

Bhaji on the Beach: **A Female Journey Towards a New British Identity**

VICKY GIL

Universidad de Zaragoza

vickygil@inicia.es

ABSTRACT

Bhaji on the Beach (Gurinder Chadha, 1993) tells the story of a group of British-Asian women on an outing, organised by a local women's centre, to Blackpool, an icon of British popular culture. To see the city light up. This multi-positioned group, their understanding of their place within their community, and their problems, allow the film to explore the issue of changing identities in women of colour in the nineties in Britain. In this paper, I propose to show how British-Asian women are depicted in *Bhaji on the Beach*, and how the fluidity of the film itself, in both aesthetic and generic terms, helps to defend a possibility of fluid and hybrid identities for women in Britain in the nineties. I will argue that the film's motifs and style illustrate the views offered by identity-politics circulating in various cultural texts as unofficial knowledge in contemporary British society. (KEYWORDS: *Bhaji on the Beach*, Gurinder Chadha, women of color, British-Asian, film studies, multi-culturalism, race, gender, ethnicity).

RESUMEN

Bhaji on the Beach (Gurinder Chadha, 1993) cuenta la historia de un grupo de mujeres Británicas de origen asiático que decide ir de excursión a la ciudad de Blackpool para una fiesta de carácter popular que consiste en ver iluminada la localidad. Las componentes del grupo, organizadas por un centro de mujeres, son de diferente edad y el tiempo que han permanecido en Gran Bretaña varía entre ellas. El lugar que ocupa cada una dentro de su sociedad, y los problemas que se exponen permiten al filme plantear la identidad cambiante de las mujeres de color en Gran Bretaña en la década de los noventa. En este ensayo estudiaré

cómo son descritas estas mujeres y cómo la fluidez de la película en términos tanto estéticos como de género refleja una defensa de la posibilidad de una identidad adaptable e híbrida para las mujeres de los noventa en Gran Bretaña. (PALABRAS CLAVE: *Bhaji en la playa*, Gurinder Chadha, mujeres de color, Asiático-británico/a, estudios de cine, multi-culturalismo, raza, género, etnicidad).

Gurinder Chadha in her film, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), tells the story of a group of British-Asian women on a day trip, organized by a local women's center to Blackpool to see the lights. The women on the trip come from the same Asian community although their personal circumstances of age, and the amount of time that they have been living in England differ greatly. There are roughly three generations of women participating on the trip. There are three older "aunties", as the younger women call them, who represent a stauncher traditional position, a Bombay-based middle-aged woman who is there to remind the women that their idea of India and its current situation may not be the same anymore, and finally a third generation of young women in their late twenties and teens that will confront the older women and their beliefs. This multi-positioned group and their problems allow the film to explore the issue of changing identities in women of color today in Britain. In this paper, I will try to show how British-Asian women's positions and their problems are depicted in *Bhaji on the Beach* and how the film defends a position of fluidity and hybridity in the construction of their identities. The women are portrayed as complex, shifting, dialogic and communal subjects. I will argue, as Stuart Hall states in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", that this film and its message may be understood as "that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak" (Hall, 1990: 236).

The complexity of the position of these women's identities is reflected formally by the hybrid nature of the aesthetics of the film itself. These women cannot be reduced to simplified categories. They are not just Black, not just Asian, not just British, and not just women. Their position is somewhere between all of these categories and no one part of their identity holds more force than any other. The film itself also lies between genres and aesthetics, combining the very Britishness of Blackpool and a sort of soap-opera or *Coronation Street* style and the aesthetics, motifs, and music of Indian films. The theme song is a version of a Cliff Richards' song called *Summer Holiday* mixed with Punjabi singing and music. Generically, the film flows back and forth between comedy and melodrama, constantly walking the fine line that separates the comic from the tragic. The spectator finds her/himself feeling in very different ways throughout the film, contemplating the balance achieved between the dangers of excessive celebration and excessive tragedy. The experience of the film becomes an allegory for the position of the women within the film and, like the process of their identity formation, their journey to Blackpool is portrayed as fluid and dialogic.

