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## Bridehood Revisited

Disarming Concepts of Gender and Culture in Recent  
Asian British Film

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# **Bridehood Revisited**

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# Bridehood Revisited: Disarming Concepts of Gender and Culture in Recent Asian British Film

Ellen Dengel-Janic and Lars Eckstein

Who wants to cook Aloo Gobi when you can bend a ball like Beckham?  
Jess in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002)

Housekeeping is a much overlooked skill, for which, I think, I blame feminism.  
Tanya Turner in *How to Be a Footballer's Wife* (2003)<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

Interviewed after the German premiere of her box office sensation *Bend It Like Beckham* in autumn 2002, director Gurinder Chadha happily claimed that she had ‘a letter from Tony Blair saying how much he loved the film. He enjoyed it especially because it represented his Britain, a very diverse, multi-cultural Britain. He also sent a House of Commons claret’.<sup>2</sup> Those who wonder why exactly Tony Blair should have been such an enthusiastic fan of Chadha’s feature film will find ample food for thought in Rajeev Balasubramanyam’s essay on ‘The Rhetoric of Multiculturalism’ in this volume; Balasubramanyam interprets Britain’s multiculturalism as a corporate propaganda, as the carefully calculated marketing of a brand in a New Labour image campaign which only superficially propagates cultural diversity, while in reality functioning as an instrument of social control and ‘white’ cultural hegemony. His reading of *Bend It Like Beckham* accordingly accuses Chadha of deliberate complicity with this official multi-culturalist ‘Cool Britannia’ ideology, by creating a fantasy-structure which celebrates Indio-British assimilation to white British standards in a deceptive feel-good comedy.

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<sup>1</sup> Jodi Reynolds, *How to Be a Footballer's Wife* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Shed Productions, 2003) p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Sternberg, ‘Gurinder Chadha in Interview’, in Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg, *Bidding for the Mainstream? Black and Asian Film since the 1990s* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 245-52 (p. 246).

While we do not wish to entirely disagree with Rajeev Balasubramanyam's assessment of the ideological scope of recent Asian British mainstream cinema, we wish to complicate some of the arguments by taking a detour via questions of gender. Our starting point is that Chadha's 'bidding for the mainstream' in the larger context of Black and Asian Film<sup>3</sup> is inextricably entwined with a bid on the cultural capital associated with Jane Austen. This, of course, is quite hard to miss regarding her 2004 feature *Bride and Prejudice*, which presents us with a Bollywood-style adaptation of Jane Austen's classic romantic comedy, yet also pertains to other Asian British films after 2000.<sup>4</sup> What specifically interests us in this context are the concomitant gender politics in Asian British film: if films of the 1980s and 1990s such as Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) (based on screenplays by Hanif Kureishi), David Attwood's *Wild West* (1992), Udayan Prasad's *Brothers in Trouble* (1996) or Chadha's own *Baji on the Beach* (1996) share an interest in transgressing norms of gender and culture – be they 'Western' or 'Eastern' –, the advent of international mainstream success in the wake of Damien O'Donnell's *East is East* (1999, based on a screenplay by Ayub Kahn-Din) seems to come hand in hand with a retraction into the moral universe of Jane Austen's late Romantic petit bourgeoisie.

In the following, we will argue that this retraction is not exclusively explicable as catering to nostalgic fantasy-structures of mainstream Britain, or to what Paul Gilroy has termed 'postcolonial melancholia',<sup>5</sup> covered up in the rhetoric of multiculturalism. By contextualising Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*, we will illustrate instead that Jane Austen's outlook on gender is rather compatible with the ideologies and fantasy-structures which have been created by mainstream Bollywood films for India and its diaspora during the 1980s and 1990s. The current fashionability of Jane Austen's moral universe, we will argue, is thus not only a specifically British phenomenon, but rather presents us with a transcultural 'common moral denominator' providing the material for filmic plots which

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<sup>3</sup> See Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg's *Bidding for the Mainstream? Black and Asian Film since the 1990s* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004) for a comprehensive overview of trends and developments until 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Her bid certainly is a timely one, as the global popularity and marketability of Jane Austen's work seems at an unprecedented high in the new millennium. In 2007, Anne Hathaway (*The Devil Wears Prada*) will star as Jane Austen herself in a cinematic biographical take titled *Becoming Jane*, while Austen's characters, and Lizzy Bennet in particular, are played by the popular sex symbols of our time; Aishwarya Rai (voted 'most beautiful miss world of all times' in 2000) was followed suit by Keira Knightley (voted 'sexiest woman in the world' by *FHM UK* in 2006) in Joe Wright's production of *Pride and Prejudice* in 2005. On the 'Austen Cult and Cultures,' see Claudia L. Johnson in Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 211-226.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge 2004).



promise cross-over success. The apparent alignment with a global rather than dominantly British or European market, as we wish to illustrate by reading a representative selection of other post-2000 Asian British films, indeed comes with a conscious sanctioning of transgressions of norms of gender and culture and is indicative of a larger trend in Asian British film making.

