia don (Abbaji/Duncan) and his cohort (Maqbool/Macbeth, Kaka/Banquo, Guddu/Fleance and Malcolm), *Veeram* (aka *Valour*) is based on folklore that are the Northern Ballads “and are part of the oral tradition in North Kerala” (Venkiteswaran 81).² The story of *Veeram* focuses on Chanthu/Macbeth, who is made the chief of kalaris (warrior castes in Kerala, experts in martial arts) by Aromal Chekavar of the legendary Puthooram house. Chanthu must accompany Aromal Chekavar to a duel against his enemy Aringodar but, lured by Kuttumani (the Lady Macbeth character), manipulates the

² Northern ballads basically focus on the heroic deeds of local warriors.



iron rivets of the sword with wooden ones. Despite this trick, Aromal still wins and is killed by Chanthu and Kuttumani. The ‘betrayer Chanthu’ (a popular figure in folklore) is finally killed by Aromal’s son Aromalunni. Thus, the attitude towards the *local* of *Maqbool* and *Veeram* is slightly different. *Veeram* incorporates traditional folk culture in an attempt to take part in a regional cinema that tries to find its place within global cinema; it animates *Macbeth* anew as a play that supports a regionally inspired agenda. In contradistinction, *Maqbool* mixes the local with the global unashamedly throughout the film.

Despite the difference in the approach to the Shakespearean source, the character of Lady Macbeth in both films shares many aspects in common. Lady Macbeth in both movies is evil, and both openly plot murders. Kuttumani’s speech before murdering Aromal Chekavar is very close to Lady Macbeth’s in 1.5.36-52: “Oh Goddess! Let all the evil and murderous spirits enter my body and take away all my kindness and compassion. Let there be no human compassion in me that will prevent me from accomplishing my evil plan. Let my breasts swell with poison and not milk”. As in the Shakespearean source, the language used suggests that her womanhood prevents her from performing violent and cruel acts. This speech is almost entirely omitted in *Maqbool* because the film presents a maternal Lady Macbeth. This becomes a major reworking of the Shakespearean source, clearly influenced by Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*, which equally incorporated a pregnant Lady Macbeth.³ Unlike Lady Macbeth, neither Nimmi nor Kuttumani is married to Macbeth. Nimmi is Abbaji’s mistress but is secretly in love with Maqbool and Kuttumani (Lady Macbeth in *Veeram*) is also willing to be with Chanthu.

Apart from the love they profess for Maqbool and Chanthu, their motives (unlike Lady Macbeth’s) go beyond mere ambition. It is their unmarried status what locks them in a status of vulnerability and permanent suffering. While Nimmi is being replaced by Abbaji for a new mistress/lover –leaving Nimmi in a complicated status that would prevent her from going back to her family home– Kuttumani is dependent on her uncle Aringodar and, upon his death in the duel, she would be alone. Domestic distress and wellbeing and Shakespearean aspiration come together in the representation of the tensions that give rise to murder.

Maqbool and *Veeram* are distinctive in the ways in which they promote sexual drive during events. This represents a major reworking of the Shakespearean source, eroticizing it more. If *Macbeth* is mostly a tragedy about ambition, in *Maqbool* and *Veeram* sexuality and lure seem to be more important than ambition; “sexual desire is the predominant transgression in *Maqbool*” (Ferleman). Cinematography and language constantly contribute to that; both Nimmi and Kuttumani manipulate

³ As Andrew Fleck notes (283), adaptations of *Macbeth* on the stage and on the screen have frequently introduced the idea that the Macbeths lost a son. Cheryl Campbell, in Adrian Noble’s production, worked with Derek Jacobi’s production on the idea they had lost a child. The BBC *Macbeth on the Estate* (1997) similarly hinted Lady Macbeth had lost a son. Even Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015) incorporated a scene with the Macbeths crying over their dead child.



Maqbool and Chanthu at ease, they both make sexual advances to achieve their purposes.

In the case of Nimmi, her display of sexuality is subtle. At the outset of the movie, when Maqbool is drinking water, she claims: “Is that all you are thirsty for?” and later in the film, she states “I have twelve moles on my body. Do you want to count them all?” (00:20:39). To these verbal advances must be added visual episodes that alert us to Nimmi’s manoeuvres. On the way to the temple, Nimmi is “openly manipulative” (Burnett 61) when she deliberately steps on a nail so that Maqbool is forced to help her, touch her feet, and hold her hand. The celebration (and veneration) of the feet in popular Hindi cinema generates “mystery and (male) desire” (Uberoi 117). According to Uberoi, the feet are corporeal signifiers and she calls this “podo-erotics”. As the narrative unfolds, another obvious example of overt manipulation presents itself when at the summit of a hill, in a shot-reverse-shot, she grabs a gun and, at gunpoint, confronts Maqbool’s love and fears and elects to choose Maqbool and turns against her patron-lover.

Similarly, in *Veeram*, sexual tension dominates the reworking of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. But characteristic of Jayaraj’s vision are the explicit erotic scenes. In a shot-reverse-shot, Kuttumani becomes a sexual agent, takes off her clothes in front of Chanthu and is resolute to have sex with him. Laura Mulvey’s iconic gaze theory (1975) posited a female body that was passive in its articulation of desire to satisfy the male gaze, but Kuttumani is not passive, she is rather presented as a desiring subject with a desire of her own; she aggressively pursues the man she loves. After the sexual encounter with Kuttumani, Chanthu is willing to kill Aromal Chekavar (the Duncan counterpart) to be with her. In *Maqbool*, it is the love for Nimmi what makes Maqbool/Macbeth kill the Duncan character. Sexuality, evil and power seem to go hand in hand.

The introduction of evil in the Lady Macbeth character in 21st century Indian adaptations and its association with sexuality needs to be analysed in relation to the figure of the vamp, the *femme fatale* of popular Hindi cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. This reworking of Lady Macbeth owes as much to the Shakespearean character as to the vamp. Although definitions of the vamp vary, Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998), Dwyer and Patel (2002), Pinto (2006), Mazumdar (2007) and Dark (2008) coincide in the fact that it is a “figure of desire, who occupied a morally ambiguous, hypersexualised space on screen” (Rekhari 134). She was depicted as the sexualized woman using eroticized gestures and movements, inviting the male gaze.

The vamp was usually involved in despicable activities, sometimes in gangs, “played the part of gangsters’ and smugglers’ moll” (Kishore 142) and was always framed in contrast to the heroine in a kind of wife/prostitute dyad or vamp/virgin binary. There were two opposing forces at work, a black and white conception of characters. The wife was idealized, depicted as pure and chaste, the epitome of kindness and goodness, whereas the vamp was mean, seductive, violent and promiscuous. Despite the audience’s pleasure with the vamp, she was morally condemned with a very clear double-speak; the narrative invited the audience “to see and then condemn the figure of the vamp” (Virdi 169). All the films from the 1970s and 1980s with vamps (the golden age of this liminal figure) punished them



with death, which was usually an accident of fate. From *Teesri Manzil* (1968) to all the movies in which Helen (the vamp par excellence) played a role, they all included “vamps” that had to pay with their death.⁴ Besides eroticism, an open display (and exploitation) of sexuality to manipulate others and their engagement with the villains, and even gang leaders in the case of Nimmi, *Maqbool* and *Veeram* operate like these films from the 70s and 80s and condemn the sexually voracious Nimmi and Kuttumani with their death.

Curiously enough, their fates are even more terrible than Lady Macbeth’s. Nimmi dies a natural death, but, in this case, “her guilt about killing one of the possible fathers of her child” (Gil Harris 167) is what drives her to madness. After giving birth, Nimmi is not allowed to be with her own son for a single moment. In a culture that values mother-son relationships tremendously—and the film *Mother India* (1957) is only an instance of that—*Maqbool* anatomizes a maternal Lady Macbeth that is punished with the worst penance, the possibility of seeing and touching her new-born son. As Mark Burnett argues, once Nimmi becomes pregnant, she is “branded ‘mother,’ ‘whore’ and ‘witch’” (63). But while the term ‘mother’ is only used once after the announcement of her pregnancy, the terms ‘whore’ and ‘witch’ assume more importance as the narrative unfolds.

The film fleshes out Nimmi’s lack of aptitude to be a mother since the beginning of her pregnancy when *Maqbool* already questions the parentage, as if a desiring subject did not deserve being a mother. The episodes in which she claims her baby ‘wails’ inside her womb or even when the child is born “of premature labor” (Trivedi 2009) emphasize a maternal crisis. The internal logic of the Indian family is vital to understand that *Maqbool* wishes to question the status of the vamp as mother via the reworking of a maternal Lady Macbeth. In *Veeram*, Kuttumani does not die a natural death, but performs a terrible suicide with a sword. In a spectacular scene in which Kuttumani uses a handful of colours, the camera zooms into her and, in a powerful medium shot, commits a horrendous suicide with one of the swords used in the previous duel. The ambiguity of Lady Macbeth’s death in the Shakespearean source is skilfully and openly resolved in *Veeram*. *Maqbool* and *Veeram* present alternative deaths to the character, expanding it considerably.

ADDITIONAL FEMALE CHARACTERS

Richard J. Hand distinguishes “addition” as one of the five strategies of adaptation (17). Interestingly, *Maqbool* and *Veeram* incorporate other female characters to the source text to provide a contrast to the female leads, with different consequences. *Maqbool*, for instance, substitutes Duncan’s sons for a daughter who serves as the antithesis of Nimmi, whereas *Veeram* draws a parallel between the two

⁴ Helen is an Indian film actress, who appeared in Bollywood movies of the 1970s and 80s. Her dance numbers in these films are well-known in India.



female leads, Kuttumani (Lady Macbeth) and Unniyarcha and what the future holds for them also looks quite similar.

Maqbool imagines the Duncan counterpart (Abbaji) with a daughter (Sameera), who has a romantic relationship with Banquo's son in this adaptation (Guddu). The film narrative presents Sameera as the antithesis to Nimmi. The palette of colours used for Nimmi mainly includes crimson and red (as when she declares her love for Maqbool), whereas that for Sameera mainly comprises pastel colours. The beginning of the film draws a parallel between the two pairs of lovers (Nimmi/Maqbool and Sameera/Guddu), which soon disappears. On the way to the shrine, "close-ups of the furtive, adoring looks exchanged between the two pairs of lovers as they worship clearly map erotic love onto mystical religious worship" (Croteau 145). While the love Nimmi feels for Maqbool is illicit and forbidden, Sameera's love for Guddu (once it is revealed by Maqbool) is well-received and Kaka and Abbaji give their consent for a wedding. Nimmi's love for Maqbool comprises lust and sexual desire, whereas Sameera's love for Guddu seems pure and innocent.

Exchange of looks, light touches of hands and gentle smiles are characteristic of Sameera and Guddu's romance. In line with the argument of the vamp/Nimmi, Sameera engages in the dichotomy that was so common in the 70s and 80s in Bollywood cinema. Although the onscreen representations of femininity are changing on the Indian screen (Gehlawat 53), *Maqbool* is still trapped in the past regarding its depiction of female characters. The preference for an idealised female character lacking sexual desire is clear at the end when Sameera and Guddu appear holding Nimmi and Maqbool's baby lovingly in a middle-shot. Not only does Nimmi die before seeing her own son, but she also is replaced as a mother by a more capable and suitable woman. Sexual assertiveness has terrible consequences for Nimmi.

Interestingly, *Maqbool* introduces a third female character that has no equivalent in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and works as a sexual rival to Nimmi. Mohini is a Bollywood actress, who replaces Nimmi as Abba-ji's lover. During the "Jhin Min Jhini" song (00:58:43-01:03:24), two different realms are combined: the female realm with all the women dancing outdoors and the male realm indoors in which an item number takes place. While Nimmi and Sameera are dancing during the wedding celebrations surrounded by women in an atmosphere of sorority, Mohini oversees an item number that takes place indoors, in front of all the men. She is portrayed as a sexualized body, dancing and trying to arouse the male gaze. With a light pink salwar kameez, abundant jewellery and numerous flowers as a kind of hair accessory, she twirls around endlessly and moves her hips. The camera zooms into certain parts of the body selectively considered sexual: her lips, eyes, cleavage, hips, and hypersexualized body movements so that she is the object of male gaze twice, for Abba-ji's acolytes as the viewers in the film and for the male audience that may be watching the film. The "Jhin Min Jhini" song finishes uniting the two realms, the female realm and that of the men.

Abba-ji approaches the couple (Sameera and Guddu) accompanied with Mohini, and even dances with her, which should be understood as a clear sign of Abba-ji's replacement of Nimmi in favour of Mohini. If elements of the vamp clearly emerge in Nimmi, Mohini is a 70s and 80s typical Bollywood vamp. According to



Ganti, “because the vamp was always excluded from the field of domesticity, she was allowed to assert her sexuality” (190). And this is Mohini’s case. But Mohini also serves as an instance of how the beginning of the illicit relationship between Abba-ji and Nimmi started, for she seems to follow on Nimmi’s footsteps.

Similarly, *Veeram* equally expands the source text by introducing another female character, Unniyarcha. The character of Unniyarcha is a popular legendary warrior, who seems to have lived in Kerala during 16th century. Unniyarcha is the sister of Aromal Chekavar. When Aromal is murdered by Chanthu, she decides to take revenge, and Chanthu is finally killed by Aromalunni, Unniyarcha’s son. Unlike Sameera in *Maqbool*, she is not idealised and is not depicted as the polar opposite of Kuttumani. The film narrative introduces Unniyarcha as a sexually voracious woman. Though married, she “inflames” Chanthu’s “old passion for her and urges him this time to protect the life and glory of her brother” (Venkiteswaran 90). Shot-reverse-shots of the couple show their sweating torsos and their desires to be together. The main characteristic of this scene is the presence of swords. Chanthu and Unniyarcha appear holding swords during their sexual encounter, which puts them at the same level and highlights their strength and bravery as well as their roles as warriors.

The powerful middle shot of Chanthu breaking Unniyarcha’s necklace, which seems to lead to the consummation of sex, is however interrupted by the footsteps of Unniyarcha’s husband. Unniyarcha immediately raises from bed to prevent her husband from discovering her with Chanthu. Therefore, the sexual act between Chanthu and Unniyarcha is never consummated. The images of Unniyarcha with her husband in opposition to the shots of an abandoned Chanthu inform the audience –and remind Chanthu– of the fact that he was “denied the hand of his childhood sweetheart, Unniyarcha, in marriage” (Mukherjee 315). The events that ensue shed light on the importance of sexual lure in the adaptation, for Chanthu is erotically charged by Kuttumani, the sexual act is consummated, and he fights for her family instead of Unniyarcha’s. Given that Unniyarcha is depicted as a sexually voracious woman, but unable to consummate the act with Chanthu, the film narrative emphasizes this ambiguity in the ending. Seeking revenge for her brother’s death, she plots Chanthu’s death on her son’s hands.

One of the last scenes of the film shows a close-up of Chanthu’s head as it flies in the air to end in Unniyarcha’s hands, which interestingly appear full of blood, in a clear reminiscence of this character to Lady Macbeth. Although the film rewards her with Chanthu’s death for having murdered her brother, it also condemns her to a future similar to Kuttumani’s and Lady Macbeth’s, for it seems to suggest that remorse will be part of her life. Kuttumani committed suicide because she could not forget her participation in Aromal’s murder, and the ending seems to hint at an analogous fate for Unniyarcha. Sexuality is equally tied to evil in the character of Unniyarcha, and the ending suggests how this female character will also be punished.



CONCLUSION

One of the latest Indian adaptations of *Macbeth*, Abhaya Simha's *Paddayi* (aka *West*, 2018) depicts Lady Macbeth as an erotic force. This Tulu adaptation of *Macbeth* introduces the Lady Macbeth character Sugandhi –meaning pleasant smell– as a person full of sexual drive. Interestingly, Sugandhi's first conversation revolves around sex. The Macbeths are newlyweds, who enjoy their sexual life. In an explicit middle shot of the couple with their bare torsos, Sugandhi is sexually voracious. Her sexual lure increases even more when she discovers a perfume that comes from the West. Completely hypnotised by it, she steals it from Duncan's house under the nose of his wife (with special needs). As Thea Buckley notes, "if Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth moans wretchedly 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'" (V.I. 44-45), in Simha's wrenching Tulu-language version, this fragrance is materialized early on, its exotic scent representing escape from poverty, banality, and mortality" (8). Like in *Maqbool*, the Lady Macbeth in *Paddayi* gets pregnant in the course of the film but differs from *Maqbool* in that she has a miscarriage at the place where everything started –Duncan's house– and in front of his disabled wife. This film, like *Maqbool*, emphasizes how a woman who is sexually assertive does not deserve to be a mother on the Indian screen, and sexuality is punished again.

Although, as Jyotika Virdi argues (167), the figure of the vamp disappeared as such by the 1980s, elements of this figure have been incorporated into these new Lady Macbeths (Nimmi and Kuttumani). A differently conceived Lady Macbeth is an effect of the films's adaptive choices in relation to the play to highlight sexuality is still a controversial issue on the Indian screen. Despite the fact *Maqbool* and *Veeram* may come across as radical Indian Shakespeares in their conception of overt sexuality, they remain an integral part of Indian cinema in the end. By bringing to the forefront the complex negotiations between Shakespeare, Indian culture and Indian cinema aesthetics, *Maqbool* and *Veeram* give new nuances to the Shakespearean character, but further complicate the role of the Indian woman as sexual agent on the Indian screen, still emphasizing there is no room for eroticism on the Indian screen, unless it is finally condemned. If the films with the figure of the vamp lapsed in the 1980s, this revival suggests how systems of representation in Indian cinemas are characterized by circularity.

The Shakespearean character needs to fit the demands of Indian audiences and culture and, for that reason, needs to be reworked. Following Robert Stam's terminology, *Maqbool* and *Veeram* would be transformations of the source text since both films expand and cut the narrative at the same time. They "generate other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (66). Linda Hutcheon equally emphasizes how film adaptations create "something new" (20). *Maqbool* and *Veeram* create a new text, which can be seen in the figure of Lady Macbeth, which is reworked at length. The films force us to reconceive the meaning of Shakespeare.

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INDIA'S INDIGENOUS *LEAR*: *IYOBINTE PUSTHAKAM*

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ABSTRACT

In his 2014 Malayalam-language film *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (*The Book of Job*), Amal Neerad combines this Biblical fable with *The Brothers Karamazov* and *King Lear* to illustrate generational tensions in a divided South Indian family on a colonial tea plantation. Patriarch Job perpetuates colonial evils, including anti-tribal pogroms and sandalwood smuggling. Here, Job disinherits his youngest son Alosy (a conflated Edmund+Cordelia figure) upon discovering his Communist sympathies. Through such Shakespearean dilemmas, Neerad's film raises ethical questions regarding caste, race, politics and environment. Ultimately, familial and societal transgressions reflect pivotal times of national division and transformation, during the era of India's colonisation, Partition and Independence.

KEYWORDS: India, Kerala, *King Lear*, Cinema, Amal Neerad.

UN REY LEAR INDIO: *IYOBINTE PUSTHAKAM*

RESUMEN

En su película de 2014 en Malayalam, *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (*El Libro de Job*), Amal Neerad combina esta fábula bíblica con *Los Hermanos Karamazov* y *El Rey Lear* para mostrar las tensiones generacionales en una familia dividida del sur de la India en una plantación colonial de té. El patriarca Job perpetúa los terrores coloniales, como las matanzas anti-tribales o el contrabando de sándalo. Aquí, Job deshereda a su hijo más pequeño, Alosy (una combinación de Edmund y Cordelia), al descubrir su simpatía por la ideología comunista. A través de dilemas Shakespearianos, la película de Neerad se pregunta cuestiones éticas sobre la casta, la raza, la política y el entorno. En definitiva, las transgresiones familiares y sociales reflejan periodos cruciales de división nacional y transformación durante la era de la colonización india, la Partición y la Independencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: India, Kerala, *Rey Lear*, cine, Amal Neerad.

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The 2014 Malayalam-language film *Iyobinte Pusthakam* [*The Book of Job*], directed by Amal Neerad, proclaims itself a mashup of an unlikely literary trio: The Biblical *Book of Job*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1880 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, and William Shakespeare's c1605 drama *King Lear*. Neerad's film centres on a family dispute between a father and his three sons over a colonial-era Munnar tea plantation in today's Kerala, India's southernmost state. This generational saga is visualized against the forested cliffs and hilly tea plantations of Idukki district. The undulating, serene green landscape provides an alternately ethereal and earthy background for Neerad's 1940's period film, set during the era of India's colonisation, Partition (1947) and Independence (post 1947). This essay examines how Neerad's film (hereafter termed '*Pusthakam*') uses Shakespearean scenes to highlight issues ranging from colonial-era exploitation and anxieties surrounding miscegenation to contemporary local topics of land rights, tribal community marginalization, and deforestation. Ultimately, *Pusthakam*'s familial and societal transgressions and its promise of redemption reflect the wider arc of contemporary pivotal national upheavals, division and transformation.

This essay focuses on *Pusthakam*'s relationship to *Lear*, among the three works to which its creative team attributes inspiration. I first locate the filmic-textual relationship in theoretical paradigms of appropriation and 'fraternity', turning next to a discussion of the plot's central Marxist egalitarian, anti-capitalist and environmentalist concerns. This essay then moves on to look at the intersection of issues of familial division and marriage with those of caste, race, gender and patriarchal control, analyzing *Pusthakam* in relation to other Indian Shakespeare adaptations. Finally, I examine the film's visualisations of verdant tribal forests threatened by deforestation and of its climactic scene of man versus nature, in my close reading of *Pusthakam*'s parallels between nature, family, and nation and its ultimate moral against endless human greed.

In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, Neerad foregrounds his native culture and land in weaving in *Lear*'s themes of familial love, blindness, betrayal, and loss to pose ethical questions on sociopolitical issues: inequalities of caste and race, environmental degradation, and neocolonialism. While Shakespearean themes undergird pivotal moments during the tale, the film's *Lear* origins are alluded to directly only in the blurb on the back of its DVD case. Due to this lack of a more overt identification, Neerad's work is listed in the filmography of *Shakespearean and Indian Cinemas* as a film "referencing Shakespeare" (Trivedi and Chakravarti 332). While this essay discusses the film as an adaptation, it must be noted that it also could be considered further as an instance of *appropriating* Shakespeare, particularly if we take this term to connote "possession" (Jean Marsden 1, qtd. in Iyengar and Desmet 4). Neerad effectively possesses a colonial text to retell the story of India's colonisation, repossessing the nation through a Marxist perspective that is both past and contemporary to debate ethical questions.¹ *Pusthakam* thus could also be

¹ The Leverhulme Trust supported this research fully. Kerala remains the rare Indian state to democratically elect a Marxist government regularly, since the 1950s.



said to align with the paradigm proposed by Iyengar and Desmet, where “because appropriation carries strong overtones of agency, potentially for the appropriated as well as for the appropriator, it can convey political, cultural, and in our contention, ethical advocacy” (4). In discussing Neerad’s film, I also find useful Gitanjali Shahani and Brinda Charry’s proposed theoretical framework of “fraternity” between Indian Shakespeare cinemas and the text (167). They note that “Hindi cinema and Shakespeare quite simply stand in an easy fraternal relationship, marked by equality and reciprocity, with each other, each drawing upon the other’s merits and strengths to reach new audiences” (167). Here, however, Mollywood² gives little back to Shakespeare. Instead, much like *Lear*’s own fraternal struggles, Neerad’s *Iyobinte Pusthakam* possesses Shakespeare entirely, taking over and assimilating *Lear* for its own benefit.

With three works to use as intertext, Neerad weaves in only those threads that suit his theme. He alters *Lear*’s daughters to sons, befitting an era where Kerala’s Syrian Christian women were still fighting for equal land inheritance rights after the 1916 Travancore Christian Succession Act (a right eventually restored in a 1986 campaign spearheaded by Mary Roy). He further softens Shakespeare’s bleak ending by adding a redemptive arc from the Biblical *Book of Job*. In this moral tale of divine justice, Job is tested severely by God, but his piety eventually carries him through undeserved suffering with the loss of his friends, family, and possessions, and the resultant bitter depression. As in *Job* and *Lear*, in *Pusthakam*, both the father and the youngest child are brought to their lowest point before reconciling; here, however, each receives their just deserts. Aside from naming his Christian patriarch Job, Neerad adopts the other main characters’ names from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s wrenching, final novelistic exploration of familial ties between father and sons. Biographer Joseph Frank records how *Karamazov*’s composition was inspired by the (Edgar-like) incident of a young man wrongly convicted of his father’s murder actually committed by his own brother, and how Dostoyevsky was preoccupied with the younger generation’s search for moral values and the failures of their “morally bankrupt” fathers to “impart any life-enhancing moral values to their sons” (707). These themes, interwoven with Job/*Lear*’s similar failures and his elder son’s transgressions, notably recur throughout Neerad’s period reimagining.

Neerad constructs familial moral failure and disintegration as a microcosm of the wider corruption and partition of the colonial nation, the family’s greedy, deadly squabbles mirrored in broader themes of societal unrest and revolution. If Dostoyevsky’s final novel was written and published amid the societal upheaval following the Russian Emancipation Reform of 1861 that abolished serfdom, an equally fraught sociopolitical context with local concerns past and present informs *Pusthakam*’s South Indian setting. Kerala is the rare Indian state with a Communist party regularly elected to power, ever since the 1950s saw the state’s formation from the Travancore, Cochin and Malabar territories and the democratic election of a

² Mollywood is the Malayalam cinema industry.



state Marxist government. Popular Marxist reforms included the promotion of universal literacy through free state education, and a land redistribution programme that eliminated large estates to provide the poor with property. From the outset, Neerad's film reflects Kerala's political leanings and history, deploying Shakespeare as a mouthpiece to amplify Marxist concerns.

The director further uses Shakespearean moral dilemmas to present his own ethical questions regarding ideas of ownership –terrestrial, physical, sexual, spiritual. Here, the retold fable of three sons and their father is framed by the narrated reminiscences of an elderly Communist leader, Comrade Varkey (T.G. Ravi). Varkey narrates the first part of the generational saga as flashback, recounting how native servant boy Iyob/Lear (Lal) is beloved by his British master Harrison, who ensures the boy gets an education. Unlike Lear, Iyob has experienced extreme poverty at the outset, and unlike Lear, there is no epiphany; his deprivation never renders him sympathetic to those less fortunate. After Harrison dies, a now grown Iyob demonstrates ingratitude befitting *Lear's* theme, when he forcibly evicts Harrison's tribal mistress and their baby daughter, Martha (Isha Sharvani) from their mansion. New master Iyob becomes a "brown sahib," or a local who behaves like the coloniser, and he perpetuates colonial inequities. The patriarch moves his own family into the mansion –his elder sons Dimitri (Chembad Vinod Jose) and Ivan (Jinu Joseph) are as evil as Goneril and Regan, while the youngest son Alosly (Fahadh Faasil) is the film's morally upright Cordelia-Edgar character. Quietly, Alosly becomes close to Martha when their mothers visit one another in secret, and their friendship grows until his mother dies, and soon young Alosly becomes estranged from his own family.

Unlike *Lear's* opening act with its fundamental scene of familial division, in *Pusthakam*, the central family splits several times. At the heart of their conflict lie issues of possession, land ownership and caste, conflated with issues of gender and race. Accordingly, one departure from its source stories comes when Neerad's film highlights what Poonam Trivedi terms an overlooked "local inflection of the caste differentiation" in Indian Shakespeares (*India's Shakespeare 23*). Kerala's Christian families (like Job's in the film) often trace their genealogy to converts from the lower castes of Kerala's Hindu society, where upper classes are stereotypically associated with fair upper-caste Aryans or Brahmins, while lower classes are aligned with darker complexions, and the "scheduled" castes–tribals, "untouchables" or Dalits. In Kerala, Brahmin priests still control temple sites and in some, women are disallowed free entry; before the universal Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, lower-caste worshippers were warned that if they dared to cross a temple threshold, their eyeballs would explode. Nationwide, indigenous peoples and lower-caste citizens are frequently disadvantaged, bullied, and even murdered. One ethical concern Neerad's 2014 film raises is the ongoing land dispossession of Kerala's tribals; that year, 2014, saw months of tribal-led protests for the distribution of land promised to them ever since the 1950s government elimination of the feudal/serf landlord system and reallocation of estates. As recently as 2019, a national plan to evict one million tribals from their traditional protected lands and forests was abandoned only after widespread protests. Tellingly, the violent incident that first causes Alosly



to flee is his brothers' horrific abuse and murder of a young low-caste servant girl, which the youngster witnesses. This act establishes the two elder siblings' cruelty at the outset, whereas that of Goneril and Regan is only hinted at in the beginning of *Lear*, by Cordelia's parting "I know you what you are / And like a sister am most loath to call / Your faults as they are named" (1.2.259-261). The torture incident also helps underline the film's preoccupation with the ethics of ownership and the abuse of power.

In addition to the film's focus on *Job's* Biblical themes of familial destruction versus repatriation, Neerad sets up Martha and Alosly as an Adam-and-Eve couple, who champion a return to nature and love each other against societal taboos. By the time the film's flashback is finished and cuts to the present day, Alosly is set up as a prodigal son figure, in keeping with the film's title. The motorbike-riding, cigar-smoking, suave naval officer returns to find his family's toxic dynamic unchanged. Dimitri and Ivan are trying to pressure their father Iyob into selling his land to a sandalwood smuggler. Meanwhile, Ivan lusts after Dimitri's two-timing, sensual wife Rahel/Edmund (Padmapriya). Furthermore, the family has ostracised Alosly's childhood tribal maid sweetheart, Martha, labelling the medicinal healer a witch.³ Martha and Alosly's resumed love affair is pure and sincere, and forms the counterpart to the toxic family corruption on multiple metaphorical levels. Closer to *Lear's* Edmund than Edgar, heroine Martha⁴ is an illegitimate heir and one that is also of mixed race and caste. This disparity in heritage causes Alosly's father to discourage their romance. Even if white women are often fetishized in Indian cinema, Martha's half-white illegitimacy makes her unsuitable to Iyob, as is the idea of his family's intermarriage with her tribal caste. Filmmaker Neerad treats the Martha character with unusual generosity; Priya Mathew and Rajesh James explain that "Malayalam cinema has always showcased a peculiar antipathy and disrespect for the lower-class Anglo-Indians who were supposedly born out of illegitimate relationships between Europeans and women belonging to the coastal areas of Kerala rather than upper class women" (32). Typically, the "Anglo-Indians of Kerala belong to the Latin Catholic sect which is considered to be of lower-caste ranking" (31). Conversely, Neerad's Marxist vision exalts Martha as a *Perdita* figure, an apparently lowborn shepherdess lass whose purer nature trumps both artificial societal stratification and patriarchal opposition, resulting in a successful union.

In centring a couple's transgressive love affair and setting it in opposition to patriarchal control, Neerad's film follows a tradition of other Indian films that rejig Shakespearean power structures to interweave gendered struggles for social and sexual equality and autonomy. In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, despite the masculine title, women remain at the centre; bastardy and miscegenation are seen as a threat to established

³ The tribals of Kerala are renowned for their esoteric herbal medicinal cures, for ills from wounds to pox and asthma.

⁴ Martha, like the more obvious Alosly, Dmitri, and Ivan, likely takes her name from Dostoyevksy's character.



patriarchal power structures. This tone is set at the film's start, with Martha's tribal family's own forcible eviction introducing elements of casteist discrimination and land dispossession. Similarly, other filmic Indian Shakespeare adaptations displace racialised anxiety onto marriage and control of the female, where transgressions often occur through the conflict between Westernised or Western-facilitated love and more traditional, patriarchally arranged unions. Indian film adaptations often substitute various "otherings" for Shakespearean racial differences, or insert these to add complications. For example, the hero of Jayaraj's 1997 *Kaliyattam (Othello)* is a dancer from an untouchable caste who elopes unthinkably with the Brahmin village head's daughter. Similarly, Vishal Bhardwaj's 2006 *Omkaara (Othello)* features a lower-caste hero who is the 'half-caste' result of an illicit servant-master union, and Bornila Chatterjee's 2014 *The Hungry (Titus Andronicus)* recasts Aaron the Moor as a lower-class servant entangled in an upstairs-downstairs affair with his millionaire mistress. The 1965 Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah* (literally, 'Shakespeare-fellow') highlights the transgressive love affair involving English actress Felicity Kendal, entangled in a scandalous offstage love triangle with a desi actor and a glamorous Bollywood film heroine; Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) features Anglo-Indian spinster and Shakespeare teacher Violet, who hosts an unmarried Indian couple during their illicit amours. In all of these cases, societal anxieties of class, race, and caste interfere and complicate these lovers' unions, rendering these tales bittersweet, unlike Neerad's triumphant cinematic retelling.

Ania Loomba's observation is relevant here, that patriarchal domination provided a model for establishing racial hierarchies and colonial domination (7). Alexa Joubin and Martin Orkin see race and gender as interconnected categories (201-202); India has its own hierarchy of gendered racism, as seen in the preference for 'fair' brides and the proliferation of fairness beauty creams and uniformly fair-complexioned pageant candidates. Colonial-era racism has mutated into a different poison, remaining interlinked with the Hindu caste system assigned at birth, and its illegal yet pervasive discrimination. As Patricia Akhimie terms it, caste and race intermingle in "a system of social differentiation" (2). Despite Independence and the dissolution of India's kingdoms, illegal hierarchies of caste persist, replacing those established by former royal and colonial masters.

In *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, Martha's tribal blood aligns her with the Indian Motherland, and the lovers' societal transgressions occur at a pivotal time of national and societal transformation with the country's Partition and Independence. The couple personify natural, physical, societal, and spiritual union, and their harmony is juxtaposed with the division caused by Job, who perpetuates colonial inequities by permitting anti-tribal persecution and deforestation of native tribal-owned lands. Martha's own disinheritance is notable for Kerala, with a tradition of matriliney; in a region which was never fully colonised, a family's name and land passed through the eldest female heir. Communist Aloshy's partnership of free choice with Martha can be seen as a metaphor for the egalitarian movement in secular Kerala where men of all faiths lived in harmony, and her feminine autonomy represents a metaphor for the new freedom of India; their energies of love and union run counter to the forces of fracture, division and control posed by colonialism, Partition, and patriarchy.



Its focus on feminine autonomy may explain why Neerad's film attributes inspiration to *Lear* even while its characters are effectively gender-flipped, bearing the names of the Karamazov brothers rather than the Shakespearean sisters. In this, Neerad's film is unusual for modern-day Indian adaptations of *Lear*, which have largely outgrown the former cultural squeamishness of the taboo of portraying multiple disobedient daughters. Preti Taneja's creative rewriting of *Lear* in English prose novel form as *We That Are Young* (2017) resets the tragedy in modern-day Delhi, where young heroine Sita is murdered after refusing the patriarchal system of arranged marriage, to which her two older sisters have already conformed. Unsanctioned love also precipitates family disharmony in Sangeeta Dutta's cinematic *Lear* version *Life Goes On* (2009), set in a London-based diasporic Hindu family. Here, after their mother's death, her three daughters are left to convince their father that the family will not disintegrate further if he accepts what he perceives as their transgressions, such as youngest daughter Dia's choice of a Muslim partner.

Iyobinte Pusthakam also pointedly contrasts visuals of Martha's free-spirited liberation and the marital unhappiness of Rahel, Dmitri's house-bound wife. Where Martha is pictured in a fantasy interlude, sailing with Alosky or running free with a white horse, indoor shots of Rahel's caged pet songbird are arranged to give the viewer the impression that Rahel feels equally trapped in her marriage. Her sultry glances at Ivan over family meals suggest their eventual adulterous affair, which lead to fatal conflict between the older brothers and to her own suicide, a tragic conclusion evocative of *Lear*'s Regan-Edmund-Goneril love triangle and suggestive of the futility of self-division, and by implication, of colonial Partition.

Pusthakam's postcolonial themes and ethical concerns set it apart from most other filmic Shakespeares, just as its portrayal of a low-caste heroine goes against the grain of conventional Malayalam cinema. One wonders whether this betokens a trend of increasing articulation of local and/or global concerns, or if it is simply individual and incidental? Other Malayalam-language Shakespeare films, such as Jayaraj's trilogy⁵ or V.K. Prakash's 2012 *Karmayogi* (*Hamlet*, literally 'the sacrificer') are equally invested in emphasising moral messages against greed or jealousy. However, these films are set in mythological eras and seem unconcerned with modern-day neocolonial or environmental issues.