In order to analyze this film and the way that it constitutes these women as new kinds of

subjects. I will look at the different subjectivities which come together within them and finally how their position is negotiated between these subjectivities. To start off with, these women are obviously not white citizens of Britain. They are of Indian descent, some of them having immigrated to Britain in their lifetime and others having already been born British. Their way of dressing shows the spectrum of possibilities for accepting or denying their heritage and adopted culture. The older aunts continue to wear traditional clothing, Rekha lives in Bombay yet dresses in a completely European style, and the younger girls combine loose draping clothes with jeans and accessories like Indian jewelry or scarves. The younger girls have assimilated but they maintain some of the Indian look so that their hybridity is obvious in the way that they dress. Their attitudes towards their ethnicity also run along a similar spectrum of possibilities. The older women apparently hold on desperately to customs, traditions, and rules of conduct, while the younger generations negotiate the tensions of a pull towards assimilation and a pull towards tradition. None of these relationships with tradition and the new culture is simple and straightforward. These women feel the pull of both tensions and the film itself shows how one need not leave one choice behind in favor of another, possibilities of fluidity and hybridity do exist. When asked about the film Gurinder Chadha explains: "What I'm trying to say is that Britain isn't one thing or another. It isn't just *Howard's End* or *My Beautiful Laundrette*. There are endless possibilities about what it can be -and is- already." (Chadha, 1994: 27)

One of the most interesting characteristics of the film is the very complexity of its position and its heroine's positions within British culture. No one single and positive identity is posited for the spectator to replace any earlier negative images. This is true not only for the image of "woman" but also for the image of the Black subject. Reflecting the problems behind the concept of the unity of all non-whites into the category of "Black" subjects, the film shows how very different the circumstances of different groups within the Black category can be. The older aunts in the film immediately check to see if their wallets are intact as soon as they notice a darker Black man on the beach next to them. Hashida's boyfriend and his friend discuss the problem directly when the friend tries to tell Oliver that Hashida's Blackness is very different from their own of Jamaican or African descent. When Oliver asks "What happened to the mouthpiece of Black solidarity?", his friend answers, "You try fusion and you get con-fusion". The political response of the eighties which tried to unite non-whites under one general umbrella term and struggle is rejected here. No one single description or prescription is valid for all Blacks and as we will see neither is one unmovable and unnegotiable identity valid for all of these women. It illustrates another of Stuart Hall's points about the construction of identity:

You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad, old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. [...] The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation with other categories and divisions that are constantly crossed and re-crossed by the categories of class, of gender, and ethnicity.

Hall (1989: 28)

These women's identities are definitely crossed by not only race and ethnicity but also by their gender and, interestingly enough, each of them responds to the "crossings" within them in a unique and personal way.

Gender and race often come together in many cultural texts, connecting non-white "Otherness" and female "Otherness". The female psyche was referred to in Freud as the Dark Continent and the temptations of the female are often connected to Black sexuality and both of these, in turn, are connected to exoticism. Lola Young in *Fear of the Dark* explains this point further:

Sander L. Gilman's work has also indicated the extent to which notions of Black hypersexuality and its concomitant threat to white sexual propriety, became connected to conceptualizations of female sexuality: most notably to that of "deviants" such as lesbians and "lower class" female prostitutes.

Young (1996, 42)

In one of Asha's dreams these two notions come together as she imagines Hashida, the young medical student, dressed as an exotic prostitute luring and tempting the men of the community, combining Indian sensuality with conventions of European seduction such as cigarettes and tight red mini-skirts. Asha's dreams in the film transmit the hidden and repressed fears and disappointments of the women and we will see in other examples how these dreams form an important part of the film's message. Hashida's character in the film is crucial because as a medical student she represents women's desires for further education and a social role and position outside of the family home. In a study on the Pakistani community in Britain, Allison Shaw discusses the implications for young women and their communities of a university degree for women.

Certainly, there are many parents who regard any studying beyond sixteen that takes their daughters beyond home as a threat to marriage arrangements, fearing that young women at college will be led astray into liaisons with boys that will jeopardize their marriages: this is one major reason why there are not more girls in further education.