## II. Gender Nostalgia Meets Bollywood: *Bride and Prejudice*

We are currently experiencing an unmistakable hype around Jane Austen on cinema and TV screens in Britain and, indeed, across the globe. An ever growing (paying) public is obviously attracted to Austen's heroines – or more specifically, their mediated film versions. Their amorous quests and moral dilemmas, their engagement with family values, class restrictions and economic problems, and the overarching concept of gender informing these concerns as embedded in the ubiquitous marriage plots, it seems, matter to women today. Germaine Greer rather unexpectedly explicates the appeal of Austen's heroines for 21st century female audiences thus:

Austen herself was, like most women of any age, no dazzling beauty. Her heroines too are middle class, ordinary, with no special advantages of looks or education or wealth, and yet they are heroines. The battles they fight are the battles of every day. They struggle for self-control in agonising circumstances. They turn aside so that other people can't see the hot tears that start into their eyes [...] Though 190 years have passed since Austen's death, women's emotional lives still present the same challenges.<sup>6</sup>

This, of course, sounds like a far cry from Greer's revolutionary feminist rhetoric of the 1970s. Surely, Jane Austen has been claimed by many as a feminist – Margaret Kirkham, for instance, positions her firmly within a feminist tradition, showing the strong resemblance between Wollstonecraft and Austen and positing that Austen has to be understood as partaking in 'the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct'.<sup>7</sup> Particularly, Austen's famous technique of focalisation and irony crucially challenges patriarchal stereotyping of women as non-rational beings. Yet if Jane Austen's art or ideology can thus indeed be considered emancipated in historical perspective, this does not automatically make for a feminist

<sup>6</sup> Germaine Greer, 'In Praise of Jane', *The Guardian*, 12 March, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 84.

appeal today, even if many critics, including Greer, seem to posit the opposite – or in other words: it is important to distinguish between Austen’s literary oeuvre in its own context, and Jane Austen as a brand name<sup>8</sup> in the Austen craze since the 1990s.

We would insist that a few ‘challenges’ and ‘circumstances’ have indeed changed in the last 190 years which render part of the ideological framework of Austen’s gendered universe rather incompatible with more recent feminist ideas. The most pressing and obvious point here is that even if Austen’s heroines are rational, introspective and confident, the framework of their fictional biographies is firmly based on social norms of conduct and marriage. Even though Gilbert and Gubar argue that ‘[m]arriage is crucial because it is the only accessible form of self-definition for girls in her society’,<sup>9</sup> and Moers points out that Austen’s subject is not courtship but ‘marriageship’,<sup>10</sup> socio-cultural norms typically remain unchallenged. Social upward mobility, and, by extension, happiness, is possible for women only via marriage (the undisputed focal point of Austen’s plots which are basically modelled on the generic conventions of the comedy), and any transgression against the ever-present norms of class, gender, and particularly, the bourgeois family, tend to be severely sanctioned.

The current wave of Austen adaptations on British screens really ties in, therefore, with a recent *vogue* of anti-feminist ideology,<sup>11</sup> by mediatizing what we would like to call ‘gender nostalgia.’<sup>12</sup> It forms part of a larger bestselling wave of British artists who, in

<sup>8</sup> Sutherland, Kathryn, ‘Muddying the Hem. How to Make the Great Jane Austen Movie – From Makeover to Minimalism’, *TLS*, 13 April, 2007, pp. 20-21, (p. 20).

<sup>9</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1976), p. 71. Moers goes on to examine how ‘marriageship’ has to be conceived: ‘the cautious investigation of a field of eligible males, the delicate manoeuvring to meet them, the refined outpacing of rivals, the subtle circumventing of parental power (his and hers), and the careful management, at the end of the story, which turns idle flirtation into a form offer of marriage with a good settlement for life. All this must be carried on in a way that the heroine maintains her self-respect, her moral dignity, her character as daughter, sister, friend, and neighbour, and her youth; it must be done quickly, in a year or two, before her bloom fades. [...]. Marriageship is one of those subjects that must be read imaginatively from the woman’s point of view, which here differs from that of the man’ (p. 71).

<sup>11</sup> Pulitzer prize winner Susan Faludi speaks of a ‘backlash’ against feminism in an American context since the 1980s ([Susan Faludi, \*Backlash: The Undeclared War on American Women\* \[New York: Doubleday, 1991\]](#)); Susan Bolotin coined the term ‘post-feminism’ as early as 1982 ([‘Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation’, \*New York Times Magazine\*, 17 October, 1982](#)). While Faludi and Bolotin are mainly concerned with intellectual retraction from feminist ideas, in the early years of the new millennium, a new, popular as well as intellectual anti-feminism has been attested. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* recently suggested that ‘[a] new wave of anti-feminism is taking hold of Germany. Former career women-turned-housewives are spreading the word about a “new femininity” which encourages women to stay at home and embrace motherhood’ (Khuê Pham, ‘Germany’s New-Housewives Spark Debate on Gender Roles, *Spiegel Online*, 15 March 2007).