One recent regional filmic Shakespeare, Abhaya Simha's 2017 niche Tulu-language *Paddayi* (*The West*), articulates current environmental and ethical concerns while resetting *Macbeth* in the coastal South Indian village of Malpe, Karnataka. In Simha's version, capitalism drives overfishing and greed that conflict with the natural rhythms of the fishermen and the monsoon, precipitating widescale tragedy. Alternatively, while mainstream Hindi-language offerings tend to also be set within a recognisable past or present era, Shahani and Charry argue that these interpretations emphasise profit over message: "Bollywood Shakespeare seems less a political or

⁵ *Kaliyattam* (*Othello*, literally 'the play of god,' 1997), *Kannaki* (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2001) and *Veeram* (*Macbeth*, literally 'courage,' 2016).



moral project than a sharp player in the amoral, profit-driven global marketplace. Ethical concerns, then, might seem to be of minimal relevance to any examination of Shakespeare in Bollywood” (162). Where *Pusthakam* remains focused on the postcolonial transition and attendant concerns, Shahani and Charry posit that “Bollywood’s appropriation of Shakespeare has not been (in its narrowest sense) a postcolonial endeavor, aiming to “write back” to the empire through its usurpation of the colonial Ur-text. Rather, it simply popularized Shakespeare for a mass audience” (162). Neerad’s film is not “mass-market”; although it has English subtitles, it is not sold globally, is currently out of print, and is aimed only at its local state audience. Yet Kerala still boasts a population of 33 million, a ready-made mass audience for Neerad’s messages against colonialisation, capitalism, deforestation, and corruption.

In turning now to examine the second half of *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, I contextualise this discussion of its layering of international literatures within a discussion of lateral relationship metaphors, mainly those of fraternity (Shahani and Charry) and *masala* spice (Gil Harris), to better unpack “how Shakespeare can serve as both emblem of India’s colonial past and its ongoing project of national self-definition” (Huang and Rivlin 13). Shahani and Charry argue convincingly that the framework of “fraternal relationships” is “especially useful to understand Shakespeare adaptations in postindependence India as the nation renegotiates the terms of its relationship with the former colonial culture” (171). In situating cinematic Shakespeares within their metaphorical model of fraternity, they present a relevant dissection of Gulzar’s filmic 1982 Hindi *Angeer/Comedy of Errors*, which “places Shakespeare as an element in this network of intertextual relations rather than its source” (167).

They consider the bastard lineage of the film’s “Ashok brothers and Bahadur brothers” (Dromio and Antipholus equivalents) as one deriving from a “larger family tree” reminding them of the “brothers of Shakespeare’s play and Plautus’s before him [...], the Corsican brothers of Alexandre Dumas’s nineteenth-century French novella and the many theatrical and film adaptations it inspired. And finally, as Bollywood audiences, [...] *Amar Akbar Anthony*” (166). This mixing is reminiscent of *Pusthakam*’s narrative layering, and the latter film (1977) is particularly relevant to a discussion of Kerala, as its three brothers are “separated at birth, raised as Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, and reunited in adulthood” (Shahani and Charry 169). Unlike the rest of India, Neerad’s state of Kerala is broadly multireligious, with a population that is approximately 55% Hindu, 25% Muslim, and 20% Christian, besides its tribal and Jewish minorities, lineages further complicated by years of intermarriage with colonial spice traders. Mathew and James point out that *Iyobinte Pusthakam* “make[s] no mention of the surnames of the Anglo-Indian characters[.] However, in reality, the Anglo-Indian community of Kerala has divisions among them based on surnames, which suggest their line of descent – be it Portuguese, Dutch or English” (34). If Shahani and Charry believe that the Hindi film “is predicated on a certain erasure of religious and political tensions that the secular state had historically sought to repress” (169), conversely, Neerad’s film brings such socio-political tensions to the forefront, using Shakespeare to crystallize these into familiar scenes of familial and geographical division.



Neerad's assimilation and combination of *Lear*, *Job* and the *Brothers Karamazov* is arguably so successful because his film widens personal conflicts into a relatable fable of transgression and redemption, underlined by ethical and political concepts of freedom and fraternity. In pre-Independence India, Iyob is loyal to the British government. At first thrilled when his favourite youngest son returns all grown up, he is horrified when Aloshy is revealed to be a naval mutineer and rebel freedom fighter. In a confrontation that takes place in the front yard of the mansion, set at the midpoint of both the film and its trailer, and visualised in the physical and moral centre of Iyob's land-grab crime, their political and moral differences come to a head. Exclaiming: "Aloshy –nee *Communist* aano?" [Aloshy –are you a *Communist*?] (00:00:56), Iyob punches and disinherits his youngest son; with equanimity, Aloshy rides away on his motorcycle, a symbol of rebellious independence. In an ensuing scene, when Iyob bequeaths his land to family in the public sphere of his front yard, he is asked by one observer why he is dividing the land into halves rather than thirds. Like Shakespeare's wounded king at the start of *Lear*, Iyob responds grimly that his third child is dead to him. He is oblivious that his elder sons have in fact just ambushed Aloshy's motorcycle, speared its rider through, and tossed their brother off a cliff.

It is worth noting that if *Pusthakam*'s fight scenes are gratuitous, they are endemic to the *masala* fight-and-dance⁶ cinematic genre that sheds light on the form's popular reception. Shahani and Charry maintain that regarding India's popular filmic Shakespeares, Salman Rushdie's definition "most effectively captures its aesthetic conventions, as a kind of uniquely Indian 'Epico-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala Art'" (148-149, qtd. in 162). Jonathan Gil Harris too argues for the use of "masala" in discussing Indian Shakespeare, using the local term as a metaphor for multiplicity and plurality against an authoritarian purity: "at the heart of masala [is], a more-than-oneness that I believe is crucial to resisting authoritarianism in all its forms" (12). He writes that in Shakespeare's own plays, "The promiscuity of influence [...] recalls the mixed inspirations for masala movies" (22). Thus, the masala film is Shakespearean in its multiplicity of inspirations, lineages, and themes. *Pusthakam* is definitely a *masala* movie, mingling several source tales, cultures, and concerns into its own distinctive recipe, a combination offering something for everyone.

Crucially, the *Lear*-esque pivotal scene of land division lies at the midpoint of Neerad's film, rather than at the start. One reason for this relocation may be the importance placed on the "nation-as-family trope" that Shahani and Charry mention in connection with India's cinematic Shakespeares (163). This trope "depicts the national unit as akin to the family unit, bound by enduring affective ties" and

⁶ Here, the musical number is a stock dream-sequence song unrelated to the plot –Aloshy romances Martha against a picturesque backdrop while a snow-white horse drifts by (an exotic animal, non-native to the tropical state; filming was delayed for a day when the horse escaped into the hills during the scene).



“acquires additional significance in the Indian context where [...] fulfilling one’s duty toward the family constitute[s] the fundamental ethical principle guiding an individual’s life” (163). *Pusthakam* widens the scope of this tenet and regards the planet as the family unit, warning us of the far-reaching and irrevocable consequences of going against the core tenets of familial duty and harmony.

By visualising its conflicts strikingly against a backdrop of verdant tribal lands and lush colonial tea plantations –cinematographer-director Neerad garnered an annual Kerala state award for best cinematography– *Pusthakam* further aligns nation with nature, acting as a parable of conservation through its message of championing tribal rights. Like *Lear*, his film conflates inner conflict with environmental conflict, while weaving in Biblical ideas of loss through greed. Unlike *Lear*, *Iyobinte Pusthakam* does not end in tragedy for all, offering a more *Job*-like redemption. Like Gloucester, Alosy survives his cliff fall (here, very real). His descent is broken by friendly thick forest growth, which saves his life, underlining the link between natural conservation and human survival. Poor Tom-like, he is nursed back to health by tribals and Martha hidden in their “low farms, / Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes and mills” (*Lear* 2.2.183-184). When Alosy’s brothers seek his life, the tribals close ranks against those who have persecuted them by allowing and encouraging anti-tribal pogroms, and sacrifice their lives for his protection.

Job’s own indifference towards the tribals and their habitat is reflected in a tumultuous scene that replaces *Lear*’s storm, without offering its ensuing catharsis. Whereas Shakespeare’s *Lear* in the storm discovers solicitude for and kinship with its “poor naked wretches” with “houseless heads” (*Lear* 3.4.28, 30), *Pusthakam*’s *Iyob* faces down a rampaging wild forest elephant, its habitat shrunk through logging, in a manmade conflict. The episode brings Alosy closer to Martha, as they bond when he helps her escape the beast’s fury as it chases them up a tree –its tusks the “oak-cleaving thunderbolts” (*Lear* 3.2.5)– yet it also underscores the harm of environmental destruction through endless human greed. Domesticated elephants are ubiquitous in Kerala, where orphaned elephants raised at forest sanctuaries later go on to parade with pomp during local temple festivals, or to clear fallen trees from houses and unload construction logs from lorries. Occasionally, the local news reports that a male elephant in the heat of *musth* (hormonal excess) has escaped its handlers and run amok, resulting in tragedy if it encounters civilians during its regular fit of hormonal discomfort. It seems a perfectly logical choice for local director Neerad to visualize *Lear*’s climactic scene of man versus nature as an elephant stampede rather than a storm, which would hardly move a local audience jaded from the biannual monsoon. Such is the artistic license afforded –or appropriated– when filming Shakespeare. In the climax of *Pusthakam*’s Orwellian⁷ nature-versus-man-style encounter, as the maddened wild elephant faces down *Iyob*, he confronts and

⁷ George Orwell immortalised the unsavoury colonial-era practice in his essay “Shooting an Elephant.”



shoots it triumphantly, attempting to assert his dominance over nature but only exposing the real beast within his own self.

The elephant-shooting scene foreshadows the film's ultimate familial tragedy, continuing the link between environmental and familial violence, with scenes that play out across the family mansion and its natural surroundings. Conniving with smuggler Angoor Rawther to take over the plantation, Iyob's middle son first shoots his elder brother over Rahel (who later takes her own life), and then attempts his own father's life. Realizing his mistakes belatedly, Iyob flees and is reunited and reconciled with Alosy briefly, before multiple shootouts eliminate everyone but Alosy and Martha, leaving the young couple destined for a happy ending like that of Nahum Tate's *Restoration Lear*. When Alosy is arrested, Comrade Varkey comes to his rescue, and his narration concludes the film.

Remarkably, in *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, Biblical symbolism is seamlessly interwoven throughout with Shakespeare, Dostoyevksy, and legends of tribal magic into a perceptive retelling of the rise and fall of family pride and greed, visualized against the background of a colonial tea plantation. Neerad's ambitious film touches on issues of fatherly and filial sacrifice, loyalty and revolt, Marxism and colonialism, interracial and inter-caste union, man versus nature, and man versus the beast within. Somehow, Neerad deftly merges these in a cinematic symbiosis that reflects *Lear's* final message of harmony and mutuality: "When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down /And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live, /And pray, and sing, and tell old tales" (*Lear* 5.3.10-12). Beatrice Lei posits that "it is his perceived cultural difference from us that defines all our encounters with Shakespeare" (21). Yet in an era where capitalist India still exports colonial tea and where it is under increasing internal and international pressure to protect its indigenous cultures from Kerala's hill tribes to the Sentinelese, *Lear's* Biblical transgressions and transformations remain resonant.

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THOSE WHO HAVE LOVED ARE THOSE THAT HAVE FOUND GOD: QUEER SIKH NARRATIVES IN *SAB RAB DE BANDE* (*WE'RE ALL GOD'S CREATION*) (2020)

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ABSTRACT

Religion and non-heterosexual and gender identifications have a complex relationship in most societies. The religious discourse in most communities condemns the LGBTIQ+ community and even deny them to access and practice their religious experiences/practices. In India, where religion and rituals are embedded in daily practices, religious identity can rarely be disassociated from other identities and added factor like caste and social class. India is if anything saturated with hundreds of religions which translates into multiple identities, sometimes overlapped and in conflict with each other. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the documentary *Sab Rab De Bande (We're all God's Creation)* (2020) produced and directed by Sukhdeep Singh to highlight the challenges that the queer Sikhs in India face when reconciling their religious identity with gender identities and sexual orientations. The corpus of this analysis sheds light on intersectionality, which allows us to see the collision of structures and the simultaneous interaction of identity avenues.

KEYWORDS: LGBTIQ+, Masculinity, Femininity, Punjab, Queer Narratives, Sikhism.

SOLO AQUELLOS QUE HAN AMADO HAN ENCONTRADO A DIOS: NARRATIVAS
QUEER Y SIKH EN *SAB RAB DE BANDE (TODOS SOMOS HIJOS DE DIOS)* (2020)

RESUMEN

La relación entre religión y otras disidencias de sexo y género suelen desarrollarse de manera compleja en muchas sociedades. El discurso religioso condena y persigue a la comunidad LGBTIQ+ e incluso les niega el acceso a sus espacios y narrativas. En la India, donde religión y rituales se integran incluso en las dinámicas costumbristas, las identidades religiosas no pueden entenderse sin otros factores como casta o clase. India es, ante todo, una región con cientos de religiones, lo que se traduce en múltiples identidades, que, a veces, se solapan o confrontan. En este contexto se mueve nuestro trabajo, que busca analizar el documental *Sab Rab De Bande (Todos Somos Hijos de Dios)* (2020), producido y dirigido por Sukhdeep Singh, para acercarnos a los desafíos que afronta la comunidad Sikh LGBTIQ+ en India al intentar reconciliar sus identidades religiosas y sexuales. Nuestros resultados parten de la interseccionalidad, lo que nos permite indagar en la colisión de estructuras e interacciones de estas trenzas identitarias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: LGBTIQ+, masculinidad, feminidad, narrativas Queer, Punjab, Sijismo.

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The clay is the same, but the designer
has fashioned it in various ways
Nothing is wrong with the pot of clay
And there is nothing wrong with the potter
Guru Granth Sahib

The Creator, in the epigraphy, indicates diversity as a principle of His creation. Sikhism, like all Karmic faiths¹, recognizes diversity. It believes in the equality of all human beings. *Ek Omkar*, ‘God is one’, is central to the Sikh doctrine. Although the holy book, the Granth Sahib, subscribes to equality and inclusivity, queer Sikhs² are discriminated against. Talking about gender identity and sexual orientation plays an important role in the maintenance of an inclusive world. The aim of this paper is then two-fold. At a first level, we seek to analyze *Sab Rab De Bande (We’re all God’s Creation)*, a documentary about the life stories of five LGBTQ+ Sikhs living in India. And simultaneously, we discuss around the inseparability of both religious and sexual and/or gender identities. To that end, we have tailored this paper in two sections that are in turn titled after Guru Nanak’s teachings, just like the title of this paper. One that provides with a very rudimentary sketch on the history of Sikhism, although there is an especial interest here in its approximation to noncisheterosexual realities. Then we dedicate one epigraph to rescuing some of the narrations that appear in the documentary, but always from a critical viewpoint that navigates between post- and decolonial postulates and the queer condition. Finally, we complement our investigation with an annexed interview with the director himself. This can be found in this very same journal, within the “Interviews” section.

The documentary *Sab Rab De Bande (We’re all God’s Creation)* explores the intersections and dissidences resulted from being queer and religious in the Indian state of Punjab. It premiered at Reel Desires, Chennai International Queer Film Festival, on December 5th, 2020. Based on interviews, the film narrates the lived

¹ Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are considered karmic faiths because they are based on the belief of rebirth (*karma*). For further reading on the distinction between Karmic faiths and Abrahamic faiths, see Devdutt Pattanaik’s discussion on the website <https://devdutt.com/articles/karmic-faiths/>.

² Queer is not only defined as an identity, but also seen as a dissent from and defiance of dominant meanings of sex and gender. It is an ongoing critical engagement of and resistance to the establishment and maintenance of cisheteronormativity. Teresa de Lauretis transformed the term ‘queer’ (in English, a strongly derogatory and vulgar term) into a concept in the 1990s. From a pejorative term, queer now is a reclaimed political term for those disrupting the normalized standards of gender and sexuality. It is often self-selected by those who either object to or prefer to a non-gender-specific term such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’. It has also been used to quantify those who go against normal convention, so it is not necessarily attached to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In the Indian context, as Devdutt Pattanaik points out, words such as ‘napunsaka’, ‘kliba’, ‘pandaka’, ‘pedi’, ‘kinnara’ and ‘kothi’ conservatively refer to the third gender (in terms of body or physical characteristics) but can also be literally translated to include sexualities (feelings or physchosexual characteristics) across the queer spectrum.



experiences of Amolak Singh, Sukhdeep Singh, Ekampreet Singh, Ritika Shergill and Puneet. The documentary starts with a panoramic view of Sikhism and Sikh culture from the Gurudwara Bangla Sahib in New Delhi and then moves on to tell the stories of these Sikh followers and their conflicts interacting with Sikh community. Next, it shows the narratives of exclusion in Sikh spaces such as families, gurdwaras, and other social institutions. This is a critical element of the film because it exposes cis-heteronormative discourses and practices which discriminate queer Sikhs based on their gender and sexuality.

The documentary is directed and produced by a software engineer, Sukhdeep Singh. According to Singh, it is the first visual material on queer Sikhs in India (Singh, 2020). As the Sikhs are a minority in India and the queer Sikhs are a minority within this minority, it was “extremely difficult” for the documentary maker to find subjects for the project, and it took him four years to complete it. Because of the small size of the community, which is also very close-knit, Ekampreet and Puneet had reservations about revealing their identities (*see interview*). The interviewees, who come from different parts of India, have different gender and sexual identities. Amolak, Sukhdeep and Ekampreet identify their sexual orientation as gay, Ritika self-identifies as a trans woman and Puneet declares to be a lesbian. All of them assert the inseparability of religious identity and gender/sexual identity. All of them perform different masculinities and femininities, breaking down conventional gender roles. As femininities and masculinities are plural and dynamic, they change with culture and with individuals. Amolak loves going to the gurudwara and performing *sewa* in a number of ways such as cleaning the place, serving food at the langar, and washing the dishes. His gender expression is androgynous. Having the characteristics of both male and female, he breaks the stereotypes of a Punjabi man which are generally expressed in aggression, militancy and rusticity. He, for example, applies make-up and wears accessories. This, as he remarks, makes him “feel confident and beautiful” (*Sab Rab De Bande*).

HE WHO HAS NO FAITH IN HIMSELF CAN NEVER HAVE FAITH IN GOD: AN INTRODUCTION TO SIKHISM

This section opens with an austere introduction to Sikhism. Literally, the Sikh community (*khalsa*) means the community of the pure. While being queer can be difficult for any person in India irrespective of their religious background there is an additional problem here; Sikhs are a unique minority in India. The current Sikh population in India stands at 20.8 million, corresponding to only 1.72% of the country's total population. The Sikhs are predominantly located in Punjab, but also live in many other parts of India, and their primary language is Punjabi. According to the 2011 Census, Sikhs constitute 57.69% of Punjab's population, followed by Haryana (4.91%), New Delhi (3.40%) and Uttarakhand (2.34%). Outside of India, Canada has the largest Sikh population in the world, with 468,670 Sikh residents (1.96%) and the United Kingdom has the second largest Sikh population in the world, at 342,429 Sikhs.



Sikhism is one of the youngest major religions of the world. It is, as Khushwant Singh states, “born out of a wedlock between Hinduism and Islam after they had known each other for a period of nearly nine hundred years” (16). The new religion, he added, “began to develop a personality of its own and in due course grew into a faith which had some semblance to Hinduism, some to Islam, and yet had features which bore no resemblance to either” (16). The author remarks that the founder of Sikhism Guru Nanak challenged not only the principles of these two religions but also “defied convention and lived the life of a nonconformist in a highly conformist society” (35). He was a religious reformer attempting to break down centuries-old, rigid codes of faith ideologies, practice, and culture in India in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. He was succeeded by nine other gurus: Angad Dev, Amar Das, Ram Das, Arjan Dev, Hargobind, Har Rai, Har Krishan, Tegh Bahadur, and Gobind Singh. In 1708, the tenth Guru passed the succession to a holy scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib*, which is considered to be the living Guru. The holy book is a set of hymns to be contemplated upon. Sikhism believes in God and soul, but, as Devdutt Pattanaik acknowledges, they are distinct (Pattanaik 2017). God is formless, before whom all are equal. Sikhism, he argues, “values devotion and service as the means to earn God’s grace and break free from the wheel of rebirth” (31).

The three pillars of Sikhism are: *Naam Japna* (Meditating on the name of God. This is done by reciting the Guru’s hymns each day and remembering Him in one’s thoughts and deeds), *Kirat Karni* (Living an honest and truthful life) and *Vand Chakhna* (Vand means to share and Chakhna means to consume. Sikhs are advised to share their wealth with others. Thus, donating it to the larger community is an essential part of Sikhism). In Sikhism, worship is a way of life. The followers believe that they should dedicate their lives to *Waheguru* (God) and follow the teachings of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Their place of worship is called *gurdwara*. The Golden Temple (The Harmandir Sahib) in Amritsar, a city in North-Western part of Indian, is their main site of worship. Present in the Harmandir Sahib is the original *Adi Granth*, the first version of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which was compiled by Guru Arjan. Each *gurdwara* has a *langar* (kitchen) in which free meals are served to everyone, regardless of their caste, gender or wealth. The *langar* is run by volunteers, who can be either male or female. It is important to highlight that the community kitchen (*langar*) originates as a protest against the Hindu caste system:

[T]he Bhaktas had paid only lip service to the ideal of casteless society; Nanak took practical steps to break the vicious hold of caste by starting free community kitchens –*guru kā langar*– in all centers and persuading his followers, irrespective of their castes, to eat together. Nanak’s writings abound with passages deploring the system and other practices which grew out of caste concepts, particularly the notion held by Brahmins that even the shadow of a lower-caste man, on a place where food was being cooked, made it impure. (Singh 40)

The rejection of caste is also exemplified by the distribution of the *karah prasad*, the blessed food. *Karah* is a type of whole wheat flour *halva* made with equal portions of whole-wheat flour, clarified butter, and sugar. It is distributed to



everyone at the ends of services, symbolizing the belief in equality and the oneness of humanity.³ Performing the *sewa* is very important to Sikhs. It means a selfless service that involves helping others without any reward or personal gain. According to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, “One who performs selfless service, without thought of reward, shall attain his Lord and Master” (286). There are three types of *sewa*: *tan*, *man* and *dhan*. The first is a physical service that can be done, for example, working in the *langar* (kitchen). The second is a mental service that can be performed by teaching the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The third refers to a material service which means to give to those in need. The Sikh family name, Singh and Kaur, demonstrates another aspect of a *casteless society*. Deriving from the Sanskrit *simha*, Singh means lion and it is a common male surname. A Sikh woman takes the surname *Kaur* which means both a princess and lioness.⁴ As mentioned by Punnet, a lesbian woman in the documentary itself.

Sikhs are required to keep the ‘five ks,’ as markers of their initiation (*Amrit Sanskar*) into the brotherhood. The initiators (*Amritdharis*) have to maintain these five emblems, These emblems together symbolize that the Sikh who wears them has dedicated themselves to a life of devotion and submission to the Guru. The symbols have become greatly more powerful with each passing year of Sikh history as they are a phenotypical logo for this community all around the globe. These symbols connect and gives Sikh authenticity whenever they go as it happens with other societies: the keffiyeh, the agal, the thawb, or the fez, to name a few. But these emblems prescribed for *khalsa* by Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), which are:

[T]hey were to wear hair and beard unshorn (*kes*); they were to carry a comb (*kanghā*) in the hair to keep it tidy; they were always to wear a knee-length pair of breeches (*kach*), worn by soldier of times; they were to carry a steel bracelet (*karā*) on their right wrist; and the were to be ever armed with a sabre (*kirpān*) In addition to these five emblems, the converts were to observe four rules of conduct (*rahat*): not to cut any hair on any part of their body (this was a repetition of the oath regarding the *kes*); not to smoke, chew tobacco, or consume alcoholic drinks; not to eat an animal which had been slaughtered by being bled to death, as customary with the Muslims, but only *jhatkā* meat, where the animal had been despatched with one blow; and not to molest the person of Muslim women. (Singh 81)

In the introduction to *I am Divine So Are You: How Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism affirm the dignity queer identities and sexualities*, Pattanaik

³ Although Guru Nanak’s teachings disapprove the caste system and other practices which grow out of it, the caste system is present in the Sikh community. For further understanding of it, see the documentary “India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart” (Syntalin 2007). It exposes the continuation of caste practices and Untouchability in Sikhism, Christianity and Islam, and even among the communists in Kerala.

⁴ In “The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity (2005),” Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh looks at the basic texts and tenets of Sikh religion and exposes the female aspect in the sacred text, daily prayers, dress code, and rituals of the Sikhs.



points out that karmic faiths approach the idea of queer very differently from Abrahamic faiths (Pattanaik 2017). While the former subscribes “to the doctrine of diversity” –everyone is unique because of the varying karmic burden”, the latter subscribes “to the doctrine of equality– everyone is equal before the eyes of God” (28). Pattanaik remarks that faiths “affirm the dignity of queer people” and also “empower them psychologically, which enables them to thrive politically and economically”. Besides this, they “reduce queer-phobic tendencies in neighbourhoods where they live” (26). Karmic faiths also look at scriptures differently from Abrahamic faiths. They put emphasis more on ritual practice rather than on interpretation of the scripture. The major focus is on experience rather than on understanding. In Sikhism, for example, “doing service (*sewa*) and listening to praise of the lord (*simran*) is more important than analysing the writings and the tales of the gurus” (47). The Sikhs are a community with a very strong sense of oneness, with the ideas of service and togetherness and the ideals of equality forming the core of their belief system and social behavior. It reflects the most in the way the religious is practiced, especially in *gurdwaras*, which serve as temple as well as place of community gathering and *sewa* (service).

Sikhism, as Pattanaik argues, separates the theological (Karmic faiths) from the administrative (Abrahamic faiths) and this has implications in understanding the world, and mainly the gender. He writes:

The holy scriptures are part of the theological world and in them genders are equal, the householder’s life is valorised over the hermit’s, and there is talk of the soul being genderless; they contain no comment that is hostile to queers. In the administrative real, queer is invisible, with laws neither including nor excluding them. Hostility towards homosexuality in Sikhism is more an outcome of general patriarchy in society and personal prejudices than a requirement that can be traced back to the faith. (48)

As it has been argued by many scholars, laws against homosexuality and transsexuality are not related to Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh scriptures, but to Victorian moral and laws. In Sikh scripture and Sikh hymns there is nothing against queer genders or sexuality. They only value marriage and the householder’s life.

THE WORLD IS A DRAMA, STAGED IN A DREAM: RECONCILING SEXUAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

The precolonial trajectory of homosexuality in India seems to move into a relatively tolerant position towards any sexual dissidence and both literary and archeological presence only subscribe to our thesis. The *Kama Sutra*, Urdu poetry, Hindu mythology, or the Khajuraho temples are only few of such examples. It is salutary to bear in mind that it was only after the arrival of Europeans that queerized bodies were problematized and tabulated from Western lenses, and by implication, criminalized. E. Han and O’ Mahoney (2014) insist that these legislative codes aimed firstly to protect British administrators from ‘sodomy’ but



it also gave missionaries control over the regulation of interpersonal modes and so it catapulted the proselytizing agenda (6). This institutionalized persecution still echoes in postcolonial India as section 377 was done away in 2018. But let us direct our attention to a task to which little attention has so far been given, that is queer identities within Sikh communities.

In the context of the teachings and values of Sikhism, we now look at how they shaped the worldview of Sukhdeep Singh who was born and raised in a Sikh family. He writes openly about gender and sexuality and is producing a digital archive on Sikh queers on *Gaylaxy*, an online magazine that he founded as a student in January 2010. The inaugural 2010 issue brought forth the article “A New Dawn” which tracked down the history of the LGBTQ+ movement in India (Singh 2010). Since the launch of this magazine, he has written many articles ranging from civil rights to public policies for LGBTQ+ folks. In 2012, Singh wrote a piece titled “Why LGBT Sikhs should come out,” which encouraged queer Sikhs to open about their sexual orientation and gender identities (Singh 2012). Additionally, in 2016, his viral article “Homophobia has no place in Sikhism” criticized the decision of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) for not offering the traditional Sikh *siropa* (robe of honor) to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne due to her views on same-sex marriage (Singh 2016). The SGPC upheld the resolution arguing that “offering her (Wynne) a ‘siropa’ would be against Sikh ethics” (Singh 2016). However, for Sukhdeep, SGPC’s arguments had no theological logic, stating,

[I]t must be pointed out that while announcing their decision not to present Wynne with a *siropa*, neither the SGPC, nor anyone else has cited on what theological basis have they made the statement. One would expect that when such a body makes a decision which will affect millions of LGBT Sikhs, they would base their decision on the teachings of the Gurus, or the *banis* composed by them. Yet, alas, their own biases and homophobia is passed off as “Sikh ethics” without quoting from any of the Granths, or the teachings of the Guru. (np)

Sukhdeep Singh’s arguments above point out that the committee’s decision is not based on the principles of Sikhism. They are influenced by patriarchal heteronormative discourses and practices which condemn same-sex marriages. The main tenet of the teachings of the Gurus is equality and inclusivity. Singh contends that Sikhism celebrates diversity, as it is demonstrated in the epigraph of this paper. For him, the great virtue of Sikh philosophy is the importance it places on acceptance. In “Sikhism: All Humans are created equal,” he affirms “unlike Hinduism, which is replete with stories of queer encounters and gender fluidity, the Sikh attitude towards queer individuals can only be surmised through interpretations of teachings and events in the lives of the Gurus” (92). When SGPC condemns homosexuality, Singh asserts, “they are basically asking LGBT Sikhs not to accept the way God made them” (2019). He widens the debate by separating Sikhism and Punjabi culture by raising the point if the hypermasculinity of the



Punjabi culture⁵ speaks for Sikh beliefs. While respect to difference is embedded in the teachings of the former, conservatism and patriarchy permeate the culture of the latter.

Contemporaneity presents itself to challenge cisheteronormative discourses, as there is not a single passage against homosexuality or transsexuality in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. As the historian Pashaura Singh affirmed, “all interpretive activity is subject to particular cultural predispositions, the historical situation of the interpreter, inevitable change in the modes of attention and the nature of interaction between the past and the present” (240). He also added that the reader can approach the “text without preconceived intentions in order to explore the many possibilities of its meaning and confront the world in front of the text” (260). According to him, the reader constructs meaning-making to the text. It involves interference, making choices and changes, breaking down pre-established meanings and creating others. Sukhdeep Singh, with the documentary, provides a thorough critique of the cisheterosexual interpretations of the Sikh scriptures, considering gender violence and LGBTQ+phobia. As a gay Sikh himself, he argues for the necessity of an anti-LGBTQ+phobic Sikh community and a change to the resistance of heteronormativity. Singh wants to assure other young queer Sikhs that one can be gay/lesbian/androgynous/bisexual/trans/asexual and Sikh. Through his activism, he asserts there is no single way of living the Sikh faith and being Sikh. This is evidently shown in his documentary as he highlights the lives of five queer individuals.⁶

Sadly enough, not much ink has been spilled on this topic or, in other words, the intersectionality between these two identities (that is religious and gender identity/sexual orientation). Mostly because queer Sikhs have been silenced and closeted for years. The following lines are then an approximation to some experiences that have contributed to the formulation of this bifold identity and that, in our mind, bridges the existing gap of such a bibliographical archive. Masculinity, or *mardangi*, is uncannily prefigured in the dynamics of such patriarchal society, as repeated by most interviewees in the documentary. This masculine construction, as delivered by Garha (2020), is “directly related to men’s ability to meet their household needs, and have control over women” and that even the turban is a sign for masculinity within upper-caste Sikhs. (4-5) Another complementary observation is that Guru Gobind Singh turned the Sikhs into a martial community of fighters and gave them a unique identity. In “Locating the Sikh Pagh,” Virinder S. Kalra observes that later the British, during the colonial period, also incorporated them into a ‘martial race’, constructing a Sikh hypermasculinity against an effeminate Hindu masculinity (2005). This masculine colonial construction is also mentioned in the film,

⁵ For a further reading on toxic masculinity in Punjabi Culture, read the article “The Punjabi Jatt Hero And Other Toxic Masculinities In Punjabi Culture” (2020) where Anirban Chanda and Sahil Bansal analyze the representation of Punjabi masculinities in Indian films and songs.

⁶ For further discussion on this topic, watch the video *Power of Pride: Queer & Sikh* (Logo 2019) in which another group of queer Sikhs, based in the United States of America, discuss the importance of reconciling religious identity and queer identity.



The valor and bravery of the Sikh community was recognized by the British too regiment in the Army which continues to date in the Indian Army as well. This has also created a very macho image of the Sikh men in society, something that LGBT Sikhs find hard to break. As a Sikh, you are supposed to be macho, one who takes out a sword and fights. (00:05:21-00:05:51)

Decolonial thinkers (Lugones 2010, Oyèwúmi, 1997, or Segato 2010) have largely debated around the resonance of cisheteropatriarchal codes in colonial venues. They conclude that the gender binary paradigm has been inorganically transplanted into these scenes, where gender was originally performed with certain fluidity. And so Europeans also transported certain modes of socialization around the ideas of femininity and masculinity that jeopardized the Sikh reality. For Raewyn Connell, different historical periods establish a hierarchy of masculinities in all human societies (2005) and modern India, that is still licking from its colonial wounds, is investigating these ancient modes of gender representation that goes beyond canonical and binary understandings. We find in this documentary queer Sikhs that question and challenge these hierarchies: “My gender expression is androgynous. Androgynous means, like, you have both the characteristics, you have nature of both the genders like the nature of female as well the nature of male as well.” (00:06:49-00:07:02).

Related to this hypermasculinity is the *dastaār*, or turban, one of the most immediate traits for Sikhism. The bearded turbaned man comes from the first emblem mentioned above. The turban is a mandatory symbol of the Sikh religion. It has “a wide variation of styles, colors, material, sizes, and even uses between Sikhs from varying diasporic locations, class backgrounds, and even genders –for Sikh women may also don turbans” (Paur 48).⁷ In 2014, after debuting in the Bengaluru Pride with a rainbow turban, Sukhdeep Singh went to the Golden Temple wearing the pride turban. Singh acknowledged that it got “caught many people’s attention”, but he does not believe that “anyone understood its significance” (Singh 2020). To him, this performance was quintessential as a Sikh dissident as it “would merge my two identities into one.” (Singh 2020c). In “Understanding turbans: Don’t link them to terrorism,” Eli Sanders notes that the fabric headwraps and head coverings are common in a many other parts of the world, from North Africa across the Middle East and into Central Asia, and all the turbans are not the same (Sander 2001). It is to this *différance*, in Derridean sense, that both Sanders and Singh emphasize that we turn now. The turban has, as Jasbir K. Kaur explains,

witnessed as an appendage that is total of its being-perceived, it is often represented by the weaver as part of his or her body, and not as an appendage or thing that has properties and qualities separate from the body. The horizontal axis of ‘actions and passions’ *between* bodies reveals the ‘phenotypical encounters’, but also implodes

⁷ Normally Sikh women wear *chunni/dupatta*, but some women, especially *amritdhari* (baptized), wear also a turban.



bodies from *within*, shooting through and past bodily boundaries. Accomplice to this is the representation of the turban as ‘part of the body’. (66)

The queer Sikh bodies weave it pinning the body in social dynamics and social dynamics in the body (Connell 2016). To understand the social embodiment, as Raewy Connell asserts, is to recognize the agency of the bodies (colonized and dehumanized). For Connell, social embodiment is neither a reflection nor reproduction or signature. It is “a process that generates, at every moment, new historical realities: new embodied possibilities, experiences, limitations and vulnerability for the people involved” (49). With *Sab Rab De Bande (We’re all God’s Creation)*, Singh inserts the turbaned queer body into the temple/Sikh community and exposes the “multitudes of queer” Sikhs, dealing especially with the geopolitical displacement processes of the queer and/or of what would be a queer located in the Sikh Culture (Preciado 2003). Also, Sukhdeep Singh’s rainbow turban becomes a reference as well as a banner for the rights of queer people within the Sikh community.