Shaw (1988, 164)

The realization of this fear is precisely what happens to Hashida and her family. She has met an Afro-Caribbean boy in school who will most definitely jeopardize her position within the community. Her unplanned pregnancy adds the further threat of miscegenation since her baby will no longer be considered Indian by the rest of the community. The Asian community tries to protect its traditions by keeping their youths within the community. Arranged marriages are not just a custom, they ensure the "purity" of the ethnic group's future. Hashida as a woman must provide future generations of Asian children and must also work to preserve the traditions in the raising of these children. By fitting Hashida into this reactionary scheme for the future, shown in her aunties' concept of Hashida as the pride of the family, and contrasting it with her present situation of unwanted pregnancy and her role in Asha's dream as temptress, the film depicts one

of the contradictions faced by British-Asian women in today's society which Rattansi points to:

I have remarked elsewhere on the ambivalence around the figure of the British-Asian woman, at once the guardian and pillar of the "tightly knit" Asian family—much admired, especially for the right, for its "family values" and discipline— but also as a symbol of Asian "backwardness". She is seen as subject to extraordinary subordination and, by her adherence to Asian conventions is regarded as an obstacle to the assimilation of Asians into British culture of the "English way of life": she is also considered sexually alluring, the dusky heiress to the Lama Sutra and the Oriental Harem.

Rattansi (1994: 68)

Hashida goes from being a promise for the future upholding of tradition within the community, before the women learn of her pregnancy, to symbolizing the younger generation's betrayal of Asian honor codes, once her pregnancy and relationship are out in the open.

The figure of the woman as wife and mother, and preserver of traditions, is reflected in another of Asha's dreams, helping to question the construction of a female identity. In her dream, we see Asha playing out her roles as nurturing mother or wife, combing her son's hair and serving her husband's meals. She speaks out against her life in another of her dreams, saying that this life is not the one she expected to live. She rebels against her limited position as only wife and mother. At first, this rebellion is only manifested in Asha's dreams but, as she grows in the film, she will finally confront her feelings and literally defy male authority by facing her nephews who represent the powers of patriarchy in the narrative. Once again we see how Asha's position is only one of a number of choices for women. In contrast to her apparent submission, we are shown Ginder's refusal to continue with her oppressive life within her husband's family home. At the beginning of the film she is rejected by the older women and viewed as a traitor to community values because of her decision to leave home and seek refuge at the shelter where Simi works. Just as the ethnic community is posited as both a repressing force and at the same time a buffer for these women, the female community is also depicted as complex and deserving of analysis. Black union or fusion can bring about both good and bad things and so can the united female community as well. Simi, the social worker who is responsible for organizing the excursion, begins the day by addressing the women with a speech full of the markers of feminist discourse. She addresses the women as "sisters" and encourages them to consider the outing as an escape from the oppression of their everyday lives, enjoying what she calls a "female fun day". As the camera moves, however, we see how the women react to the words and their reactions range from the older women's look of puzzlement to the youngest girls' looks of amusement. The words offered feel foreign and alienating to the older women and amusing and meaningless to the teenagers. Each of the women on the trip confronts her gender issues in a unique and personal way and any appeal to one single collective identity as "sisters" or a female community will be rejected by all of the women. Hashida will eventually rebel and loudly inform them that she does not consider them her sisters. Ginder will question Simi's solutions to her own situation, and the older women do not care to understand the feminist message that is being

transmitted. This female community will eventually be consolidated by the end of the film through a growth process which will be analyzed here as a negotiation between all of the different positions involved. Just as there was no one single Black or Asian identity to be accepted and adopted, neither is there one single female identity for all of the women. There is also no single definition of what it means to be British or Asian or even British-Asian in the film. Their destination within the film is very important because Blackpool is an icon of British tradition, becoming the perfect setting for the confrontation between the disparate elements of their hybrid identities. Their Asian Bhaji picnic lunch eaten in British style on a British beach brings together two poles within them, the Asian and the British. Paradoxically, the Bombay-based woman is the most "assimilated" of all of the women. As I have mentioned before, all of the British-Asian women maintain some vestige of their heritage in costume and in their attitude towards life in Britain.

All of the elements that constitute these women as subjects come together, cross each other and interact in their identities, their Britishness, their Asianness, their race, their ethnicity, and their gender. But all of these factors have also been considered layers of oppression in their society. They are discriminated against for being of a different race, a different ethnicity, and also because of their gender. The problem is that oppression comes not only from white men and white society but also from the men within their community. The women feel oppressed by their position and status within the patriarchal structure of their community. They are relegated to the roles of mothers and wives and these roles are supported and preserved by the older female members of the group as well. As Nancy Chodorow states in her article "The Psychodynamics of the Family":

Women's mothering also reproduces the family as it is constituted in male-dominant society. The sexual and familial division of labor in which mother creates a sexual division of psychic organization and orientation. [...] Social reproduction is thus asymmetrical. Women in their domestic role reproduce men and children physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Women in their domestic role as houseworkers reconstitute themselves physically on a daily basis and reproduce themselves as mothers, emotionally and psychologically, in the next generation. They thus contribute to the perpetuation of their own social roles and position in the hierarchy of gender.