<sup>12</sup> We should indicate here that we have a slightly different reading of filmic nostalgia than Slavoj Žižek, for instance, proposes. Žižek holds that nostalgia in film works on the grounds that ‘we are fascinated by

Paul Gilroy's words, 'affirm post Feminist responses to the country's changing structures of class, gender, and family [and] share a basic hope that the destructive process that corroded family life from within can be reversed,' among other things, 'by reconstitution of the bourgeois household'.<sup>13</sup> Gilroy's perspective is particularly important in this context since it shows how the resurgence of conservative gender ideology is part of a larger cultural conservatism which goes hand in hand with the discrediting and demise of a number of transnational political agendas among which feminism is only one (next to, for instance, Marxist, post-colonial or anti-racism movements). The phenomenon of gender nostalgia, Gilroy argues, is part of a larger political climate in which 'cultural nationalism, cheap patriotism, and absolute ethnicity supply the potent default settings for political identity,'<sup>14</sup> and in which the 19th century tends to be increasingly perceived 'as an economically, culturally and morally intact era'.<sup>15</sup> Gilroy speaks of 'postcolonial melancholia' in this context, of a desire to return to a purportedly intact cultural identity in a process that is wilfully forgetful, not only of the more dire realities of Victorian gender politics, but especially of the imperial atrocities of the Victorian reign. As Gilroy assesses:

Once the history of Empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than working through those feelings, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten. The resulting silence feeds an additional catastrophe: the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects.<sup>16</sup>

If one attends to the nuances of Gilroy's argument, therefore, the realities of racism and cultural exclusion, particularly after 9/11 and the 2005 London bombings, and the current Austenmania on British screens, seem less unrelated than they appear at first sight. If a

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the gaze of the mythic "naïve" spectator, the one who was "still able to take it seriously," in other words, the one who "believes in it" for us, in place of us.' He concludes that '[f]or that reason, our relation to [such films] is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance: ironic distance toward its diegetic reality, fascination with the gaze' (112). What is at stake regarding the success of heritage film and gender nostalgia in Britain, it seems, is probably the exact opposite of what Žižek suggests: There is indeed, as Greer puts forth, a continuing fascination and identification with the diegetic 'realities' of gender in Austen's moral universe, while fresh, playful and ironic approaches to sex up 19th century discourse and modes of perception are permissible and invited. Slavoj Žižek, 'Pornography, Nostalgia, Montage: A Triad of the Gaze.' *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 107-22.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire*, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire*, p. 28

<sup>15</sup> Ulrike Pirker, 'Britain', in Lars Eckstein (ed), *English Literatures Across the Globe: A Companion* (Stuttgart: UTB 2006), pp. 33-60, (p. 34).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire*, p. 98.

member of the Indian Diaspora in Britain partakes in the Austen craze by taking up a popular classic like *Pride and Prejudice* and bending it into the generic context of Bollywood cinema, this should by the nature of Gilroy's argument provide ample space for writing-back in familiar Green Book fashion. Quite obviously, though, viewers who hope to find postcolonial subversion or serious (gender)political aspirations in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* will be rather disappointed.

The reason, we would propose, why a film which is, in Homi Bhabha's sense, paradigmatically hybrid, nevertheless fails to live up to postcolonial ideals of subversion is that *Bride and Prejudice* deliberately evades the postcolonial logic of cultural confrontation (as expressed in centre *versus* periphery, coloniser *versus* colonised). Instead, it seeks out global alignment and common ground between cultural norms and conventions, thereby conforming to the dominant logic of globalism, i.e. that of the market. Or in other words: *Bride and Prejudice* no longer desperately bids for the British mainstream, but for the British (and Euro-American), *and* the Diaspora, *and* the Indian mainstream, self-confidently catering to a number of very different veritable markets at the same time. The recipe allowing cross-over rather than local mainstream success could vaguely be described thus: 1) choose a plot structure which appeals to the popular taste of all cultural contexts; 2) avoid serious transgressions of heteronormative notions of gender and culture with regard to all contexts; 3) sublimate potential fractions between culture-specific norms in exoticist fantasies and clichés.

In view of these demands, it turns out that the nostalgic revival of Austen's work and the world of Bollywood cinema are hardly as incompatible as a first glance would suggest, but rather that they are in several respects an ingenious match. In terms of plots and their underlying gender ideologies, there are a number of similarities between Austen's tales and prototypical Bollywood films.<sup>17</sup> Even though one of the dominant

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<sup>17</sup> We should make clear that Bollywood is not be equated with Indian cinema, even if it is its most prominent segment. According to Rajadhyaksa, until around 1990, Bollywood roughly denoted 'popular Hindi film'; and has only more recently opened to non-Indian audience (from the beginning, however, there was a trend towards globalisation in Bollywood's catering to Diaspora audiences around the globe). 'The term [Bollywood] today refers to a reasonably specific narrative and a mode of presentation [...] Amit Khanna [says] that "Indian movies are feel-good, all-happy-in-the-end, tender love stories with lots of song and dances [...] That's what attracts non-Indian audiences across the world" and to this we could add "family values" and their palpable, if not entirely self-evident, investment in 'our culture.' Ashish Rajadhyaksa, 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian cinema: Cultural Nationalism in the Global Arena', in Preben Kaarsholm, *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience* (Calcutta and New Delhi: Seagull Books, 2004), pp.113-139 (p.119). Of course, it is impossible to reduce Bollywood to traditionalism or nostalgia; as Prasad argues, Bollywood simultaneously caters to tradition *and* a 'desire for modernity': 'While often anchored in familiar narratives that reinforce traditional moral codes, the popular film text also offers itself as an object of the