Returning briefly to this interweaved identity, we find also fascinating the words of Prabhdeep Singh Kehal in an interview with Logo (2019) when he says that, during Pride, instead of celebrating, Sikhs stay at home and mourn. June coincides with the massacre that occurred at the Golden Temple in 1984, also known as Operation Blue Star, when Indira Gandhi directed a military operation to remove Sikhs from the temple, an event that is also mentioned in the documentary. And, whether by accident or design, they are reconciling these two confronted identities. While in the West we celebrate Stonewall and the figures of trans women of color such as Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera, queer Sikhs are now intertwining experiences and working in the construction of their identities away from Western gesticulations. In a similar note, Sukhdeep Singh also offers us a testimony of a trans woman who instrumentalized religious practices for transitioning. She told her parents to cut her hair like a boy so she could shave her beard too (00:07:56-00:08:43). Narratives such as these two here add to the repertoire of discourses resulted from being queer and Sikh as they are autochthonous to this community.

All the five persons whose narrative is included in the documentary do not see their religious and queer identities in conflict and seek acceptance from the community-despite being rejected or not accepted-on the basis of teachings of their religion. On the contrary, some of them justify their queerness by religious means, phenomenon described by Humphreys (1972) as ‘stigma redemption,’ “if God made male, female, then he surely has made transgender as well, God never discriminates based on your physical appearance.” (00:16:12-00:16:18) or, in the words of the director,

The idea of Sikhism that I grew up with was a very accommodating and inclusive one. Thus, I never felt any conflict between my own religious identity and my sexuality. I was Sikh, and later I realized I was gay, and both of these were part of me, and I did not think being one meant giving up on the other. (Singh 2020c)



Also, some Sikhs in the diaspora confirm that there is no need for these two identities to be apart, but rather that Sikhism amalgamates both from a spiritual realm,⁸

Sikhi is a way for them not only to connect with the Guru but also preserve the connection to culture and religion that has been bestowed upon them by family. Sikhi places a great importance on the belief that the human race is all equal, regardless of gender, religion, race, nationality, or sexual orientation. The light of God resides within every one of us, and the aim of Sikhi is to allow us to connect with the One inside of us. (Sidhu 2019)

This makes the case of queer Sikhs different from LGBTIQ+ people from other religions and communities, especially the majority Hindus, who may be at times be in conflict with their religion or do not assert their religious identity while seeking social acceptance as a queer. In this sense, this documentary has explored the meaning of being a sexual minority inside a community that is itself outnumbered by others. The director then takes the viewers into the life and death struggles of those who, excluded and shamed by orthodox Sikhs, must operate their own embodied existence, securing the conditions for their own lives. Amolak Singh, Sukhdeep Singh, Ekampreet Singh, Ritika Sergill and Puneet develop within their own language an understanding of being Sikh and queer, their own bodies as sites of desire and affliction, modes of persistence linked to communities of belonging, and a subtle practice of subversion in relation to institutions from which they are excluded.

Even though the people interviewed here aim to reconcile their experiences as Sikh and queer, it is mandatory on our part to provide with some of the narratives that appear in this film and that are less diplomatic, to say the very least. Amolak, for example, tells the camera that “Just as I entered the *Gurudwara*, there was a group of boys who were serving *langar* (food). He was serving tea and all of a sudden, he saw me and he said ‘from where did this @#@#% come?’ That comment that he made... still pain is there” (00:21:46- 00:22:02). Ritika also elaborates on her experiences as a trans woman in a religious site, “it happens that when we take Prasad (Holy offerings) those who are distributing it give it from a distance so that their hand doesn’t touch us. Also if we are doing *sewa* (religious service) and cleaning utensils they say ‘No, no, it’s fine.’” (00:21:46- 00:22:15). Stigmatization towards sexual dissidents on the part of religious institutions seems a universal anecdote. These are not isolated cases, but rather a routine for those who, besides being religious, are also queer. This ultimately leads to contradictory sentiments and hostility that might affect the believer’s channels of identification: internalized homophobia, dysphoria, or heterocentrism. It has been demonstrated, after all, that religiosity

⁸ For further reading on Sikh diaspora, see *The nation’s tortured body: Violence, representation, and the formation of a Sikh “diaspora”* (2001).



raises prejudicial attitudes as well as detrimental consequences for the LGBTIQ+ community (Cragun & Sumerau 2015). These tensions, reports Yvette Taylor (2016),

[...] between ‘self-cultivation’ in religious subjectivisation and ‘life-as’ demands where gendered and sexualized scripts recirculate certain sources of authority. These positions can occur at the same time as queer people may not officially be welcomed or legitimised in the institutionalised church (as audiences, listeners, leaders [...]), which in turn occurs in the midst of queerer places of religion. (7)

We also find two stories in this film that are no doubt part of a dangerous discourse that aims to invert sexual orientation and/or gender identities through corrective violence. This violence could be not only physical but also sexual, medical, psychological, emotional and even cultural. These do not operate exclusively but they are rather reproduced dynamically. But let us exemplify the aforementioned with two narratives extracted from the film itself. Rikita, also invoked in the paragraphs above, tell us the following,

They didn’t understand what was happening. They thought may be someone has performed black magic. They took me to Babas (local quacks) thinking that may be I would change. Then in February a very big incident happened with me...By that time I had already had sex change operation and all other things. My mother called me home deceitfully telling that “I am very sick, please come and visit me”. And then they put me forcibly in a drug de-addiction camp for three months. Among 74 men, I was all alone... I used to be given sleeping injections... People would have sex with me at night and I wouldn’t even know But when I would finally gain consciousness after 2-3 days all my body parts would hurt. (00:10:08-00:10:56)

This testimony presents itself problematic in numerous ways. Firstly, her mother draws a parallelism between her daughter’s gender identity and black magic. We will not enter into discussing her intentions but such correlation is endemic to the LGBTIQ+ community: “Viviane, who was raised to believe her same-sex attraction meant she was *bewitched*. Her family’s response: to chain her to a wall to be raped by a man who they forced her to marry.” (Sobel 2018). And other testimonies as Sohail Ahmed’s, whose father forced him to undergo an exorcism to cure him from homosexuality (Hanif 2015). Then Rikita goes into saying that she was in a rehab center where she was both medically and sexually assaulted. As it also happens with other LGBTIQ+ individuals all around the globe: conversion therapy, corrective raping, electroshock, pharmaceutical violence, or lobotomies, to name a few.

Puneet, a lesbian woman from Punjab, also suffered from her family’s emotional blackmailing. Her father, who was very sick, insisted that she would get married. While marriage, or *anand karaj*, within Sikhs seems to be more egalitarian than other religious philosophies, as far as they refuse derogatory practices such as *dowry* or *purdah* (Mahajan et al. 2013), it cannot escape from its patriarchal significance. And in the case of Puneet we venture into saying that there is a homophobic impulse too. Marriage is expected for cisheterosexual women, but in the case of lesbians it also has a conversing significance. Mustikan has recognised that,



In Britain, forced marriages among Pakistani, Indian and other communities has obliged the government to launch the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU). Though the FMU distinguishes between a marriage of convenience of gay and lesbian couples as being different from a coerced marriage, in reality the former-where true love is essentially missing-are also forced, not by family in this case, but by social and cultural and religious expectations. The FMU has detailed some cases to underscore the disastrous impact on those within the LGBT+ community who are married against their wishes, after effectively becoming a victim of human trafficking at the hands of their families. (2019)

And even now that her mother accepts her, she lives in constant anxiety: “In fact, before my brother’s marriage she herself told my cousins and all relatives not to ask me about my marriage as that would upset me. And all the time, I kept thinking that they will push me again for marriage.” (00:14:50- 00:15:09). This fear is not unreasonable if we consider that forcing LGBTIQ+ people into cisheterosexual marriage is common in India. Sukhvinder’s parents, after knowing about his sexual orientation, took his passport and money, forcing their son to marry a girl already chosen from the village. (Mustikan 2019) And this is only one of many stories also located at the FMU webpage like Yasmin’s, Farhan’s, whose parents thought that marrying a woman would correct his sexuality, or Maya’s, who compares corrective marriage to “being sold to be raped”.

Dating apps have also proved themselves an alternative for the interaction between members of the LGBTIQ+ community. There is little doubt when we say that, at a sociological and even anthropological level, queer dissidents interact in ways that scape cisheteronormative understandings and that this queer-socialization occurs in scenarios that are far from inviting. If Lacan speaks of recognizing oneself in the mirror, being a dissident subject with no references that you can relate to, only obscures the experience. This feeling is also gathered in the documentary when said “are there any other gay Sikhs around?” (00:04:42). The public is, for some, a neglected territory, and so technology has become a vehicle for the transportation of queer codifications into a domestic realm (socialization, culture, sex practices, romantic narratives). *Grindr*, named in the documentary and perhaps the most downloaded app among gay men, provides a platform as it connects people from the safety of their homes and, if desired, anonymously. It creates somehow an online community and brings some experiences and narratives together.

That is the theory, but reality proves otherwise. In 2017, Egyptian police hacked *Grindr* for tracking gay men in the country and imprison users indiscriminately (Jankowicz 2017). The infiltration of cisheteronormative regulations into these spaces also needs to be called into question. It is common to find profiles that only join in conversation with masculine, normative and straight-looking men, then discriminating against other ways of gender and bodily expression. In a not so much positive light, Sukdeep Singh also elaborates in the problematics of such app and concludes that, especially in India, gay Sikhs are being virtually attacked and marginalized. He provides a series of screenshots from different profiles where users make clear that they would not date Sardars (00:22:41-00:22:43) or even question



their religious sentiments because of their sexual orientation (00:24:12-00:24:16). Little has been written about religious minorities on *Grindr*, as literature rather focuses on racial issues but, in this fashion, Andrew DJ Shield (2018) provides us with a thorough discussion on this fascinating topic and he gathers that there are two significant phenomena that occur when racialized gays claim for these spaces.

Firstly, minorities are addressed as a sexual fetish (“I’m into Asians”), which Sukheep Singh himself subscribes in a public interview organized by the *Brasil-India Associação de Redes de Conhecimento* (Brazil-India Knowledge Networks Association, São Paulo) as well as in an interview for Salzburg Global Seminar: “Then there were others who only looked at Sikh men as very muscular and well-endowed and wanted to fulfill their fantasies.” (Singh 2020c). And it is also mentioned in the film as the director makes us look at the world not only as marked by the material experiences of colonization, exploitation, and economic and political dependence on the Global North but also through the lenses of those marked by the cultural experience of being categorized as exotic. And, on a second note, that people of color are insulted and harassed because of the race, nationality or religion (Shield, 150-152),

It is not just the wider Sikh community that LGBT Sikhs have to battle against. Discrimination against Sikhs within the LGBT community is rampant as well. Where profiles on dating apps often mention No Sikhs and No Sardars (turbaned Sikhs). This can have its own psychological effects too. When it comes to you know probably dating gay Sikh men and going out with them. A lot of discrimination is there. (00:22:28-00:22:55)

One may be then confused as to why Sardars are being discriminated when, genetically speaking, they are not much different than a Hindu. In some cases, these categories earlier mentioned (that is nationality, race, and religion) are understood by others as a whole. And so Sikhs are not only presumed as a religious group but also ‘cartographed’ in certain areas (Punjab, in this case) and taxonomized into a racial subdivision that is alien to Indian genetics. Actually, Shield provides us with examples that confirm our words. He gathers some testimonies from religious minorities who are also active on Grindr: “F*ck you [Arab country], f*ck Islam, f*ck you” (151). If assumptions are often made around your religious status based on your skin color and/or nationality, in the case of gay Sikhs this is even more jeopardizing because the turban and the beard work as immediate signs for Sikh recognition. And this, concludes Sukhdeep Singh, “led to a lot of insecurity within me.” (2020c). He believes that because of being Sikh “no one would ever want to date me, causing to a lot of body-image issues that took a while to go.” (ibid).

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of this analysis make a case for its initial considerations. It is verified that Sikhs are themselves a minority in the world, but LGBTIQ+ Sikhs are The Other within such minority. Not to mention other overlapped systems of discrimination that may occur within this category: women, caste, trans, or capital.



And so queer Sikhs struggle in configuring themselves as active agents in their religious communities. This situation leads them into complicated, if not problematic, associations with their own philosophy and it disrupts every way of socialization. They are most vulnerable and feel that their voices can easily go unheard. It becomes however important for them to assert and maintain both identities. As Sukhdeep Singh states in the interview annexed in this very same journal, he has “not come across a queer Sikh person who gave up their religious identity or religion because of their sexuality”. He also mentions that he has met quite a few gay Sikh men “who did not see their religious and queer identities in conflict, because of the larger message of acceptance and equality of Sikh religion” (ibid.). It seems fundamental to bring such debate here because for queer Sikhs emancipating from their religion is sometimes a distant possibility. Unlike other scenarios that enjoy certain secularism, Sikhism emerges in an already effervescent context: colonialism, customary laws, domestic racism, traditionalism, orthodox practices. Finally, and at the risk of sounding little conventional, we borrow from Pattanaik (2017) and we attach here a series of enunciations that may illuminate whoever dissident Sikh is reading this paper. Pattanaik lists ten points from Karmic faiths that can be used to affirm the dignity of queer people. As they are very important to the acceptance of gender diversity and sexual orientation, we quote them entirely:

1. There is no concept of Judgement Day in any Karmic faith. God is no judge. There is no such thing as eternal damnation for anyone, which includes queer people.
2. Nature/God is infinite (*ananta*). Infinity has no boundaries (*rekha*), no divisions (*khanda*). It is fluid, like a river. It includes the queer. The human mind is finite and limited and so cannot understand everything. We have to accept even that which makes no sense to us, with love for and faith in the infinite.
3. Our body, our personality and our sexuality are outcomes of their karmic burden. They are therefore natural. Wisdom lies in accepting them as such rather than fighting them.
4. Knowledge helps us accommodate the queer in society. Every society has to change its rules as per the needs of geography (*sthana*), history (*kala*) and people (*patra*). In the past, women were seen as inferior to men, Dalits as inferior to Brahmins, and queers as inferior to straight people. But this is considered unacceptable in modern times. We have to change with the times.
5. We have to think in practical terms: a. How to include the queer in our family? b. Who will take care of the queer when he/she is old? c. How will the queer take care of old parents when they grow old? d. How will the queer take the family name forward?
6. Problems with the queer are the same problems we face with young men and women who are increasingly choosing career over family, singlehood over marriage, divorce over staying together, and preferring to have only one child. Old religious practices are being abandoned and new ways are emerging as boys and girls marry across religions, languages, castes and communities. This adjustment is no different from adjusting with queer people.



7. Queer people can get married, for marriage is between souls (*atma*) that have no gender. We give too much value to the body (*sharira*) that can be male, female or queer.
8. No matter what our body (male, female, queer), no matter what our social status (rich/poor, educated/uneducated, married/unmarried, business/service), every human being has to cope with loneliness, sense of invalidation, and feelings of frustration and abandonment. This is universal for all creatures. Wisdom lies in helping people cope with this.
9. God is within us (*jiva-atma*) and others (*para-atma*). Through the other (*para-atma*) we can realise the infinite divine (*param-atma*). Hence the Upanishadic maxims: there is divinity within me (*aham brahmasmi*) and in you as well (*tat tvam asi*). To discover love and appreciation for the world as it is, not the way we want it to be, is wisdom. Discover God –that is wisdom and love– within you by being more generous and accepting of the queer in you and around you.
10. Everything in the eternal faiths (*sanatana dharma*) has a way out (*upaay*), nothing is fixed, provided we have open hearts, expanded minds, and are willing to ‘adjust’. (51-52)

The reader can now start a new reading.

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FROM PUNJAB TO PEGGY'S COVE: JOYFUL ACTIVISM IN *BEHIND THE BHANGRA BOYS* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine how the 2019 Nancy Ackerman documentary film *Behind the Bhangra Boys* both deconstructs the complexities of contemporary Sikh immigrant identity in Eastern Canada and reinforces the intricacies of one's social responsibility of being a welcome guest on the unceded territories of Mi'kma'ki, otherwise known as Nova Scotia. Following the energetic choreography and generous hearts of five young Sikh immigrants, the film reminds viewers that the protection of community and the planet is part and parcel of joyful activism, whilst following Guru Nanak's teachings, be it along the rocky shoreline of Peggy's Cove or the fertile farmlands of Punjab.

KEYWORDS: *Behind the Bhangra Boys* (2019), Sikh Diaspora in Eastern Canada, Joyful Activism.

DEL PUNJAB A PEGGY'S COVE: ACTIVISMO DESDE LA FELICIDAD
EN *DETRÁS DE LOS CHICOS DEL BHANGRA* (2019)

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia cómo el documental *Detrás de los chicos del bhangra* (2019), de Nancy Ackerman, deconstruye la complejidad de la actual diáspora sij en el Este de Canadá y contribuye a explicar la responsabilidad social de cada individuo para considerar la hospitalidad en los territorios Mi'kma'ki, también conocido como Nueva Escocia (Canadá). El documental describe las coreografías de este grupo de cinco migrantes sij para lanzar un mensaje de protección para la comunidad y el planeta, a través de un activismo basado en la felicidad y en las doctrinas de Gurú Nanak, la orografía de Peggy's Cove y las tierras del Punjab.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Detrás de los chicos del bhangra* (2019), diáspora sij en el Este de Canadá, activismo de la felicidad.

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INTRODUCTION

As Hamseet Singh Chandok declares in *Behind the Bhangra Boys*, “the language of dance is universal” (in Ackerman, 00:35:21-00:35:47). Nance Ackerman is an accomplished documentary filmmaker and photographer, creating images and film around the globe for over 30 years. Her social documentary films have explored topics ranging from the world of opioid drug addiction to the challenging spaces of Canada’s prisons incarcerating persons who identify as women. Many of her more recent projects examine the power of the human spirit behind extraordinary global issues, including her 44 minutes documentary film, *Behind the Bhangra Boys*, released in 2019. Ackerman’s visual appetite for storytelling comes alive as viewers capture a glimpse into the generous hearts of five young Sikh men: Hasmeet Singh Chandok, Kunwardeep Singh, Davinder Singh, Simran Singh Chadha and Bikramjit Singh. These five men moved to the unceded territory of Mi’kmaki, that is, Nova Scotia, Canada for post-secondary studies. Ackerman highlights how these vibrant spirits accomplished much more than the completion of their degree because they lived with their hearts and with their faith and decided to spread positivity through a form of Punjabi dance, *bhangra*, giving back wholeheartedly and in multiple ways, to the land and the people who initially welcomed them. This film, screened virtually as part of the South Asian Film Festival of Montreal in 2020, is about the power of interculturality, accepting the challenges of the immigrant/settler experience, and propelling the heart towards activism via the barrier-free and universally welcoming community that is dance.

This paper will examine how Ackerman’s film *Behind the Bhangra Boys* both deconstructs the complexities of contemporary Sikh immigrant identity in Eastern Canada and reinforces the intricacies of one’s social responsibility of being a welcome guest on the unceded territories of Mi’kma’ki, otherwise known as Nova Scotia. Following the energetic choreography and generous hearts of five young Sikh immigrants, the film reminds viewers that the protection of community and the planet is part and parcel of joyful activism, whilst following Guru Nanak’s teachings, be it along the rocky shoreline of Peggy’s Cove or the fertile farmlands of Punjab.

THE DECONSTRUCTION

As Chandok reminds viewers, that the point of their #joyfulactivism videos is to “find someone who needs help and help them” (in Ackerman, 00:5:30-00:5:33). The mystery of the Sikh *pagh*, the turban worn by some men and women following the Sikh faith, and one of the more visible identifiers of Sikhism, decreeing accountability as a servant of the Divine Presence, is instantly demystified in the very first scene of Ackerman’s film. The young men are seen tying the colourful material around their long hair and head, proud smiles abounding, in preparation for a performance. The scene segues smoothly from images of sunshine shining on bright *paghs* to crisp icebergs crumbling into waters, as viewers prepare to learn more



about who these young men are and how they honour not only their faith but the unceded land upon which they now work and live.

In 2016, Maritime Bhangra Group was established, perhaps unconsciously, on the principles of Guru Nanak's three main motives of living with accountability and respect: *Naam Japo*, the omnipresence of the Divine, *Kirt Karo*, a concerted effort to live in an honest and dedicated manner, and *Vand Chhako*, to share the fruits of one's labour with those less fortunate. And in turn, all of three Guru Nanak's teachings radiate throughout the film, in particular when Chandok mentions his father (Ackerman 00:19:27-00:19:30), a former social worker, who he lost in 2012.

In terms of *Naam Japo*, Ackerman provides several images of the men, gathering together, like brothers, eating together (Ackerman 00:21:45-00:22:35). The fellowship emits elements of meditation and prayer, despite not being shot inside a *gurdwara* but sometimes on the floor of an Ottawa hotel room as they prepare to dance at the celebrations for Canada 150th Anniversary on Parliament Hill, in front of the Prime Minister and millions of Canadians (Ackerman 00:11:15-00:11:57), on the floor of their apartment that they share, with someone preparing *masala chai* and another stirring the *dhal*. The men sit, cook, eat, in quiet, clearly conscious of the Divine ever present (Ackerman 00:5:21-00:5:30).

For *Kirt Karo*, viewers learn the members, whilst practicing their dances at night or on the weekends, all now have full time employment, including as an IT security consultant, a manager of a petrol station and a software developer. However, as students, they managed to stay awake for their 8:00am classes whilst working part-time, and for minimum wage, many night shifts delivering food, snow shovelling distributing flyers, working back shifts at a local Lebanese restaurant but slowly and surely, making his way up the ladder to manager (Ackerman 00:13:35-00:14:05). Ackerman is realist in her approach, and she is aware that some viewers, perhaps those who do not share the lived experience of being immigrants of colour, may not know what the reality of working, studying and devoting time to activism, actually entails. The close-up shots in this scene focus on the driver and the facial expressions he makes when declaring, "sometimes it's hard to keep the negativity inside and only show positivity" (Ackerman 00:38-50-00:38-57).

As for *Vand Chhako*, the mere fact that when practicing their dances, either in a gym or outside, all done outside of work hours, the films are produced and posted with a clear and distinct purpose for raising funds for charity. This notion of *seva*¹ by engaging in acts of service, on a regular basis so to become closer to the Divine, is what the Maritime Bhangra Group videos represent. Chandok asks that donations be made directly to the agency for whom the video has been prepared and that only a receipt be sent to the Maritime Bhangra Group.

¹ Meaning-purpose-and-importance.



SEVA –BLESSING OR BURDEN?

As Elina Tujanmaa reminds us, “Gratitude is related to indebtedness, which is often defined via obligation” (64-65). In the spirit of *seva*, Ackerman brings to light how beyond posting dance videos for fundraising, Maritime Bhangra Group are also educators. At Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, where the members were students, Chandok and others started a Sikh Student Association (Ackerman 00:15:58-00:16:15). The goal of the association was not to teach their fellow students about Sikhism, nor the practices outlined by Guru Nanak, explains Chandok (Ackerman 00:16:40-00:17:29), The purpose was to educate their peers about the choice to wear a *pagh* and/or keep a long beard. As Chandok reminds viewers, “sure there is joy, but there is the reality as well. It is tough being an outsider” (Ackerman 00:41:33-00:42:00). And like many persons of colour, in particular newer Canadians immigrants or migrants, there is a particular burden attached to be othered, a burden to educate, in the case of Canada, the cis-white heteronormative Catholic-Protestant majority, as Kali Holloway states:

Because here’s the thing: people of color are not obligated to teach even the most well-intentioned white people anything about race. They certainly can if they want to, but it’s neither their duty nor obligation. The onus rests on white “allies” to educate themselves.

Is explaining the significance of the *kirpan* and *pagh* necessary? Or does the Maritime Bhangra Group feel the unofficial burden of *seva* to educate the majority white population in order to feel more welcome? Ackerman offers a cozy scene between Hasmeet Chandok and Kunwardeep Singh, sitting together on the floor, where viewers hear a little more about the burden of being racialized newcomers to Mi’kmaki (Ackerman, 00:38:05-00:38:39). With comments like “you are spoiling the Maritime culture and you guys are not the Maritimes and you are not Canada” (Ackerman, 00:39:33-00:39:45). Chandok softly repeats, this xenophobia, this hatred for what is different, “it does not let us down” (Ackerman, 00:38:05-00:38:40). He refers to how improved intercultural competence starts at an early age, similar to what they are doing with their visits to schools. They are, according to Chandok, “willing to work to be called Maritimers” (Ackerman, 00:39-52-00:39-53), but of course, at what cost?

Part of the uphill battle for acceptance is due to the fact that the history of Sikh migration and settlement in Mi’kmaki is much more recent than in other areas of Canada, such as British Columbia. According to the Canadian Sikh Centre, the first Punjabi Sikhs to arrive in Canada where a small group of soldiers from Hong Kong travelling via Canada to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Jubilee in 1897. More clusters of Sikh migrants made their way to the West Coast as well as to Ontario, primarily what is now known as the Greater Toronto Area. Those Sikhs who did arrive in Nova Scotia in the late 60s and early 70s, and chose to stay, worked in education and later were the founding members of the Maritime Sikh Association, which now marks 52 years of service to both the local gurudwara in Halifax.



Thus, with little or no anchored history in the region, there is a certain ignorance of who Sikhs are, primarily amongst members of the population who are descendants of European settlers. Therefore, this alternate dimension of *seva* to educate children and break the cycle of ignorance is explored with Ackerman's footage of the Maritime Bhangra Group visiting a local school, where the majority of children live with developmental delays, children who themselves struggle with acceptance by greater society (Ackerman, 00:3:57-00:4:20). There are close-up shots of young children freely dancing with the Maritime Bhangra Group, huge smiles abounding, examining their *paghs* and beards with curiosity and humanity. Ackerman interviews the teacher in charge, whose face is visibly flushed from dancing alongside Chandok, or perhaps from the joy of seeing her students uninhibited, freeing their own minds from the burdens of being different. Chandok adds, "this is the land that accepted us as we are (in Ackerman 00:34:41-00:34:42)." Perhaps, this form of *seva*, showing young children it is acceptable to one's true self, is more of a blessing than a burden. Why is this so? The author/s may want to add a sentence to specify why it is a blessing. A spiritual reward? A cultural experience? An experience of fulfillment? If so, which fulfillment?

THE REINFORCEMENT

In the second half of the documentary, Chandok humbly declares, "if you talk about change, it's all about that one drop." (Ackerman: 00:42:21-00:42:22). Ackerman brings to viewers a more in-depth view of how the Maritime Bhangra Group have made their commitment to social responsibility with the notion of #joyfulactivism, that is, bringing joy with their dance videos as a way to be a part of the greater solution. Beyond what digital anthropologists have surmised as a *phenomenon* with the number of views their videos acquire, it is clear viewers are watching and donating funds to their causes. In particular, Chandok shares how the dancers prepared a video to raise money for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS research (Simran). Instead of the ice water bucket challenge that went viral across Canada, Maritime Bhangra Group decided to showcase "snow shoveler bhangra" as seen on their YouTube channel. The video received more than 50 million views in four days and consequently, thousands of dollars were raised for ALS research.

One of those viewers had her family request the dancers visit her at home and Ackerman was able to include this emotional and inter/intra cultural event into the film. Shot entirely from the kitchen and living room of this woman's home, despite being physically restricted to her wheelchair, there is clearly joy in her face (Ackerman 00:6:25-00:7:00). The camera later pans out to focus on members of the Maritime Bhangra Group huddled close to the family of the woman who has since passed from complications due to ALS. The entire group are embracing as they watch footage of the encounter, reminiscing on the joy experienced by all parties. This 'kitchen party' scene is #joyfulactivism at its finest. These young men, without hesitation, and only with full intention to bring joy and happiness to someone whose life expectancy is limited, are described here by the family as "basically nice people



who do good things for people and they are kind and warm. They are just that way (Ackerman 00:7:10-00:7:16). Viewers see cultural boundaries erase and simply the interaction of humans bringing other humans much joy.

UNCEDED TERRITORY

In the most powerful part of the film, the scenes that connect the Maritime Bhangra Group to their newly found roots in the Maritimes, the unceded territory of Mi'kmaki, are the shared scenes of dance intertwining both Punjabi and Mi'kmaq cultures (Ackerman 00:30:00-00:30:06) with welcoming comments from one Punjabi dancer to the Mi'kmaq dancer, "It's funny we have the exact same dance" (Ackerman 00:30:05-00:30:06). Ackerman gracefully captures the road trip of the dancers on their way from Halifax, Nova Scotia to meet Chief Matilda at Lennox Island, Mi'kmaq First Nation, Prince Edward Island. Along with a respectful choice of cinematography, one that is not touristic or voyeuristic in nature, but that gracefully captures the beautiful vistas of the land and sea of Lennox Island in ways that validate the reality of climate change, Ackerman shares with viewers a few moments of fragility and fear as well. Chief Matilda declares to Chandok and his fellow activists that the shorelines are eroding and consequently, sea levels are rising, threatening the community and indigenous ways of life.

Part of #joyful activism for Chandok and the Maritime Bhangra Group is about highlighting a problem, like climate change and the negative effects on indigenous ways of knowing and living, but then actively becoming a part of the solution. Viewers witness the Mi'kmaq dancers preparing their headpieces for dance as well as the Punjabi dancers tightening their *paghs* (Ackerman 00:28:06-00:28:40). Shots of the footwork are in close range and Ackerman's gives ample room to compare how the dance steps (Ackerman 00:29:58-00:30:01) between two groups of people whose geographical origins are miles apart, are astonishingly similar. Both dances involve raising hands high up, above the air. Kunwardeep Singh explains how *faslan*, in Punjabi bhangra, is a dance step signifying farmers who are grateful during the time of a good harvest, giving thanks to the Earth and the Divine by swaying their hands above the head to emulate a field of crops, moving back and forth as the wind blows, personifying the land. Ackerman zooms into the reaction of the Mi'kmaq dancers during Singh's explanation and a collective understanding is acknowledged; we are all more alike than we are different.

The dance moves mirror each other, the will to honour land and water are rooted in the same intention of understanding each other and our place and duty to each other and the land. The differences between the two groups grant more opportunities to dialogue, to understand and to reflect as Chandok declares to Chief Matilda, "[w]e have come to you guys and just listen. So I think that getting that knowledge from you, I think it will give us a chance, to learn more and put in the front of the people" (Ackerman 00:29:33-00:29:35).

Chandok sees this experience to engage with the Mi'kmaq as an opportunity to act as ambassadors of change. He says, "we want to work for the issues that affect



people and especially to the first people who us all a chance to live and work here” (Ackerman 00:34:34-00:35:35). This land, this unceded territory of Mi’kmaki, the land that has welcomed us as uninvited newcomers, this land should be honoured and preserved, according to Chandok. Viewers learn in particular from Chandok about water safety and fragility in Punjab, the province named for the five rivers merging together, (Hindi *panch* or Farsi *panj*, meaning five and *ab*, meaning water. Punjab and Mi’kmaki are both facing climate change (Ackerman 00:32:19-00:32:35). Ackerman reminds viewers that global warming and access to safe water is a common threat around the world. This documentary’s role is to highlight the intercultural activist component of reminding us that climate change and its effects are for us all to manage.

Whilst the shots of learning dance steps from each other is joyful and unifying, including observing Chief Matilda giggle in between each of her sometimes misjudged (!) bhangra steps, Ackerman allows for shots of silence too (Ackerman 00:36:34-00:36:46). Her camera is nearly perfectly still with panoramic views of Chandok and his team standing together, quietly, overlooking the flowing river, the same waters bringing life to Lennox Island and simultaneously eroding it. There are other tender moments of intercultural exchange and mutual understanding including a traditional tobacco offering (Ackerman 00:33:54-00:33:35):

Tobacco is offered for many reasons and in many different contexts. It is appropriate when asking for assistance from an Indigenous elder, knowledge keeper or person to offer tobacco. When the person accepts the tobacco, they are agreeing to help in some way. Offering tobacco is a respectful way of asking for assistance and not as symbol of gratitude after help is provided. When someone accepts tobacco, they are agreeing to listen openly and without judgement and to support you as best they can. (Carleton University)

The final scene of the Lennox Island visit is of the Maritime Bhangra Group dancing in the rain (Ackerman 00:35:06-00:35:20), perhaps nostalgic of rain scenes à la *Lagaan*, as outlined by Giacomo Licktner and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, where Gujarati (Indigenous) villagers under British colonial rule pray for the rains to break the physical drought and these prayers are answered once the British leave and *return* the unceded land back to the first peoples. The world-wide reception of *Lagaan* as a landmark film of indigenous resistance to colonial occupation is important as this sense of nostalgic connection to the land is also evident *Behind the Bhangra Boys*. Both films respond to settlers occupying lands which later create living conditions which are unsustainable for the indigenous-first peoples of the land. Both films share cinematographic nuances of nourishing the land with heavy rains and dance scenes in the once parched land. Chandok is seen hopping into the back of the rental vehicle, in full rain-soaked garb, as they drive off, smiles abounding (Ackerman, 00:31:37-00:31:45) amongst the members of the Lennox Island First Nation, quite similar to the smiles of the Gujarati villagers as the British have their cantonment disbanded and make their way out.



CONCLUSIONS

As Kunwardeep Singh states, “we want to interact with people and make a connection” (Ackerman, 00:10:57-00:10:59). Nance Ackerman’s film is multi-dimensional in its approach to better understand what motivates the Maritime Bhangra Group to give so much of themselves for others. Viewers learn about how intention and passion to serve others leads to purpose. Both obstacles and blessings of life come and go for these practitioners of #joyfulactivism and Chandok alludes to a calling, from the Divine, to serve. With the camera focusing on an image of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Chandok declares, “If they send a hateful message, we will send more love” (Ackerman, 00:40:11-00:40:12). He is asked about politics, and his answer is poignant, humble and exuding such hope, “I get into the business of change wherever it takes me, I’ll go” (Ackerman 00 40:40-00:40:53).

This study has proven to viewers that the #joyfulactivism intent and campaign of the Maritime Bhangra Group is breaking barriers. With these young immigrants wishing for positive impact, there is a better understanding of the relationship between the unceded Indigenous territory and its people, both Canadians, newly settled or with three or four generations born in Canada, and the first peoples. All of us who share Treaty land we will be alongside you, Maritime Bhangra Group, working on our cardio skills, so we can keep up!

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“CHITTHI AAYI HAI”: DIASPORIC SENSIBILITIES, MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

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ABSTRACT

Nostalgia has been a popular concept deployed to examine diasporic narratives. This paper is an examination of the song “Chitthi aayi hai” (“the letter has come from the homeland”) from the popular film *Naam* (1986) looking at how nostalgia is constructed and recreated. The song is about ‘a letter from the homeland’ gesturing at pain, memory, what has been lost and what is being achieved in the hostland. Through scholarly references to nostalgia, Bollywood music and diasporic theory, this study focuses on the role and function of nostalgia in Indian diasporic narrative practices.

KEYWORDS: Indian Diaspora, Nostalgia, Memory, Bollywood Music.

«CHITTHI AAYI HAI» («LA CARTA QUE HA VENIDO DESDE NUESTRA PATRIA»):
SENSIBILIDADES DIASPÓRICAS, MEMORIA Y NOSTALGIA

RESUMEN

El tema de la nostalgia es una constante a la hora de examinar narrativas de diáspora. Este artículo estudia la canción «Chitthi aayi hai» («La carta que ha venido desde nuestra patria») que aparece en la película *Naam* (1986), analizando cómo se construye y recrea en torno a la nostalgia. La canción trata el tema de una misiva recibida desde un territorio donde se albergan los orígenes para articular el dolor, la memoria y lo que se ha conseguido y perdido en el nuevo lugar que ahora se ocupa. El ensayo pretende estudiar la importancia y la función de la nostalgia en las prácticas narrativas de la diáspora india a través de referencias teóricas sobre nostalgia, música de Bollywood y teoría de la diáspora.

PALABRAS CLAVE: diáspora india, nostalgia, memoria, música de Bollywood.