Chodorow (1992: 168)

This is explored in the film through the aunties' relationship with the younger generation. Asha's dreams show, as we have seen, how her role as wife and mother repress her, yet she joins the other two older women in condemning Hashida and Ginder for their conduct and therefore she helps to support the status quo and the male position of dominance. However, as the film develops, we learn that her position is simple. Contrary to the political stance of the eighties that envisioned black women's position as repressed by a layering of oppressions, the interaction of the oppressive forces in these women's lives is closer to the concept of articulation described by Rutherford:

What the political alliances of the miner's strike demonstrated was that identity is not reducible to the single logic of class. It is constituted out of different elements of experience and subjective position but in their articulation they become something more than just the sum of their original elements. For example, our class subjectivities do not simply co-exist alongside our gender. Rather our class is gendered and our gender is classed. This process of the combining of elements into a "third term" has been called articulation.

Rutherford (1990: 17)

Just as no single oppressive force is pinpointed as the most important one, no one aspect of identity is described as just negative or just positive. The emphasis that the film places on wife abuse and the sexist pressures of the Asian community may be used to defend a position that the text is anti-Asian because it portrays a negative image of the community. Gurinder Chadha does not deny the negative aspects of her community and she confronts head on the "burden of representation" which Mercer Kobena coined as a term and Higson explains as follows:

In a culture in which cinematic images of Blackness are so rare, many Black film-makers have found themselves weighed down by what Mercer Kobena has called the "burden of representation", the sense that any film made by a Black film maker has to solve all of the problems of Black representation at once.

Higson (1996: 206)

Chadha does not seem to feel this burden either for the Black community, the more specific Asian community, or even for her gender. All of these groups are viewed alternately as oppressive, judgmental, unfair, supportive, and communal. Regardless of the pressures that Hashida feels coming from the older women against her, there is a crucial scene in the film which illustrates the negotiation between tensions which constitutes her as a subject. In a cafe at Blackpool, the two oldest women are discriminated against because of their ethnicity. The white women in the cafe and the cafe owner insult the aunties for bringing in their Indian food and start to loudly discuss how British culture has been affected by Indian immigration. They express a series of racist opinions and ask the women to put away their food or to leave the cafe. The aunties choose to ignore all of this and in turn insult Hashida who is sitting at another table. They let her overhear how they judge her for her promiscuity and unwanted pregnancy. Using some Punjabi expressions and extremely reactionary arguments against her, they label her as a prostitute and an unwanted member of the community. Hashida's reaction to all of this illustrates the articulation of the forces within her which constitute her identity-forming process. She must confront all of the different tensions in her life in order to constitute herself as a subject. Hashida reacts in the cafe by spilling coffee in her aunt's lap and telling her to "fuck off", reacting against the patriarchal impositions of her ethnic community and defending her position as "woman". Moreover, she continues to rebel by hurling the coffee pot onto the floor and insulting the owner of the cafe and in this way reacting against the racist pressures of white British society and defending her position, not as a woman in this case but as a British-Asian citizen.

Hashida rebels against her aunts but she also shows a feeling of solidarity with the Asian community. She wants to be accepted by the older generations and by her parents in particular. The women in the group also oppress her and oppress Ginder and the two teenagers but as the film develops we see how the group gradually comes together. In the climax of the film, when all of the women must decide in favor of Ginder or in favor of her husband, Asha physically supports Ginder by standing up against her nephew (Ginder's husband) and stopping him from hurting Ginder further. The women upon their return trip, have grown through their journey. They have learned about themselves individually on their journey and also about themselves as a group and they return to the community transformed and ready to face the future. The lesson learned by these women seems to be that their identities will be formed and asserted throughout their lives through a negotiation between race, gender, and ethnicity. As Rutherford points out vis-a-vis a general discussion of identity in contemporary British Culture:

Cultures and identities can never be wholly separate, homogenous entities; instead the interrelationships of differences are marked by translation and negotiation. The cultural politics of difference means living with incommensurability through new ethical and democratic frameworks, within a culture that both recognizes difference and is committed to resolving its antagonisms.