tropes in Bollywood is love at first sight, followed by opposition by authoritarian fathers (and mothers), the films usually re-establish the values of the middle-class family in the way that love interests are integrated into the cultural norm.<sup>18</sup> Take for example *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (dir. 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (dir. 1995) or *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (dir. Karan Johar, 2003), the three most popular films of the past 20 years: In all three films, family values are ultimately more influential than the romance plot, very similar to Austen's moral universe in which individual love and desire have to be subordinated to moral values and rules of conduct. Certainly, in Bollywood – just as in Austen's novels – transgressive moments occur, such as Kajol's rebellion against her father in *Dilwale*, in which she falls in love with a stranger despite the fact that she has agreed to an arranged marriage.<sup>19</sup> Yet the initial transgression of the socio-familial ideology on marriage is later overpowered by a willingness of the couple to conform and to subject themselves to the 'law of the father.' Hence they seek the family's permission to get married, a permission which can only be given by the patriarch himself (Amrish Puri cast in a very typical role). In *Pride and Prejudice* disobedience against parental advice – as in Lydia's eloping with Wickham – similarly leads to despair, and can only be (partly) redeemed by Darcy's newly gained patriarchal influence which forces Wickham into the normative confines of marriage.<sup>20</sup>

The Lucky (Lydia)-Wickham subplot, incidentally, is the only feature in Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* which significantly differs from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in an otherwise rather faithful adaptation revolving around the Amritsar-based Mr. and Mrs. Bakshi and their four beautiful and eligible daughters. Lucky indeed runs off with

desire for modernity'. Madhava M. Prasad, 'Cinema and the Desire for Modernity', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (December 1993), pp. 71-86 (p. 85).

<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that critic Gayatri Gopinath offers an alternative reading of classical Bollywood drama, namely, a queer reading of the joint family in films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun...!* (dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), the space for new gender roles and norms is rather limited when it comes to popular Hindi films (Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> As the film progresses, the perspective shifts from the female to the male protagonist, played by famous Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan, whose endeavour to convince Simran's (Kajol) family of his suitability as a future son-in-law, becomes the dominant focus. Focalisation indeed perhaps proposes the most obvious difference between the gendered narratives of Jane Austen and Bollywood – while the latter is dominantly preoccupied with male perspectives, the first foregrounds the emotional and moral development of her female characters.

<sup>20</sup> Deepa Nair holds that 'Pride and Prejudice has always been a favourite with the Indians. For Austen's world is not much different from the middle class Indian homes. Like the 18th century England of Austen's novel, the world in Chadha's film is primarily concerned with the question of matrimony. Marriage for Bakshi sisters and their friends offer the sole mode of escape from the small town they were born in. The craze of getting NRI grooms for daughters is also something quite real in India.' 'Bride and Prejudice – A Review.' *South Asian Women's Forum* <<http://www.sawf.org/bollywood/reviews/brideprejudice.asp?pn=Bollywood&cn=27>> (15 May 2007).

Wickham in a rush of teenage folly, yet it is only a few days before she and Wickham are tracked down by Darcy and Lalita (Lizzy); Darcy gives Wickham a good beating, Lalita and Lucky give him a good slap, and the matter is resolved as Lucky returns to the secure bosom of her own family. On the one hand, one might argue that this de-escalation of the affair is merely conceived to make for a happier happy ending which is required by Bollywood convention. On the other hand, of course, it avoids alienating Diaspora and Indian audiences in terms of culture and gender. After all, Johnny Wickham not only represents the bad boy of the tale, but he is also white, English, comparatively poor and lower class (being the son of Darcy's nanny and living in a house boat in London). While interracial romance in itself seriously challenges the conventions of Bollywood, interracial marriage without the redemption of economic and social improvement seems to have been too much to ask of *Bride and Prejudice's* Asian audience segments. Consequently, Lalita Bashki's romance with and eventual marriage to Darcy, a white American, is the movie's only consistent transgression of norms of gender and culture.

*Bride and Prejudice* effectively disarms this transgression, however, through a number of redeeming elements: First, Darcy is a less problematic choice than Wickham; after all, he is a desirable millionaire and part of a respectable family in the hotel business; and he is an American living in the glamorous world of LA rather than an ambiguous<sup>21</sup> British tramp based in the former imperial centre of London. Second and just as importantly, Indian audiences are made to feel good about Darcy as he is thoroughly 'reformed' by Lalita and eventually acknowledges the equality, if not superiority of Indian culture. Starting out with a great portion of, as Lalita puts it, "arrogance, pride and vanity" and expecting to find "simple, traditional and subservient" women, he encounters a woman who teaches him better. The main battle ground between Darcy and Lalita is, not surprisingly, family values. Lalita angrily responds to Darcy's qualms about arranged marriages that 'Americans think they have the answer for everything, including marriage – pretty arrogant considering they have the highest divorce rate in the world', and goes on to explain that "it is more like a global dating service.' Darcy is hardly convinced at first, but over the course of the film comes to value Lalita's points; in a subchapter tellingly titled 'The Importance of Family,' he begins to truly win Lalita's affections by acknowledging his own disrupted family background ('I don't remember the last time my family got

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<sup>21</sup> In Bollywood films, ambiguity in characterisation is mostly evaded (there are few exceptions, such as *Devdas* [dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali 2002, a remake of *Devdas*, dir. P.C. Barua 1935]); instead, characters are clearly divided into good and evil, hero and villain.

together like this’’). *Bride and Prejudice* thus at once caters to British gender nostalgia (paired with exoticist fantasy), counters Western notions of backwardness by reinterpreting arranged marriages in a context of ‘global dating,’ and confirms reservations against the corruptions of Western liberalism. Yet Darcy is not only turned into an acceptable groom by becoming a true family man; more crucially, perhaps, he also comes to accept the national(ist) metaphorical overtones of the trope of the family by learning not to interfere with the body politic of ‘Mother India’. Having come to India to invest in a five star hotel complex in Goa, Lalita, as it turns out in the end, manages to talk him out of the investment by accusing him of neo-colonial interest. ‘You want people to come to India without having to deal with Indians,’ she admonishes, and concludes: ‘I don’t want you to turn India into a theme park. I thought we got rid of imperialists like you.’

Read as a meta-commentary, these statements perhaps form the most stunning moments of irony in the entire film – because of course, we are hardly presented with a ‘realistic’ image of either India or the US in *Bride and Prejudice* itself; rather, what we get is indeed a collage of ‘theme park’ imagery in best Bollywood fashion. If there is any sense of social realism at all, it is – as in Jane Austen’s novels – firmly reserved for the middle classes, even if Mrs. Bakshi’s moaning about her old house and unpaid bills strikes the viewer as slightly spoiled in view of the ‘palace’ which the family inhabits. Apart from a clownish toothless servant in the opulent family home, people of lower castes and classes are only shown and given a voice during dance sequences in the streets of Amritsar, where they happily sing in heavily accented English and wear colourful costumes. The film goes through a total of four Indian weddings, and the dominant image of India for Western viewers is indeed, as the DVD-cover hails, one of ‘vibrant colours, fantastic musical numbers, and stunning dance routines.’ Americans, of course, do not fare much better in this context. The most memorable moment of exoticist fantasy primarily created for the Indian market, presumably, is a musical sequence on an L.A. beach where Darcy and Lalita’s blossoming romance is framed by the appearance, first, of a full blown gospel choir, then of a number of surfers who begin to wave their boards, and finally of a Baywatch couple running for rescue in tight red speedo gear.

Quite obviously, this deliberate accumulation of clichés owes much to a playful homage to the larger generic conventions of Bollywood and its self-consciously anti-realist aesthetics. In view of her global market, Chadha makes effective use of a persistent strategy of double address; passages which cater to the exoticist and escapist fantasies of certain audience segments will simultaneously appeal to other viewers as hilarious

persiflage or revealing caricatures, and vice versa. Significantly, though, the recourse to constant cliché and hyperbole alleviates viewers in either case of really having to engage with cultural otherness in any serious way; instead, cultural difference can always be readily relegated to the realm of exotic fantasy or comic laughter, and never gets in the way of the bourgeois feel-good comedy. Potential ideological conflict regarding different cultural norms – particularly with regard to gender ideology – are thus defused from the very beginning, and transcultural negotiation is really only a sexy surface phenomenon which is always carefully interrogated for veritable marketability (as encapsulated, perhaps, in the special appearance of Black American singer Ashanti, who performs a bhanga-inflected pop number at a Goa beach party). Beneath this glitzy glam transcultural surface, *Bride and Prejudice* tends to affirm conservative nostalgia on all sides, and retracts into cultural and national(ist) stereotypes.

### III. Ways out of Transgression: *Second Generation*, *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Nina's Heavenly Delights*

Gurinder Chadha's aiming at global mainstream success and its concomitant, only thinly veiled conservatism is rather blatantly obvious in a film like *Bride and Prejudice*; this conservatism, as we have shown, is only partly explicable as an orientation at the British mainstream and the cultural capital of Jane Austen in the context of a larger, widely mediated gender nostalgia in Britain. Rather, Chadha's film ingeniously negotiates British mainstream conservatism with the moral universe of Bollywood and not only fits the tastes of the booming Indian market segments, but also appeals to the exoticism of Western viewers. But in order to decide whether we are indeed dealing with a larger cultural trend here, it is necessary to examine whether Chadha's formula for global success is also applicable to other more recent Asian British film productions and directors less obviously indebted to Bollywood, yet similarly concerned with intercultural negotiations of gender. We suggest having a brief look at three further recent productions, therefore: first, the two-part Channel 4 feature film *Second Generation* (dir. Neil Biswas 2003), which particularly fits this discussion as it adapts another all-English classic; second, Gurinder Chadha's earlier *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), and Pratibha Parmar's *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006).



While an adaptation of *King Lear* set in cosmopolitan multi-ethnic London might raise expectations regarding a (postcolonial) subversion of the canonical text, *Second Generation*, taken as a whole, is a surprisingly conservative rendering of the Lear tale (albeit closer to Nahum Tate's adaptation than to the Shakespearean original).<sup>22</sup> One significant alteration, though, provides a valid point of entry into a discussion of *Second Generation*, namely the centrality of the female protagonist's predicament. Heere (Parminder K. Nagra, playing the Cordelia figure) falls out with her family as her patriarchal (first generation immigrant) father (Om Puri) cannot accept the fact that she has adapted to British 'lifestyle'. Her transgression, from her family's point of view, lies in her relationship with a white British journalist (Danny Dyer). As in all films under discussion here, the problem of being caught between two conflicting worlds – the more 'traditional' world of the family and the 'modern' world of Western society, and the difference between Indian and Western culture – is thus negotiated through the central female protagonist. Yet more so than in the other movies, Heere is reduced to a symbol in *Second Generation*, a symbol of difference which is basically emptied of individuality and depth of character. Through her, the movie basically stages incompatible gender concepts, pertaining to Western notions and respectively Indian family norms, both centring on female sexuality.

Female sexuality, indeed, is seen as inherently conflictual. As long as an inter-racial relationship is maintained, a re-union with her family seems impossible. But as soon as Heere enters a sexual relationship with her childhood friend and owner of an underground record label, Sam Khan (Christopher Simpson), she begins to rediscover her 'Indianness', presented in the film as a rather unproblematic, organic category which eventually redeems Heere of the contingencies and fragmentations of 'Western' life. The ultimate re-affirmation of her (Indian) cultural identity takes place when she is identified and defined according to her gendered role in the family: Thus Heere not only decides to take care of her old, mad father, but she also chooses Sam, whose attitudes to family and especially Heere's father are presented as more sympathetic than Jack's (Heere's boyfriend), who advises her to ultimately transgress family values. Thus the family, like in the moral universe of Bollywood or Jane Austen, eventually wins over transgression and individualism.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ellen Dengel-Janic and Johanna Roering, 'Re-Imaging Shakespeare in *Second Generation* (2003) – A British-Asian Perspective on Shakespeare's *King Lear*', in Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker, *Drama and Cultural Change: Turning Around Shakespeare* (Trier: WVT, 2008), forthcoming.

This is highlighted particularly in the film's ending, when Heere, her father and Sam return to 'Mother India' to escape the corruptions of British life and Diaspora kinship (Heere's two sisters as greedy Goneril and Regan figures). What is striking here is a significant change in Heere's character: We are left with Heere bargaining at a local Indian market, followed by a domestic scene in which she is serving food to her father and husband-to-be. Sublimating all earlier conflicts and ambiguities, this transformation from independent, even rebellious young woman, having a pre-marital relationship with a British man, to a dutiful wife-to-be and daughter is presented as utterly unproblematic and convincing. In contrast to pre-2000 films such as, for example, Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*, which takes an openly feminist stance against various forms of patriarchal oppression (domestic violence being one the film's most dominant themes), *Second Generation* reverts to conservatism. Gender as well as cultural identity are in the end reduced to blatant stereotypes, and the narrative closure sublimates all complexity, let alone transgression, in favour of an astonishingly simplistic and idealised resolution.<sup>23</sup>

Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It like Beckham*, released a year before *Second Generation*, promises a different take on gendered identity: after all, Chadha herself labelled it a 'girl power movie'.<sup>24</sup> Yet a glimpse beneath the surface soon reveals that *Bend It Like Beckham* basically already shows an unwillingness to openly transgress norms of gender and culture. The gender roles in *Bend It Like Beckham* adhere to a strictly heteronormative matrix despite the fact that the movie's core idea is a story of transgression – that of a young Asian-British girl who wants to become a footballer. *Bend It Like Beckham* receives more detailed attention elsewhere in this volume,<sup>25</sup> and we wish to therefore only very briefly indicate how the transgressive potential of the plot is defused by strategic appeals to gender nostalgia and cultural conservatism. This concerns, first, Chadha's take on family values and agency in gendered contexts. Here, Jess's (again, Parminder K. Nagra) passion for football rather than cooking indeed presents a serious transgression against norms of gender and culture (football being a paradigmatically 'English' sport, while Jess's father is a cricketer – which is of course no less English, but has been fully appropriated by Indians) – yet it is important to note that Jess is willing and determined to heroically sacrifice her passion to please her family; eventually, it is her

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<sup>23</sup> At least on the level of story. In terms of its filmic discourse and its visual and auditory focus on the British dub and bhangra house scene (Nitin Sawhney providing the movie's soundtrack), the message is less clear cut (cf. Dengel-Janic and Roering, 'Re-Imaging Shakespeare').

<sup>24</sup> Sternberg, 'Gurinder Chadha in Interview', p. 246.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the essays by Rajeev Balasubramanyam and Sandra Heinen.

father who permits her to play the all-important league final despite the fact that it is her sister's wedding day. In other words, Jess's transgression is only legitimised, in the end, by the redeeming effect of patriarchal consent.

Second, Chadha obviously shied away from a more provocative presentation of the core triangular relationship between Jess, her white team mate Jules (Keira Knightly) and her coach Jo (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers). Both girls are in love with their coach, while Jules in the end steps back for Jess. As in *Bride and Prejudice*, the main transgression here is the interracial relationship between Jess and Jo, and again, cultural friction and conflict are defused in rather simplistic strategies of evasion – Jo is Irish rather than English, and purports to know everything about racism and being an outsider in Britain (which supposedly eliminates potential cultural friction between him and Jess). Any notion of an (interracial) sexual attraction between the two girls, by way of contrast, is negated in the filmic plot – rather, lesbian overtones are merely used for one of the main comic twists, as Jules's mother mistakes the two girls' friendship for an affair.<sup>26</sup> It is highly interesting to note in this context that Chadha apparently wanted a lesbian romance in *Bend It Like Beckham* in the beginning, but then decided to stay within heteronormative bounds. Chadha's friend Nisha Ganatra claims that Chadha planned to have a lesbian main plot, 'but "chickened out" at the last minute for fear of offending and upsetting Indian audiences'.<sup>27</sup> What has originally been conceived as a queer story, quite obviously, has been very consciously domesticated to become a fairly tame Romantic comedy in view of the film's global marketability. All remaining transgressions – Jess's love of football, and of her white (Irish) coach – are toned down and eventually ratified by parental law, and even though the main marriage plot is 'incomplete', if you like, *Bend it Like Beckham* is hardly far beyond the normative moral universe of Jane Austen's romantic comedies.

To complement a larger picture of the post-2000 Asian British film scene, let us close then with a feature film which is, at a first glance, all about transgression in a Diaspora context. Pratibha Parma's *Nina's Heavenly Delights* centres around Nina Shah (Shelley Conn) who returns to her Glaswegian family after three years in London 'exile' to attend her father's funeral. It gradually turns out that she escaped from an arranged marriage on her wedding day in pursuit of 'true' love, and the power of 'true love' vs. family obligation also forms the core concern of the film. Upon her return, she finds that

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<sup>26</sup> The film's only gay character is Jess's cousin, who remains largely undeveloped.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Sarah Warn, 'Dropping Lesbian Romance from *Beckham* the Right Decision', *AfterEllen* (November 2003) <<http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/Movies/beckham.html>> (15. May 2007).

her father, a renowned Indian chef and two-time winner of ‘The Best of the West Curry Competition’ hosted by the local ‘Karma TV’ station, gambled half his restaurant, now owned by the attractive young Scotswoman Lisa (Laura Fraser). Rather than selling the restaurant off to her father’s former rival (her mother’s secret ‘true’ love) and his son (Nina’s formerly intended husband Sanjay), Nina and Lisa hook up to posthumously fulfil the late chef’s dream of winning a ‘Best of the West’ hat-trick. Circling around this basic plot, the film celebrates transgression – Nina’s teenage sister is a Scottish Highland Dance champion; her brother is secretly married to a white Scotswoman and comes out just before the crucial culinary competition; Nina’s childhood friend Bobbie is a wannabe drag queen who rehearses with his friends to get a role in an ominous ‘Scollywood’ feature titled ‘Love in a Wet Climate’; Lisa and Nina, finally, fall deeply in love and eventually come out, after Nina’s mother’s encouragement to elevate love over mistaken family obligations, during the ‘Best in the West’ TV battle (which the girls of course win against the purely technical, but non-sensuous brilliance of Sanjay).

No doubt Pratibha Parma violates rule two of our tentative recipe for global success (avoid serious transgressions of heteronormative boundaries) which Chadha and Biswas have rather faithfully followed in *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Bride and Prejudice*, and *Second Generation*.<sup>28</sup> Yet she of course compensates this violation by deliberately wallowing in rule three (sublimate potential fractions between culture-specific norms in fantasies and clichés). If the closure of *Second Generation* evades the complexities of transcultural dynamics by a nostalgic return to holistic stereotypes of gender and culture, *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* proposes a diametrically opposed, yet no less simplistic solution – namely the effortless transcendence of all social obstacles through the power of love. In cooking as in life, the chef’s core message goes, ‘no matter what the recipe says, petit, always follow your heart’. This evasion of social realism is, of course, a deliberate and in a way legitimate artistic choice, highlighted by metafictional commentary (as in magical realist sequences in which the benevolent ghost of the dead chef appears, or in the film’s closing sequence, which presents us with a dance routine as part of the shooting of ‘Love in Wet Climate’, featuring not only Billie and his drag friends, but all other characters of *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*, too). Parma thus constantly indicates that what is at stake is the

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<sup>28</sup> As Philip French notes in a *Guardian* review, ‘Not since the last major amnesty in Ulster have so many people come out at the same time.’ Philip French, ‘Review of *Nina’s Heavenly Delights*’, *The Guardian*, 1 October 2006.

fictional creation of an ‘urban fairytale albeit in world full of real people,’<sup>29</sup> and the DVD proudly quotes reviews styling the film as ‘unapologetically upbeat’ and, quite tellingly, ‘breezy and escapist’. Even though rooted in a local, Indo-Glaswegian context and based upon autobiographical experience,<sup>30</sup> *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* evades the particularities of social problems; instead, it seeks the company of other major ‘exotic foodies’ (first and foremost, probably, Ang Lee’s *Eat Drink Man Woman* and Alfonso Arau’s *Like Water for Chocolate*) and counters the provocative thrust of its gender politics in a fantasy world of sensuous universalism.

#### IV. Conclusion: One Step Backward or One Step Beyond?

What are the tentative conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of the four films we have looked into in our discussion? We believe that it is not too far-fetched to argue that overall, the progress of Asian British film in the new millennium is marked by an unmistakable evasion of the complexities of transcultural exchange and the ways in which notions of gender are implicated in such dynamics. We should perhaps make quite clear that this not to claim that the films fail to live up to a purportedly universal set of Western feminist ideas; as Chandra Talpade Mohanty explicated in her seminal ‘Under Western Eyes,’ to globally impose Western feminism as a universal doctrine comes with a number of severe problems, not least since it tends to lump together a range of highly diverse cultural contexts to construct the singular category of invariably oppressed ‘Third World Women.’<sup>31</sup> Rather, our argument is that Asian British filmmakers have tended to give in to rather facile resolutions and often nostalgic fantasies of gender and culture which transcend the conflictual realities of socio-historical challenges (generally staged by focussing on central female characters).

There are two ways of assessing this phenomenon, really. The first is to see it as a sign of progress and, ultimately, emancipation from what Kabeena Mercer called the ‘burden of representation’.<sup>32</sup> If up until around 2000 ‘the relatively small number of black art works which are available to a potential audience,’ as Karen Ross summarises

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<sup>29</sup> Parma’s ‘Director’s Statement’ as part of the ‘Production Notes’, <<http://www.vervepictures.co.uk/docs/nhdnotes.doc>> (31 May 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Parma, ‘Director’s Statement’.

<sup>31</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ *Feminist Review*, 30 (Autumn 1988), pp. 61-88.

<sup>32</sup> Kabeena Mercer, ‘Black Art and the Burden of Representation’, *Third Text*, 10 (1990), pp. 61-78.

Mercer's argument, meant 'that each one must necessarily bear the burden of having to authenticate and typify heterogeneous black communities'<sup>33</sup> in a multi-ethnic British context, recent Asian British filmmakers have clearly freed themselves from this 'burden'. Social realism and differentiated takes on culture and gender are no longer on the top of the agenda, really, as our readings have tried to illustrate. Once confidently part of the mainstream, the next frontier is the global market, the potentialities of which have only been fully opened up for Asian British cinema by the unexpected blockbusting success of *Bend It Like Beckham*. As Korte and Sternberg indicate, the particular privilege of Asian British film (as opposed to Black British film) in this context is that it may draw both on the British film tradition and marketing mechanisms, but also on the booming South Indian film industry, which increasingly develops an 'interest in supporting British Asian films'.<sup>34</sup> Chadha's affirmation that she would 'rather make films for the multiplex crowd than for academics', and that *Bend It Like Beckham* was indeed her attempt 'to make the most commercial, mainstream, wide-appealing, multiplex movie [she] possibly could – with an Indian girl in the lead', may thus indeed be interpreted as a sign of an ultimate and successful 'centering of the margin'. Asian British film makers, such a reading would suggest, single-handedly moved Asian British film from a politically overdetermined minority art to a relatively autonomous global player.

Chadha's anticipation of academic discontent shall not prevent us, though, from interrogating some of the downsides of this process. Of course, one may find the reductive perspectives on gender and culture which we have attempted to highlight in our discussion regrettable as such, and a fairly high price to pay for commercial success; it should also be mentioned, though, that such moralistic calls for artistic integrity tend to underestimate some of the institutional difficulties of political filmmaking. It is interesting to note in this context that after a (gender)politically daring film like *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), co-funded by Channel 4 and 'the first *mainstream* feature written, directed and produced by a non-white British Woman',<sup>35</sup> Gurinder Chadha did not initially find funding for a second feature film in Britain, and instead produced her second feature *What's Cooking* (2000) in L.A., before returning to Britain with *Bend It Like Beckham*.<sup>36</sup> What is more problematic,

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<sup>33</sup> Karen Ross, *Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press), p. 51.

<sup>34</sup> Korte and Sternberg, *Bidding For the Mainstream?* p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> Korte und Sternberg, *Bidding For the Mainstream?* p. 163, italics in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sternberg, 'Interview', pp. 248-49. Which role the recent policy of the UK Film Council, itself funded by the National Lottery, plays in the larger picture, and whether, as Rajeev Balasubramanyam's assessment of *Bend It Like Beckham* suggests, New Labour's 'Cool Britannia' ideology comes into play

however, is perhaps that while Asian British filmmakers tend to busily alleviate themselves of the ‘burden of representation’, established white British filmmakers have – very successfully in commercial terms – moved into the vacuum and discovered the ‘authentification’ and ‘typifying’ of Asian British communities, and by extension of gender roles within these communities, as a topical sujet. Thus, it is avatars of committed British social realism like Ken Loach (*A Fond Kiss*, 2004) or Kenneth Glenaan (*Yasmin*, 2004) who take most of the credit for critically engaging with the new Asian-British realities after the turbulences of 9/11, while their (disputatious) ideological positioning is hardly challenged by Asian mainstream directors.<sup>37</sup> One of the most expensive prices to pay for having moved beyond the ‘burden of representation’, it seems to us, is to leave the job to the others – and to relapse again into the ‘burden of being represented’.

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here, remains a matter of speculation – suffice it to say that Tony Blair and New Labour have taken a decided interest in the more recent commercial success of Asian British film which coincides with increasing government funds.

<sup>37</sup> One exception being Neil Biswas’s second drama commissioned for Channel 4 after *Second Generation*, *Bedford Riots* (2006), which is hardly interested in (female) gender roles, though. See Claudia Sternberg’s contribution in this volume for a discussion.

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