INTRODUCTION

A significant aspect of people that have migrated and settled abroad is a tendency to reminisce the cultural experiences of the homeland. This can be extremely troublesome and overwhelming in the wake of *cultural shocks* in the hostland. While acquainting with an alien culture, the members of the diasporic community are constantly engaged in acculturation processes and meaningful integration practices that are central that prepare them for employment and social purposes in the new society. Notwithstanding, the diasporic members do not wish to sever connections with the motherland, the umbilical cord connection being resilient. New experiences in a foreign country do not wipe out the remembrances of the homeland. Memories remain strongly entrenched in the mind and nostalgia becomes crucial in defining the identity of the individuals. Textual practices and discourses like written narratives, songs, music, Bollywood films demonstrate key features that help comprehend the homeland-hostland quandary, negotiation of memories and what has been lost during the migratory processes. The narratives of diaspora are manifold and there is a frequent attempt to analyze the layers within the broad understanding of *nostalgia*. It is noteworthy that the idea of nostalgia is frequently used as a concept to study the different kinds of texts and in the exploration of diaspora, nostalgia has often been seen as vantage point in terms of examination of the textual practices.

This study centres on the discourse of nostalgia, memory and diaspora, specifically the Indian diaspora, as represented in the Bollywood song “Chitthi aayi hai”, meaning “here comes the letter from the homeland”. The song is from the film *Naam* (1986) and was sung by Pankaj Udhas. This song became extremely popular due to the manner in which it encapsulates the feelings of the members of the diaspora community. It evokes the lost relationships, lost culture, the feeling of alienation in a foreign land.

While those who settle abroad do not necessarily or actually wish to return to their ancestral home, they do reconnect through culture. Bollywood has always been seen as a vantage point when it comes to cultural revisiting. In this study, through the concepts of memory and nostalgia, and the diaspora theory, I look at how the ‘letter’ in the song becomes pivotal in determining one’s emotions, specifically, nostalgia in the context of migration, diaspora and homeland remembering. Two specific questions that this chapter will investigate are: (i) the relationship between nostalgia and diaspora (ii) music and remembrance in the diasporic context. The interrelationship between nostalgia, music, Bollywood music and the members of the diasporic community will help establish the interpretation of ‘longing for the past’ and its perception within the framework of the Indian diaspora.



NOSTALGIA AND DIASPORA

Quayson and Daswani (2013) suggest that “the term nostalgia, which is derived from the Greek *nostos* (‘to return home’) and *algos* (‘pain’), was originally intended to refer to a medical condition and physical ailment Coined in the seventeenth century by a Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, nostalgia was used to describe the pathological homesickness of Swiss soldiers serving outside the fatherland who were pining for their mountain landscapes” (16). This definition of nostalgia is important because comparing it with how diaspora scholars explore it and contextualize allows an understanding of specific cultural, historical and social processes.¹ From using the term ‘nostalgia’ in a pathological context to borrowing and applying it to societies and cultures, the term has been deeply explored and expanded. Scholars have tried to study if nostalgia is ‘homesickness’ or goes beyond this definition with reference to society.

A recurrent idea in the narrative of the diaspora is the sense of loss and how this can be negotiated through various means concerning culture, religion, rituals, customs, music and heritage. In such a context, being able to contact the past with the help of cultural artefacts, narratives, cultural signs and so on, assume importance. Scholars have attempted to examine the nature of nostalgia in different contexts and have endeavored to look at how this affects people situated in different cultures. In his essay, Hage (2010) tries to underline “that diasporic nostalgia as a memory of ‘back home’ should not be always treated as a form of sickness. Homesickness is, as it suggests, a sickness: a state where one’s memory of back home plays a debilitating function and produces a state of passivity, where the subject is unable to ‘deploy’ himself or herself in the environment in which he or she is operating” (416). This perception shows how nostalgia can be meaningfully problematized to unearth its implications for the members of the diasporic community. If nostalgia is not ‘homesickness,’ how else can it be contextualized in the framework of migration? It is interesting to note that, as Hage suggests, looking at diasporic nostalgia as a form of ‘sickness’ can exert a ‘debilitating function’ in the host society for the diasporic individual. In this scenario, if nostalgia is ‘sickness’ it should inhibit the personal progress of the person, divert him from his goals and ambitions, disallow any sort of movement into the future and completely become regressive in terms of aspirations. However, this does not or need not happen. On the contrary, the individual works efficiently, is able to control the emotion of nostalgia and consistently aims to achieve personal goals.

So nostalgia, in this framework, ceases to be a negative feature but the fact that there is ‘remembrance’ is undeniable (and undefinable too). It is not regressive. The individual learns to overcome the ‘pulling back’ effect and probably even derives energy from the memory (that is, the feeling if I have struggled to reach this place,

¹ Consider the use of the word “fatherland” in the definition. It is interesting to compare this with the frequent use of the word ‘motherland’, umbilical cord connection and so on.



I might as well work hard and do well for myself!). As Desai (2003) points out “not all transnational structures of feelings are nostalgia or longings for homelands” (19) and that “[n]ostalgia is not simply a reaching toward the definite past from a definite present, but a subjective state that seeks to express itself in pictures imbued with particular memories of a certain pastness” (199). The gesturing at how diaspora is not all about nostalgia alone and how it is a complex framework where nostalgia is an intriguing feature but not one that collapses beings within it is meaningful and necessary to explore.

Nostalgia allows the members of the diaspora to refer to their own culture, that is, their past that is in a different territory now. It can only be a reference point, not a present and certainly not a perpetual reality. To borrow an idea from Tsagarousianou, “[t]hey increasingly overcome ethnic, linguistic, and national barriers and contest traditional and inherited identifications, and they develop spatial imaginations that do not necessarily involve nostalgia for a physical homeland but instead the yearning for a symbolic space” (93). The performance of nostalgia within a ‘symbolic space’ is a useful and productive signalling. So if the individuals remember or enact a specific cultural format (like music or dance), it happens within the ‘symbolic space’. Imagination has a prominent role in this process because both memory and the capacity to imagine helps in stabilizing the cultural aspects of the individual.

Howard suggests “a more plausible time comparison account holds that nostalgia must be motivated by the felt deprivation of the older self: in some respect, nostalgia involves a judgement that the past was better. I will call this the *poverty of the present requirement*. On this view, the intentional object of nostalgia is necessarily a past regarded as preferable to the present” (2012: 643). Comparing the idea of the “poverty of the present requirement” (Howard 2012: 643) with the notion of the *symbolic space* can generate dynamic significations in terms of what has been lost and how complicated it is to grapple with it. The past cannot be retrieved, yet there is a felt need to reach the unreachable. Nonetheless, the individual realizes that what is lost is a permanent phenomenon and can be accessed only via memory or by reliving the experience vicariously.

Notably, the feeling that *what* has been lost is difficult to retrieve deepens the longing for the past. When this is expressed in cultural narratives and disseminated, there is the reliving of the experience among all those who partake of the narrative. In the case of the diaspora, there is a feeling of how the sense of longing for the past is ‘universal’ for the members of the diaspora. While referring to the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas,² Mani and Varadarajan (2005) state that in a conference, the

² Sinha (2015) records, “a hundred years ago, on January 9, 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to Indian after approximately two decades of living and working in South Africa. In 2003, the Government of India designated the day of Gandhi’s return as official Pravasi Bharatiya Divas or Overseas Indian Day” (821). The Overseas Indian Day allows the reconnection of the members of the diaspora community with the homeland. The emphasis is on cultural, economic and commercial ties. It also gestures at homeland nostalgia since those that become a part of the



“delegates emphasized the ‘ultural ties’ that bring together diasporic subjects and Indians in India, ties of sentiment, affection, and nostalgia that overlook the political errors of the Indian state” (58). While the economic and commercial nature of the event in India is undeniable, the delegates to the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas happened to suggest nostalgia as a significant aspect in their sense of strong connection with the country. So powerful is this sense of longing that it helped them to ignore the *political errors*. This is such an emphatic idea with reference to the concept of nostalgia where emotion can override the so-called sensibilities and rationale; so that connecting with the homeland becomes more important in comparison with diplomatic relations. To accord nostalgia, a supreme position in the framework of homeland or ancestral land ties, is critically significant as it allows the Indian diaspora, possibilities of travel, cultural exchanges, trade and commerce.

MUSIC AND REMEMBRANCE IN THE DIASPORIC CONTEXT

Matusitz and Payano (2011) state, “[g]enerally speaking, Bollywood movies tend to be musicals” (66). The suggestion is that music happens significantly define Bollywood’s identity among the masses and how it reflects Indian culture and ethos. Even if the individual shifts to a different country, the songs continue to exist in memory, so that the person can relive and recollect the moments and meaning associated with the song. It is not just the music but the semantics too that allow the association between the song, the situation, the connection between the song and the cultural context. Bhattacharjya (2009) observes, “[m]usic and the song sequence’s ability to refer to all those traditions associated with the inner domain mark their potency to denote Indian culture and identity, as well as play a significant role in establishing the Indian cultural identity of their diasporic characters” (54).

In the film *Naam* (1986), the character Vicky travels to Dubai to make money for his family in India. What triggers this idea is his belief that those who travel to Dubai become wealthy and lead affluent lives. His desire to salvage his family from penury compels him to take this decision. He faces dire challenges in Dubai since he had got his visa through unfair means. To come out of the travail, he has to work for a smuggler. In the meanwhile, he doesn’t send a word or connect with his family in India. It is in this framework that the song “Chitthi aayi hai” in the film gestures at the emotional trauma that he faces in the hostland. The ‘chitthi’ (‘letter’) is not an ordinary object here. It brings a plethora of emotions and a reconnection with ideas that were forgotten such as family, Indian values and culture, nostalgia, memories of the homeland. The forgetfulness has to necessarily be temporary because the letter evokes everything that is lost and obliterated. Forgetting the homeland is

programmes have some sort of ancestral connection with India. Mahatma Gandhi’s return to India on January 9, 1915, in this context is historical and iconic; and is emblematic of the umbilical cord connection with India.



strange and the letter it comes from 'watan' ('the homeland') and so the nostalgia with which it arrives is a supreme emotion. Further, it is not just a chitthi, a mere message because it has also brought with it the mitti, the 'soil' from the motherland.

The insinuation is symbolic but the connection with the *mitti*, the soil is inextricable. It cannot, should not be severed. It is this emotion of nostalgia within the song that evokes the familial and the emotional. There is no escape from these ties and if these ties have become weak, they need to be strengthened because Indian culture and values cannot be forgotten just because the individual has travelled or settled abroad. The letter in the song, with its multilayered perspectives and gestures, thus becomes a motif to strengthen the emotional bonds between the individual and the family, also the country.

There is no communication between Vicky and his family because he is cheated in the foreign land and the problems overwhelm him but as suggested, no problem should be allowed to weaken family bonds. The connection with the country is an emotional and strong one, as the *mitti*, soil and one's connection with it is necessarily a resilient one. The song symbolizes the psychological pain of the members of the diaspora community since they are reminded of their homeland and how the distance between the hostland and their home is too long to be bridged either emotionally or physically. As Allesandrini notes, diaspora implies the need to talk about loss (loss of homeland, of language, of culture) due to migration. The corollary of this loss would be a form of nostalgia that seeks to heal the wounds of dislocation through acts of memory and imagination" (2001: 315-316). So, while it is certainly *memory* that plays a preponderant role, *imagination* makes it practical and feasible to produce those memories. The dislocation, however, cannot be completely bridged. Songs have this capacity to *play* in the mind, that is, the tunes happen to 'catch the tongue' and replay them. This 'replaying' emphasizes the memories, increasing the feeling of nostalgia and not being able to forget. In "Chitthi aayi hai" song, the idea of the letter evokes memories of the homeland while gesturing at the displacement from India which is difficult to reach physically, immediately. However, the song becomes the means to emotionally revisit the homeland.

The lack of forgetfulness makes the act of memory most telling. Sarrazin (2008) makes an interesting observation with reference to Bollywood songs by suggesting that "songs differentiate Indian cinema from others not only by their inclusion, but also as an aural illustration of the perception that India and Indians have an abundance of 'heart'. 'Heart' is symbolised by selflessness and displays of emotional subjectivity particularly exemplified through singing" (395). In addition to the idea of *heart* and intense emotions, themes selected in the songs gesture at how Indian culture can be perceived and what it means for people going through different experiences and stages in life.

For instance, the chosen song palpably shows the geographical displacement that has happened to the character Vicky but the letter with the emotion of nostalgia shows that something is wrong with the situation for him. He is not interacting with his family and this is against Indian values and culture. Whatever be the problems for Vicky, connecting with his family and consequently with his 'home' is a judicious thing. So the song becomes a text in edification, letting Vicky realize what he has lost



in terms of values and culture, family relationships being of paramount significance. Whatever be the problems in life, family connections are of great significance. Ignoring one's family is unpardonable and the letter has the function of reminding Vicky his duty towards his family. Upholding family values is of utmost need. The film was produced in 1986 when the internet/email/messaging did not exist for the Indian diaspora. The letter therefore was the object that facilitated the connection between people and reestablishing relations with the loved ones, influencing each others' emotions and feelings.

Pankaj Udhas is a popular *ghazhab*³ singer in India and in the film he sings for an audience in Dubai. In the film, people shed tears since the song makes them nostalgic. It is a universal experience for the people in the audience. Through the scene where all of them weep, nostalgia for the lost homeland and people is highlighted. Also, listening to an Indian song and form (the *ghazal*) underscores the desire of the Indian diaspora to reconnect with the homeland. It is crucial for them since it reinforces that the Indian ethos⁴ resides in their memories. It is not possible to sever that aspect of culture, at least for the first generation migrants. For the second generation migrants, Indian culture is learnt via narration. Their elders transmit their memories, experiences, stories and culture (cuisine, music, dance, religion). It is palpably learnt and rehearsed at home or in community/ Indian associations in the hostland. Martin and Yaquinto suggest, "[a]s the factors of identity (ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, and class) are complicated and revisioned by the experience of exile and diaspora, such cinema suggests a counterpoint to the deterritorializing and dislocating experience of global migrations, using journey narratives to interrogate the 'homeless subject'" (22). Here, the trope of journey gestures at how difficult it is to go back to the home country, India.

Penning down one's feelings, emotions and thoughts are easier in comparison with travelling to the homeland. In the film *Naam*, the character Vicky is unable to do even that. Listening to Pankaj Udhas's song trigger memories and evoke tremendous psychological pain, emphasizes the emotional trauma of not being able to meet one's kin. To quote a few lines from the song (translated into English):

"The letter has come from the homeland,
After several days,
We displaced citizens remember,
After several days,
We displaced citizens remember,
The soil of the land".⁵ (02:00:47-02:01:36)

³ For an understanding of the 'ghazal' form, see Faruqi and Pritchett's "Lyric poetry in Urdu: Ghazal and Nazm" (1984).

⁴ It is interesting to note that the film doesn't specifically highlight any particular Indian state (like Karnataka, Kerala, Gujarat etc). It is a Hindi film that represents the whole country.

⁵ Here are the original lines from the film:

Chitthi hai vatan se chitthi aayi hai,
Bade dino ke baad,



The word ‘bevatan’ or ‘displaced citizen’ or ‘those who have *lost* the country’ implies those who are out of the homeland and the letter reminds the individual of the *soil from the motherland*. The imagery of the soil is an emotional one, highlighting a personal and permanent connection. It cannot be changed, altered, destroyed. The letter has the power to call to mind the numerous associations that the members of the diaspora community have with their point of origin. It is interesting to observe that cultural revisiting and remembrance happens across the diasporic communities settled in different parts of the world and this comparison is essential because it throws light on how there are similar patterns in different cultural discourses. For instance, the example that Verstappen and Rutten note in the context of the Netherlands⁶ offers a crucial point of recurring patterns regarding cultural longing. In their article, they state, “[h]industani dance parties are also organised every weekend, sometimes in huge party halls on the outskirts of the city; teenagers and tweens come here to enjoy live performances and remixes of **Bollywood** songs, performed by local artists. A dozen movie dance schools teach young girls how to dance to this music; clothing shops in the Hindustani neighbourhood of Transvaal sell the matching outfits” (219). The possibility of recreating the homeland experience in a new geographical and cultural territory is exciting because it lessens the foreignness that seems immediate and permanent. Yet, this could be completely illusory because it is not possible to completely displace an alien culture. What is possible is only a temporary respite and seemingly authentic homeland culture.

These dilemmas can be very real for the members of the diasporic community, yet there is an effort to recreate homeland cultural signs because they are strong psychological means to feel better and as suggested at the beginning of this study, be able to negotiate the “poverty of the present requirement” (Howard 2012: 643). When the audience listens to the song, they realize what they have always known: the experience of their culture, the connections with their family and friends and how these are not immediately accessible. The vacuum of the present moment’ can be handled only through shared emotions of the diaspora which the song happens to express through addressing members of the diaspora.

Ham bevatano ko yaad,
Bade dino ke baad,
Ham bevatano ko yaad,
Vatan ki mitti aayi hai (*Naam*: 2:0047 to 2:01:36: 1986).

⁶ Interestingly enough, the subject of Bollywood music and diaspora has been frequently discussed by scholars. A comparative analysis of the cultural reception, revisiting and re-creation in different countries can provide a fascinating understanding of the layers that exist within music and diaspora. See Matusitz and Payano: “The Bollywood in Indian and American Perceptions: A Comparative Analysis” (2011) for a study of how Bollywood is seen and understood in North America.



CONCLUSION

The notion of nostalgia for the members of the diasporic community is certainly beyond the basic perception of homesickness or a mere *longing for the past* as suggested in the song “Chitthi aayi hai.” As Kim (2007) observes, “[d]iasporic consciousness forms out of the ‘foreignness’ of the multiple worlds that one has inherited, such that the world that the diasporic subject inhabits is perpetually haunted by the absence of another, distant world” (349). The lack of immediate contact with the home country in the film *Naam*, but the possibility of recreation of cultural signs through the analysed song, for instance, allows reconnection with the homeland and helps bridge, albeit temporarily, the need for the homeland connection between the character Vicky and the members of his family, back home in India. In the song, it is not just Vicky but also an entire audience that weeps while listening to the song that highlights how much they miss home and are trying to deal with the loss. Through the song, memory and culture become the means to tap the emotional necessity of remembering home and also grapple with contemporary realities of the hostland.

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GURINDER CHADHA'S *VICEROY'S HOUSE* (2017) AND OTHER EVICTIONS: TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS OF PAST AND PRESENT CRISES IN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Crisis is the word that seems to best characterize the twenty-first century conjuncture. The bleakness and instability of an uncertain and troubled present often encourages the proliferation of nostalgic images of past times, which become sweetened scenarios for escapist memories. On the other hand, the local and global current economic, social and political divisions have also brought to light the need to revisit certain aspects of the past from *other* perspectives. This is the case of Gurinder Chadha's films, which frequently advocate for the crossing of cultural borders by showing the hybrid nature of communities and their heritage. Following Robert Stam's cultural and filmic methodology which includes a trans-disciplinary, transmediatic, transtextual, transregional, and transartistic approach (2019), I aim to analyze Chadha's *Viceroy's House* as a film that proposes a revision of India's Partition while offering a critical transnational and intersectional connection of contemporary global and local scenarios.

KEYWORDS: Crisis, Recession, Heritage Film, Transnational, Nostalgia.

EL ÚLTIMO VIRREY DE LA INDIA (CHADHA 2017) Y OTROS DESAHUCIOS: CONEXIONES CINEMATOGRÁFICAS TRANSNACIONALES DE CRISIS EN EL PASADO Y EN EL PRESENTE

RESUMEN

Crisis es la palabra que mejor caracteriza la coyuntura del siglo XXI. El panorama inestable de un presente incierto y turbulento a menudo fomenta la proliferación de imágenes nostálgicas del pasado, convertidas en escenarios edulcorados de recuerdos escapistas. Por otro lado, las divisiones económicas, sociales y políticas del presente han puesto de manifiesto la necesidad de revisar ciertos aspectos históricos desde *otras* perspectivas. Este es el caso del cine de Gurinder Chadha que aboga por un cruce de fronteras culturales que muestra la naturaleza híbrida de las comunidades que representa y su origen. Siguiendo la metodología de Robert Stam que, desde un punto de vista fílmico y cultural, incluye un enfoque transdisciplinario, transmediático, transtextual, transregional y transartístico (2019), analizaré la película *El último Virrey de la India* como una propuesta de revisión de la Partición de la India que ofrece una conexión transnacional e interseccional crítica de escenarios globales y locales contemporáneos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: crisis, recesión, cine de época, transnacional, nostalgia.

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Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* was released the year when the 70th anniversary of India's Independence and Partition was commemorated. 2017 was the UK-India year of culture, which celebrated a series of events that revisited the complex historical and cultural relationships between British and South Asian territories. The BBC broadcasted a special season of programmes *70 Years On: Partition Stories*, which included documentaries produced by British-Asian filmmakers such as Anita Rani's *My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947* and Chadha's *India's Partition: The Forgotten Story*, which showed the filmmaker's research on the historical events that were portrayed in her feature film *Viceroy's House* (70 Years On, 2017). India and Pakistan memorialised the event, yet the painful remembrance of Partition often cast a shadow over the celebrations of independence.¹

Chadha's *Viceroy's House* was therefore released against a background of past remembrance and recovery. The willingness to revisit the past goes hand in hand with the increasing instability that the socio-economic processes of globalization entail. Situations of crisis fuel feelings of nostalgic harking back to times of yore which are perceived and imagined as more stable. The paradox of postmodern culture is that the yearning for revisiting the past is met with the impossibility of its full recovery (Rosenstone 2012). This situation has resulted in a neoliberal commodification of history and memory so that the generalised longing for the past becomes a profitable enterprise. A conspicuous example is the British heritage industry which boomed during the Thatcher decade (1979-1990). As part of this phenomenon, heritage and Raj Revival cinema spurred a nostalgic harking back to British imperial times. It is true that heritage cinema is associated with "the construction of a collective cultural memory" (Vidal 2012: 2) and that Raj revival films offered an orientalist vision of the Empire (Wollen 1991; Rushdie 1992). Nonetheless, these films also brought to the fore present-day tensions in terms of class, gender and race, which advocated for a kind of critical, revisionist nostalgia, and not mere escapism (Oliete-Aldea 2015).

The economic and social instability of the New Millennium fuelled a renewed harking back to imperial times in the UK and pro-Brexit discourses made the most of it. As Berghahn explains:

Not unlike in the Thatcher era, the heyday of the Raj revival films, it has been interpreted as a response to the gloom of austerity resulting in a weakening of national pride and self-confidence. Hence the rallying cry of the Brexiteers 'Britain will be great again' –as if leaving the EU would automatically give Britons the Empire back. (2019: 39)

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¹ Partition has been portrayed cinematically since the 1940s, especially in films in Hindi, Bengali and Urdu, and by diaspora filmmakers. British Raj revival productions also tackled Partition in *Gandhi* (Attenborough 1982) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (ITV 1982), as well as in documentaries such as *Partition: The Day India Burned* (Pollack 2007). See Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Debali Mookerjee-Leonard 2015 and Dwyer 2017.

A romanticised ‘Raj vintage’ style could be appreciated in shops and decoration in restaurants. In cinema, *Victoria and Abdul* (Frears 2017), *The Black Prince* (Raz 2017), and productions such as *Indian Summers* (Channel 4 2015-16) –and implicitly, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Madden 2011), *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Madden 2015)– are examples of the twenty-first-century Raj Revival.² Yet, as occurred in the 1980s, some of those nostalgic films were critical re-visions of the past which also condemned some of the ills of the present conjuncture. Diaspora filmmakers in particular added a transnational turn by combining the ‘heritage’ filmic tradition with ‘Bollywood crossover’ cinema in order to utter subaltern voices which had hitherto been silenced.³ It is against this representational background that the film *Viceroy’s House* puts to the test the current historical conjuncture, as well as the transhistorically and transculturally constructed artificial boundaries which impede to connect affective structures of feeling to the construction of history. Following Robert Stam’s cultural and filmic methodology which includes a transdisciplinary, transmediatic, transtextual, transregional, and transartistic approach (2019), this article will explore Chadha’s film as a revisionary text on India’s Partition of 1947 which also offers a critical transnational and intersectional connection of contemporary global and local scenarios.

Partition epitomizes a moment of *crisis* which was aggravated by the British decision of bringing forward the date of independence so that they were not blamed for the political, social and economic havoc they had originated throughout colonisation of the Indian Sub-Continent. The term *crisis* refers to a particular moment of change, a turning point which entails a decision and course of action to tackle a problem and provide a solution (Kosseleck 2002). Runciman (2016) points at the discursive construction of the term “crisis” and the contingency of its duration, which depends on who experiences its effects. In this sense, India’s independence marked the end of a crisis for the British and its aggravation in the former colonial territories.

The twenty-first century has also been characterized by a series of crises, starting with the 9/11 terrorist attacks and war on terror in the US, followed up by the global financial crisis and Great Recession, which escalated in a series of austerity, political and democratic crises, and continued with environmental, refugee and health crises. All of them are intertwined and originated not at the very moment they were coined but some decades, even centuries, ago, with international impact. The concatenated nature of these events has been also described as a single organic and multifaceted crisis (Grossberg 2015). The convenient neoliberal motto “There is no alternative,” linked the moment of crisis and the subsequent decisions to an

² The chain of restaurants *Dishoom* and the that of luxury shops *The East Indian Company* the aesthetic ‘experience’ of the British Raj into a commodity to be consumed by twenty-first-century customers (Berghahn, 2019; Clini, 2019).

³ Further analyses of “crossover cinema” and diaspora films and their subversive potential has been carried out by Desai (2000), Raminder and Sinha (2005), Dudrah (2012), Gehlawat (2010) and Diego Sánchez (2015).



irreversible and irremediable path and therefore leaving vulnerable citizens hit by the crisis in a state of paralysis and inaction.⁴ Growing economic inequalities within and between countries, regions and supranational structures derived into authoritarian and protectionist movements blaming minorities for the precarious context.

The commemorative events of India's independence and the Partition crisis were therefore remembered in convulsive times at a global scale when both emancipatory and divisive movements were at stake. In a similar trend, Brexit 2016 referendum has built up a frontier which separates the UK from Europe but it has also revealed a polarized internal division among the British population within its own nations, regions, social classes and generations. Reminiscent of Thatcher's calls to "make Britain Great again," Brexit discourses promised to *protect* the UK borders from unfavourable European policies and from unwanted immigration. 2016 also witnessed Trump's presidential election with his motto "Make America Great again." These claims revealed profound scars in US society brought about by the President's controversial views on the economy, society, gender and ethnicity and his promise to build the wall in the US-Mexico frontier; walls which were also replicated in European frontiers to prevent the entrance of refugees and migrants. India was also experiencing further social division, as Modi's neoliberal policies were increasing the gap between the wealthy and the poor, at the same time that he advocated for Indian traditional values, fuelling nationalism and igniting further religious tensions. In September 2016, newspapers headlines in the international press showed concern about a possible war between the two countries as the Kashmir conflict escalated. The highly militarised Line of Control in Kashmir epitomizes the long-standing scar of Partition (Khan, 2017).⁵

These three examples have something in common: the idea that the construction of walls will protect a country from the ills of globalization, namely the free movement of migrants which are blamed for economic and social decay, while the neoliberal flows of financial capitalism boost. The idea of 'pure' imagined communities that imperialist nostalgia yearns for is counteracted by critical revisions of the past which reveal and celebrate the existence of hybridity in a past re-visited from the hitherto obliterated margins. Chadha's *Viceroy's House* is a conspicuous example of such reflexive nostalgia (Davies 1979). By revisiting an English Literary classic in *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) or producing a crossover heritage film in the *Raj revival* fashion, Chadha challenges the view of appropriation and heritage itself. Chadha's filmography could be thus labelled as transnational, understood as a method which points at the uneven nature of global movements and flows with their own temporal and spatial interdependencies (Stam 2019: 233).

⁴ The *There is No Alternative* (TINA) slogan was widely used by Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s and is still uttered by neoliberal governments whenever unpopular measures are to be imposed specially in times of crisis (Bauman, 2007).

⁵ Tension in the region recently escalated, resulting in the Revocation of the Special State of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. Since then, lockdown and curfews have been imposed to the region.



The “transnational” has been defined as “the global forces that link people or institutions across nations” together with their critical responses (Ezra and Rowden 2006: 2-5) namely, what Higbee and Lim call “critical transnationalism” (2009). Chadha crosses borders by presenting characters turned into various imposed national allegiances and narratives that unfold not only the multicultural but also the hybrid nature of identity itself. Furthermore, her films result from intertwining different genres and cinematographic traditions. Such hybridity provides a critical transnational tool in terms of a cultural text that questions other hegemonic global accounts of past and present history and memory. Using Stam’s terminology, Chadha’s film is therefore a transtextual and transartistic product which also combines a transectional approach to the narrative events.

In line with other academic and cultural analyses of the past events in the “memory boom” context of the last decades (Winter 2007), Chadha’s film aims at portraying *India’s Partition* from perspectives other than those which had been provided by the *official* dominant discourses on the events. The film, though, was not exempt from criticism. Chadha was accused of portraying a negative view of Muslims while favouring not only the portrayal of Hindus but also the Viceroy himself (Bhutto 2017). She was also criticized for historical inaccuracies, basing her interpretation of the causes of Partition on unreliable resources (Jack 2017, Matthews 2017). Cinematically speaking, her film was accused of sweetening the portrayal of such cruel events as well as trying to include too many storylines in a single film, leading to a superficial portrayal of characters and events (Mullen 2017, Rees 2017). Chadha responded that she intended to make a film on reconciliation. In her own words,

I didn’t want to make a film that recreated violence [...] I knew I didn’t want to show women getting raped and jumping into wells, or Hindus and Muslims killing each other. I wanted to do something on these ordinary people that I had met, because it was so different from the political discourse.” (in Grant 2017)

An in-depth analysis of the film actually reveals the subversive potential of such intertwined narratives from the perspective of “ordinary people.”

The transtextual nature of the movie is revealed in its combination of generic conventions closely associated to well-known ‘national’ cinematographies with a transnational scope: the British heritage film and the ‘Bollywood’ romance and melodrama of Indian popular cinema.⁶ As a critical category within the umbrella term of “historical cinema,” “heritage films” are intrinsically associated with British

⁶ Indian popular cinema comprises a variety of local industries in the Indian Subcontinent, yet the term “Bollywood” became a cultural dominant popular signifier of Indian national cinema in Hindi, which acquired a transnational and Pan-Indian meaning (Mishra 2009). Aware of the contested meanings of the term Bollywood, I will use it in this essay to refer to mainstream popular Indian films with an often transnational distribution and scope. For a further discussion on the term, see Raminder and Sinha 2005, Gehlawat 2010.



national cinema (Higson 2011, Vidal 2012). The careful mise-en-scène, beautiful landscapes, historic sites and buildings provide visual pleasure for spectators willing to nostalgically hark back to Britain's times of wealth and splendour. In the 1980s, such visual pleasures were enhanced with the exotic landscapes of the Raj revival films. Hence, *Heat and Dust* (Ivory 1983), *Gandhi* (Attenborough 1982), *A Passage to India*, *The Jewel in the Crown* (ITV 1982) and *The Far Pavilions* (Channel Four 1984) were much criticized for fuelling imperialist nostalgia in the line of Thatcher's conservative discourses on British traditional values. British heritage was associated with whiteness and upper class standards, which were highlighted in the portrayal of aristocratic and upper middle-class lifestyle. Heritage and Raj films also contained critical views which contravened those hegemonic discourses and prevented spectators from indulging uncritically in the visual pleasures of the past. Tensions in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and national identity were portrayed as problematic not only in the past but also when read against the present time of their release (Oliete-Aldea 2015). These films, therefore, offered "reflexive nostalgia" which has been the case of subsequent (post)heritage productions in the 1990s and 2000s (Higson 2011; Vidal 2012).

Viceroy's House could be broadly labelled as historical drama. Nevertheless, the approach to the historical events is closer to the heritage tradition, as very much attention is paid to heritage sites and buildings with a careful mise-en-scène and detailed decoration. Another important feature in Chadha's film is the portrayal of an intimate, personal side of the main characters, in an attempt to present a "feminized" perspective and portrayal of what occurred inside the private sphere of such historical spaces while historical events unravelled in the outside (Vidal 2012; Oliete-Aldea 2015). The film thus follows the generic conventions of Raj Revival films in both providing visual pleasures of the past with India's exotic tinge yet offering also a critical revision of the events. The film starts with the epigraph: "History is written by the victors,"⁷ which renders account of the past with suspicion (0:01:06-0:01:09). Then, an establishing shot offers a panoramic view of the Viceroy's house at the background, indicating that the audience is invited to see Delhi in 1947. The camera moves inside the British quarters and shows the splendid gardens and magnificent rooms of the palace. We also see the Indian staff working in the house while supervised ultimately by their British masters, reproducing an ordered and hierarchical colonial structure. The camera pans over several portraits of former viceroys to stop in a picture of the last one (0:01:09-0:02:40). Heritage films have traditionally tended to focus on upper-class characters, yet Chadha's film introduces the working-class Indian characters first, since her intention was to provide an upstairs/downstairs perspective in the film, as in the *Upstairs, Downstairs* (ITV 1971-1975), *Gosford Park* (Altman 2001), or *Downton Abbey* (Fellowes, ITV 2010-2015) (Walsh 2018, Gant 2017; Aftab 2017).

The film makes an intertextual reference to the latter by having Hugh Bonneville, Lord Chapman in *Downton Abbey*, playing the role of the Viceroy,

⁷ Although attributed to Churchill, this expression actually has uncertain origins.



allowing audiences to sympathize with this character. Lord Mountbatten is first introduced as a family man, exchanging views with his wife Edwina (Gillian Anderson) and his daughter Pamela (Lily Travers) about his mission as India's last Viceroy while traveling to the country by plane (0:06:22-0:07:20). Edwina's knowledge and opinions reveal that she is an active woman who is going to help actively her husband in his mission, the film thus allowing female characters to have a prominent role in the narrative. After that, the movie shows the pompous arrival of the Viceroy in India, with long shots displaying the ceremony as Lord Mountbatten and his family are taken in their carriage to the palace, where they are received by the former Viceroy and all the staff (0:07:20-0:09:10). The scene is similar to those of the Raj films of the 1980s, particularly *A Passage to India* (Lean 1984), which also shows the ceremonies welcoming the arrival of the Viceroy.

In these first images, the main building stands at the centre of the screen and will remain at the centre of the narrative. The images of the palace highlight symmetry and order. Every detail has been taken care of, all is clean, bright and employees work efficiently. Raj revival films generally depict the order of the spaces inhabited by the British, to be contrasted with the chaos of Indian streets and neighbourhoods. The arrival of the Viceroy in *A Passage to India* reflects this clear-cut contrast. Also, Attenborough's *Gandhi* and Morahan and O'Brien's *The Jewel in the Crown* display the peaceful houses of white British citizens living in the Raj as opposed to the chaos in the streets when independence is granted to the colony. Chadha's film also provides that contrast between the first and last scenes of the feature. However, the narrative clearly blames the chaos of the denouement to the British *divide and rule* policy as well as their rush to leave the country due to political interests, rather than making Indian culture responsible for their lack of ability to self-rule. Chadha carefully portrays tolerance among the different ethnic and religious groups, which is clearly disturbed by the decisions taken by British and also Indian politicians. The spaces inhabited by Indians, such as the employees' quarters, are shown to be humble and poorer, but also clean and cosy, highlighting the peaceful conviviality of its residents –only to be altered by the tense conflict of the imminent partition.

Instead of portraying the historic events from the point of view of the British, as Raj revival productions did, Chadha balances the perspective by including that of the Indians, allowing them to have the status of main characters. Nonetheless, as in many other heritage productions, the building itself, which provides the title to the movie, is actually the main character. Similarly to *Brideshead Revisited* (ITV 1981), *Howards' End* (Ivory 1992), and *Downton Abbey*, the question of who is going to inherit and inhabit the house, together with the matter of its own survival, is the main issue at stake in the narratives. The plot usually revolves around the potential inheritors of a particular estate and the traditional values associated to it, which are often questioned in terms of gender and class. The buildings stand still while convulsive changes in history threaten their survival together with the traditional values attached to them. The transformation of the Viceroy's House into Rashtrapati Bhavan, home of the President of India, symbolically lies at the centre of the narrative. Ironically, the building itself was conceived as a hybrid construction. Designed by British architects to be home of the Viceroy in Delhi, its architecture blends



European neoclassical and Mughal styles both in the structure, inner decoration and its surrounding gardens. The building is not purely Indian, nor entirely British. Identity is shown to be contingent to political interests, which favour the creation and transformation of nations depending on the geopolitical interests of those who hold more power. National allegiances towards *India* as a nation are shifted into religious ones, which are, in turn, merged with a new form of nationalism with the creation of a newly shaped India, Pakistan, and, later on, Bangladesh.

As explained above, the film first shows the Indian employees within the palace's premises. It will be in subsequent scenes that Lord Mountbatten will arrive in, taking up his position as Viceroy and therefore his right to inhabit the place. His arrival, however, is portrayed as if he were actually stepping in a space which does not belong to him but to the vast amount of its workers. The camera shows his entrance to the building from above, taking the perspective of Aalia Noor (Huma Kureshi) –assistant to the Viceroy's daughter Pamela– who is standing in the upper galleries, together with other members of the staff (0:08:45-0:09:10). In spite of the hierarchy and power granted to the British, the high angle shot of the Viceroy from above surrounded by all the Indian staff is quite intimidating, rather questioning the entrance of the Viceroy to that space as an 'invasion.' This is particularly relevant in a (post)colonial context, since, according to Nirmal Puwar, spaces are not fixed but dynamic entities (2004). Colonial land was appropriated by the colonisers and the right to abode in certain spaces was suddenly forbidden to certain racialised and gendered identities. Puwar points out that it is not only a matter of the legal right to occupy a space, but also how certain individuals are perceived as "space invaders" in certain locations (2004). This scene, thus, represents the way British authorities are perceived as *invading* those spaces in British India which had hitherto been occupied by them and forbidden to Indians themselves.

This feeling is reinforced by a previous scene, which shows the arrival of Jeet Kumar (Manish Dayal) to the place as the new Viceroy's valet. He is guided through the rooms and corridors by his cousin; with the camera closer to him, he is shown to be integrated in the space. Jeet claims that he imagines England as this palace. His cousin replies that England is now ruined by the war, that is why the British can no longer afford to maintain an empire and are thus leaving India (0:03:13-0:03:40). This conversation is very telling, as it questions the idea of postcolonial *indebtedness*. According to Robert Stam, Eurocentric perspectives, understood in ideological rather than geographical terms, have constructed the Global North as creditor and the Global South as debtor, as if European/Western 'progress' were autonomous, disregarding the wealth and resources that came and still come from (formerly) colonized regions, namely the "Four Cheaps: labor, food, energy and raw materials" (7). The film thus questions the structures of power not only during the times of the Raj but also after its demise, since the very act of independence and partition is eventually revealed to work in the interests of the West/North.

The film shows the terrible consequences of 1947 Partition for the Indian –and soon-to-be Pakistani– population, namely those 'ordinary people' who suddenly realised that their own homes belonged to a country which was suddenly hostile to their religious beliefs. Paradoxically, instead of regaining the rights to



the land and resources which had been usurped by the colonial rule, many people found themselves displaced and evicted from their own houses. Symbolically, the images of refugees crossing the new national borders are combined with the absurd distribution of the Viceroy's House assets between the two countries, such as the volumes of the encyclopaedia, cutlery and a random distribution of the canon of British literature. By portraying the Viceroy's House change of occupier, the film actually depicts a massive eviction. The film devotes no scene to the Viceroy and his family abandoning the house, as their privileged position will never leave them homeless. In contrast, there are several shots of the Indian staff having to choose allegiances between India and Pakistan, many of them having to change residence forcefully and dangerously, without any specific point of arrival.

The image of an empty house and homeless people recalls some of the twenty-first century crises: the mortgage-economic crisis, leaving many people homeless, often affected by long-term unemployment and thus forming part of an underclass. It also brings to mind the refugee crisis seen on Italian or Spanish shores, with many migrants fleeing the terrible economic conditions and violence in their countries, just to find more violence in the borders which prevent their entrance. The film also connects the contingency of the *Partition crisis* with the twenty-first century multifaceted crisis: the vulnerability of people whose lives are suddenly affected by the decisions of those in power. The gap between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, which can be appreciated in 1947 India-Pakistan, is also patent 70 years afterwards, with the existence of a powerful transnational overclass and a vulnerable transnational precariat (Bauman 2007; Standing 2016). The scenes portraying British and Indian politicians arguing about the situation in their glamorous parties and ostentatious offices and rooms are contrasted with the poverty and violence lived by common people in the streets. A parallel situation could be established between these sequences and the cinema of the financial crisis, which portrayed bankers and politicians discussing about the dilemma of bailing out the banks in their luxurious skyscrapers while more and more people became unemployed and homeless. Eviction, precarity and vulnerability have become recurrent tropes in the cinema of the New Millennium.⁸ This cinematic link in terms of narrative and imagery reveals not only postcolonial legacies but also the intersectionality of race, gender and class issues across time and space.

The aesthetic conventions of heritage cinema in Chadha's film include intertextual references to other Raj revival movies. Cinematic productions such as Attenborough's *Gandhi* and the series *The Jewel in the Crown* depicted a realist, documentary-style aesthetic –close to the British tradition of filmmaking– which included newsreel footage of the times combined with *fake* newsreels with the movie actors. Chadha makes use of the same techniques when referring to the historical

⁸ Examples of the contraposition of the privileged overclass and the precariat include financial crisis films, such as *Freefall* (Savage 2009), and austerity cinema with movies such as *I Daniel Blake* (Loach 2016). See Oliete-Aldea 2018.



events present in the film. Apart from that, the *transartistic* contraposition of Chadha's film and her documentary, *India's Partition: The Forgotten Story* (2017) intends to justify the events narrated in the film and therefore respond to the accusations of fake history and unreliability that the film got after its release. The film offers an interpretation on Partition which refers to a document elaborated by Winston Churchill as a plan on the part of the British to grant a territory to Jinnah so that India –and its soviet sympathies– could be weakened and access to a seaport with an ally state in the area could be granted. Even though it is true that the documentary fails to provide proof that this document actually existed, it nonetheless acknowledges the feasibility of that explanation. Rather than enlightening the spectator with an epiphany of hitherto hidden true events, both film and documentary leave the audience with questions which put to the test previous accounts of the past whose cinematic *truths* are taken for granted. Chadha, therefore, aims at portraying other *histories* which have not been written by the *victors*.

This re-writing of history from the margins not only considers a silenced and *marginal* perspective in terms of ethnicity and national identity, but also in terms of gender. Heritage and Raj Revival films offered a “domestic” and “feminized” view of history which contributed to the critical tone of such “reflexive nostalgia” (Oliete-Aldea, 2015). Chadha enhances the female perspective by giving a prominent role to Edwina Mountbatten, emphasizing her concern for implementing measures that intended to promote the conviviality and understanding among Britons and Indians. As opposed to her husband's focus on external appearance and ceremonies, she tries to give advice on practical matters and takes the initiative in inviting the wives of princes and politicians to their events and parties. As a character constructed in a film released within the context of the fourth-wave feminism, Edwina symbolically stands for a *feminized* vision of history and society which cares for the well-being of ordinary people and prioritises reconciliation and conviviality over political and individual interests. Her decision-making power, however, is limited to the private sphere, and she is shown to unwillingly support her husband's views on Partition and has to leave the room in which negotiations are taken by male politicians. Similarly, Aalia is portrayed as a strong and independent Muslim Indian woman, features that contradict the often represented stereotype of the submissive Oriental woman (Oliete-Aldea 2015). She is torn between her family duty and her individual choice of husband, yet it is the turbulence of 1947 Partition that makes her sacrifice her wishes for her father's safety. Becoming a victim of violence, she represents the suffering of women during Partition; nonetheless, she is also depicted as a survivor, being rescued by another woman and actively taking the microphone and shouting Jeet's name so that both of them can finally meet in the refugee camp.

The British restrained and realist mode of filmmaking of heritage cinema is combined with the generic conventions of fantasy and melodrama of Indian popular cinema, thus highlighting the artificiality of any filmic recreation of the past. The transnational mixture of generic conventions highlights the hybridity of Chadha's filmmaking style. The bright and warm colours of the scenes deviate from the realist shooting of British cinema, while the conventions of mainstream Indian movies are foregrounded with the melodramatic denouement. The troubled inter-religious



romantic relationship of the main characters and a daughter's duty to comply with an arranged marriage against her will are recurrent plot stories in Bollywood dramas.⁹ The irruption of the melodramatic conventions of Bollywood cinema thus undermines restrained British filmmaking style in favour of the screen portrayal of feelings and emotions. The importance of emotion derives from the concept *bhava-rasa* and is fundamental in Indian aesthetic theory.¹⁰ As Mishra explains:

Rasa as a theory of embodiment is based on connecting to an audience through evoking a collective emotion. It is a theory of communication that shows that human expressivity and subjectivity are shaped and shared in relationships with one another and to the material world. (2009: 215)

Emotions are connected to human subjectivity and spirituality and often expressed through music and dance. In classical Indian performing arts, the dramatist, through art, should convert an emotion (*bhava*) into *rasa*, which would transform the aesthetic experience of sensitive spectators. Ultimately, the experience of *rasa* requires empathy on the part of the spectator, who will transcend from a self-centred perception of the individual (Higgins 2007). The use of *rasa* as shared structures of emotion could be related to Raymond Williams "isomorphic structures of feeling," which, in transnational cinema, acquire a relevant status. According to Stam, "isomorphic structures of oppression and identification provoke affective bonds and link similar movements across borders" (149). The emotions arisen by the situations described in Chadha's film may not only appeal to victims of Partition in both the Indian Sub-continent and in diasporic communities around the globe, but may also recall the suffering of global audiences, which resonates in the present caused by policies of division: mass migrations and house evictions. As mentioned above, Chadha refused to depict the violence exerted on refugees trying to reach the other side of the newly created borders. The movie focuses, instead, on the emotions of pain and suffering felt by the main characters in their separation and final re-union to reach the spectators' compassion with a Muslim woman and a Hindu man, by sharing their pain collectively as part of a multicultural audience. The objective of the film is thus to utter those traumatic unspeakable silences by depicting situations that convey shared emotions by an eclectic audience.

Music and dance are essential elements in Indian popular cinema which contribute to express hidden or suppressed feelings and emotions. Chadha includes a dance sequence which hints at Bollywood cinema (0:24:46-0:29:15). In the staff quarters, people from different geographical and religious origins party together until there is a confrontation between Hindus and Muslims due to the heated socio-political situation. Characters are finally reconciled and both Aalia and Jeet dance together enjoying a brief moment of happiness that is soon going to come to an end.

⁹ *Veer-Zaara* (Chopra 2004) is a conspicuous example.

¹⁰ The origins of the concept can be traced back to Bharata's *Natyasastra*, a "manual" on technical knowledge about the performing arts (200-500 CE) (see Higgins 2007).



The party is embedded in a quotidian situation, expressing the spontaneous festivities of downstairs staff, as opposed to the formal parties of the British and upper-class Indians. The dance sequence therefore unifies cinematically both the British heritage and Bollywood traditions. On the one hand, it works as a way to convey *rasa* as happiness in aesthetic beauty, elevating spiritually the spectator beyond class, gender, race and religious divisions, with love as the ultimate expression of happiness in unity. It represents the fantasy of peaceful cohabitation and a Gandhian unifying vision of India. On the other hand, it celebrates freedom and natural cohabiting of people when released from social norms orchestrated by the British divide-and-rule policy in colonialism, which replicates the rigid class system in British society, too. While dance sequences of the upper classes show a choreographed rigidity of social norms, working class dance and music tends to be more spontaneous and enjoyable, a space when characters can be freed up from social constraints.¹¹

The dance sequence, therefore, epitomizes Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality:" "the ways in which the various axes of social stratification –class, gender, race, sexuality and so forth are interconnected and mutually impacting" (in Stam 139). According to Stam, a transnational approach could add a further dimension to the meanings these axes might represent as common transnational phenomena with their own local inflections. When taking into consideration the emotional attachment to the situations experienced by individuals and communities affected by such axes, minorities may identify transnationally with other groups due to their own affinities. In this sense, Chadha's film acquires a further dimension when analysed in the cultural conjuncture of the time of its release. Apart from sharing the specific historical collective trauma of Partition, the film also interpellates the contemporary transnational audience to share collective structures of feeling in the current postcolonial context of the film release.

Further emotions are expressed in the final scene (1:31:41-1:35:22). The intense, far-fetched ending sacrifices a realistic plot in favour of the symbolic union of the Hindu-Muslim couple amidst religious hatred. This bitter-sweet, weepy ending seems to provide an intertextual hint at Bollywood cinema yet, when read against the ending credits, it acquires a further meaning. The filmmaker portrays pictures of real people who suffered situations similar to those of the characters in the movie, only to unveil that one of those women was her own grandmother (1:35:42-1:36:32). This ending foregrounds the importance of individual and collective memory, which goes hand-in-hand with historical events. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the pain that has been silenced for decades, and the need to represent

¹¹ Examples of characters being freed up by dance can be found in *The Jewel in the Crown*, with the interethnic couple dancing together (Oliete-Aldea 2015: 185-186). More recently, *Downton Abbey* also offers a contraposition of characters finding their true expression of their identities and relationships in popular dance sequences as opposed to rigid upper class ballroom conventions. Other well-known examples are *Titanic* (Cameron 1997) in Hollywood and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Johar 2001) in Bollywood.



and acknowledge individual and collective traumas in order to be able to heal those wounds or, at least, to understand the traumatic scars of the present.

By combining different filmic traditions in a transnational film, Chadha creates a hybrid outcome which questions the authenticity of any screen recreation of the past in terms of telling the *truth* of historical events. As Hayden White states, any recreation of the past entails a selection and interpretation of the events, which will be encoded and decoded following literary or, in this case, cinematic codes (1990: 47-48). Memory, as well as history, acquires a conspicuous status, as it does not entail a mere recreation of the past but brings to the fore the importance of disclosing the feelings attached to remembrance. This is what the conventions of Bollywood melodrama add to the film: the importance of acknowledging the suffering of collective trauma which has not yet been overcome. As any *faithful* portrayal to historical events can be questioned, the filmmaker does manage to be faithful to her relatives' suffering by foregrounding the relevance of depicting and re-living the traumatic emotions experienced in the past so that they can be recognised and shared collectively by the audience.

Historian Yasmin Khan (2017) highlights the importance of understanding that Partition occurred in a complex socio-political conjuncture and that many documents which could explain its causes were lost or destroyed. As difficult as it is blaming any side for its outcome, what can be done is to analyse its consequences for all the parties involved. It is actually crucial to link the historical events with the memories of victims and survivors, as well as with the sociological accounts of the contemporary conjuncture. In Khan's words: "The rendering of Partition as a uniquely devastating event works to place it beyond the bounds of comparative accounts and, perhaps, to silence its echoes in contemporary global politics" (xxxiii). *Viceroy's House* is a film which tackles history and memory by establishing a dialogue between central and marginal accounts of the past. It depicts how the independence of a colony was transformed into a devastating crisis to favour the interests of a transnational overclass, symbolically protected in the magnificent palace. The rush in the decision-taking process and its disastrous consequences for ordinary people cannot but recall the contemporary conjuncture in which the film was released: the construction of real and metaphorical borders which leave a transnational precariat in highly vulnerable situations. As a diaspora filmmaker, Chadha has created a cinematic universe in which hybridity stands for the subversive potential of hope that may shake those dividing walls (Diego Sánchez 2015). *Viceroy's House* does not unveil hidden truths nor does it offer a faithful re-creation of hitherto distorted events. It just adds a new perspective which combines history and memory as well as different cinematic traditions in order to be faithful to the stories of ordinary people in a transnational and *transectional masala film*.

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VIOLENCE AND SILENCE:
KEN MCMULLEN'S *PARTITION*
AND GURINDER CHADHA'S *VICEROY'S HOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

The literary and cinematic representation of violence has always been problematic and has involved ethical imperatives and rational understanding of an event that often defies logical understanding. In this paper, I propose to deal with two films that directly engage with the political negotiations that took place concerning the Partition of India and the cartographic violence that ensued: Ken McMullen's *Partition* (2007) and Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017). The work compares the representations of the Partition in these two films to investigate whether the reparative or sentential aspect of cinema heal our memories or compromise with the truth to connect with the audience.

KEYWORDS: 1947, Partition of India, Ken McMullen, Gurinder Chadha.

VIOLENCIA Y SILENCIO:
PARTICIÓN, DE KEN MCMULLEN,
Y *EL ÚLTIMO VIRREY DE INDIA*, DE GURINDER CHADHA

RESUMEN

La representación literaria y cinematográfica de la violencia siempre ha sido problemática y ha implicado mandatos éticos y racionales sobre un evento histórico que muchas veces escapa a los límites del entendimiento humano. Este artículo estudia dos películas que analizan las negociaciones políticas que tuvieron lugar en la Partición de India y la violencia cartográfica que siguió: *Partition* (2007), de Ken McMullen, y *El último Virrey de India*, *Viceroy's House* (2017), de Gurinder Chadha. El trabajo compara las representaciones en los dos films para investigar si son reparadoras en cuanto a que sanan recuerdos o si oscurantizan la realidad de los eventos históricos para conectar con la audiencia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: 1947, partición de India, Ken McMullen, Gurinder Chadha.



Cinema and literature in their own ways reflect the psyche of a nation. In their own ways, they are different from historical records in recreating the emotional investment in the event. The Partition of India in 1947 left an indelible mark in the formation and progress of India as a nation-state. Freedom came with the caveat of the division of the subcontinent. Violence of an unprecedented scale marred the road to freedom. More than 1.8 million people died and many others were displaced by the Partition. The myth of a strong united India was shattered forever with an ensuing violence that led to the emergence of Pakistan and later to that of Bangladesh. The Partition was not just an isolated event or an act of violence with a definite resolution, rather it was an act that changed the lives of millions of people for generations to come. The Partition affected women more severely because, besides being killed, they were often raped and violated. The disruption and the disjuncture that it created had sprouted other myriad acts of violence in the forms of not only wars and riots, but even in that of a nuclear standoff. Since 1947, and even after all these years of independence, literature and cinema had found it difficult to cope with the violence that Partition entailed. The identity of India was negotiated in terms of this originary act of violence against the concept of nationhood. The imaginative leap that 'nationhood' demanded, and the 'thirst with destiny' that Nehru talked about during and after the Partition, had to undergo a complex partition of cultural memory as well. It is therefore interesting to look at how cinema as a medium would try to negotiate both the utopian and the disruptive aspects of the idea of nationalism whose future was inevitably mediated through the Partition of India.

The literary and cinematic representations of violence have always been problematic, and have involved ethical imperatives and rational understanding of an event that often defies logical explanation. One might argue whether there is any unbiased way of representing violence without falling into the trap of valorising it. There are political, cultural and social sides that one might take, and the process often occurs deliberately, and at other times unconsciously, in such a manner that our choices of representation are often marred with implicit biases. The emotive aspect of representation in terms of verbal and visual imageries, in literature and in cinema, recreates our past in more myriad ways than the representation of facts in historical discourse. The possibility of multiple stories interacting with each other, and with multiple perspectives, shows us the different sides of the story and sprouts in us the possibility of empathy. To grapple with the unspeakable violence of the Partition of the country has always been a challenge for literature and cinema alike.

In this paper, I propose to deal with two films that directly engage with the political negotiations that took place concerning the Partition of India and the cartographic violence that ensued: Ken McMullen and Tariq Ali's 2007 film *Partition* and Gurinder Chadha's 2017 film *Viceroy's House* (It was named *Partition: 1947* in the Indian release). These two films represent the politics of the final round-table negotiations and I attempt to compare the representation of violence in them as opposed to other literary and cinematic representations of Partition, such as the short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto or films such as Govind Nihalini's *Tamas* (1988). The violence of Partition has in a sense challenged the boundaries between the community and the nation. It was a violence that was not only inflicted on the



body of the nation-state, but also on its smallest constituent, that is, the exiguous physical human body. My paper proposes to investigate whether the reparative or sentential aspect of cinema heal our memories or does cinema compromise with the truth to achieve an empathetic understanding of this event.

So, is cinema on the theme of the Partition all about mourning and loss? Or, is it in some sense reparative and therapeutic, hopefully looking forward to a future more posited in rebuilding a new cultural imagination where a willed cultural amnesia is the way forward? Cinema about the Partition can also be about the representation of an event that is utterly inexplicable. The desire to know and understand the truth in its multiple dimensions has always been the purpose of storytelling, even if the truth is bitter and laced with unspeakable violence. Storytelling also satisfies our urge towards epistemophilia. Visual storytelling, as in films, also hankers towards this desire to know the truth. There are many films on Partition, which, unlike nationalist historiography, seeks to continuously deal with the long-lasting lacerations that Partition has inflicted on the individual and the cultural psyche of the nation. For an individual, the term Partition has served as a borderline not only between two nations but also between the three metaphorical spaces: the things that we have left or lost, the things we might have gained and the things we could have achieved, if the Partition never happened. Cinema as a medium can give permanence to the contingent nature of human experience and give motion to our memories; the past is thereby resuscitated from the dead, evoked with all our paradigms of reality and fantasy, so that we can continuously and variously interact with it in the process of understanding it. The resuscitation of a traumatic event, the re-enactment of it, is a way of not only negotiating with it, but it is as if the reel life will lead us to continue with our real life. A mythical metonymic re-enactment of the past is also a way of unencumbering the lack of, the loss of the sacred space that is always/already deeply etched in our unconscious.

Of the many movies that describe Partition, Gurinder Chadha's film directly deals with the politics in the Viceroy's house from just before the arrival of Lord Mountbatten till the transfer of power leading to India's independence, and more elaborately engage with the negotiations that took place leading to the Partition of India. John Hutnyk rightly points out in his essay "Screen Violence and Partition" that this film can be classified in the genre of "Raj revisionist films" that exudes of Raj nostalgia (611). These films portray an alternative history to the mainstream historiography, and to do so they take recourse to works of history that have tried to project an alternative version of the negotiations that led to the Partition of India. With such representations, there is always a possibility of reducing the nuances and complexities of history, especially so when one is attempting to lay down the background politics that led to events such as the freedom of India, the Partition of India and the birth of two nation-states which eventually led to a million people being killed and more than ten million people being displaced from the land where they were born. Freedom, therefore, entailed large scale violence not against the colonial power, but rather against each other: it played out in the name of religion. It is, therefore, extremely important to look at the politics of such a representation and how they etch in the mind of the viewers a history that is simplistic and reductive.



Some of the important literary works on the theme of the Partition of India include Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories, Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1989) or Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988). Some of the texts in Indian languages that also deal with Partition include *Partitions* by Kamaleshwar (2000), *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni (1974), *Bakultala P.L.Camp* (2012) by Narayan Sanyal's or *The River Churning* (1968) by Jyotirmayī Debī. Jyotirmayī Debī's novel foregrounds, for example, the perspective of women who have been victims of Partition. *Tamas*, which deals with the communal tension and strife in a district town in West Punjab before the Partition in 1946, was later adapted to a television film by Govind Nihalini. It is extremely difficult to address the issue of violence directly without taking sides, or the possibility of a true and nuanced representation of whatever has happened is an extremely difficult, if not an impossible, act. Literature, therefore, seeks to primarily concentrate on stories usually narrated from the perspective of the victim rather than addressing the larger, rather incomprehensible, political negotiations that were taking place. These stories have tried to scale the impossibility of understanding such big historical events microscopically from the point of view of the individual.

In terms of cinematographic representation, there have also been several attempts to represent and understand the Partition. We are reminded immediately of Ritwik Ghatak's trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1962). Ritwik Ghatak deals with the impact of Partition on displaced individuals, on the refugees struggling to survive and the insecurities that displacement entailed after being uprooted from one's own place. Like Manto, Ghatak could not come to terms with the Partition of the country and was obsessed with it throughout his life. Ghatak's association with the Indian People Theatre Association, which was a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, had a tremendous influence on him, and so he always felt that film was a vehicle to uphold and address social issues. The trilogy was also a part of this endeavour. Ghatak's films have an endearing appeal because of the nuanced portrayal of the suffering of women, the insecurities faced by the refugees and caste problems, and his portrayal of strong women characters, such as Nita, Anasuya and Seeta, whose struggle and suffering is often the main focus of the story, reflects the trauma of cultural divide, displacement and Partition.

Gurinder Chadha's film is different because it focuses on the political negotiations that led to the Partition of India. The movie attempts to portray a different understanding of history by drawing attention to the Viceroy's House, where Lord Mountbatten and his family arrived to expedite the process of the transfer of power. The other strand of the narrative is the love story of Jeet and Aaliya, both of whom work in the Viceroy's house and are privy to the unfolding of greater historical events where their individual lives get entangled. Gurinder Chadha had herself claimed that in writing the script of the film she had relied on Narendra Singh Sarila's book *The Shadow of the Great Game* (2005), which seeks to attempt to provide a different interpretation of the greater motives of the British Parliament in shaping the course of the history of the Indian subcontinent: "Studying the archives, Chadha came across confidential government documents that support a revisionist view of the lead-up to Indian independence" (Thorpe np).



The film seems to rely too much on Sarila's book and the theory of the Great Game.¹ In response to Fatima Bhutto's concern, Chadha had pointed out that she was more interested in portraying the emotional content: "I wanted to show the emotional impact, not the fighting. My maternal grandmother came to live with us in the 1970s and she was still totally traumatised. When she sat with us to watch telly she would be disturbed by conflict of any kind. We laughed at her, but she would say, 'You don't know what happened to us!'" (qtd Thorpe np). Gurinder Chadha's film begins with a scene in the Viceroy's house where the Indian workers are cleaning, dusting and wiping the Viceroy's palace in preparation for the arrival of the last Viceroy Lord Mountbatten. When one is dealing with a theme that has tremendous historical relevance and where the sensitivity of so many people can be disturbed, and one has to get the act together in not more than three hours, such a scene seems to be superfluous in keeping with the gravity of the situation. It portrays the Indians in a servile light and does not add to the storyline of the film. Jeet Kumar is the recruit to the Viceroy's house, and he immediately praises Lord Mountbatten for freeing Burma. He is in the service of Mountbatten as he expects him to free India from colonial rule. Fatima Bhutto is critical of the film and points out that "[t]he empire and its descendants have their fingerprints all over this story." (np) She's concerned that "[t]he benevolence of the Mountbattens and, by association, the British Raj is laced throughout Chadha's film." Here there are no freedom fighters, that is, their characters are never brought into focus or portrayed at length, nor is there any footage/discussion of the events of the effect of the non-violent struggle of Gandhi, or other efforts made by the great Indian freedom fighters.

The historical background is empty, the film begins in a sort of vacuum and what is important here is the exotic spectacle of the dressing up of the Viceroy's house and the Indian housekeepers preparing the stage for it. Aaliya is here assigned to take care of Pamela who happens to be Mountbatten's daughter. Aaliya and Jeet seem to know each other before they have come to work in the Viceroy's house. Jeet had helped Aaliya's father when he was in jail and they have since then fallen in love with each other. As they meet each other again in the Viceroy's house, the director, it seems, is too bent on portraying a strict decorum in how men and women might meet and talk to each other. So the film also triggers the quintessential theme of a love story in times of war. It reminds us of the portrayal of Tridib and May in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), where the physical love story of both the characters is brought to an end, as Tridib dies in Dhaka in the riots trying to protect his grandfather. Tridib's memory lives on and interacts with the narrator, as his growing up is shaped by memory and as he seeks, along with the other characters, to understand the reason behind Tridib's death. The Partition

¹ In this context the Great Game implied that Great Britain wanted to create a buffer state between the British and the Russian empire and the creation of a supportive state like Pakistan would provide them secure access to Afghanistan, Central and South Asia and the oil trade. They believed that the Congress with socialist leanings and an United India would not go against the Soviet Union.



and the riots thereafter continuously hover in the background as individuals make sense of their historical destiny. Not so in Chaddha's film: the lovers Jeet and Aaliya are united in extraordinary circumstances. A small act of reparation that the film concedes besides its love for the Mountbattens.

Another important trope of Chadha's film is the space of the kitchen which acts as a mini theatre where the tremors of the impact of the larger political policies are played out on a miniature scale. Here we get to know the reactions of the ordinary people and their understanding of the situation. We also find that the Hindu and the Muslim workers are not at peace with each other and are made to work together by the authority of the British masters. This thread is very fragile, as the threat of Partition looms large over the apparent peace that is maintained in the Viceroy's house.

Mountbatten is shown in a sympathetic light, as his family is immediately critical of the policies of Churchill and talks about the power of Gandhi challenging the Empire. His wife and daughter are aware of the greatness of the job at hand. The superfluity of the scene of Lord Mountbatten dressing up in his Viceroy's robes again seems to distract the audience. The purpose of the scene remains ambiguous as to whether the scene seeks to reinforce the servility of the Indians, or the superiority of the dressing sense of Mountbatten, or, for that matter, the sense of time that will become important to the policies of Mountbatten, or, is it that the 'dressing up' is in the process of becoming an important symbol in the film. Lord Mountbatten is immediately warned by Lady Mountbatten that the job at hand is not an easy one and, she states, "Let's not make a mess of it" (00:07:35-00:07:37). Mountbatten slowly becomes aware of the enormity of the task, the 'Operation Madhouse', that has been assigned to him. It seems that the film looks at history from the perspective of the Mountbattens, unlike other films based on the Partition such as *Tamas*, where the perspective is not that of the victors, but of the victim.

As I have earlier discussed, there are a lot of scenes that seem to me to be frivolous and undermine the seriousness of the issues that have been dealt with. One of the scene displays how food is provided for the pet dog, and the manner in which it is done provides a sort of comic relief not only at the cost of the servility of the Indians, but also speaks of the grandiloquence of the affairs at the Viceroy's house (00:12:05-00:12:35). Lady Mountbatten and her companion themselves guzzle on the food, while the Indian servants are bemused by the impropriety of the act. Similarly when projecting Gandhi for the first time what strikes out is his interest in the curd made of goat milk, which he is prepared to share with the Mountbattens (00:44:00-00:46:03). Amidst all these, we are constantly reminded of the rancour taking place in the background as the Hindu and the Muslim workers are prepared to fight with each other at the earliest opportunity.

The Mountbattens are projected in a very sympathetic light, more as a victim of the grand designs of the British Parliament rather than as the ones who are primarily responsible for carrying out the Partition of India. The discord between the Hindus and the Muslims seems to compel Mountbatten to bring the timeline forward so that the British would not be held responsible for the mismanagement. Aaliya and Jeet, the two Indian protagonists, bestow their faith on the Mountbattens. Pug



extolls Mountbatten's qualities as the one who could "charm a vulture off a corpse" (00:21:12-00:21:16) and ironically the film also proceeds in a similar direction, charming the reader away from history. Lady Mountbatten is always projected as the one who is sympathetic to the Indian cause. She is the one who is continuously pressing on Mountbatten not to divide India. She also seeks to bring out some reforms in the Viceroy's house by inviting Indian guests, especially Indian women; she rushes off to the kitchen to praise the food made by the Indian cooks. She can also be found busy supervising the relief work (01:33:52-01:34:05), whereas Nehru appears helpless, and in fact gets slapped for what he and his fellow politicians have done to the country (01:34:24-01:35:59).

The British policy of *divide-et-impera* is not given much focus in the film, although the politicians harp on the policies of Britain in dividing the Hindus and the Muslims of the country. Chadha displays, instead, the immediacy of what happens in the kitchen, in the Viceroy's house and the wedding party takes over. Radcliff and Mountbatten are all concerned with the "fairness of the thing" (01:16:42-01:18:53). Radcliff reveals to Mountbatten, the policy document given to him by Lord Ismay that contained the grand designs of the Parliament in partitioning India and their interest to preserve the balance of power with regard to their opposition to the Soviet Union and to maintain an advantageous position in the oil trade (01:20:55-01:22:15). The plan, Lord Mountbatten realises, is a foregone conclusion, drawn almost two years ago in a policy document by Winston Churchill (01:24:02-01:26:34). Like Nehru, Jinnah and Gandhi, Mountbatten too has been played to carry out the larger interests of the British empire. Mountbatten's romanticised personal life and his concerns for India as is projected in the film seems to absolve him of any wrongdoing or partitioning the country. The absurdity of the Partition is revealed in the way the things of the Viceroy's house is distributed among the two countries; and the focus on the issue that both sides meticulously are clamouring for the same in the 80-20 ratio of dividing the assets and liabilities between India and Pakistan seems to blame the national leaders instead of the British in propagating such an absurd plan.

Films can serve as an important site for the dissemination of information, ideas, projections to a huge audience, more so when one is dealing with a historical event that has tremendous ramification for the past and the future. The visual medium in the present age reaches a much larger viewership than the written medium. A historical event that had curved up the fortunes of two nations should have been dealt with much greater sensitivity and historical accuracy. Gurinder Chadha's allegiances in making this film, therefore, needs to be questioned. Chadha positions the viewer within a medley of situations amidst an exotic spectacle, a romance somewhat fulfilled, the "maa-baap" (literally mother and father, here implying the role of the colonizer as a guardian) like concern of the Mountbatten family and the violence in a partitioned country. In Chadha's film, the sympathies seem misplaced, and although the violence of the partition is not directly projected, there is a violence that lurks in the background, the violence to History. Chadha rather focuses on the exotic and the spectacular and the film can be classified to be part of the genre of romance. It is in direct contrast to what we find in Ken McMullen's film where the partitioned spaces demands a sort of fragmentary narrative.



The film *Partition* (1987) directed by Ken McMullen was made exactly after forty years of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. The film, commissioned by Channel 4, is a very complex and nuanced artistic adaptation of Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" (2008a: 9-15). Saadat Hasan Manto is one of the greatest short story writers of the Indian subcontinent who wrote in Urdu and who himself suffered the trauma of migration, as he had to leave Mumbai and move to Lahore in Pakistan. His stories about the Partition are very passionate, direct and truthful, and reveal the trauma of Partition. In one of the stories of Manto, "Colder than Ice" (16-20), we find the protagonist Ishwar Singh inhabiting both the spaces of the subject and the object of violence. The spaces in Manto's stories dissolve as the familiar world has broken apart. In "Khol Do" (2008b), the violence of Partition seems to have erased the space between the dead and the living, as Sakina's corpse unties her salwar. As in "Toba Tek Singh," we find that in the madness of violence, familiar boundaries of spaces have been disrupted. Ken McMullen's adaptation also utilises the idea of disruption of familiar spaces and the sanity/insanity divide, as is found in many of Manto's short stories. The film's script, which adapts "Toba Tek Singh," was written by Tariq Ali, who himself is an activist, journalist, historian and has authored many books. The film was produced within ten days, and it is a multi-layered and complex film dealing with the handover of the power by the British to the Indians and the negotiations and exploration of the reasons behind the Partition of India.

The film is not a linear historical exploration of the events that led to the Partition, rather it is a symbolic representation of the motives behind the Partition of India. It is never easy to adapt a five-page short story and transform it into a film: what Ken McMullen has done is not just adapt the short story to a film, but explore the several dimensions of the short story and allow it to mediate our understanding of the traumatic event. The film, therefore, occupies two different spaces: one is the map room where the civil servants discuss and argue about the division of the country, and the other is an asylum where the inmates are concerned with the Partition and their location in that indeterminate space between the two new political borders that were being drawn. The two spaces, however, spill into one another producing a rich texture of meanings. These are two large rooms, the asylum is bigger than the map room and is characterized by a tree at the centre. The tree extends to several dark corners, spaces which have been magnificently utilized in the film. The map room, on the other hand, is characterized by the large maps of India and the ceiling fans looming large over the head of the characters, a reminder of the heat outside of the room. The major actors in the map room drama, such as Sayeed Jaffrey and Roshan Seth, play different characters in both the stages and this parallelism subtly allows the metaphor of sanity and insanity to spread its wings over the entire film.

The intertextuality in the characters that these actors play in historical films, the repository that they have created by acting in films related to the Raj, also resonate in the viewer's mind as to the subtle layers of meaning that are created from the filmic 'textual' field. In this context, Graham Allen states that "reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which



exists between a text and all other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations” (2-3). Here, ‘reading’ can as well be replaced by ‘viewing’. I am immediately reminded that Roshan Seth was Jawaharlal Nehru in Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) released just five years before this film. Roshan Seth also played the role of Nehru in the 53-episode TV series by Doordarshan, *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988). The series was based on Jawaharlal Nehru’s book *The Discovery of India* (1946) which explores almost five thousand years of Indian history finally leading to the independence from the British. The series was aired just a year after the film *Partition* was released. In the public imagination, Roshan Seth is etched as Nehru and such resonances create and generates in the readers’ mind a subtle play of symbolism. Saeed Jaffrey’s family also suffered the pangs of Partition and many of his relatives migrated to Pakistan. Saeed Jaffrey played Sardar Patel in *Gandhi* and the Nawab of Meerut in *The Jewel in the Crown*, a British television serial in 1984 which represented the final days of the Raj based on Paul Scott’s Raj Quartet novels.

Zohra Sehgal who plays a very significant choric role in the movie *Partition*, that of Everywoman, also played the role of an Anglo-Indian lady, Lady Lili Chatterjee in *The Jewel in the Crown*. The resonances of the several characters that these actors have played in films often dealing with the Indian independence, in terms of similarities and dissimilarities, creates a sort of symbolic continuity across films. Zohra Sehgal is privy to both the stages as she is the Everywoman who observes and comments on the goings-on of both stages. She carries on incessantly with her acts of cleansing, sweeping, dusting and wiping: despite it the mirror will forever break. It reminds us of Lady Macbeth washing her hands to remove the blood of Duncan (Shakespeare 139). No act of cleansing will ever be able to wipe the violence of Partition.

In the opening scene (00:01:14-00:3:14), Zohra Sehgal plays the role of Everywoman sweeping the courtyard of the asylum and seen through a veil. She removes it after two minutes giving us a glimpse of the world that lies, beyond the gates of history or even normalcy, as we peep into a world that is often beyond our comprehension. Her face is that of one who has endured a lot of suffering and in that process has gained empathy: she is the chorus of the earlier plays grown wiser with age and observation. It is through her eyes and narration that we see and seek to comprehend whatever is happening behind the veil. She also wipes the mirror (00:00:51-00:01:14). McMullen’s use of the mirror is rich and dense. Beyond these two spaces lies the contemporary newsreel that intervenes with the continuity of the spaces and reminds us of what was happening in the outside world.

The director does not take recourse to the portrayal of violence, but rather focusses on the intensity of emotions. In the background, we can hear the voice of Nehru and his famous speech after India achieved freedom from the colonial yoke, while in the foreground we have the mutterings of Toba Tek Singh, and amidst most of his nonsensical utterings, we can hear the words ‘partition’ and ‘retribution’ (00:03:50-00:04:30). The English has failed in the role of ‘Maa Baap,’ the colonial parent, and has left India in tatters. The monochromatic opening scene of the mental asylum is then replaced by the vividness of the red colour with Leonie Mellinger



seated at a grand piano and wondering about the “million British graves in India” (00:05:14-00:05:34). Her words, “who will look after them now” are ironic, when considered from the perspective of the Indians (00:05:14-00:05:34). The image of John Shrapnel, who plays the role of the General,² fills up the map room. He appears perplexed, confounded and despairing over the situation and says that in the given situation the British could not have continued to hold on to power. The reflections in the mirror take on a symbolic dimension as it is through them that we seek to penetrate the soul. In an interview, McMullen talks about his use of mirrors: “The mirrors extend the whole plane of action in Partition, doubling and then quadrupling the spatial possibilities. Furthermore the mirror, as Plato says, is the way the ‘soul’ identifies its true self [...] in the case of John Shrapnel’s character, it allows the articulation of deep misgivings about imperial policy.” (np).

The inmates are finding it difficult to understand what and where Pakistan is. Saeed Jaffrey, in the garb of the inmate, comments “Pakistan is a place in India where they make cut throat razors” (00:09:13-00:10:01). Zohra Sehgal’s whispering voice takes over and suggests that the apparent calm prevailing in the asylum should not deceive us, as the inmates here are worried about the displacement that may be caused due to Partition (00:10:09-00:10:50). We are made aware that Toba Tek Singh had once expressed the wish that he wants to be buried in the ancestral village. The inmates are clueless about the situation (00:09:10-00:13:01). The scene moves from one space to the other, from monochrome to colour, but in both the spaces we find that there is a general sense of despair and incomprehension. The character performed by Sehgal incessantly goes on with her wiping outside the door of the map room and observes “Even they don’t understand what they have done.” (00:15:38-00:16:31), which seems almost to have a Biblical echo: “forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). We also get to know from her that some English officers have relented to stay on for another six months to ease the transfer of power (00:15:38-00:17:30).

Even in the map room, where the civil servants are discussing the transfer of power and the Partition of India, the division of assets and liabilities are given due importance, and that is when the pressing issue of the ‘lunatics’³ creeps up (00:17:31-00:19:23). The discussion that follows about them have a tinge of absurdity and that carries over the symbolism of madness to the entire film. The civil servant observes that “[t]heir [the mentally challenged] minds have escaped” (00:20:13-00:21:15).

² He could as well be a civil servant representing the British. I prefer to call him the General as he is often seen in a military uniform and is a figure of authority. Ken McMullen doesn’t name his characters which further plays on the subtle symbolism of sanity. They could be civil servants, diplomats or even politicians. While describing the different events that take place in this film I have taken recourse to the name of the actors.

³ The film uses the term ‘lunatic,’ ‘lunies’ and ‘lunatic asylum’ to describe the mentally challenged inmates and the mental asylum. The same can also be found in the translated text of ‘Toba Tek Singh’ (2008a, 9). As these terms might seem offensive, I will hereafter use the terms ‘inmates,’ ‘mentally challenged person’ and ‘mental asylum.’



They get angry when people see them from the outside of the gates of the asylum. In this context, Roshan Seth observes, “[s]o one must see and not be seen” (00:20:13-00:21:15) and equates the role of the hidden spectator to how the British saw us: “India was somewhere outside, that was their power” (00:20:13-00:21:15). Saeed Jaffrey, meditating on the same issues, talks about the architecture of England: that it is built like this and observes “an architecture that allowed those inside to be under constant observation” (00:20:13-00:21:15). The meditation on the mentally challenged leads them to discussions on how the British had so long been able to maintain their power over India.

The inmates in the asylum are confused with the space that they are now inhabiting, whether it is in Pakistan or India. An inmate, almost naked, crawling and dragging himself in the ground is playing God. Toba asks him whether Toba Tek Singh is in India or Pakistan, to which God replies “Neither in India nor in Pakistan” (00:25:39-00:27:46). This is ironical in the sense that Toba will ultimately die in the no man’s land on the border of India and Pakistan. The discussion further leads to the connection between the two spaces, as “God” here says “I have received a delegation of ship, goats and donkeys. They want to have a special round table discussion” (00:25:39-00:27:46), probably a telling commentary of what was happening in the map room.

We also come to know that for the last sixteen years Toba’s daughter has visited him in the asylum. She has now come to say goodbye to her father with a heavy heart as their family will migrate to India leaving forever their ancestral village. This poignant scene is symbolic of the millions of people being uprooted from their place of birth and thereby being robbed of their identity. In India it is this rootedness to ancestral place which provides continuity and defines them. The politicians, the civil servants and their colonial power had managed to dislodge the people of India.

The film also touches upon the mutiny of the Connaught Rangers (1920), which links the politics of Britain regarding the Partition of India to a much larger global perspective and Britain’s greater imperial designs. Dally’s reburial in Ireland also stirred up public interest in Ireland. By touching on the mutiny of Connaught rangers, the film relates the partition of Ireland of 1921 and the partition of India to the divide-and-rule policies of a retreating empire, who by hook or by crook wanted to maintain its place in the world. By referring to the Connaught rangers, the film forges links with issues of global interest and thus expands and interconnects the different strands of history related to the Partition. The trains, which were a proud symbol of British imperialism, had metamorphosed to dumb spectators and carriers of Death, and it can be argued that the political trajectory of the last days of the British in India was in a similar vein. Roshan Seth rightly points out that “[w]ar has drained your economy and your will to power” (00:55:28-00:55:47). The only safeguard during the Partition riots was the colour of the skin and ironically it was the whites that were spared. Johnny Boy in the asylum has gone mad driving the trains and witnessing the massacres that happened on the trains. Zohra comments, “for six months his trains became like moving graveyards” (00:35:55-00:37:49).



The film pivots around a brilliant ten-minute shot in the asylum where Sayeed Jaffrey rants out the most important speech in the movie: “What have you done to my world! For six months, quietly, I have been listening to your crimes [...] What have you done to my world? Bastards, criminals, traitors and butchers! What have you done to my world! Even the monsoon this year is evil. It is raining red” (00:37:49-00:39:35). The speech is followed by contemporary reels of people lying dead in the streets, people carrying dead bodies and fire blazing the houses, as Zohra seems to open the gates of the asylum. The scene is poignant in its lyrical intensity and that a mentally challenged person, the outsider, has to render such a speech, plays on the idea of sanity. The theatricality of the speech brings out the sense of utter destruction that has ushered in. It embodies the fear that the world which one inhabited will never be the same again.

As in Chadha’s film, this film also comments on the larger imperial policies of Britain. The theory that was mentioned in Chadha’s film, based on Sarila’s book, was that India was partitioned keeping in mind larger political interests of Great Britain related to its opposition to Russia, and it is also suggested here. Saeed Jaffrey, while playing the role of one of the civil servant in McMullen’s film, is seen talking to the General and suggesting that one of the causes of the Partition could be to create “[a] totally hundred per cent reliable state on the edges of the Soviet Union” (00:40:20-00:41:12). The two scenes, where one to one conversion takes place between the General and the two civil servants, Roshan Seth and Saeed Jaffrey, separately are meditations on the causes of Partition and are reminders of McMullen’s intended title of the film, which was *Ten Meditations on Partition* (McMullen).

Like the reference to the Connaught Rangers, the film also refers to the mutiny of the Royal Indian navy, that is, the insurrection of the Royal Indian Navy against the British Government in India in 1946. The revolt had initially sparked off with protests against food and living conditions in the navy, and it soon spread to different corners of the country taking on a singular nature. The major politicians such as Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel and Jinnah, asked the leaders to call off the strike. The mutiny could not garner political support from the Indian politicians and was, therefore, quelled. The stories of the INA and its leader Subhas Chandra Bose inspired the leaders of the mutiny. There were several mutinies in the Indian Navy as well as in the Indian Air Force since 1943. In the film, Madan Lal appears as a naval recruit and he is depressed at the failure of the mutiny and the lack of political support. In the General’s conversation with Roshan Seth, the civil servant, the latter meditates about the nature of the British rule. He comments that “for hundred years the British held a veil between us and power” (01:01:56-01:02:27). The film uses many symbols to unfold the complexity of meaning, and the veil and mirror help us are in our understanding of the events of Partition.

In another important scene the space of the civil servants spills over to the space of the inmates, Roshan Seth in a long shot walks from the map room to the asylum and we can hear the sounds of the train and the rain in the background (01:02:02-01:07:25). The scene emphasises the continuity of both the spaces and it becomes more and more unclear as to who are the ones who are actually mentally challenged. The line between sanity and insanity thus becomes blurred. The inmates



are not willing to board the van that has come to take them away (1:11:39-01:13:18). They run around the vehicle and try desperately to avoid it. The pathos of the scene is relieved by the resistance that these inmates offer. It is the 30th of August, 1947, and the transfer of the inmates is going to take place. At the same time, it is raining heavily, and we observe the footage of the British leaving India and boarding the ship. In a most poignant scene, Toba Tek Singh refuses to cross the border and in the process falls down and dies in the no man's land between India and Pakistan (01:13:8-01:15:13). The film ends poetically with Sehgal greatly grieved, wiping the mirror and reciting in Hindi the poem, "What is broken is broken" ("Shishon ka masiha koi nahin") by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, as the mirror finally breaks down (01:15:27-01:16:28). The reference to Faiz is very pertinent, as Faiz himself was disillusioned by the Partition and foresaw it as a "poisoned chalice" (Hashmi). It also reminds us of his poem, "Dawn of Freedom" (123).

Both Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* and Ken McMullen's *Partition* confront the politics of the time. *Viceroy's House* focusses more on the position of Lord Mountbatten, Jinnah and Nehru concerning the Partition of India. Chadha's film is primarily a commercial endeavour, whose purpose it seems is to exonerate the Viceroy by focusing on his personal life and charisma. Chadha's representation silences the complexities of history. It is a film that is extravagant in the use of location and exotic in nature and follows the conventional formula of a love story and its portrayal of history requires at the end the suffering of Chadha's own family to provide a first-hand authentication and legitimacy to the story. Ken McMullen's *Partition* adopts an artful approach to cinema, extremely nuanced in its portrayal of the Partition with variegated shades of meaning: not only is it a faithful adaptation of Saadat Hassan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" but it is an interpretation of it as well. The empathy in Chadha's film seems to lie more with the Mountbatten family, whereas in McMullen's film the sensitivity and responsiveness is embodied in the character of Everywoman. She is the ancient storyteller who observes everything in the light of empathy, insignificant and helpless to change the course of history, but lives to tell the tale.

The Partition of India has been a violent blow to the idea of the possibility of convergences between the idea of nation and the idea of the community. The continuity of the partitioned spaces will seek to disrupt social and political life in the subcontinent as was evidenced in the 1964 riots in Bangladesh, the Delhi riots in 1984 as well as in other acts of terrorism and in continuous challenges to the borders. In both films, violence is lurking in the background, not directly portrayed, but ominously present in its absence. The shadow lines of Partition have led to a perpetual cartographic instability in the subcontinent. Cinema in its own way has sought to unveil the silence that has followed the violence, to understand the violence, to confront it, even if it is with a sort of lyrical pessimism. Cinema about Partition can often be reparative, for it can fill up the gaps in the official history, rise above nationalist or even colonialist triumphalism, it can also be reductive and silencing, playing with the truth and the memories of the viewers. How does cinema articulate the incomprehensible in terms of a narrative? The question remains whether we confront head on with the violence that was the Partition or leave it behind and



bury it as an aberration. We are reminded of Krishna Sobti, a writer and a refugee of Partition, who once said that Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember (qtd Butalia 357).

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THE MAKING OF THE FILM *BRIDGE* (2016): THE ALCHEMIC PROCESS OF TRANSFORMING SELF AND SOCIETY

Amit R. Biswas

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ABSTRACT

The author and director of the film *Bridge* (2016), Amit R. Biswas, reflects on the process of film-making, using strategies that deal with self (and, therefore, social) transformation through art. In a sort of inner confession monologue, he delves not only into the more anecdotal part of the logistics and economic tour-de-force problems that producing a film involve; but also, and more interestingly, in the causes, nuances, and psychological details that are contained in the plot. Seen as a process of catharsis and posterior anagnorisis, the film unveils the subtle influences that underlie human contact, the transformation of the human psyche by means of compassionate attitudes, and the mutual redemption suffered by the seeming victim and his apparent saviour, in a sort of alchemic metempsychosis released by mutual understanding and empathy.

KEYWORDS: Amit R. Biswas, *Bridge* (2016), Filmmaking Process, Alchemic Transformation.

EL PROCESO DE CREACIÓN DE LA PELÍCULA *BRIDGE* (2016): EL PROCESO ALQUÍMICO DE TRANSFORMARSE INDIVIDUAL Y SOCIALMENTE

RESUMEN

El autor y director de la película *Bridge* (2016), Amit R. Biswas, reflexiona sobre el proceso de creación y producción cinematográficas, utilizando para ello estrategias que tienen que ver con la transformación del yo (y, por ende, de la sociedad) a través del arte. En una suerte de monólogo-confesión interior, el director profundiza no solo sobre esa parte más anecdótica de la logística y de los enormes problemas económicos que se suscitan cuando se produce un largometraje; lo hace también, lo que es más interesante, sobre las causas, matices y detalles psicológicos que están contenidos en la trama. Visto el film como un proceso de catarsis y posterior anagnorisis, se desvelan en él las sutiles influencias que subyacen en el contacto humano, la transformación de la psique por medio de unas actitudes compasivas, y la redención mutua que sufren la aparente víctima y el que parece su salvador, en una metempsicosis alquímica catalizada por la comprensión y la empatía mutuas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Amit R. Biswas, *Bridge* (2016), producción cinematográfica, transformación alquímica.

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In today's world, films and visual media dominate our cultural stratosphere as the most available and accessible form of creative expression. The journey of films began with the first public demonstration by the Lumiere' brothers with their new device, the Cinematographe, in the basement of Grand Cafe in Paris. Since then, suspended between realism and illusion, cinema has transformed our lives in unprecedented ways. Film is both an art and a science, perhaps a bridge between our left and right hemispheres of the brain but also it creates connections between our internal and external worlds, psychologically, emotionally socially, culturally, and spiritually.

The journey of making and subsequently presenting our film *Bridge* (2016) to the audience worldwide was a transforming experience for me and the Team Bridge, not only as film makers but also as human beings. The central message of the film is the importance of unconditional human bonding and kindness in human lives. In this process, it was wonderful to see that our multi-cultural team of individuals also related deeply, co-creating something beautiful and purposeful. The making Bridge was collective and throughout the process, we worked together with a sense of higher purpose, to make something greater than ourselves.

STORY OF THE FILM AND CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION

Bridge is a life affirming and heartwarming story of the chance meeting of two suicidal strangers on a bridge over the Ganges. They are both experiencing immense emotional distress. At dawn, Tanima, a young woman and Santanu, an octogenarian, are seen on a bridge, evidently both intending to commit suicide. Noticing Tanima about to jump off the bridge and driven by the sheer impulse of saving her, Santanu momentarily forgoes his own suicidal thoughts and runs to stop her from jumping off the bridge. He brings her home. Tanima continues to be in great distress and remains suicidal; refusing interactions, even food and resisting every help offered. Santanu does not give up. As he tries to figure out a way forward, he slowly gets to understand Tanima's trauma and painful past. Santanu does not only show great compassion and determination and the sequence of events allow him to connect with his own unresolved grief. Although, their meeting initially brings great challenges but through gradual building of a bridge of deep trust and bonding, eventually both heals, regaining a sense of meaning and belonging to life.

WHY THIS FILM? BACKGROUND STORY OF THE PURPOSE

My own creative journey evolved through a gamut of artistic forms; being a performer and choreographer of Indian Classical dance (Kathak) to a director of Dance theatres; from being a poet and playwright to a screenplay writer; from making short films, documentary and awareness films to evolve towards a feature film maker. After traversing and experiencing this long journey through various



genre of creative expression, I needed to find a single but wider canvas where I can seamlessly blend the colors of science and arts to involve and inspire people across cultures. My vision was to make international films deeply rooted in Indian culture with a universal theme in appeal.

Apart from being a film maker I am also a senior Consultant Child & Adolescent Neuropsychiatrist and an educator based in UK. I am a firm believer that 'recovery' is not just about reducing 'symptoms'. Instead, 'healing' happens through engaging various dimensions, beyond the physical- namely emotional, cognitive, behavioural, social, and spiritual. When clinicians can see the individuals in a holistic way and applies a 'person centred approach' in their work, the process of recovery starts. Clinicians are highly skilled and experienced individuals, but it is also important to approach patients with kindness, an "Intelligent kindness" (Ballatt and Campling 1) where they can build trust through empathic connection. This is otherwise called 'therapeutic alliance', one of the most important factors in the recovery process.

In the past, in my creative work, I was keen to raise bigger questions of life, through musicals or through plays. The vision of *Bridge* was also to raise questions: what heals and transforms us? How we create hope/optimism and how important is kindness and compassion in our lives? While developing the idea of my film, I attempted to bring together three aspects: the psychological insights I gathered from working with young people with severe mental illness, my worldview beyond materialism and my creative vision to make a film that will create a greater and lasting impact on society.

INSPIRATIONS

My inspiration from *Bridge* came from my direct experiences of clinical work with young people and families to whom I am highly indebted to. Psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's life changing book *Man's Search for Meaning*, deeply moved me and inspired my directorial vision of *Bridge*. Like Stoic philosophers, Frankl's prophetic words made a deep impression because they gathered the inner strength of individuals to change their own life as well as life in general.

I was initially influenced by legendary film makers such as Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa, Andrei Tarkovski but after emigrating to UK, I was exposed to a wide range of European and American filmmakers and directors such as Krzysztof Kieslowski, Louis Bunuel, Michael Haneke, Steven Spielberg, Woody Allen, Robert Bresson, Abbas Kiarostami, Jean Luc Goddard, Pedro Almodover and many others whose footprints are evident in my growth as a visual storyteller.

Soumitra Chatterjee (cast as Santanu in *Bridge*) who worked extensively with the lifetime Oscar winning film director Satyajit Ray has been a major influence in my life, a mentor, muse, friend, and creative collaborator. He directed and acted in plays I wrote that ran successfully in India for many years. He was a tremendous support and inspiration while I was conceiving and writing *Bridge*.



Bridges have several metaphorical, symbolic and mythological meaning, of a passage or connections, a portal to cross. Majestic bridges like Howrah Bridge in Kolkata, India or Tower Bridge in London have always inspired me not just as a structure but something that tells many stories of human society and history.

THE JOURNEY OF A HERO

I am highly influenced by the ideas of philosopher Joseph Campbell in *Hero with Thousand faces* (1973) and later by the Hollywood screenwriter Christopher Vogler (gathered in *The Writer's Journey*). Both point out that the ideas embedded in mythology can be applied to understand almost any human problem. Many stories also contain a mythic dimension which can strongly affect and catalyse transformational process.

According to Carl G. Jung's theory, we inherit as a part of our humanity (1927). Mythical stories can be taken as a projection of the collective unconscious as a collective 'dream.' An individual is a part of the whole species in the long evolutionary journey and the pattern of myths are used in many fairy tales, novels, plays and more recently, in screenplays. The stages of the journey of a Hero can be traced to all kind of stories such as Dorothy's voyage in *Wizard of Oz*. The protagonist goes through various phases; of hesitation and fear of taking up a challenge, meeting mentors, facing conflicts and crises, confronting fear finally leading to release of old ideas and undergoing inner change through gaining new perspectives.

I felt the urge to create a film which with have that mythic dimension, as films are an important part of our evolving mythology. While writing *Bridge*, I was very mindful of this journey and the transformative power of mythology, symbols, and metaphors. These have been used for a long time both in psychotherapy and films. These films in turn can help and support an individual to strive towards personal growth and transformation by connecting them on a mythological level. The viewers alongside the filmmakers can tap into their greater wisdom, reassessing their inner capacity and aligning with their deepest and wisest self. In literature, it is reported that as viewers gain a new perspective, a possibility of discarding old ways of, as Simon states (2002), living arises and new maps of behaviour are forged.

THE PROCESS OF ALCHEMY

Marsha Sinetar' *Reel Power-Spiritual Growth through Film* recognized movies as tools for personal transformation. The movement started to revive again in 2019 with the featured documentary *Calypsonians* by director Anghelo Taylor. Perhaps like other debutant director/ producers, we endured seven long and frustrating years to secure money for the film unsuccessfully from various companies and financiers. I knew that I needed to make this film desperately. Eventually, I decided to raise the money from my personal funds, pension policies, investments and so on. Preproduction of the film started in February 2014 and we eventually finished



it at the end of the year on a shoe string budget. Most of the cast and crew worked on a fraction of their fees not only because they were inspired by the script but also because many of them believed that making this film was 'essential.'

We met Zoran Veljkovich, our cinematographer, an experienced and respected professional in the UK and a teacher at Raindance Film School at BAFTA way before the funds were raised for *Bridge* and I remember our mutual excitement and passion about making *Bridge*. I am still deeply indebted to him for believing and being inspired by my vision. It was not easy for Zoran to film in India. He did not know the language, most of the crew spoke scanty English. Also, as the summer months approached, it was not only him suffering in the heat, even his equipments were getting exhausted. However, excellent body language, locally produced meals, caring caterers and tea boys kept him nourished and for the first time shooting in India he maintained a bug-free tummy for five weeks.

We were fortunate to have Paramita Banerjee as the producer and Arghyakamal Mitra, an award winning and highly experienced editor, in our team. Abhijit (Tenny) Roy our sound engineer walked the alleyways of Bally day and night, coaxed locals for organic sounds, begged boatmen to take him to the middle of the river to record sounds of waves. Our supremely talented young music director Dishari, moved in with me in our home for several weeks, went without sleep for days, shortlisted instruments from hundreds to create the apt soundtrack of *Bridge*. Renowned still photographer and artist Suvomoy Mitra was inspired by the script and he offered his services for free and took incredible production stills which are invaluable. Three film school students from three different Universities came along to shoot 'behind the scenes' footage and became an integral part of our team. Similarly, highly and globally regarded colourist Dado (Valentic), well known art director Goutam Basu, famous singer Upal Sengupta and many others joined us along in our journey and co-created the film.

On the first day of our shoot, I led a meeting, sitting in a circle with a candle in the centre. Everyone in the team introduced themselves and answered the question 'what do you love about cinema and why are you in the business of film making?' Seventy-five people talked openly about themselves, their passions, their beliefs and their lives and what they loved about movie-making. We felt a growing sense of a community; individuals gathered with a single purpose, to make a great film that heals and transforms.

As in every low budget filmmaking, the most difficult aspect was to manage the production and postproduction of the film within the limited budget. It was also a challenge to maintain the effective communication and coherent understanding between the international crew members with different outlook in practical approaches and practices and linguistic differences. It was all possible because we connected and cared for our film.

The film was mostly shot at a family home of our producer which was generously provided for free. The members of the household eventually became a part of the cast and the crew. The locals in the otherwise quiet town of Bally were extremely excited and participated in every way they could. The cooperation from them was invaluable. Local youngsters who had no idea about film making became an integral part of the crew. To our utmost surprise, the idol of Kali that was created



for the film was transformed from a mere prop, a part of the set design to a sacred entity that the locals worshipped. Almost every aspect of making this film was ‘fun’ just because as a team, we were inspired to make it happen. But dealing with a huge number of extras and involving residents and local people of Bally, was albeit frantic but gave us great joy and satisfaction. Our youngest actress was only 18 months old and it was a delight to work with her and other children who gave ‘perfect’ shots every time. The sense of humor of the entire crew, the positive attitude and the feel-good factor within the team kept us going even in a stressful and challenging schedule coupled with hot and humid weather. Overall, we felt that it is not just the cast and crew but the community in Bally created the film and held it together with love, affection, curiosity and enthusiasm that sustained all of us.

Nature also helped us in many ways and we all felt blessed. To give an example, we did not have enough money to hire a rain machine for 3 days that was the requirement of the film. We used artificial rain on one day but to our utmost surprise, we were rewarded with a downpour and thunderstorms for the other two just when we needed them.

Before every shot, we practiced a Mindfulness based exercise or meditation that started with the ringing of a Tibetan bell. This was new to our cast and crew, to pause and be in stillness before ‘Action’! However, they allowed themselves to go with the process and later talked about their experiences. Many felt that it was really helpful to be fully attentive and focused before the scenes were shot. The cast and crew continued talking and reflecting about their experiences even after the shooting was finished.

There were indeed differences in opinion and disagreements during the creation of *Bridge* but given our heartfelt connections, commitment towards our film, we were able to hold meaningful and constructive dialogues, throughout the process. We were always able to find common grounds, as all of us always kept the film at the center of our vision keeping at bay egos and opinions.

USING *BRIDGE* TO TRANSFORM AND HEAL

The use of movies for personal growth, transformation and healing comes from a long-standing connection between storytelling and self-reflection dating back to the beginnings of spoken language. Many cultures throughout the human history have recognized the transformative and healing effect of the act of telling and listening to stories. Potential impact of films on health can be traced back to Mellon’s concept of Bibliotherapy (2003), which was used by ancient Greeks with the use of ‘engaged reading’ to gain insight into one’s psyche. Greeks used drama in their visual and performing arts as a catharsis to deal with their emotions and trauma. Neimiec & Wedding argued in 2008 that the appropriate movies speak to the non spoiled spot that is present in all of us, where people escape from their lives into themselves and come out feeling better, stronger and more willing to take healthy action.

For me, the purpose and challenge of making *Bridge* were twofold: on the one hand to create a meaningful film that will move the viewers and raise questions



and awareness with a potential to transform the viewers. On the other, I wanted to make a film that is aesthetically pleasing, stylistically distinct and cinematically of high quality. The balance needed to be right so that the vision is not lost in the techniques of storytelling or aesthetics and the cinematic beauty is not marred by the film's underlying message or psychological implications. A film can create, as Haidt states, a cinematic elevation by witnessing acts of moral beauty (such as humanity, courage, justice), through the physical sensations (like warmth, openness) and motivation to move towards higher morals. During the cinematic elevation, Haidt comments that an individual feels a sensation of inspiration which help them subsequently to take action for their own greater good or for others or society.

I used various psychological (especially psychoanalytic and positive psychology) musical, linguistic, visual and other techniques in a way that would enhance the evolution of characters and the central message without losing the fluidity of storytelling. I was aware that, as Gardner claims, we have multiple intelligences and the synergistic effect of movies can impact hugely on a person's physiological, psychological, and other dimensions, creating the potential for healing and transformation. Being a great fan of positive psychology, I was also aware that positive psychological approaches are not only about fixing what is broken, disordered or deranged but also nurturing what, in the tradition of Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2007) is best. Researchers also found that films can directly and indirectly influence the character strength and inner virtues and enable individuals and communities to thrive and flourish, to "self-actualise" (Maslow 1971, 1987). I wanted *Bridge* to be in this genre of film that inspires, heals, transforms and one that focuses on the human strength of character. Hope and optimism that is portrayed in our film exemplifies this view about bouncing back from our adversities. With great delight, we have seen every audience moved and experiencing a cinematic elevation after watching *Bridge* and sharing with us experiences of feelings of positivity and optimism.

Bridge travelled the world in many festivals and received twelve international film awards, but I have also presented my first feature film in various professional and educational settings (University of Salamanca, University of Michigan, University of Pittsburg...), public gatherings and mental health awareness platforms to create dialogues on various relevant issues. This included the centrality of kindness and trusting relationships in human life, compassion-focused healthcare and, at the same time, raising awareness on suicide and mental health issues and confronting stigma. Apart from being asked on the processes of film making and directorial questions, it has been hugely satisfying and enlightening to create dialogues on topics that goes beyond *Bridge* as a film and its storyline.

It was a privilege and an honor to work with a talented, committed and connected team and to present our film to the global audience. We feel optimistic about our human condition and continue to celebrate our interconnectedness creating a meaningful impact on our lives.

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INTERVIEWS

NEW NARRATIVES IN THE INDIAN LGBTIQ+ COMMUNITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH FILM-MAKER SUKHDEEP SINGH

Regiane Corrêa de Oliveira Ramos & Jairo Adrián-Hernández
Universidade Estadual de Mato Grosso do Sul (Brasil) & Universidad de La Laguna

REGIANE RAMOS (RR): I became aware of Sukhdeep Singh's documentary on Facebook, on 24 February 2020, as he posted 'the coming soon flyer'. I immediately wrote to him asking for the actual release date and transsexuality in Sikhism (as I am interested in this topic). He promptly replied and then we started exchanging messages. On 3 December 2020, he sent me an email inviting me to watch the online release of the *Sab Rab De Bande (We're all God's Creation)* on 5 December 2020. After watching it, I invited him for an interview. We had our conversation on February 5th 2021 via Google Meet as I was in Brazil and he in India.

JAIRO ADRIÁN-HERNÁNDEZ (JAH): Dr. Corrêa de Oliveira Ramos and I have been working closely on transgender communities in India for some time. After she got to know about this documentary, she kindly invited me to participate in translating the script into Spanish. Then we both got in touch with Mr. Singh for a discussion on his film and activism as part of the LGBTIQ+ community himself. My questions here are then a recreation from this interview, which, if interested, is fully disposed at the *BrIndARC* (Brasil-Índia Associação de Redes de Conhecimento) YouTube channel (28 June 2021). Due to space constraints, some questions have been either shortened or omitted.

Good afternoon, Sukhdeep. First of all, thank you so much for accepting my invitation to talk about the documentary *Sab Rab De Bande (We're all God's Creation)* and the challenges that LGBTIQ+ Sikhs face.

RR: Who is Sukhdeep Singh? Please tell me a bit about yourself.

SUKHDEEP SINGH (SS): I am a gay Sikh person in his early 30s who is involved in multiple things. I grew up in Kolkata in a Sikh family, and then proceeded to pursue a degree in Engineering from IIT Dhanbad. While in college, I came out and then founded *Gaylaxy* Magazine, a LGBTIQ+ e-magazine. After graduating, I started working as a software engineer, while parallel running the magazine. I am currently based in Delhi where I am working as a Senior Software Engineer. *Gaylaxy* is more of a passion project and has completed 10 years. I have recently also finished my first documentary on LGBTIQ+ Sikhs called *Sab Rab De Bande (We're all Gods Creation)*.

RR: Can you describe Punjabi culture? What is it for queer Sikhs?



SS: Punjab culture is hyper-masculine and patriarchal. There is a very macho image of a Punjabi man that exists, and one is supposed to conform to that. Women are expected to follow patriarchal roles, and everyone is expected to conform to gender roles. This can be very suffocating for queer people, especially queer Sikhs, who are taunted for their traits. If you are a boy, you are often teased that you are acting like a girl and asked to man up. Similarly girls would be reminded to be within boundaries, and are burdened with safeguarding the honour of the family, all very patriarchal notions.

RR: What was your first experience of discrimination? Have you ever been bullied in school?

SS: This is a difficult question to answer. Discrimination because of which identity? I carry multiple identities, and in each of my identities I am a minority. So do you mean discriminated against because of my religion, or my sexuality? As a kid, growing up in West Bengal, I was often teased because of my religious identity by other kids, especially when I would shampoo and have my hair untied. They would question my gender, because I had long uncut hair, and boys are supposed to have short hair. Some would also think of my *kara* as a bangle.

I was very good in studies and was the first boy of my class, and I never faced any kind of bullying in school. I suppose I am cisgendered so my sexuality was not so obvious. College was a little different. There was a lot of stereotyping. I studied in a national level college, where students from all over India has joined after giving entrance exam, many from small villages and remote parts of India. For them, the fact that I was a Sikh person from Bengal was something funny. They were so small minded that they thought all Sikh people only live in Punjab. The fact that I did not fit into a macho Sikh man's image (I was very thin) added to their confusion, often making me the butt of jokes. But I think my college in general was a very bad place. Then when I came out, I was the only out gay person in college, and then again, I faced a barrage of questions. Some outrageous suggestions about how to change my sexuality, and then there were many rumors about me too. There was this one specific incident that happened with me, after I left college. I was living with my college friends in a shared flat in Gurgaon, and sharing a room with one of my batchmates. After a month or so, because he wanted the room to himself, he made an issue of my sexuality and said he will not be sharing a room with me. That was very hurtful for me.

RR: How was it when you stepped into the queer community?

SS: When I stepped into the queer community, I was all rosy eyed, and thought this is where I would be finally accepted fully. But that was far from the case. I soon discovered my Sikh identity was not acceptable to many, and I would be rejected as soon as they would get to know I was a turbaned Sikh. And I am talking pre-smartphone era, or when smartphones were still a novelty and apps like Grindr were yet to be made.

JAH: I have realized a fascinating phenomenon here in the Canaries and it is that LGBTQ+ Catholics have reappropriated the discourse and they are



occupying certain spaces and spheres that were once neglected. Even Drag Queens perform dressed up as the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ and young Catholics are also creating new support groups that are inclusive towards the community. Do you know of any similar situation within Sikhs?

SS: Outside of India, in some of the countries like United Kingdom, Canada or the United States with a larger Sikh diaspora, I know that there are support groups and that they are bringing up these discussions around religion and sexuality. They are also helping their members to accept both identities. We are at a very key point where we are either moving into a more accepting and inclusive interpretation of sex and faith or having a very rigid interpretation.

RR: How do you deal with all your identities?

SS: I have never had any issues with my multiple identities. They are all part of me, and I think it is wonderful that I carry so many different identities within me. It is in fact other people who seem to be having confusion or problems accepting that a person can have so many different identities at the same time. People like to box others in neat identities, and since they cannot do that to me, they have a problem.

RR: How was the reception of *Sab Rab De Bande* (We're all God's Creation)?

SS: The reception of *Sab Rab De Bande* has been extremely good, right from the start when word about the project got out. Our crowdfunding campaign achieved its goal in under two weeks. There is a lot of excitement and anticipation for the movie. And the initial press reviews too have been positive. The movie is also getting selected at many different film festivals.

RR: How was it for you to produce this documentary? What was the most difficult part of producing it?

SS: It was extremely close to my heart, and I wanted to make this documentary for a long time. But it was also a very challenging one. This is my first documentary, and I had no experience of weaving the stories of different people together into under 30 minutes. Also, I did not have any sponsor or anyone, it was all self-funded in the beginning.

The biggest challenge for me was finding queer Sikh people who were willing to come on camera and share their experience. Amolak was the first one who came onboard. He had seen a call from me on Facebook, and he reached out to me. We had a long chat, and he said that this is an important topic and we should be bringing our stories to the public. But after that, it was a long search. A few people who were in fact out to their family or close circles, initially agreed, but later backed out. I kept a look put for people on social media and would reach out to them if I thought they had a story to tell. I would even assure them that we will keep their identities hidden, but even then, people were scared. So, over the next 2-3 years, I finally met and connected with people who agreed to be a part of the documentary.

Even when they agreed, none of them were comfortable to shoot at their home or workplace, because even if they were out to family, it was not a topic that their family was comfortable with. Also, time was another issue. I was in a full-time job, and so was my videographer, and the subjects of the



documentary. So, finding a day and time when everyone would be available was a huge task in itself. And even when we did manage to take out time, we would only have 2-3 hours with them, and we had to shoot everything within that time frame, take all necessary filler shots. Also, given that it was self-funded, I was looking for people in or around Delhi so that the travel costs are a minimum.

RR: Did you get satisfied with the result of the documentary? Was it that you had in mind?

SS: Not sure if I can say that I am satisfied, but yes, I am happy with the final output. This is the story that I wanted to tell the world. Also, with all our constraints, both monetary and otherwise, I did the best I could, and I am happy with the output. There were different aspects of being a queer Sikh that I wanted to cover, and I have been able to cover them through these five stories.

RR: Why do not Ekampreet and Puneet show their faces in the documentary? Were they afraid of retaliation? Was it difficult to find people to participate in the documentary?

SS: As I mentioned above, it was extremely difficult to find people for the documentary, and that is one of the chief reasons why it took me four years to complete it. Both Ekampreet and Puneet had reservations about showing their faces, and I had to assure them that their identities will not be revealed. Ekampreet was not out to his family or anyone else (except may be a few close friends), while Puneet was very anxious of how people might behave with her if they got to know about her queer identity. It is not easy being a girl in Indian society, and being a queer woman exposes one to double the oppression and marginalization. She was very concerned about the judgmental attitudes and how it could affect her life and relationships. In fact, just when the documentary had completed and we were ready to submit to film festivals, Puneet had a kind of panic attack, and rang me up, asking to delete her footage from the documentary. I had to calm her up, and then further blur scenes where she appears to consider her concerns. This is the first time that queer Sikhs in India are openly discussing various aspects of their life and their religion. It is not easy to expose oneself like this, and on top of that, no one amongst us knows what the reaction of the Sikh society will be to this.

RR: The five testimonies in the documentary are arguing in favor of their both religious and sexual identities. Do you know anyone who gave up the faith in Sikhism because of their sexuality?

SS: Personally, I have not come across a queer Sikh person who gave up their religious identity or religion because of their sexuality. I have met quite a few gay Sikh men too, some even *Amrithdari*, who did not see their religious and queer identities in conflict, because of the larger message of acceptance and equality of Sikh religion.

JAH: Do you still face racism and stereotypes within the gay community?



SS: Gay community is extremely racist from within. People often discriminate you because of your caste, they will not date you if you are not from a specific caste. So yes, I do face racism and stereotypes from within the gay community. Many a times people have it written in their profiles, “No Sikhs” or “No Sardars”. Sometimes others go on a moral lecturing, and asking me not to be on dating apps, as Sikhs cannot be gay, or not to bring a bad name to Sikhs by being gay, or at least do not put your pics. On the other hand, some people use gay Sikhs on *Grindr* to satisfy their fantasies and I have been myself fetishized.

RR: How does queer Sikh deal with the religious leaders?

SS: I think key to changing attitudes is through dialogue and discussion. Unlike other faiths, there has not been a debate or discussion on the topic of homosexuality within the Sikh community. The religious leaders have always taken a reactionary stand, without trying to understand what homosexuality is, or what are the stories of queer people. For example, the Akhal Takh, whenever they have spoken on the topic, it has been in reaction to certain events, like the legislation of same-sex marriages in Canada, the 377 ruling in India.

It is important for the queer community to engage with them, highlight our stories and educate them on the topic as well. The more of us are out there, the more they see us as part of themselves. I am hopeful that *Sab Rab De Bande* will help bring these stories to the forefront and initiate a conversation.

RR: It is impossible not ask this question. How does caste operate in the queer community?

SS: Like most communities in India, queer community is not left untouched of casteism. A lot of casteist attitudes exist within the queer community, that are not discussed, or recognized or spoken of. Some people like Akhil Kang and Dhruvo Jyoti have been trying to address it and highlight the issues.

RR: Do you think that the colonial/LGBTIQ+phobic discourse of the *granthi* (priest) in the documentary will change in the future as the society and the new generation are slowly changing their mentality?

SS: Yes, I do think so. It is disheartening to listen to the *granthi* in the documentary, because much of what he says is out of ignorance and lack of knowledge on the issue. He equates homosexuality with depraved behavior and calls it unnatural, arguments that have no scientific evidence. Much of this attitude around the topic of homosexuality has been due to a colonial mindset, and so he sees the topic through the same lens. But he had no problem in accepting trans people, because in general there is some kind of acceptance of trans people in the society.

His interpretation of some of the things or verses from the *Granth Sahib* are coloured by his own homophobia, which in turn stems from ignorance and colonialism. With the younger generation being more open and liberal, I believe there will be a change in the future.

JAH: If the West’s confrontation towards sexual dissidences is mostly of a long tradition of Christian perversion, I gather that within Sikh literature there are



a number of sections that seem to raise Sikh's hopes, I mean for example that marriage is understood as a union of two genderless souls, as mentioned in the documentary. However, gender and sexual dissidences are still a tabooed and a very much controversial topic within the Sikh community. I wonder if Sikhism originated in a country that, prior to the European invasion, was relatively tolerant to other ways of being and loving, and your scriptures also reflect this diversity, what happened in the natural evolution of Sikhism?

SS: Every religion in India has been touched by Victorian morality and so we are very much influenced by those colonial thoughts. From there we have started interpreting our religion through a very colonial mindset, especially regarding homosexuality. Everywhere the British went you would find a law that is similar to section 377. That is why even ancient religions like Hinduism, where sexuality and gender was very much fluid, are not that accepting. When it comes to Sikhism, it has no such strict rules as it happens with Christianity, for example. Our emphasis is on spirituality and so inclusion comes naturally for Sikhs, but we are neither untouched by colonialism.

RR: Is gender/sexuality debate in schools/colleges/universities can help creating a more acceptable society?

SS: Without doubt! Gender/sexuality education in schools and colleges is the need of the hour, especially in a country like India. It will help bust many myths and taboos around the topic and dispel the lack of information/knowledge that often leads to a lot of homophobia. It will help youngsters understand their own feelings and educate them that sexuality is diverse and there is nothing wrong in being non-heterosexual.

JAH: I've been doing some research and I've ran into this YouTube channel (Logo) interviewing Sikh queer people and, although they are Americans, they were narrating that in June (Pride month) they mourn for the first weeks, in memory of those who were killed in Operation Bluestar, also mentioned at the beginning of your documentary. This certainly creates new bodies of queer Sikh culture, but do you know of any other peculiarities that are endemic to queer Sikhism?

SS: Young people in their early twenties on Instagram, or even Amolak Singh in the documentary, are very experimental with their looks and some of them even do drag. They carry both identities. Amolak, for example, is very strict about going to the *gurdwaras* wearing make-up and in this androgynous fashion. We do not let other define our identities.

RR: Puneet in the documentary states that "your religion is between you and your God" (00:26:44-00:26:48). Please make a comment on this assertion.

SS: Puneet makes a very valid assertion. Often we become too entangled in outward display of our religion, or bound by so many rules set by religious heads, on how one can reach god. But I think your faith is basically a personal relationship between you and God, and no one has a right to interfere and tell you what or how that relationship should be.



RR: Government policy and legislation for LGBTIQ+ in India. What are the challenges?

SS: I think the biggest challenge right now is that we have a conservative government that is very anti-minority and anti-human rights. They were not very supportive when Section 377 case had come up in the Supreme Court. Even when they passed the Trans Rights Bill, they have discarded all suggestions and concerns of the Transgender community and come up with a law that is being vociferously opposed by the Trans community. I think it is not going to be easy.

RR: What is the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019, situation now?

SS: The Bill was passed in the Parliament in Nov 2019, and has become a law. It was passed in the lower house in August while the Parliament was in chaos over Article 370 (the Article in the Indian Constitution that gave some special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir), and then again in Nov 2019 it was passed in the upper house by a voice vote despite objection by many members and suggestions to send it to a Standing Committee. The Trans community has opposed the bill because of its many shortcomings. Despite many representations from the community, their concerns were overlooked and the government went ahead with its version.

RR: How is the pandemic affecting the queer community in India?

SS: The pandemic has affected the queer community the harshest because India has had the strictest and longest lockdowns. This had the most devastating effect on the trans community, many of whom depend on begging and sex work for their livelihood, were stripped of their earnings. Trans people do not have savings to fall back upon. Many of them are also taking hormones, some are HIV positive and need their ART medicines. It was a very dire situation, and in some states, the courts finally intervened and asked the government to provide them with pension or other help. Many trans activists too started crowdfunding campaigns to raise money to distribute essential supplies and ration to the member of the community.

Apart from that, many queer people had to return back home to their families and were then trapped with them. Many families are abusive towards queer children. This increased not just abuse, but also mental health issues. Further, even the ones who used to live with their families, they were not able to go and meet friends or hang out at community spaces. They lost their support system and this too adversely affected everyone.



LETTING FEAR GO: AN INTEVIEW WITH PRODUCER PARAMITA BANERJEE

Mónica Fernández Jiménez
Universidad de Valladolid

I first met Paramita Banerjee in the winter of 2019 when I was invited to the screening of *Bridge* (2016), a film she had produced. Little did I know that this film would touch me in so many unexpected ways, completely changing my perception of what caring and being cared for means. That beautiful Salamanca evening ended with the chiming of the cathedral's bells at midnight, and I went back to my hotel to sleep. The next morning, I planned to do some work at the university library whilst waiting for my train, but before I arrived, I ran into Paramita and some colleagues. I cannot recall the progression of events leading to this, but we found ourselves scrolling through the historical archives of the University of Salamanca, astounded by the many medical treatises of the sixteenth century that the institution harbors, as well as some of the first world maps to ever have been drawn.

To me, a student newly embarking on her PhD, having moved cities several times to pursue my academic career, each time having to start anew without any acquaintances or old friends to rely on, Paramita's warmth meant so much at the moment. The unconditional hospitality with which she approaches anyone new that she meets filled me with hope. Now I know that Paramita is a Rabindra Sangeet singer and film producer based in London and has recently released a new album titled *Kharobayu*. Without her dedication and faith in independent cinema, *Bridge* would not have been possible. Paramita has always been extremely kind to share her knowledge with us and today she will be telling us a bit more about her own experiences in the world of arts.

MÓNICA FERNÁNDEZ JIMÉNEZ (MFJ): Paramita, thank you very much for allowing me to carry out this interview, it is such a pleasure and I am so impressed by your work on film production. We often hear accounts of what it is like to direct a film or act in one, but producers' testimonies are not as commonly widespread. Could you tell us a bit more about your job and what it consists of?

PARAMITA BANERJEE (PB): I am going to respond with an analogy someone once said to me: a producer is someone who has to organise a party. He or she will book the venue, put the guest list together, prepare the venue, arrange the food, make everything spick and span, get the tables just right and then when everything is finished, stand and watch the party happen –making

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sure the party is a success! You can't eat, drink or do anything while you are at the party. You just have to sit and watch people eat and drink and be happy and hope this party is going to go well. I think, in film terms, this is what a producer does.

When you attempt to define a producer there are many differences to consider. Hollywood has this kind of producer like George Lucas. I am sure he doesn't make tea, but I make tea when I am on a set. There is this macrocosmic producer and there is a microcosmic independent producer. However, if you look at it from the theoretical point of view, both will find a script or a novel that they like and decide to make a film out of it. They will next find a scriptwriter and then they will buy the rights or get a company to do so. This is how a script is born. Then they are going to obtain some money and once the money comes in –simultaneously, I would say– they will find the director best suited for the script. Then they will make sure there is a casting director. Basically, the point of inception is the producer. The producer starts the journey and there is usually a collaboration between the producer and the director. This is the initial marriage. There are many marriages in a film: there is a marriage between the director and the cinematographer, between the cinematographer and the editor, between the editor and the colorist... there are various relationships and that is why filmmaking is so challenging and exhausting. There are often so many strong personalities, all having their own creative ideas, so part of the job of a producer is to find people who see the film differently. Similarly, and differently. They see the big picture but then they add to it. Ultimately the film is the vision of the director, this is why the director is so important. A producer sees it from the sales point of view... so he or she will find the right director who has the right artistic vision for this film. Although there is a huge difference between big production producers and small production producers, they all basically carry the inception of the idea. It can be a sentence or an original script. This is the exciting bit for the producer because it all starts from a sentence, or a conversation, or from reading a book, and then eventually the film is in theatres or on Netflix or Amazon these days.

MFJ: So we can agree that this is an extremely important job! Without a producer there would certainly be no film. He or she is the backbone or the building blocks of the film. Considering all this, do you think production work is under-appreciated?

PB: If you watch a film with Tom Cruise or Matt Damon in it, obviously the producer is not going to get the attention, but I guess those producers have to be at peace with that, and if the face of the film sells, the film gets sold. In a way a producer has to be quite detached from their own ego and their own claim to fame or popularity because what he or she is doing is bringing people together, people who will make this film happen and whose faces or names are going to sell. I just wonder whether popularity or name recognition is the ultimate sign of success, because of course there are other things that matter. Some people are very private and may not want the attention. You



are right though, producers are under-appreciated, I completely acknowledge that –there is no question– but the challenge of a producer is to live with that because a producer is not a star. He or she does not have the body of Matt Damon but he or she knows that James Bond’s body is going to sell James Bond and the franchise is going to make money for the producer. This is the deal. From my point of view, you have to be happy and contented with it. If you crave for attention, I think this is not the job for you.

MFJ: This is very interesting. It means that it is part of the job to deal with the dynamics of appreciation and recognition and at the same time make sure that the film exists.

PB: Yes, the producer has to be the jelling element [sic] who says “the film is the most important thing.” So “let’s think of the film.”

MFJ: So in this sense, would you say there have been any personal challenges related to your system of values that you have had to face in the production of films?

PB: Not really in terms of values because I came into this job by chance. Amit [the director of *Bridge*] and I love cinema, we watch a film a day. Amit had been writing a lot of theatre and doing very well and then we met Mr. Chatterjee, the protagonist of our film. To cut a long story short, that is when we started to think that we could make a film. There was no question that we would make it together because this was completely a work of passion. This was not planned, it was accidental; it was never my intention to become a film producer, but I love cinema. The challenge was that Amit and I have a personal relationship so it was difficult to have a boundary. There were lots of screaming on the sets but what we were doing was like raising a child. When you raise a child, you keep the child at the forefront. Egos, even if they arise, must be set aside.

I’ll tell you a story. Everybody hated the first cut of the film, and we hated it too, which was relieving. But when we hated it, that’s when we forgot that everybody hated it. A film goes through various editing processes and then the music and the sound are slowly introduced and *voilà!* One day you feel that this is what you were looking for. I am not saying that we have created a masterpiece but it is something that we love. If I have to sell a soap, I have to love it. If I do not use it, nobody else will. I wanted to love *Bridge* first before I expected anybody else to love it. Just before the final version, every week we watched the film once, just to see what could be done, and one day I realised that during one particular sequence I would always get up to make a cup of tea. I thought, this can’t be a coincidence. I told Amit that he should drop these few scenes and see how the film worked. There were obviously fireworks in the house, considering we had spent so much time filming these scenes. Any work of art eventually amounts to editing it, to see what can be thrown away, and it can sometimes feel as if the best bit is being left out. Eventually Amit agreed. To my delight, once the scene was cut the film was flowing better, and Amit said: “yes, you are right.” This is the producer’s job, to have that detachment from the film, because as a



director or as an actor you are too close to it. I think we have to have that tough love and even if we spent half a day shooting this, we can admit it is not working.

MFJ: This film is beautiful, and I could see that its inception was a very personal process. What are your thoughts on the reception of *Bridge* as an independent film of intimist content? Are there any significant differences in the reception depending on the country or the context where it was presented?

PB: Thankfully it was universal. We have only screened it in film festivals so far. We have not been able to release the film. We were supposed to release it theatrically in India last year, but we could not because of Covid. Wherever we went there were tearful eyes in the end. There were people who held our hands and said “thank you for making this film.” It is very humbling. I think it is universal; cinema is universal language. We have created a story which happens everywhere and is relevant everywhere. I have yet to meet anyone who has disliked the film, although there may be. We need to have that detachment because the fact that I like something does not mean that everyone else likes it. I do not like violent films, for example. I am not obsessed with the fact that everybody has to love it, but so far we have had brilliant responses from people. Even if we do not make money out of this film, what Amit and I had in common is that we did not want to die without making a film. I think that conviction is still true.

MFJ: *Bridge* is filmed in a very special location, Bally. As per the film’s website, which I am quoting, this is “a suburban town just outside Kolkata where the 82-year-old Bridge crosses the majestic Ganges.” Film locations bear great significance for the plot and the message, which is very striking in the case of *Bridge*. In the same website it says that “[b]ridges all over the world have a history of visitations of men and women, victims of misfortune, with the resolve to end their lives.” They are also places of encounter, uniting different worlds in some occasions. This is all very present when one watches the film. There must though be other stories, lived by the producers and those working on set whilst interacting with local people and the local environment, which the audience does not get to experience. Can you tell us anything remarkable about producing a film in Bally?

PB: I am glad you mention the location because this was the house where I grew up, it was not a hired place. And since this is an independent film, we had to cut costs wherever it was possible. Having a free location meant that we could work extended hours. Because it is a big space, we could also convert things, we could convert one part of the room and then make another part of the room into another setting. This is the rational side. It is also a place which is close to my heart because it is my ancestral home, it is where my grandparents lived, where we lived as children. This is a very emotional space for us and we go back every year. Everybody knows us in the town as well, so there were people stopping on the street to look and we used to ask them if we could get a shot from them. One day I remember there was a very elderly woman, in her 90s or even a hundred, who was walking with a



stick completely bent. She was gorgeous, independent and fine, so we asked her if we could take a shot of her walking with our camera and she said “you know darling, I have to go to the bank, I haven’t got the time.” These are the memories, we employed the local people to work for the set, we employed local caterers to do the food, everybody who knew us as a family. And that bridge is amazing because it is not used very much, but we had to shoot at 3 in the morning, so the location is extremely special. There is the river as well, which is part of the Ganges. And from the very technical point of view, we did not have to pay anything. It was like a party.

MFJ: Apart from being a producer, you are also a music content creator and performer. It is so nice to hear about the more emotional aspects of being a producer and so continuing with this theme, what would you say are the main differences between your production job and your musical work?

PB: Essentially, I am a very highly strung emotional person. I cry at good endings, happy endings. I also cry at sad endings, obviously. I watch *Love Actually* and I weep. I am deeply emotional generally; however, I have a technical side. I worked in a bank and I am a list maniac. If you take a look at my diary, it is full of lists of things to do. That is my control freak side. I like things to be in control, which helps for being a producer. It might turn me out, it might affect my psyche to some extent, but I enjoy it. I love being in control of everything that is happening around me. But also, I never have considered myself to be a solo artist.

On stage one is vulnerable so one is dependent on other musicians to be carried through. While you are singing there are other people around you who are taking you through this journey. I would hate to say I am a solo artist and producing is also a team work. I love team work. I derive inspiration from people. Frankly, I love collaborating and working with people, and that builds relationships. That is where I find a similarity. Furthermore, I do not personally think you can demarcate art. You have a relationship with all art forms through a single mind which is going to affect your experience of a piece of art. Your experience will also be completely different from that of other people. A farmer from India, if he or she watches Van Gogh, is going to react completely differently to how an art critic would. Our psyche determines how we react in similar ways to all art forms.

When I perform, however, I try to be objective. I think that is the only way that I can grow. That is the big similarity with film making. I do not write my songs, I sing a particular genre which comes from Tagore, the Nobel laureate from India. I tell myself that I am the audience of my songs and that I need to see if I can do better. I obviously have limitations, but am I doing the best that I can? The best interpretation of the song? Similarly with *Bridge*, when I was drinking tea, I knew there was something going on with that clip. That is the objectivity I try to have. The problem with emotional people, that I certainly am, is that they get easily carried away. But if I believe I am the best singer on the planet I am limiting myself. I am limiting my art form.



MFJ: You have just said that you approach both of your jobs through your particular mindset regarding art. Do you think there is anything to be gained from the fact that you are combining them as well? Would it be any different if you did only one of the two?

PB: A hundred percent. Music obviously has a huge part on it because of the sound. I am going to give you an example of how it helped me in this particular context. I think being a butcher is going to help you in filmmaking because you will know how to cut without passion. Filmmaking is so diverse that you can bring on to plate any talent that you have. Music is something that gives sensitivity about rhythm. Music is not always about tone; it is about rhythm. Because I am a musician it has created my gut. The fact that I realised that there was a moment when I went to make tea because the rhythm of the film was slowing has to do with music.

Music is flow, you know what needs to come after. It is quite mathematical in a way. There was one scene where we were struggling to add the music, nothing worked. And then I remembered one lullaby that my father could sing well despite being completely tone deaf, very bad at music. And it worked well, and we could use it. Any sensitivity, any talent can be brought. It is about being exposed to art and exploring one's vulnerable side. I think everybody is an artist but sometimes we have to resist it because art moves. If art moves me, it can also bring me down. I can handle it. I want it to touch me. I want it to make me cry. I saw the *Pietà* in the Vatican and I started weeping uncontrollably and I was thinking: "is it my hormones, what is it?" But then I thought: "if I am exposing myself to that embarrassment, let me do it, let me enjoy it."

MFJ: Of course! Go ahead! Very much related to this, much of the content of *Bridge* is about the transformative power of human contact. What do you think you can achieve with your music in terms of transforming other people's realities?

PB: I think it is more about transforming myself. What I can do is having an immersive experience. I have sung in places where nobody spoke my language so I decided to have an immersive experience. I am immersed in my song, in my music, and if that touches another human being, I am grateful for that. I do not think I can claim that it is going to transform. I think *Bridge* is exactly the same thing. Whether it is going to transform someone, or touch someone, or make someone cry is not in our control. We use our art form to present something and of course there is a scientific mind presenting it. When you do your music, you know your rhythm, you cannot get carried away. When you do your film you need to edit it, you need to have your left brain working as well. When people say art is just your right brain, just the creativity, I disagree. It is a combination of both. Even in a painting there is structure, there is rhythm, there are blocks through which the artist thinks. There is the combination of the left brain and the right brain, otherwise I would go off on a tangent. All I can say is that I do what I can. I can train as well, I sing with a muscle, my vocal cords. If I go to the gym to work



out, I have to practice this muscle to make sure it works and I can take it wherever I want. I think it is a combination of both aspects.

MFJ: When I first watched the film I remember having a debate about some of its meanings and I specifically remember that some of us came up with interpretations which you and Amit did not share or had not thought of. It seems like the film itself went through a process of transformation in its contact with the viewers. How does this transformation work in the case of music? Have you been transformed by your listeners?

PB: I am sure I have, but unconsciously, because I have performed in front of eight to eight thousand people. Zero when I am practicing because I think I sing the best when I am on my own, when I am completely uninhibited. As I was growing up, I was extremely nervous about performing because I had an expectation on myself, I was worried I would go wrong. But if I have one achievement in my life, it is that I have become free. When I go on stage, I think that if I go wrong, it is completely fine, at least I am enjoying it. When the audience has responded when I am free, I think that has made me freer. I think I have been liberated by the experience I have had when I am performing on stage with an audience around me. I usually shut my eyes and I sing; I do not want to see anyone. I know they are there but I do not want to see them because I want to make it as immersive as possible. I think they have transformed me in a way that I could just be free and all that fear is gone.

MFJ: That is a beautiful answer. I think that is what *Bridge* is about, the letting go of fear, achieved through human interaction and contact. Thank you very much Paramita.



CREATION

“ME, SARBAJAYA”

Zinia Mitra

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Apu, this is the letter I never wrote to you
carrying a world of huff inside me
your restless syllables a lump in my throat.
If you hold it close enough you can smell
the water –hyacinths
that bloomed purple in the grey pond
the mud road, the slant of our doorway,
hear the banana leaves sliced by the wind
the rail crush our dreams. Do you remember
the pond beside the house we stayed last
the one you ran to dip in every time you came home
on holidays, circles breaking
around you like my protective love?
I still walk beside the footprints
of its dense memories, my life
reflecting on its old waters.
Nature and me embroidered your home hand in hand
in unequal stanzas, stitching
dreams with your father’s words
broken verbs and adjectives on the monsoon
clothline. Then Durga
left me forever and your father’s thoughtless footsteps
followed. I gathered my straws
and stitched your nest in Mansapota.
You went to school, earned coins,
serving the gods. I felt
we were finally settled. Then, your results were good
you bagged a scholarship or something.
It took you to college, to Kolkata
away from me. I did want you
to study further, secretly nurturing
pride in your achievement like a red
hibiscus. I squeezed my heart
to let you go. Since then

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I lived only on weekends when you came home
waiting in silence with the entire ecosystem
the movements of earthworms and water- snakes
in my blood. Then, your shadow began to move away
from my courtyard and I spread out
my eyes throughout the long days along the curved
dun mud road until
the world turned an empty twilight. Your absence
the big black bending trees in illusion.
I heard the rattle of time in my bones
grow louder, the empty hours curl in their brown edges.
I did not write to you
my silence was heavy with too many words.
I expected you'd come
at the culmination of my protracted wait.
You came. But by then I had already left.

I have kept our house immaculate
in my mind's attic
the tulsi mancha, the kitchen
the clock you made –you and me
lived a brief happy life here, perhaps your green nostalgia
will sometimes bring you to me.

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* Sarbajaya is Apu's mother in Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy based on Bibutibhushan Bandopadhyay's novels. Brief Bio: Zinia Mitra teaches in the Department of English, University of North Bengal. Her travelogues and articles have been published in *The Statesman*. Her poems have been published in National and International journals including *Muse India*, *Ruminations*, *Contemporary Literary Review*, *Kavya Bharati*, *East Lit. Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi)*, *Asian Signature*, *Teesta Review*, *Setu*. Her translations have been published in books and journals including Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi). Her translation of Abanindranath Tagore's *Khiner Putul* has been published by Parabaas. Her translation of "Jatiner Juto" by Sukumar Ray as 'Jatin and his Sandals' is included in ICSE textbook, *A Magic Place*. Her books include *Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays*, *Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: Imagery and Experiential Identity*, *Twentieth Century British Literature: Reconstructing Literary Sensibility* (co-edited), *Interact* (co-edited) and *The Concept of Motherhood in India: Myths, Theories and Realities, Fourth Wave Feminism: Social Media and (S)Activism*.



A FINAL SHOWDOWN AGAINST STREAMING GIANTS

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PROLOGUE

In the year 2121, Satyajit Ray, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal, Mira Nair, Mrinal Sen, Ritwick Ghatak, Anurag Kashyap, Anand Patwardhan, Bhaskar, Manju Borah, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and many others joined hands together in their common fight against the streaming services in India. A week ago, Netflix had joined hands with Amazon Prime, Hoichoi! and Disney+ Hotstar to declare that they would only be streaming films that are made by English speaking people. Addatimes and SonyLiv had tried their best to protest, full credit to them, but the sheer power of the names of Bezos and Disney stalled them into a corner. The dusk of Indian cinema was near; the journey was coming to an end.

ACT I SCENE I

1 Bishop Lefroy Road. A dilapidated house with some dusty photographs of Ray's golden years. The living room is resplendent with the smell of dead creativity. A smoke cloud from several pipes clouds the vision. The smart TV plays an expired Netflix trailer of *Pather Panchali*.

Slapstick clicks. "...camera, and action" is heard from a distance.

Ray: Friends, Filmmakers, Foes...

Ghatak: Who on earth is your foe here?

Benegal: Why, *The Enemy of the People*, of course! This pedantic, fascist government, which has managed to impose English upon us.

Ray: Precisely! Though I know not how or why I address them

Ghatak: Yes, who would have thought that they would have grown tired of their favourite Hindi so soon?

Benegal: Oh, that was when they realised that *someone* managed to rule unopposed in India for almost two decades using English as their divisive and dividing sword. Thus, they cornered English and made it their own.



(A whisper is heard. Someone says, ‘for even the walls have ears. I mean, CCTV cameras with mics’)

The crowd asks, “Who spoke?”

They realise it is probably the spirit of free cinema, and by extension, of free art. They sit upright.

Gopalakrishnan: This is our last chance. The halls are closing out in the coming new year. We barely have three months.

Kashyap: Yes, but who will direct?

They all look at the exactly two-hundred-year-old man. The 2nd of May was barely a month ago.

Ray smiles wryly. He looks at Borah and Agarwala.

[*Aside*

Borah: We could have done it. Many think Assamese is a dead language these days. Recently, it was de-listed from the 8th Schedule as well. This is our chance.

Agarwala: Oh no Manju, this is no time for selfish motives. We must remember that we are here for a greater cause. To have this effort recognised by the West, we must hand over the reins to the man who received one of the greatest western accolades in his day.]

Sen: The days are gone by where anyone could direct any film they want to. You now have to take the script to the Censorest Board, which was built upon the ruins of the Censor Board of our times. Upon approval, you must take it to the home minister Vomit Shah, the great-grandson of the great divider.

Ray takes out a smartphone from his pocket!

Ray: Why, these phones are said to have good cameras. Hundreds of megapixels. There is a dusty selfie stand left behind by my grandson Souradeep that we can use as a tripod, and a spare trolley. Who needs to know we are shooting a feature film. We could be making Instagram reels for all they care.

Patwardhan: I have always admired your ingenuity, Ray. Be it using a live tiger in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* or shooting from the dicky of an ambassador, you always had an ex-factor about your work.

Kashyap: Yes sir. I had done a late PhD in my life, and it was on the transition from black and white to colour films in the works of Satyajit Ray, and I discovered so much about colours and framing I had no idea about. Tell me, Ray *babu*, was it all a part of a large scheme, or...

He is interrupted by Ghatak and Sen simultaneously.

Ghatak: Oh lord, no! It was the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions...

Sen: Nuh-uh! Powerful cinematography recollected in tranquillity.



Nair: If y'all are done quoting the Romantics, may we please shift our attention back to this dystopia? Or is your Xanadu too little too dear to your souls which rest in denial?

Borah: Let us then shift to a more open space, where we can discuss this more freely.

The directors run to the back of the stage and the stage rotates on its axis. The scene is now at Moulali, a few steps away from the bus stop of what was once called "Jora girja" (double mosque). 10 in the morning. Everyone from Scene I except Mirnal Sen have come together for a meeting.

A 221 bus passes by, shouting "Kalamnadir, Beckbagan, Minto Park...". The bus stop now reads, "Bharatpur."

Ghatak: These dumb idiots did not know that Moulali is a combination of Maula and Ali. That's why the name was spared. I still miss the mosques, though.

Gopalakrishnan: It's been a hundred years since a decent Bengali film was made. What was the last one?

A flute plays in the distance. Riddhi Sen (A Bengali actor from the twenty-first century) emerges with the first and last Bengali Filmfare in his hand.

Riddhi: Nagarkirtan.

"Right", murmurs someone from the crowd.

Enter John Abraham and Mani Ratnam.

Gopalakrishnan: Ah, finally! My compatriots from Tamil Nadu and Kerala are here. You people managed to hold them out till they cared to conduct elections.

Ratnam: It all began on the 7th of April, a hundred years ago. The Film Certificate Appellate Tribunal was abolished by the Ministry of Culture. Do you remember how pathbreakers like *Lipstick Under My Burkha* were released after the intervention of the Appellate?

Abraham: Yes, who could forget! The decades around the turn of the millennium were the finest that Indian cinema ever saw.

Ghatak: And we were fools to believe that the streaming service giants are here to help; that they would release those films of ours for the masses which the censor board did not allow to be released in theatres. Who knew the Covid-19 pandemic would hit the theatres so badly that they would run out of business and existence within 2030?

Someone runs into the scene. It is not clear who it is, because of the pollution in the air. They seem to be carrying something in their hands.

Ghatak: Who is it? Sen, is it you?

Sen: It is me indeed. Look what I have with me



He shows everyone a reel (not Instagram; a physical reel with film inside it)

Gopalakrishnan: Where on earth did you get that.

Kashyap smiles wryly. As a former resident of Bombay, he knows that the city is helping them fight back. After all, it was the two cities of Calcutta and Bombay which had produced most of the stellar films and directors of all times.

Ray: We are digressing, people! We need to decide on the subject matter of the film and how it would be shared with the masses...

Riddhi Sen: Manik babu, probably you have forgotten that at the advent of the twenty-second century, the Government of India made it mandatory for every registered citizen to have their WhatsApp account linked to their Passport and Aadhar Card. We can use that!

Everyone rejoices at this prospect. They mutually decide that the content of the film would be about a slow degradation in the reception of films and the past glory in which Indian cinema used to bask. Since there are no professional actors (except Riddhi), the directors and Riddhi Sen decide to act themselves. After all, in every director sleeps the essence of a magnanimous actor.

Borah: Should we start the show with a quick recap of the hundred golden years of Indian cinema?

Ghatak: What good will that do? They already teach that to kids these days, as a part of their “Ancient Art Forms” course. Our target audience, let us not forget, are not the octogenarians who contributed largely to this scarcity... err... let’s call it ‘the absence of quality cinema in the regional languages’.

Benegal: Yes, all that is fine. But has anyone ever wondered what language we are going to do it in?

Kashyap: Of course we can’t use English. That kinda defeats the purpose. Hindi is no good either.

Ray, Sen, and Ghatak look up in hopeful anticipation of their mother tongue outnumbering the other languages. Borah and Agarwala seem visibly upset. They are reminded of the decades of Bengali oppression in Assam which removed their language from the *diverse* map of the country and replaced it with Bengali, and then English. Gopalakrishnan catches the glimmer of hope in the Bengalis’ approach and cuts them short.

Gopalakrishnan: Before the Holy triumvirate of Bengali cinema come ahead and explain in great detail that Bengali is the *obvious* choice for the film, let me suggest that we follow the footsteps of Charles Chaplin and other silent filmmakers.

Ghatak (disgruntled): So the hashtag would be #ReturnToNature??

Nair: Again with the Romantics? What is this weird obsession?



Ghatak: Fine! You can have your own hashtag. Why don't you suggest something?

Tension builds up. The directors are apprehensive about the distinctive identities and regional alliances which they have, and they realise it holds in it, potential ground for animosity.

Abraham: Don't you know this is what they tried to do? Just like the British did for two hundred years? They told one of us that the other was making a better film and we went on to do everything in our power to sabotage it. Did we not? Especially the twenty-first-century directors! The government divided you according to languages, states and even what they called "standard" so that one Sanjay Leela Bansali would go up in arms against Anurag Kashyap.

Kashyap: You have a point. Let's keep hashtags for later, then. Who has the screenplay?

Nair: Screenplay! I didn't even know we had a plot? Where did a screenplay come from?

Ray: I would request everyone to please calm down. We are wasting valuable hours by discussing what to do, and how to do it. I say, *carpe diem*! We will figure it out as we go along. Something which has been done by greats in fiction writing as well, as I am sure you are aware. I have an idea for the first scene. We will show a bunch of..

[Transition]

The scene fades out into what appears to be the imagination of Ray.

It is a scene within a scene. The directors move like robots to one side of the stage and a cardboard piece is drawn from the wings, which separates the stage into two parts. They stay there unmoved for the entire duration of this metaplay.

A huge camera, placed on a tripod, turns automatically towards the crowd. A loud sigh of regret is heard.

A "CAMERA FOR SALE" board is dropped from the top. The writing is in English.

Someone from the audience shouts out, "Isn't this ironic"

Ray smirks in the other half of the stage and murmurs to himself, "Exactly." That murmur is all but heard by everyone.

The trolleys are full of rust. The mechanical half of the screen now shows a screen. The audience is visibly confused about whether this is a movie or a play.

A few close shots of some of the audience members are shown on that screen. The audience is surprised to see themselves on both sides of the performance. Amitabh Bachchan, Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Rajnikanth are amongst the ones whose faces are shown.

Audience member 1: What does this mean? Why are we being shown on the screen?

We had nothing to do with it.

Audience member 2: It? What is it?



All of a sudden, a camera mounts itself on a rusty trolley and slides closer to the front rows. The lens grows big in an attempt to zoom in...

The screen shows a notice which declares

ALL FILMS WRITTEN, PRODUCED OR DIRECTED IN REGIONAL LANGUAGES WILL HENCEFORTH BE NO LONGER AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION IN ANY AND ALL STREAMING SERVICES

Audience member 3: Are you implying that we are responsible for this? That we did not appreciate films made in regional languages enough for the Capitalist giants to be interested in them?

Audience member 2: No they can't be implying that! We are the next generation. Our great grandparents were no better! There was not a single streaming service, even a hundred years ago in 2021, where one could watch all the movies of Mrinal Sen, Mani Ratnam or Adoor Gopalakrishnan. What is the point of blaming this on us, when our ancestors did most of the damage?

Audience member 4: So what? We could have done everything in our power to bring some change, could we have not? We managed to get Disney to produce 17 Star Wars films. We could have surely gotten them to have at least SOME regional language films.

The directors, standing perfectly still, straighten their spine a little. The beam of pride is reverberating across the stage. Ray smiles the widest because he knows the age-old trick, from the times of Shakespeare, has worked again!

The camera turns towards the audience, clicks, and its shutter closes. The photo it clicks is that of the audience members, their heads down in shame.

The photo comes up on the screen presently, and slowly loses all its colour. The word "symbolic" is heard from the crowd.

Audience member 1: Is there absolutely nothing we can do?

Audience member 2: Oh please! When have we ever managed to change the decision of this government?

Audience member 3: We can still try. Let's take it up to them and attempt a mass unsubscription?

The camera, which had rolled itself towards the audience in unprecedented belligerence, rolls back to its position. The audience takes it as a positive hint. The screen starts showing snippets of colour here and there, much like the last few minutes of *Goopey Gayne Bagha Bayne*.

"...and cut"

ACT I SCENE II

Cumballa Hill, Mumbai, Maharashtra. The Censor Board's former office. Now, a heritage site with a hanging image of Pehlaj Nihalani, who is now considered to be the greatest Chairman of the Board's history. The CEOs of Netflix, Amazon and Disney, Baldwin Matthews, Timothy Bezos and Samantha Clarke respectively, have decided to meet in this rather odd location, just to get a hint of the situation at hand.

Clarke: Why has the subscription rate gone down so rapidly over the past few weeks? Can anyone tell me if its just Disney or all of us?

Bezoz: Amazon Prime has had many people discontinue their subscription as well.

The signature Netflix theme plays in the background with the word "Shame" falling down on the stage on a banner.

Bezoz: Yea, they have some sort of rebel movement going on. I did get a tweet along with the hashtag #BringBackRegionalFilms.

ACT I SCENE III

The stage is divided into two parts. On the left hand, all the directors are holding up placards that have "Bring Back Regional Films" written in their mother tongues. The right side of the stage has a screen that shows a zoomed-in shot of the directors' faces. The audience members who speak Bengali are reminded of a rather popular song created in 2021 by the resisters against fascism called "Nijeder Mawte Nijeder Gaan" [Our song and our opinion]. The stoic solemnity in their faces arouses hopes in the hearts of the film enthusiasts. All the placards have a border made of ancient film reels.

The words "apt usage of available material" is heard from the crowd.

The lights on the stage are dimmed out. It slowly becomes dark. After a pause of a few seconds, the lights are back on. A different set-up is visible.

The confederation of CEOs has decided to fly to Kolkata to have an inter-dimensional talk with the directors who have caused this uprising of the masses. The time is that of sunset. They have decided to meet at Princepghat, right next to where Fort Williams once stood.

Matthews: Where are they? They are not supposed to be late.

The other two look at the sun and then breathe a sigh of regret. They wonder when will Matthews understand. One of them is dangerously close to a facepalm.

They wander around. A seller of fast food identifies them as foreigners and sells them things at 10 times the original price. The city smiles wryly.



As the darkness descends upon the scene, some whispers of the heart are heard. The people around the area fade into darkness. The three billboards outside Fort Williams, Princepghat display the *heinous slogans*

DOWN WITH THE LANGUAGE IMPOSITIONS BRING
BACK REGIONAL FILMS STREAMING GIANTS,
ARE YOU STILL WATCHING?

The band of directors step in. It is noted that only Ray, Gopalakrishnan, Agarwala and Abraham have come.

Bezos: This is ridiculous. Why have only the four of you come?

Ray: Why the streaming giants can send their representatives, and we can't? We still live in a democracy, though we know that you don't.

Clarke: Let's not get carried away. Tell us what you want.

Gopalakrishnan: Nothing.

Matthews: What do you mean? We are ready to talk about the terms and conditions of bringing back a lot of regional films to our streaming services! We have talked it over amongst ourselves!

Agarwala: We don't need your sympathy.

Bezos: Then what will happen to the films? They will get lost and people will eventually forget that these films existed. Why don't you take our generous offer?

Ray: Let me quote myself and say, "I don't take money for work that I have not done." In this case, we know you are trying to set us up for a betrayal in the future so that no one can bring up an issue like this again.

Abraham: Yeah exactly. Don't you think we already know by now that all you'll do is buy the streaming rights for some of these movies and dump them in one corner of your websites, make them unavailable for most of the countries, and not give them subtitles? The list goes on. You might even use Search Engine Optimisation to make sure no one ever finds these movies, as well.

There is visible panic on the faces of the three foreigners. Suddenly, the stage turns 180 degrees and the backstage comes to the forefront. A huge bundle of papers, held together by paperweights. It is not clear what the paperweights are. The three walls are lined up with posters from innumerable regional films. Some of them are torn apart, some are old and indistinguishable. A zoom-in to the paperweights reveals them to be stacks of CDs and DVDs which were declared obsolete more than a century ago.

The stage shakes up a bit, resembling something of an earthquake. The paperweights fall off onto the side of the audience. Surprisingly, the audience members (some of whom are recognised from a previous scene) are carrying jute bags and DVD holders.



The CDs and DVDs fall on the floor of the hall. The audience members make a line, pick up the ones they want to, and go back to their seats. Without any paperweights, the huge bundle of papers fly up and about in the air. People realise that the papers contain the scripts for some stellar regional films. They are flying in the air when the stage takes another 180-degree turn, revealing the sweating faces of the three CEOs and the contented faces of the directors.

Audience member 1: But. I have so many questions

Audience member 2: Like what? They don't have time to answer all of your questions.

Ask the most pertinent one.

Audience member 1: How did a bunch of dead directors manage to communicate to the ones who live and breathe?

Audience member 2 smiles. Their eyes glow in the happiness which they feel.

They point towards the stage. A huge placard is being rolled down on the stage. It slowly unfurls itself, clearing most of the doubts of the people about the discrepancies in this play.

The placard reads,

WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

Curtain Call.

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“BHAVANI CINEMA”

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(Trans. Juan Ignacio Oliva)

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“Viewing Bhavani Cinema” (Kolkata, 17 August 2019).

Hay un lugar poético que interpela a quien lee:

A ti que lees. A ti que decides creer.

Son lugares de advertencia:

Alerta, cuidado, presencia.

[Ahí también hay cines de advertencia]

Desde allí se transmutan espacios de advertencia:

De cuatro fases lunares que se repiten,

que hacen eco en su supervivencia.

Hay lugares en la guerra que dan seguridad;

Cobijo, alimento, esperanza.

Hay también lugares tras la guerra

que persisten

que recogen conocimiento

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que guardan recuerdos
que metamorfosean memorias.
Y existen lugares que muestran guerras, aliento y transformación.

Bhavani Cinema es lugar, espacio y manual de vuelta.
Ahí existe un sitio donde cohabitan todas las líneas anteriores

Sin verso
Con intención de verso
Con silencios

Es un espacio de referencia:

Perenne
Anterior al GPS
Facilitador de conversaciones
Confort de una dirección precisa
Referencia para saberse en el barrio, cercano.
Recuerdo para conocerse en la proximidad de un posible
retorno.

Bhavani Cinema prosigue en su advertencia:

Su contrato de visión, tiempo, nación, historia y narración.
Advierte porque recoge monzones, promesas y furtividades.

Es lugar porque se posiciona en el mapa

porque ilustrará posibles grúas que construirán torres
porque es contraste a los hangares donde se higienizan los nuevos Bhavani
Cinema
porque muestra películas de carteles y canciones y tiempos y espacios

Bhavani Cinema es espacio de advertencia:

Geolocalizaciones, huidas, pantallas imperfectas, respiraciones y posibilidades.

Bhavani Cinema es manual de vuelta:

para recoger pigmentos
para embadurnarse de historias.

[There stands a poetic site that reads those who read:
You who read. You who decide to be a believer.

* Jorge Diego-Sánchez wants to acknowledge and express his gratitude to the Project "Narrating Resilience, Achieving Happiness?" (PID2020-113190GB-C22) (Entidad financiadora: MICINN; IP Ana María Fraile-Marcos). Both Diego-Sánchez and Oliva also share their indebtedness to both Ratnakara Research Group (led by Felicity Hand at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) & AEEII (Spanish Association for Interdisciplinary India Studies: aeeii.org).



Warning places, they stand:
alertness, care, presence.

[Warning cinemas stand also there]

From there, warning sites transmute:
Of four moon phases repeating,
Echoing survivals.

There are war zones that make you safe;
That offer shelter, nourishment, hope.
There are also postwar loci

That persevere
That gather knowledge
That save remembrances
That transfigure memories

And there are places displaying war, inspiration and transformation.

Bhavani Cinema remains a place, a space and a guide for returning.
There stands a site where all the previous lines live together:

Without a line
Wanting to be a line
With silences

A benchmark, it stands:

Continual
Prior to GPS
Enabling conversations
A straight comforting address
A neighbouring reference, so close.
An easy meeting point for contact in a likely comeback.

Bhavani Cinema keeps on in its warning:

A contract about gaze, time, nation, history and narration.

It warns because it collects monsoons, promises and secrecies.

A place it stands because it can be located in maps

Because it will signal future cranes to build up towers

Because it contrasts the hangars where new Bhavani Cinemas are sterilized

Because it shows films with posters and songs and times and spaces

Bhavani Cinema is a warning place:

Geolocations, runaways, faulty screens, breathings and possibilities.

Bhavani Cinema is a guide for returning:

To pick up pigments
To plaster with stories.]



Bhavani Cinema es un cine local en Kolkata (Calcuta, India). Se encuentra en frente de la parada de metro Rabindra Sarovar. La siguiente es Kalighat, donde se localiza uno de los templos más famosos que alberga la ciudad. La anterior es Mahanayak Uttam Kumar, Tollygunge, la factoría de cine bengalí. O quizás una es la siguiente y la otra la anterior. En esa línea de metro (sólo hay una, en línea recta, pero con dos destinos, por eso línea 1 y 2 en algunas guías de viaje) se recorren Jatin Das Park (donde se celebra el Kolkata People's Film Festival, un festival de cine del que se reseña la edición de 2020 en este volumen), Maidan, Rabindra Sadan (con el cine que muestra las películas clásicas bengalíes y los nuevos estrenos más independientes), Girish Park (desde donde se camina a Jorasanko, la casa de la familia de Rabinandranath Tagore), o lugares claves para la historia de India como Dakshineswar, Esplanade, Park Street o Central. En todas ellas hay calles y edificios representados y archivados por Satyajit Ray, Aparna Sen o Amit R. Biswas, por citar algunas de las figuras que aparecen en este ejemplar de la *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*

En mis primeros viajes a Calcuta, Bhavani Cinema era el lugar en el que iba a visitar a mi familia india, donde volvía a mis amigos. No existía Uber, tampoco los móviles, y montaba en un taxi Ambassador amarillo, sin conocer palabra de bengalí. Confiaba en pronunciar bien ese lugar para, desde allí, perderme por las calles que me llevaran hasta el hogar bengalí que me recogía. Cada viaje proporcionaba expresiones bengalíes: lenguaje, historias y mucha cultura. Por las mañanas me encerraba en bibliotecas, paseos, entrevistas... y por la tarde (acabaron siendo también las mañanas) me perdía en lo que comenzaba a través de Bhavani Cinema.

Aparecieron los móviles, el Uber, la seguridad de marcar un lugar en un mapa y no tener que intercambiar palabra. Bhavani Cinema era el punto de referencia. Ahora sí, con la posibilidad brindada por la precedida a la seguridad de la localización, la misma con la que la experiencia de Durga Puja se podía realizar de estación a estación, a cualquier hora pues el metro abría 24 horas.

Bhavani Cinema fue lugar de reencuentro con familia en un lado de la carretera, en otro, bajo monzones, bajo calores, bebiendo un agua de coco, deseando escapar, ansiando permanecer. Todavía bromeamos con ese espacio de memoria, nostalgia y constante reinención de historias (personales y ajenas).

Quizás Bhavani Cinema se convierta en torres de pisos con todas las comodidades. Y desde allí cada habitación albergue una pantalla desde las que se proyecten o inventen historias en las que ya está Bhavani Cinema. O quizás se mantenga, como lugar de advertencia, como estrategia de disidencia, como posibilidad de una nueva historia.

Hoy insiste en el recuerdo Bhavani Cinema, metamorfosea el escape a la permanencia de la impermanencia, al saberse entre historias, memorias, familias y amistades. Y sí, Bhavani Cinema continúa como lugar, espacio y, como cualquier representación cultural, como manual de vuelta a las historias para entender(nos), comprender(se) y saber(se) persistentes en la variabilidad.

[Bhavani Cinema is a local cinema in Kolkata (Calcutta, India). It stands opposite Rabindra Sarovar underground stop. Next stop is Kalighat, where one of



the most famous temples in the city is located. The previous one, Mahanayak Uttam Kumar, Tollygunge, is site of the Bengal Cinema industry. Or perhaps it can be all the other way round, I guess. In that underground line (there is only one, straight ahead, but with two terminals, that is why line 1 & 2 in some tourist guides) there can be visited Jatin Das Park (where the Kolkata People's Film Festival takes place, and whose 2020 edition is reviewed in this issue), Maidan, Rabindra Sadan (hosting not also classic Bengal films but also the newest premiers made by independent houses), Girish Park (departure point for Jorasanko, Rabindranath Tagore's family house), or some other benchmarks for Indian history, like Dakshineswar, Esplanade, Park Street or Central. All of them plenty of streets and buildings displayed and stored by Satyajit Ray, Aparna Sen or Amit R. Biswas, to name just a few of the protagonists of this volume of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*.

During my first trips to Kolkata, Bhavani Cinema was the place where I could visit my Indian family, where I returned to my friends. Uber didn't exist, neither mobile phones, and thus I was seating a yellow Ambassador taxi, without knowing a word of Bengali. I trusted to pronounce that place properly, so from there I could lose myself in the streets heading for the Bengali home that was fostering me. Every trip made me Bengali language wiser: slangs, stories and a lot of culture. In the mornings I was busy with libraries, walks, interviews... in the evenings (which ended to be in the mornings as well) I lost myself in what Bhavani Cinema gave me for a start.

Mobile phones appeared, Uber, the safeness of marking a place in a map without a conversation. Bhavani Cinema was the point of reference. But now, with the possibility offered by the safety of a geolocation, the same certainty that the Durga Puja can be made possible any time, from one stop to another, because the underground opened 24/7.

Bhavani Cinema was certainly a meeting point for the family on one side of the road, on the other, under monsoon rains, extreme heat, drinking coconut water, wishing to run away, and yearning to remain. Still kidding about that place for memory, nostalgia and constant rewriting of stories (own and alien).

Maybe Bhavani Cinema will become commodified skyscrapers. And from there every single room will host a screen where to project or invent stories with Bhavani Cinema in them. Or it may remain as a sort of warning place, a strategy for dissidence, a possibility for alternative stories.

Today Bhavani Cinema keeps ringing in the ear, transmuted a runaway to permanence from impermanence, knowing it is filled with stories, memories, families and friendships. And yes, Bhavani Cinema remains that place, space and, as any other cultural representation, a guide for returning to stories to guess(ing), understand(ing), know(ing) how to persist in variability.]



“KALIGHAT”

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con los pies descalzos se siente el suelo
que rodea la senda de los creyentes
la sangre derramada sobre la ofrenda
en la orilla del eje de los esclavos

el tiempo no corre sobre la dama
que rescata la vida y mata a su paso
en los ojos se advierte una fiera llama
de pasión desmedida y la luz de un rayo

hoy me mezclo como un peregrino extraño
en la cola que sigue bullendo y canta
letanías de adoración y en trance
resucito la historia y regreso al huevo

en la sombra que ciñe la tarde oscura
un ritual desnudo se desvanece
el humo recubre la ceremonia

calzado regreso a la vida en sueño
portando la antorcha de lo imperfecto
en la frente un sucio surco empolvado

[on bare feet one can feel the soil
that weaves the path followed by believers
the blood spilt over the offering
on the shore of the axis of passing slaves

time does not count for that lady
who rescues life and slays it with her wander
holding a ferocious gaze that is achy
of irremediable passion and the glow of a lightning

today I let myself mix as a strange pilgrim
on the line that bustles and murmurs

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litanies of worship and in a trance
I bring history to life and return to cocoon

in the shade that binds the dark gloaming
a naked ritual fades
the smoke clothing the ceremony

with shoes I return to life in a dream
holding the torch of imperfection
with a dusted furrow on the forehead]



* Juan Ignacio Oliva is indebted to the energy produced by two research projects that make him work and visit Kolkata and revolve around its cultural substance and lore: “Rhizomatic Communities: Myths of Belonging in the Indian Ocean World” [PGC2018-095648-B-I00] (Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, IP Felicity Hand, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) & “Aesthetics, Ethics and Strategies of the New Migratory Cartographies and Transcultural Identities in Twenty-First-Century Literature(s) in English” [PID2019-109582GB-IOO], granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (IP José Manuel Estévez-Saa, Universidade da Coruña). Both Oliva & Diego-Sánchez also acknowledge the help of Ratnakara Research Group (led by Felicity Hand at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) & AEEII (Spanish Association for Interdisciplinary India Studies: aeii.org).

REVIEWS

People's cinema with people's support: a review of the 7th Kolkata people's film festival (Kolkata, India–January 2020)

The 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival ran from 23–26 January 2020 at Uttam Mancha, Hazra, Kolkata, India. The 7th edition screened 34 films across a wide range of compelling stories from India and South Asia. Organized by the People's Film Collective (PFC), the People's Film Festival is a people supported, independently organized, volunteer led cinema festival that showcases politically committed contemporary documentary and fiction cinema from the sub-continent. The festival brings together filmmakers, students, workers, students, artists, writers, journalists, as well as a wider cross-section of people to interact and form friendships and camaraderie over films and conversations.

The People's Film Collective has stated that while selecting the films, the screening committee had in mind that we are living in a time of increasing rise of home-grown fascists. While people of an entire valley (identify and explain the conditions of the Revocation of Status if you are referring to Kashmir) are caged into silence, entire communities are being othered and threatened to be stripped of their citizenship, as a two-nation theory rears its ugly head once again amidst ghosts of the Partition. Moreover, it felt very relevant for the time of deepening climate crisis, when even the seasons have visibly shifted patterns, causing immense distress to the ecology, agriculture and to the most marginalized sections of our people. At this juncture, the 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival was received as a space for renewed conversations between everyone committed to celebrate people's agency and their putting up cultural and political re-

sistance against the current national and state government.

The 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival showcased a variety of films screened under various sections: *Stories from India: Long Documentary and Short Documentary*, *Stories from Southasia: Documentary*, and *New Indian Fiction: Long Fiction and Short Fiction*. Several films had their Indian Premiere These features included Biju Toppo's *Jharia*, Leesa Gazi's *Rising Silence*, Matjaz Pinter's *Taking on the Storm*, Varun Sharma's *Darroj* or Sakshi Gulati's *Neon*. Several films had their Kolkata Premiere such as Pankaj Rishi Kumar's *Janani's Juliet*, Renu Savant's *Mod Bhaang*, Lalit Vachani's *Recasting Selves*, Naveen Tejaswi's *Bidugade (The Redemption)* or Atanu Mukherjee's *Wig*.

The opening day of the festival was marked by an Opening Keynote Address by Arundhati Roy. Roy commented that “the violence of inclusion and the violence of exclusion are precursors of a convulsion that could alter the foundations of India and rearrange its meaning and its place in the world.” Roy contended on how Islamophobia is normalised, and she expressed concern over the politics of “a tiered citizenship”, where there are a set of rules prescribed to decide what being a citizen is. She complained about the relevance of caste in contemporary Indian life and celebrated the possibilities opened by the popular initiatives and funding of the festival. The inaugural ceremony ended with the release of the seventh volume of the Magazine, *Protidiner Cinema*.

The closing film of the ceremony, *Rising Silence*, a powerful documentary by theatre actor and writer Leesa Gazi on the Birangona women of Bangladesh, drew a stunning response from the silence of the audience, who was moved to tears. It recounted the horrific real-life stories of



nine women who survived the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, Gazi takes a piercing gaze on the aftermath of war, where the women, who were rape camp survivors, were left to rebuild their lives dealing with violence, ostracization and stigma.

The concert of poetry, music and conversation by Amir Aziz and Moushumi Bhounik, aided by Tajdar Junaid, marked the closing ceremony of the festival that translated into a night of hope, memory and poetry. The 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival was uncompromising in its selection of films and documentaries and provided ample space for conversations

and discourses regarding the current political climate. Organized by a crew of volunteers and marketed without any additional table for cutting the biggest names, this edition of the film festival was headlined with the premieres and conversations that felt expansive in its growth and sustained optimism.

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Review of *Revolving Around India(s): Alternative Images, Emerging Perspectives*. Edited by Juan Ignacio Oliva-Cruz, Antonia Navarro-Tejero and Jorge Diego Sánchez. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, 313 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5275-4524-3).

India, as an isolated word, may not adequately conjure up the sheer complexity of the country for which it stands. Its ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity creates an amalgam of superimposed selves that intersect with issues of gender, caste or class, which in turn lead to the outright rejection of Indianness as a one-sided, monolithic category. Whether through the lens of pluralism (Sen), fuzzy multiculturalism (Mitra), or contact/conflict theory (Gundelach), those manifold identity markers apply to a population of nearly 1.4 billion whose circumstances ultimately influence the overall perception of their homeland. The editors of *Revolving Around India(s): Alternative Images, Emerging Perspectives* dive deep into these matters through a comprehensive volume that covers three core elements in the forging of any identity, namely tradition(s), distance(s) and difference(s). By adopting a holistic approach to those interconnected tags, the twenty-one selected articles illuminate how history, space and culture combine to shape not only the Indian nation, but the infinite Indias within.

The contributions in the opening section –“Revolving Around Tradition(s)”– offer a diachronic perspective on faith, epics and policies, as well as a thorough analysis of their changing social significance. The scholarly inclusion of minority and minoritised groups such as Christians or Dalits, for instance, calls into question an assumption of national homogeneity which is further challenged by alternative readings of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In their respective chapters, Meenakshi Malhotra and S. Asha address gynocentric, polyvocal narratives which contest the patriarchal undercurrent in said myths without denying their pivotal role in the construction of an Indian imaginary. Along the same lines, the remaining articles explore the transculturation and assimilation of Shakespearean and Brontëan texts, thus breathing life into the postcolonial interpretation of English classics

in both the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora. In fact, the Bollywoodisation of *Wuthering Heights* deftly analysed by Laura Viñas Valle and Blanca M. Lara González encapsulates the dominant idea of the section: a much-needed acknowledgement of identities off the radar or in the making which, in their defiance of essentialism and purism, create new spaces and senses of belonging for subjects like those at the heart of the next segment.

“Revolving Around Distance(s)” evaluates the subcontinent from its periphery through in-depth chapters on the works of Rohinton Mistry, Sujata Bhatt, Hanif Kureishi, Amitav Ghosh, and fellow indo-diasporic authors such as Uma Parameswaran, who is herself a contributor. Her first-person experiential article produces an insight as to how notions of hyphenated ethnicities, inbetweenness or migrant melancholia have profoundly influenced her “Forty-Five Years of Diasporic Life and Writings”. Literature is indeed a valuable tool for the interdisciplinary study of diasporas and transnational communities, the latter no longer “consisting of a bilateral relationship between the homeland and overseas communities,” but being “caught in fluxes” (Gowricharn 4). Likewise, the politics of location are of utmost importance in Bandana Chakrabarty’s chapter on the traumatic Partition of India. Through her close reading of selected short fiction, the author perfectly captures the popular attempts at coming to terms with a past of displacements and relocations that is equally ever-present and defensively forgotten, especially for women, as brought to the forefront by the feminist current of historiography on which she draws. By the end of the section, it becomes apparent that mobility –be it the outcome of (de) colonisation, globalisation or even free will– also involves a constant cultural flow able to blur the same national boundaries which, despite often constricting the definition of a homeland, do not prevent diasporic identities from surpassing geographical limits.

Otherness and its associated coping strategies are the main focus of “Revolving Around Difference(s)”. Indian people, in the broadest sense of the term, “can be many things *and* one thing” (Tharoor 126). Hence, the articles that



make up this segment show how deviations from normative beliefs and patterns of behaviour may result in a feeling of alienation which either enforces social exclusion or, if shared, strengthens the bonds between those affected. For example, in the comparative literary analysis carried out by Luz González Rodríguez and Juan Ignacio Oliva, the pursuit of written self-definition acts as a means for doubly colonised subjects to transcend cultural schizophrenia. Rejection on the grounds of race and gender also features prominently on Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri's and Antonia Navarro-Tejero's pieces, which incorporate queer performativity on the one hand and sexuality-based abjection on the other. The following contributions shift the attention towards casteism and religious stereotyping. However, inasmuch as discrimination harbours the potential for dissension, writing can become a form of resilient activism which, as Jorge Diego Sánchez argues in his closing examination of Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, could dismantle dominant structures of power and ultimately change the world if only readers were willing to listen.

All in all, the coherently structured, substantial book that is *Revolving Around India(s)* manages to unpack the unconventional points of view anticipated in its title. The well-balanced corpus of household and extracanonical artists, albeit predominantly literary, evinces that there are still untrodden paths to follow in the study of what it means to be Indian. As such, the volume should appeal alike to academics across disciplines and to general audiences with an informed interest in the subcontinent and its diaspora, for it does an excellent job of recovering unheard voices and reclaiming contested spaces that can only be found by repeatedly going round identitarian dynamics. Although "literature is not a blueprint for action" (Spivak 25), it may instead be one for the (re)presentation, (re)consideration and (re)cognition of fluid subjects whose mere existence poses a threat to movements of a dichotomic nature such as contemporary Hindutva. Composite nationalism may at first seem to be a more inclusive political model, but it is a plurality beyond nationalist boundaries that truly transforms India into the tapestry of

identities reflected in this volume. It is, in conclusion, a timely addition to the growing body of indological research, and one that underlines the urgency of turning the spotlight on off-centre selves to gain a more accurate understanding of an otherwise overshadowed India.

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Review of *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India: Approaches in a Global World*. Edited by Carmen Escobedo de Tapia and Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, 221 pp. ISBN 978-1-5275-5780-2).

In an often mystifying, and orientalisering vein, it has been (and still is) unfortunately common to imagine India as the locus of a radically distinct, even *purier* form of spirituality than that of the presumably more materialistic, secularised West. It is in countering such discourses that the volume *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India* finds its primary justification and its critical impetus. Although heterogeneous and transdisciplinary, this collection of essays is clearly structured around the deceptively simple but urgently necessary argument that the spiritual and the corporeal are inseparable and intertwined, and that, despite ideological mystifications, this applies to Indian cultures as much as to any other culture. Escobedo de Tapia and Moreno-Álvarez's edition indeed makes a strong case against the dualism and dichotomies of much Western thought. As they argue, what one could call a *corporealised spirituality* or a *spiritual corporeality* is an intrinsic part of every aspect of culture in its broadest possible definition, from religious practices to socioeconomic theory, going through sculpture, literature, and film.

From the contributors' different perspectives, the volume also makes clear that both the spiritual and the corporeal elements of Indian cultures are to be understood as profoundly overdetermined by the multiple processes and hierarchies of post/neocolonial global capitalism, a world-system that continues to subordinate India as a country, as well perpetuating structures of oppression within the country. In other words, the book illustrates how the *Indian spirits* and the *Indian bodies* are full of traces and wounds of the country's history and present. Moreover, the book also illustrates how postcolonial and transnational bodies and souls, far from being objectified or victimised *others*, are potential agents for resistance and emancipation from entrenched systems of domination along the axes of race, nation, caste, gender, or class.

In a much more evocative manner than the usual collection of academic essays, the first contribution is a short story, "The Landing," by Rohini Bannerjee, which stands as the corporealisation of the book's spirit. The creative piece is a first-person narration of an Indo-Canadian character's arrival in India for a temporary retreat in an ashram. The story offers a set of symbols, characters and situations which, with a suggestively poetic sensuality, foreshadow and complement the remaining contributors' academic pieces. The story showcases, among other things, the liminal subjective experience of a diasporic-global individual, the coexistence of the (post)colonial with the precolonial in its descriptions of the Indian cityscape, as well as the profound entanglement of spirituality and embodiment. This last trend is provocatively illustrated by associating *spiritual symbols* (a butterfly or an ashram) with the more corporeal connotations of sexual desire. As shall be now noted throughout this review, the remainder of the volume makes the work of theoretically elaborating and/or concretely analysing many of these themes.

The second chapter by Murali Sivaramakrishnan elaborates upon Neo-Vedanta philosophy, particularly as developed by the mystic Sri Aurobindo (1872-1952). Countering the orientalist preconception of Indian culture as spiritual rather than rational, Sivaramakrishnan illustrates how both the spiritual and the rational were an integral part of both Vedanta and Neo-Vedanta, contending that such holistic philosophies may provide a healthier form of self-awareness, as opposed to the materialistic and one-dimensional worldview of neoliberal globalisation.

Javier Gil re-examines the capabilities approach to socio-economic inequalities, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, in the next chapter. Specifically, Gil argues that Sen's and Nussbaum's theoretical frameworks for understanding human development and living conditions are deeply indebted to said authors' personal experiences in India, where the experiences of low-class and female bodies allowed them to nuance and to flesh out their liberal critiques of socio-economic injustice.



The representation of bodies in Indian sculpture articulates Eva Fernández del Campo-Barbadillo's piece, where she draws on a wide range of examples, accompanied by visual illustrations. Fernández's main line of argument again resonates with the whole volume, since she proposes to theorise Indian sculpture as both mundanely sensuous, linked to our sense of touch over and above sight, as well as profoundly spiritual, an art in which "the fluidity of the universe turns out to be stone" (56).

Guillermo Rodríguez-Martín's contribution follows, engaging in a close reading of A.K. Ramanujan's poetic opus and personal diaries. Among other themes, Rodríguez-Martín observes and assesses Ramanujan's concern with the difficulty of connecting spiritually with the here-and-now material reality—a preoccupation with what may be referred to as the elusive spectrality of the corporeal and the material, a seeming paradox that poetically illustrates the book's main concern with the underlying unity of spirit and matter.

The next essay is authored by Ángela Mena-González, who studies Anita Desai's *Feasting, Feasting* from a theoretical combination of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. This chapter strives to make the case that the combination of said theories, with their respective reassessments of our relation to the land, would allow for a greater spiritual self-awareness, especially in female postcolonial subjects such as Desai's novel's protagonist.

Literary subjectivities often illustrate and foster processes of self-awareness. In the following piece, Jorge Diego-Sánchez focuses on the representation of misogynistic-patriarchal violence in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* and on how the main character of the novel comes to terms with her history and her own stories. In a very socially oriented, critical reading, Diego-Sánchez reads the novel as an index of what Arundhati Roy calls "the flawed democracy of India" (qtd. in 107), a patriarchally and racially hierarchised status quo which perpetuates itself through the systematic infliction of spiritual and corporeal violence against women, especially against those of lower castes and minority religious groups.

Subsequently, Elena Avanzas-Álvarez continues and complements this critique of misogynistic violence by focusing upon the media discourses surrounding a real case, the 2012 New Delhi Gang Rape. Avanzas-Álvarez's first point is that such crime is not an isolated incident, symptomatic of "Third World" issues, but rather part of a global "epidemic of feminicides" (133), which should be (although they are often not) discursively approached without reproducing the patriarchal, victim-blaming, and sexually objectifying biases of traditional crime narratives.

Turning the focus towards cinema, Francesca Rosso's examines and theorises the symbolism of dance in Bollywood. Echoing the chapter on Indian sculpture, Rosso begins by suggesting that dance is also "a harmonious fusion of sensuality and transcendence" (138). Subsequently, the essay elaborates a series of theoretical notions by which to apprehend Bollywood dance in its whole complexity, specifically approaching it as an example of haptic (rather than optic) cinema, and of affective (rather than cognitive) realism.

Returning to the epitome of a *corporeal-spiritual practice*, Rocío Riestra-Camacho's contribution focuses on yoga's recent commodification in the media as a weight-loss method. More specifically, the chapter re-traces the introduction of yoga into the West, to then critically analyse how it was gradually commodified, feminised and presented as merely a fitness activity. Hence, holistic yoga, part of "the unmarketable Hindi world" (154), was invisibilized by an emphasis on its more instrumental and *functional* use-value.

María Tausiet's subsequent chapter is concerned with the cultural history of chakras, the key symbols of a tradition of allegorical anatomy in which the body is regarded as inseparable from its spiritual life force (prana). Besides noting how this discourse (despite the stereotype) is not exclusive to India, Tausiet is particularly interested in examining how, upon arriving in the West, the complex idea of the chakra became increasingly literalised and related to medical discourses, often with mystifying and/or simplifying effects.

The volume concludes with Antonio Ballesteros-González's contribution, which touches



upon the interrelation of Victorian and Indian spectral narratives (examining not originals, but their English translations). Elaborating upon the socio-economic, the geographic and the psychological connotations of ghosts, Ballesteros-González explores, through a series of short stories, the “spectral dialectic between the colonizers and the colonized” (187), taking ghosts as spectral embodiments of underlying historical (and present) (post/neo)colonial tensions.

It is with such an interdisciplinary variety of approaches that the volume *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India* provides a thought-provoking, prism-like approach to the deeply problematic and perennial human concern with the interrelation of body and soul. In so doing, the volume in its entirety not only debunks the simplistic reductionism of dualistic, Cartesian thought: it also opens up, to the non-specialist academic reader, a world of cultural nuances, bodily diversity and social conflicts in India that may otherwise remain hidden under the inescap-

able veil of orientalist ideologies. As Escobedo de Tapia and Moreno-Álvarez’s introduction puts it, *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India* “illustrates the two dimensions of the Indian self as a result of the contact between two cultures [the colonized and the colonizer] with an evident and reciprocal influence on each other” (3). Moreover, the book achieves all this without falling into a re-mystification or idealisation of Indian culture. Instead, it confronts the reader with a problematic and provocative picture of the multidimensional, on-going processes that conform the country and its cultures, not shying away from a critique of social injustices when it is (as it always is) necessary.

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