Rutherford (1990: 26)

The real community of women is formed once the older women can feel free to support and protect the younger women's new positions. When Asha is able to confront Ginder's husband, her nephew, and accept that Ginder need not succumb to his demands, their group has begun to be formed as a support system. The simple fact that they are all women and must therefore feel the same kind of pressures and unite against them holds true only once all of the differences within them have been recognized. Each of the women has a unique personal situation to deal with, due to particular circumstances of age, marital status, education, and personality. As Rattansi explains:

The notion of patriarchy as a singular form of trans-historical and cross-cultural male domination has also been challenged for its totalizing and ethnocentric essentialism. This deflation of the explanatory claims of "patriarchy" has been accompanied, in postmodern feminisms, by a displacement of the search for the ultimate, definite origins of male domination by a more historically and culturally nuanced analysis of particular forms and contexts of domination, subordination, and resistance.

Rattansi (1994: 35)

As we have seen, the oppressions that they feel are not just several layers superimposed on one another, they are articulated and interrelated elements in their fluid identities: fluid, in the sense that they are constantly open to changes and nuances in their concept of themselves as part of the community. It is precisely because their subjectivities are structured by multiple determinants that the film proposes a multi-vocal form of expression as an answer. These women do not have to choose one force over another, as Trinh Minh-Ha states:

The same holds true for the choice many women of color feel obliged to make between ethnicity and womanhood: how can they? You never have/are one without the other. The idea of two illusory separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), again, partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer-tactics. Triple jeopardy means here that whenever a woman of color takes up the feminist fight, she immediately qualifies for three possible "betrayals": she can be accused of betraying either niaii (the man-hater), or her community ("people of color should stay together to fight racism"), or woman herself ("you should fight first on the women's side").

Vinh-ha (1989, 104)

The women in this film may be accused of any or all of these betrayals just as the film itself may be viewed as going against women and the Asian community because it is not afraid of exposing the negative aspects. However, what arises from the film is a feeling of empowerment for these women and the film's spectators who see through their stories much of the unofficial knowledge shared by British citizens today and who may learn that, through this knowledge, they are able to confront the pressures of the more official depiction of one single, codified British identity.

Each individual in the film is a unique being whose identity is fluid and hybrid, and determined by a number of different factors among which are age, gender, ethnicity, and race. They refuse to be bound by any one single identity or by the official definitions of any of these identities. The plurality of the characters' circumstances and the different ways that they choose to confront their problems illustrate the term "heteroglossia," coined by Mercer to define "the many voicedness and variousness of British cultural identity *as it is lived*, against the centrifugal and centralizing monologism of traditional versions of national identity" (Mercer 1989: 12).

This film, full of generic, cultural, and narrative fluidity, proposes a renewed perspective on British-Asian women which is not afraid of showing the problems of their situation and also offers a new woman-based community support system which does not force a choice between "British-ness" or "Asian-ness". Their identity can be fluid and integrate the plurality of their social context and still find a space and a voice with which to speak. In fact, they refuse to be categorized or limited by the official versions of national or generic identity and with the depiction of this refusal they represent a new form of unofficial knowledge which tells British citizens that Britain is no longer a monochromatic culture which can be appealed to in the name of any kind of solid tradition and past. New ethnicities and new gender roles must be recognized and accepted as part of that culture, without asking anyone to claim one single and fixed identity as his or her own.

REFEKENCES

Chadha, Gurinder (1994). "Blackpool Illumination". *Sight and Sound*, February 1994, 76-77.

-
- Chodorow, Nancy (1993). "The Psychodynamics of Family". *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Ed. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit. Cambridge: The Polity Press.
- Hall, Stuart (1989). "New Ethnicities". *Black Film British Cinema*. Ed. Mercer Kobena. London: ICA Documents.
- Higson, Andrew (1996). *Dissolving Views. Key Writings on British Cinema*. London: Cassell.
- Kobena, Mercer (1989). "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation" *Black Film British Cinema*. Ed. Mercer Kobena. London: ICA Documents
- Kobena, Mercer. ed. (1989). *Black Film British Cinema* London: ICA Documents
- Minh-ha, Trinh (1989). *Woman, Native, Other* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rattansi, Al (1994). "Western Racisms, Ethnicities and Identities in a Postmodern Frame". *Racism, Modernity, and Identity on the Western Front*. Ed. Ali Kattansi and Sallie Westwood. Cambridge: The Polity Press.
- Rutierford, Jonathan (1990). *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishait Limited.
- Shaw, Allison (1988). *A Pakistani Community in Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Young, Lola (1996). *Fear of the Dark Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge.