Pakistani Englishness and the Containment of the Muslim Subaltern in Ayub Khan-Din’s Tragi-comedy Film *East is East*

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**Abstract** *East is East*, through carnivalising modes and techniques, reworks social histories and restrictive notions of individual, cultural, racial, and national identity. This essay examines the roles that rehistoricisation, spatial encodings and the carnivalesque elements of rude language, popular culture, and sexual imagery play in the film’s satirical project. Yet, it also argues that the structural dimensions and motifs of the screenplay drive the film towards the containment not only of a father who indulges in domestic abuse against children and wife, but also the containment of certain kinds of Pakistani Muslim subject positions in Britain. The character George Khan is circumscribed to a subaltern position of troublesome and potentially volatile ‘alien’ in both family and nation. Ultimately, the film reinforces the notion that within the plural British nation, an essential polarity exists between ‘East and West’.

Advertised on cinema posters as ‘The dog’s bollocks’, Ayub Khan-Din’s tragi-comedy *East is East* (1999), the largest grossing film in Great Britain for the year, won ‘best screenplay’ from the British Independent Film Awards, the BBC Asia Award for Film and Television, the London Film Critic’s Circle Award for best screenplay, and the Alexander Korda Award for outstanding British film of the year. Moreover, Irish director Damien O’Donell received the first European Union MEDIA Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. Set in northern England, *East is East* was touted by some reviewers and promoters as the next *Full Monty* (Dir. Peter Cattaneo, Britain, 1997). Although it might evoke the pleasantly vulgar vernacular and good humour of Salford, Manchester working-class Brits, references to a dog’s testicles might seem like a somewhat peculiar way to draw mass audiences to the theatres to see a film about Pakistani Muslim and British cultural mixing; however, once in the theatre, viewers would certainly find themselves enjoying a full measure of below-the-belt humour and belly laughs. Images of the family jewels, the testicles, the ‘knob’ (penis) and the pudenda have their own carnivalesque roles to play in this saga about the phallic father, authoritarianism, family inheritances and hypocrisy. Yet the tightly structured screenplay, the loaded visual language and the emotional depth of the superb acting by the entire cast contribute to both the jollity, pathos, tenderness, and violence of scenes and the serious cultural work that the film accomplishes.

Based on his successful stage play, Khan-Din’s film portrays a domineering, ‘castrating’ Pakistani-Muslim father, immigrant fish and chips shop owner George Khan (outstandingly acted by Indian Om Puri), a Roman-Catholic British mother from Lancashire, Ella Khan (acted equally as impressively by Linda Bassett), and their seven rebellious children: six sons and one daughter.

If Khan-Din, sitting at his desk with manuals on screenplay writing within easy reach, had asked himself, ‘How can I create seven children—with
contrasting characteristics—that would drive their controlling Muslim father past the breaking point? he would have—and did—come up with the right mix. The eldest son, Nazir, who provides the inciting incident in the narrative by bolting out of his arranged marriage ceremony, is later banished from the family and works with his male lover and boss at ‘Beau Chapeau,’ a fashionable hat boutique in Eccles. The second son, the charming and rebellious Tariq, conducts clandestine marathon kissing sessions with the granddaughter of the neighbourhood racist and loves the nightlife of music, drinking, dancing and women. The third, Abdul, is the family man. He works at a car repair shop with working-class British buddies who amiably call him ‘Gunga Din’. The fourth, Maneer, earns the nickname ‘Gandhi’ from his siblings for his passive acceptance of Islam and his father’s precepts. The fifth, Saleem, masquerades as a college student majoring in engineering, when, in fact, he takes art classes where he gains the skills of drawing and sculpting remarkably life-like male and female genitalia. The sixth child, the girl Meenah, a spunky, self-aware, rude-tongued tomboy, hates to wear the traditional ‘shalwar kameez’. The story is often conveyed from the point-of-view of Sajid, the seventh and youngest child. In fact, thanks to creative camera work, spectators even look—from his perspective—through the furry rim of his parka hood at a street scene as Sajid recovers from a circumcision forced on him by his father. The parka fits him like a protective foreskin, and he often hides out in a womb-like back shed, forcing his parents to speak to him through a vaginal hole in the door. The wife and all the children tend to negotiate their cultural and individual freedoms by concealing forbidden activities. They ultimately stand up to their dominating husband and father. The tension, conflict, comedy, and violence escalate when George decides to bend his children to his will, secure their paths as Muslims, and shore up his own questionable position in the Muslim Pakistani community by secretly arranging an unsuitable double marriage for his sons Tariq and Abdul.

East is East, through carnivalising modes, reworks social histories and narrow notions of individual, cultural, racial and national identity. This essay examines the role that rehistoricisation, spatial encodings and the carnivalesque elements of rude language, popular culture and sexual imagery play in the film’s satirical project. Homi K. Bhabha comments upon artistic and social assertions of ‘cultural difference’ that challenge ‘the consensual, ethnocentric notion of the pluralistic existence of cultural diversity’. He refers to cultural expressions that attempt to unsettle ‘the liberal ethic of tolerance and the pluralist framework of multiculturalism’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 177). Bhabha criticises the contemporary celebration of multiculturalism as just another hegemonic ploy. He argues for the subversion of programmatic multiculturalism and the promotion, instead, of ‘alternative hybrid sites of cultural negotiation’ (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 177–178). This essay argues that East is East examines an immigrant experience during an era of immigration backlash in Britain and emerging forms of cultural hybridity, accommodation, and resistance within one Pakistani British family. However, it also argues that, ultimately, the film does not subvert or unsettle some of the popular cultural notions about traditional ‘Asians’ in Britain upon which conventional representations of Britishness and multiculture are based. In other words, the essay analyses the kind of rearticulations of British social history and multiple positionings of cultural identity that East is East offers. Yet, it also argues that the structure and motifs of the screenplay drive the film towards the
inevitable containment not only of a based-on-real-life father who, under certain pressures, bosses his children around, refuses to listen to them or care about their quests for happiness, and indulges in domestic abuse against children and wife, but also the containment of a certain kind of Pakistani Muslim subject position in Britain. This is exactly the kind of interpretation that Khan-Din would most likely refute. Nevertheless, the social, historical and symbolic signs in the film do not simply expose the folly of the father’s hypocritical and aggressive imposition of Islam and Pakistani culture on his children. The film demonstrates a bias that cultural in-betweenness, or a rearticulated Englishness is preferable to assimilation to traditional Pakistani Muslim culture.4

Black British Cultural Studies critics, such as Stuart Hall (1988, 1992); Kobena Mercer (1994); Hazel Carby (1980a, 1980b); and Paul Gilroy (1987, 1993); have discussed changing social boundaries, concepts of identity formation, and representations of racial or ethnic alterity that have emerged during the post-Margaret Thatcher, postcolonial, and postmodern eras. In the essay ‘The Question of Cultural Identity’, Hall argues that ‘Individuals now have access to “a more positional, more political, more plural and diverse, less fixed, unified or trans-historical”’ identity (Hall, 1992, pp. 29–30).5 However, Carby, like Bhabha, also criticises the instrumental deployment of images of the ‘plural nation’ and diversity in public discourses, political speeches and mass advertising (see Carby, 1980a, 1980b). As Les Back (1996) notes in his book New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racism and Multiculture in Young Lives, while ‘multiply inflected forms of social identity are being expressed within cities such as London… these are equally being met multiply accented forms of popular racism that sometimes operate inside urban multicultural and at other times prey on these fragile forms of dialogue from outside’ (p. 7; as cited by Jacobson, 1998, p.99). One might crudely say that even though East and East is a magnificent film in many ways, it dangles somewhere between these two bollocks of the bulldog nation. On one side, the film is seemingly responsive to contemporary theoretical discourses that chart plural signs of identity. On the other side, representations of the Islamic patriarch and the Muslim community fit harmoniously with public discourses that celebrate multiculturalism even as they simultaneously continue to define British society in terms of ‘Englishness’, belonging, and exclusion.

Discussing the positioning of Muslims in the British imagination, Fazeela Hanif’s (2003) essay ‘Muslims in Britain’ cites Wolfe’s statement that ‘Islamic and British identities are in conflict which can be resolved only by the ascendancy of one or the other’.6 This kind of categorical pronouncement—simplistic and binary as it is—suggests how sometimes Muslims in Britain continue to be represented as inassimilable and incompatible with Englishness.7 By the end of my discussion, I hope to show that George Khan is contained not only by his family’s immediate actions to end his domination but also by formulations sampled into the screenplay from just such ‘public scripts’.8 He is circumscribed to a subaltern position of troublesome and potentially volatile ‘alien’ in both family and nation.9 The term ‘subaltern’ is deployed here to suggest not only forces of subordination, control, and dominance that work against the subaltern, but also lingering elitist constructions of colonial India and imperialist constructions of contemporary Pakistan—of subaltern ‘inferiority’, ‘otherness’, ‘dangerous’ insurgency, and threat to (British) national values, lifestyle, and security (see Ranajit Guha, 1982). George Khan can only be recuperated...
back into the family through the grace of his British wife, once she has gained or
revealed her ascendancy in the power structure of the family. After it is
clear that her children will not accept George’s bullying or forced conversions,
no matter how idyllically he portrays Islamic belief in the equality and
community of man, he is allotted at least his ‘half cup of tea’, a marginalised place
in the family.

Like George, other male representatives of the Pakistani community—though
also depicted during reflective, festive or cordial moments—use physical force,
pitch and tone of voice, or non-verbal communication forms to intimidate or
exert their authority over their students, family members, wives or employees.
This includes the Mullah, who manhandles Sajid when he discovers that the
twelve-year-old boy has not been properly circumcised; Poppa Khalid, who
painfully pinches Sajid’s cheeks; George’s nephew, who cuffs his employee’s
head; the patriarch of a Bradford household, who bangs on the wall joining
parlour and kitchen and shouts orders for his wife to serve tea; and the potential
in-law, who intimidates his wife with a swift glance. Although the working-
class British men of Salford engage in ‘horseplay’, they never exhibit these traits.
Traditional Pakistani Muslim masculinity is associated with undesirably harsh
qualities. As we will see in the following section on spatial encodings of
Bradford, Pakistani Muslim women are presented in an equally biased, narrow,
and negative manner.

Bringing together absurdity, social commentary and comedy, the film lampoons
every social arena. However, each of the settings in Salford and Eccles provide
at least a limited diversity in characterisations of the British. The intolerant,
xenophobic grandfather, Mr Moorhouse, has a respectful grandson, Ernest,
who readily accepts the Khan family and greets the patriarch with the courtesy
‘Salaam Alacum’; one of the working-class blokes (though fat and naked,
‘hog-tied’, swinging from the ceiling on a rope around his rump, and tarred
and feathered during his stag party at the auto mechanic shop) expresses his
respect for Abdul’s religious practices; and the ‘slag’ women at the nightclub
certainly do not demonstrate any prejudice against Tariq, even though a
bouncer at the door enforces a ‘colour bar’. These characters suggest personal
instances of intercultural tolerance existing during national eras of immigration
backlash. Unfortunately, the film does not develop the Pakistani Muslim world
and its characters to the same degree. The camera pans past people walking
on the streets of Bradford, allowing spectators to glimpse the cultural and
religious diversity of the Asian community. Opting for the maximum level
of hilarity, the film makers underelaborate the Asian British world, limiting
the number of distinctive characters who promote traditional Pakistani
values and pushing their scenes to conclusions demanded by the comedic
genre. Although buffoons exist in the varied worlds depicted, spectators
are positioned to gain respect for the few white British characters that do
demonstrate acceptance of the Khan family cultural and racial admixture.
Conversely, spectators are positioned to either pity a British woman who has
assimilated fully to traditional Pakistani Muslim culture or enjoy and laugh at
the ridicule of Pakistani characters that earn their humiliation through
pomposity and narrow-mindedness. Of course, the racist British grandfather
must also be cut to size. However, Khan-Din and the production crew have
imbued with a flaw each of the traditional Pakistani characters given any
development at all. This biases spectator reactions against them in a way that
suits the comedic genre and contributes to characterising not only George but the larger Pakistani Muslim society as obstacles that must be overcome in order for George’s Pakistani British children to have freedom of cultural identity in Britain.

The writer is the son of a Pakistani Muslim father who did own a fish and chip shop in Salford and a British mother, and a sibling of nine other children who all ultimately rejected the life practice of Islam. He has claimed that Sajid represents himself, a boy who perennially hides in his parka. Khan-Din seems highly aware of the ‘egg shell’ strewn ground, to use his cliché, upon which he might tread by creating a portrait of a frustrated, hypocritical and thwarted Muslim patriarch who verbally and physically lashes out at his family, finally punching and bloodying a son and battering his wife.10 An adviser was hired as part of the production crew to ensure that Arabic and Urdu phrases, social courtesies, and Muslim ceremonies or practices would be accurately represented. In interviews, Khan-Din has repeatedly emphasised the autobiographical nature of his story, arguing that he was not attempting to create a ‘Pakistani everyman’ (Olden, 2003). Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, in the newspaper feature ‘Sacred Beauty’, examines the recent atmosphere for artists dealing with Indian, Pakistani or Islamic subject matter in Britain. She cites feminist novelist and playwright Ruksana Ahmed’s comment, ‘I felt that the reactions against [Salman] Rushdie were unnecessarily harsh. It made many of us petrified of our communities and the hideous self-censorship, which was imposed. The imagination must be free of strictures and I resent what happened’. However, many Muslims have expressed indignation at the perceived frontal assault against Islam in Rushdie’s novel. Alibhai-Brown suggests that community reaction must also worry Khan-Din, as ‘there are those who have been busy gathering up protest against this film’.

As Mercer has noted, ‘cinema and image-making have become a crucial arena of cultural contestation today—contestation over what it means to be British; contestation over the values that underpin the Britishness of British cinema as a national film culture’ (Mercer, 1994, p. 73). Khan-Din’s public statements often reflect a strong degree of resentment in response to essentialist representations of ‘Asians’ in British film, television and theatre. As an actor, he has most enjoyed the roles ‘where you’re a character, not an Asian’. In an interview with Maya Jaggi, published in The Guardian, Khan-Din remembers enjoying his parts in the television shows London Bridge and Staying Alive because ‘they had no baggage; they didn’t have to get beaten up by skin-heads’. Indeed, East is East does not deploy some of the more stereotypical scenes long-associated with Asians in Britain, such as ‘Paki-bashing’ by working-class skinheads, National Front youths, the public disorders, or the militant Muslim youth protests and street violence that appear in the films written by and/or based on fiction by Pakistani-British Hanif Kurerishi, including My Beautiful Laundrette (Dir. Stephen Frears, Britain, 1985), Sammy and Rosie Get Laid (Dir. Stephen Frears, Britain, 1987), and My Son the Fanatic (Dir. Udayan Prasad, Britain, 1997). Unlike much media coverage, the film does not reduce ‘the religious and cultural identity of Muslims to a political movement’ (Dajani and Michelmore, 1999). Like the woman-centred, intergenerational Asian British film Bhaji on the Beach (Dir. Gurinder Chadha, Britain, 1993), East is East interrogates patriarchy and domestic abuse, but it also attempts to understand, to some degree, George’s frustrations as a Pakistani immigrant, as well.11 None the less, the film perpetuates other pervasive stereotypes of Asian Muslims in Britain.
Revisionist History in *East is East*

Khan-Din provides a disclaimer, describing the content of his play and film as ‘a personal story. I wasn’t writing about any specific community, I was writing about my father’ (Olden, 2003). However, the film is not without a social conscience about the way that children growing up in a household of cultural mélange might be impacted by larger events. Situated in working-class Salford, Manchester, England, in 1971, the film, through various modes, depicts how post-World War II societal transformations in Britain and Pakistan underwrite the mounting familial turmoil and shape the children’s identities. The film revisits and reworks history through studying the impact of post-WW II and current events and their reportage by radio, television, newspapers and cinema on the Khan family. It depicts the early 1970s as a time of sexual liberation, effusive, modish popular culture and fashion. Margaret Dickinson, in the critical study *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–90*, characterises the 1970s as not only influenced by leftist politics, but also ‘showbiz and high-society fashion’ (Dickinson, 1999, p.36). As Roger Ebert says in his review of the film, ‘what George is fighting in the Britain of 1971 is the seduction of his children by the secular religion of pop music and fashion’ (Ebert, 2003). Indeed, the discos, pop music, fashion world and pop art do lure the sons away to English society. Yet 1971, in particular, was also the year in which Pakistan and India engaged in a brief but devastating war over Kashmir and the independence of East Pakistan. Defeated by the India Air Force and ground troops who captured 93,000 prisoners of war, West Pakistan relinquished the territory that became Bangladesh, although the territory continues to be the site of religious, political, and national dispute. The film suggests the pressure, rage and shame George Khan feels as he listens to news of the division of Pakistan on radio and television. The war news compounds his frustrations and adds tension to the domestic sphere.

An additional significance of the year 1971 for immigrant populations in Britain appears only in one incredibly brief blip of the dialogue. When George chastises Ella for not behaving like a proper Muslim wife, she retorts, ‘Don’t make me laugh, George. I’m a proper Muslim wife when it suits ya … until the shop wants opening or some of your relatives want out at the Home Office’. As Gilroy notes in the essay ‘The Peculiarities of the Black English,’ 1971 marked the ‘end of primary settlement’ (Gilroy, 1993, p. 50). The following brief passage from *Policing Against Black People*, a book of case studies and data compiled by the Institute of Race Relations in Britain, suggests how immigration policies of the Home Office tightened during the early 1970s:

> Under the 1971 Immigration Act the police have the power to arrest without a warrant anyone whom they suspect of being an illegal entrant. After arrest they can be charged and tried in a court, which has the power to, and usually does, recommend deportation. At that point the convicted immigrant can he held indefinitely in prison awaiting the Home Office decision whether or not to deport. (Institute of Race Relations, 1987, p. 42)

This anti-immigration legislation was enforced in an atmosphere generated, in part, by the racist rhetoric and agenda of social leaders such as Enoch Powell. A
survey of British newspapers of the late 1960s through 1970s reveals the degree of attention and popular support Powell’s speeches commanded, a phenomenon well documented in Black British Cultural Studies. His most infamous speech of all, which alluded to the ancient Roman river of Tiber foaming with blood, portended that the black immigrants in Britain would provoke public disorder and violence until blood would run like a river. The speech also suggested a racist fear of the commingling of bloods, races and ethnicities that would cloud the ‘pure’ British cultural and racial bloodlines. Biological and cultural racism were, thus, linked in the rhetoric of the public sphere. In the film, the buildings surrounding the Khan’s family home and business are plastered with posters announcing a forthcoming speech to be delivered in Salford by Enoch Powell, and the next door neighbour, a bellowing, domineering grandfather, often makes xenophobic remarks to his granddaughter and grandson, or distributes flyers in the streets for Powell’s speech. The filmmaker, thereby, criticizes the xenophobia, racism and anti-immigration backlash prevalent in British society during his coming-of-age years. In an interview with Mark Olden, Khan-Din refers to the impact in his own home of the British and Pakistani events of the 1970s: ‘When all these events started happening, I was Sajid. I was living in a parka. Enoch Powell was always being thrown in my face as a child, and the whole Bangladesh war of Independence had a big effect on our household, because what happened in the house always revolved around the TV news. In a way, it was almost as if the disintegration of Pakistan was happening in our house at the same time. It affected everything that was going on’ (Olden, 2003).

In the film, as the kids devour forbidden sausages and bacon during their father’s absence, they watch Enoch Powell’s speech on television. In support of repatriation for undesirables, he differentiates the inassimilable immigrants from those immigrants ‘whose future does lie here’. The boys quip, ‘We could get Dad deported’. This scene works both ways. It carnivalises the racist broadcasts of Powell, but it also, though humorously, enforces the categorisation of the father as the inassimilable sort. In a speech delivered in Southall, 4 November 1971, Powell used military metaphors to describe the invasion of inassimilable Asians into Britain: ‘It is ... truly when he looks into the eyes of Asia that the Englishman comes face to face with those who would dispute with him the possession of his native land’ (see Gilroy, 1987, p. 45). As Gilroy notes, Powell understood Asians to be ‘bound by cultural and biological ties which merit the status of a fully formed, alternative national identity’ (Gilroy, 1987, pp. 45–46). Thus, Asians were judged ‘incompatible with authentic forms of Englishness’ (Gilroy, 1987, p. 46). The next door neighbour obviously serves as a mouthpiece for Powell’s ideologies, calling Nazir’s wedding party a ‘piccaninnies’ picnic’; however, even Ella’s language contains traces of racist colonial imagery.

When George tells his family to notice how happy Asians on the streets of Bradford look, Ella says, ‘George, I don’t care how bleeding big their grins are, we’re not moving here’. Several commentators have referred to the portion of Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech in which he refers to a letter received from an elderly white British constituent who fears the changing demographics of her neighbourhood. For Powell, she symbolises Little England being invaded and overrun. As quoted by Gilroy, the alarmist speech warns: ‘Windows are broken. She finds excreta pushed through the letterbox. When she goes to the shops, she is followed by children, charming wide-grinning piccaninnies. They
cannot speak English, but one word they know, “Racialist” they chant’ (Gilroy, 1987, p. 87). In Jamaican Michelle Cliff’s novel No Telephone to Heaven, Clare Savage discovers in London’s Portobello Road market a display of ‘golliwogs, grotesquerie’, images remembered from childhood books about ‘Little Black Sambo’ (Cliff, 1987, p. 112). The images evoked in the film by Powell’s rhetoric, the next door neighbour’s outbursts, and even George’s wife’s speech stem from these sorts of caricatures and racial constructions of the colonial era. Thus, the film comments upon the continuing pervasiveness of racism in daily British life.

In addition to using scenes that feature George and/or family members watching/listening to television or radio news broadcasts or reading the paper to suggest the impact of media reportage and historical events, the film uses allusions to cinema as another method of reexamining and reworking British history. References to cinema occur twice as the family travels from Salford to Bradford in the Mosque van. These references provide implicit criticism of the way that British filmmakers have promoted exclusionary representations of nation, national history and race. To use Mercer’s (1984) terminology, these sequences ‘recode narratives of race and nation’ (‘Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation’). As they approach the distinctive tower of the Lady Bower Reservoir, the Derwent Valley Dam, Ella exclaims, ‘They filmed The Dambusters there’. The Dambusters (Dir. Michael Anderson, Britain, 1955) also grossed more than any other film during its release year. It lauded the legendary WW II British squadron 617 that dropped spinning cylindrical ‘dam busting’ bombs on Nazi Germany. Of course, the film contributed to nationalist myth making of the heroism, ingenuity, bravery and supremacy of the British state. In response to her mother’s exclamation, Meenah retorts, ‘You say that every time we come to Bradford!’ By remarking the filming location of The Dambusters as a road sign on the way to Bradford, the ‘British Islamabad,’ East is East exposes worn-out myths that are sustained through representational media. Implicitly, the new film replaces monological constructions of history, nation and race with its own revisions of history. The nation is represented in terms of multicultural flux and intercultural conflict. George also mentions cinema on this trip, nostalgically remembering that within a year of his arrival in England, he played a part in a film. Goaded by his daughter, who mockingly asks, ‘Were you the star, dad?’ he replies, ‘No bloody star, stupid. I was shouting in a bloody crowd, “I kill bloody English”’. In a film that probably glorified British attempts to quell anti-colonial rebellions in colonial India, he played a non-differentiated part of the murderous, insurgent subaltern hordes. This reference also suggests the supporting role that cinema has played in Empire-building and the idealisation of national and imperial decline.

Though George certainly has a distinctive character in East is East, he never really transcends this cinematic representation of threatening subalternity—even if his struggle is relocated from class and nationalist struggle to conflicts within the domestic sphere. A strongly developed motif of the film is George’s nature as castrating father (in the Freudian sense). His threatening early film role is later reenacted in the home, one might argue; however, throughout the film, George is associated with the phallic knife and ‘cutting’. The most pronounced instance of this is his insistence that the terrified 12-year old Sajid be relieved of his ‘tickle-tackle’ through circumcision. As George says, ‘this thing need cutting’. ‘I bloody fixes’. However, Khan-Din consistently attaches this image to George. George brings his wife an old barber chair as a bribe when
he organises the trip to Bradford. He threatens to cut Tariq’s hair himself. He sends his sons off to see how chickens are decapitated while he conducts the marriage negotiations in Bradford. He also threateningly wields a fish-filleting knife, inspiring at least this viewer’s expectations that he might plunge it impulsively and murderously into his son Tariq, who finally confronts his father and incites the familial rebellion. When beating Ella, he threatens to burn her family while she sleeps. Ironically, the one line he is assigned in the late 1930s British film, ‘I kill bloody English,’ is a line he is destined to nearly act out with his own family. Thus, although the film performs a variety of historical remediations, it does not free George Khan from his association with negative images of Pakistani Muslim ‘otherness’ that have accrued in the British public sphere.

Traditional Muslim Culture in Bradford: Spatial Encodings of the Muslim Community and Representations of Pakistani Muslim Womanhood

According to Jessica Jacobson’s ethnographic study Islam in Transition: Religion and Identity Among British Pakistani Youth, intergenerational conflict in conventional British Pakistani society ‘arises most commonly in relation to the subjects of marriage (more specifically, over the appropriate criteria for marriage partners and the right of parents to choose their children’s partners), dating, going out at night and—among women—dress’ (Jacobson, 1998, p. 60). While East is East challenges racialist aspects of British society, it also highlights these primary sources of intergenerational conflict in Pakistani Muslim culture. According to Khan-Din, hypocritical George had ‘abandoned his culture and married an English woman, and then decided that his children should marry Pakistanis’ (Olden, 2003). Several film scenes depict the children’s and wife’s rebellion against George’s attempts to arrange marriages and dictate the daughter’s dress. However, the family’s trip to Bradford allows for a more extended exploration of arranged marriages, conventional Pakistani Muslim womanhood, and the circulation value of women.

Image clusters function to encode Bradford as a feminised space, or at least a space where notions of traditional Pakistani womanhood are superficially reworked by the film. Throughout the film, George and Ella jokingly refer to the Muslim practice of polygamy. George threatens playfully, and sometimes more seriously, to bring his first wife from Pakistan. At one juncture, Ella reaches for a bedsheet drying on a clothesline, pulls it over her lower face like a veil, and mockingly retorts, ‘and send me over there, but she’ll have a hard time serving fish and chips dressed from head to toe in a bleeding bedsheet’. As the mosque van enters Bradford (first passing a road sign overwritten with the graffiti ‘Bradistan’), we see a similar image, a gigantic advertisement painted on the side of a building. A veiled woman standing by a line of fresh laundry smilingly advertises Ovo detergent. The camera also frames a ‘Housewives Cash & Carry’ store. In the context of British consumerism and product marketing, even the traditional Hindu or Muslim homemaking woman is not sacred. Her image has been commodified into the ‘sanitised/fetishised body of consumerism’ (see Jones, 2002).

Traditional Pakistani Muslim women receive various kinds of treatment in the film. They sometimes appear as silent and veiled. For instance, the hopeful and lovely bride of the first arranged marriage with Nazir conveys her sentiments entirely with her eyes. During the animated wedding scene, the camera pauses
on a veiled, stoic elder woman who sits in the audience, moving only her eyes. Two women of Ella’s generation who live in the traditional Pakistani community of Bradford are imbued with characteristics that significantly contrast with Ella’s. Screenplay writer and production crew place together Ella and a British woman who marries a traditional Pakistani Muslim and settles in Bradford, generating pity for the woman. Ella’s encounter with Mrs Shah produces slapstick and situational humour that levels the snobbish Pakistani Muslim matriarch whose husband has amassed a comfortable wealth from his Bradford business. Ella gains strength of character in both sequences, emerging as moral superior or victor.

At the home of a Pakistani man married to the white English woman who wears the veil, George meets with men of the community to secretly negotiate the marriage plans. Here, George and Ella’s daughter Meenah learns that the daughter of this family, through arranged marriage, has moved to Pakistan and had a baby. The segregated scenes of men in the parlour and women in the kitchen allow two distinctive settings for an examination of the circulation value of women and the impact of social practices on women. In the parlour, the men pass around photographs of Mr Shah’s daughters, ‘showing’ the prospective brides for Tariq and Abdul. When the photographs reach George at the end of the circle, he must pause in shock as the audience is allowed a glimpse at the comically and grotesquely ugly daughters. As C.J.S. Wallia (2003) notes in his review of the film for *India Star Review of Books*, George struggles to ‘swallow his disappointment’ and accepts the women as part of his family out of fear of community rejection. In the kitchen, a family photograph hanging askew on the wall says it all, as it depicts the daughter of the household in gold-embellished, red marriage attire, veiled mother, and proud, smiling father. The mother and daughter grimace morosely into the camera’s eye, suggesting the undesirable effect when Muslims gain ascendancy and the English assimilate to Pakistani Muslim culture fully. When Meenah asks, ‘When will she come home?’ the British mother collapses, drops her head on the table, and delivers the rending outburst, ‘My baby!’ The scene portends the wrenching experience in store for Meenah and Ella should George Khan decide to arrange a marriage for his non-conformist daughter. Unlike the wife who has lost her daughter to Pakistan, Ella staunchly defends her children. Although Ella demonstrates a willingness to accept some aspects of George’s Muslim and Pakistani heritage and practices, after this scene, one may read her earlier refusal to move to Bradford as a refusal to fully submit herself and her children to assimilation to Pakistani Muslim values in the way that this distraught mother did.

George entices the wife and family to go on the trip to Bradford by suggesting that they see a movie. After the marriage arrangement meeting, the family does go to the movies together. As viewers, we see clips from two of the movies screening at ‘Moti Mahal’. This scene plays a dual function. Spectators watch George, who, in the previous sequence, has just sealed his plans to marry off Tariq and Abdul. During the film clips we see George romantically singing along with a film, mimicking the role of the courtesan. Ella puffs away on her cigarette, providing a contrast with the chastely eroticised image of the woman on screen. George also glances over at his sons momentarily, with a look that makes Tariq and Abdul pause uncomfortably. These gestures add irony to the plot since George has preempted any romantic courtship for his sons, promising them without their knowledge to unbeautiful women.
However, the actual film clips spliced into this family moment also facilitate a comparison of contemporary Indian and Pakistani values and popular constructions of womanhood with those of Pakistani Muslims in Britain. The first, from Professor, obviously influenced by Bollywood films, shows a ‘modern’, shorthaired woman dressed fashionably in culottes. She flirtatiously skips away from and lures a perplexed man. The second scene from Chaudvin Ka Chand seems to suggest a Hollywoodesque, sexualised representation of women in traditional, romantic films. The male courtesan observes and sings to a reclining, sleeping beauty that is definitely positioned as object of the gaze.20 Her eroticised look at lover and camera lens upon waking belies the propriety with which she abruptly rises and places the diaphanous veil over her hair when the lover advances. These two films suggest that, firstly, concepts of womanhood are not as static in India or Pakistan as they seem to be in the traditional Islamic world in Bradford. Secondly, they form part of the larger sequence of scenes that re-examine the role of Pakistani women in Britain and suggest hypocrisies or cultural contradictions. In the penultimate scene of the movie, when the Shahs visit the Khans, Mrs Shah chides Meenah for wearing a sari, sent to her from an Aunt living in the Pakistan capital city Islamabad. George had insisted that Meenah wear the sari for the occasion. The matron argues that the traditional ‘shalwar kameez’ would look much better on Meenah. Against Ella’s defence, George sides with the Shahs, who agree that even women in Pakistan are getting ‘too bloody moderns’. Again, Pakistani British Muslim culture—and the women—are portrayed as much more conservative and static than their Pakistani counterparts.

As noted earlier, other representations or characterisations of traditional women from Bradford provide situational humour. To preserve her family, Ella must achieve ascendancy over the fundamentalist, rigid, nouveau riche, and snobby potential mother-in-law for Tariq and Abdul and her two absurdly and monstrously ugly daughters in a scene that will be more fully treated in the following section on the role of carnivalesque elements in East is East.

Carnivalesque elements, Comedy, and Social Commentary

The carnival registers in East is East destabilise rigid concepts of both English and Pakistani identity. However, one must recognise the elements that also subalternise George Khan and provide narrow depictions of the traditional Pakistani Muslims. The film begins with a Catholic holy day processional where the Khan children happily carry idols of ‘holy Mary,’ the compassionate mother, and the crucified son. In an aerial shot we see the typically British parade marching along the narrow streets and terraced, row houses of working-class Salford (it was actually filmed elsewhere). The Ompah-pop music ‘The Banner Man’ sets up the carnival atmosphere, as the soundtrack declares, ‘I wish that I could be a banner man’. George, who does carry the banner for Islam in his family, watches from the sidelines, while his children madly dash down the parallel street to avoid his discovery. At least four other songs refer to the carnival theme of free movement (‘Moving,’ ‘On a Carousel’), including a reggae song that white British youths dance to in a disco that Tariq and Abdul manage to get into, despite the colour bar. Other carnivalesque elements include the wedding ceremony, an enormous black and white spotted dog that tries to
hump women on the street, the tarring and feathering of a working-class bloke at his stag party, a juggling bartender, and Meenah’s performance of a vigorous Bollywood style dance in the fish and chips shop backyard. One of the best carnivalesque moments takes place when Ernest, the boy next door, who has a romantic crush on Meenah, begs her to play football with him. Aiming for his face, she kicks the ball through a glass window plastered with an Enoch Powell poster. When the ball perfectly smashes out Powell’s face, the enraged, xenophobic grandfather, Mr Moorhouse, sticks his face out of the window to curse Ernest. Of course, when he does this, his own face takes the place of Powell’s in the poster and acquires the same degree of ugliness. The carnival elements bring joy or subversive pleasure to a film that also contains painful familial violence and oppression. Yet, obviously, these scenes also perform revisionist cultural critique.

Another element that contributes to the carnival spirit of the movie is the rude and vulgar language deployed by the Salfordians, including George, who has certainly assimilated the use of high frequency adjectives, such as ‘bleeding,’ ‘bloody,’ ‘cheeky little bleeder,’ and ‘bastard’. We see the term ‘bastard’ deployed with great _gusto_ by Ella’s friend Annie, who chides a neighbour complaining about the household noise, ‘Wash your bastard curtains, you frigging cow’. The term is both funny and terrifying when George routinely uses it as a form of address for Sajid, but it gains an intense brutality when paired with ‘bitch’ in George’s enraged attack against Ella. ‘You bastard bitch. You called me a pig’, he shouts as he beats his wife. By repeatedly using these particular terms, Khan-Din not only creates a sense of a real working-class British speech community, but he also creates a space for examining the way in which language is loaded with ideological constructs. As T. Modood notes in the essay “‘Difference’, Cultural Racism and Anti-racism”, ‘cultural racism builds on biological racism a further discourse which evokes cultural differences from an alleged British or “civilized” norm to vilify or marginalize or demand cultural assimilation from groups who also suffer from biological racism. Post-war racism in Britain has been simultaneously culturalist and biological …’ (Modood, 1997, pp. 155–156; as cited by Jacobson, 1998, p. 76). ‘Bastard’ and ‘bloody’ carry the multiple connotations of legitimacy or illegitimacy, blood lines, and violence, suggesting issues that underlie the cultural conflicts within both the Khan family and the society.

Biological formulations of ethnicity, race or civilisation are carnivalised and exposed in a scene in which the potential in-laws of the Khans bring their hideously and clownishly ugly daughters to meet the family. In a verbal battle, Ella, humiliated by Mrs Shah’s pomposity and condescending manner gains the upperhand as Mrs Shah calls her sons ‘half-breed’, and she calls the ‘monstrosities’, the daughters, ‘in-bred’. Near the end of the film, Ella makes the children think about the function of language. This takes place after wife and children deport George temporarily from his family home to the shop, ‘George’s English Chippy’. When Saleem charges that that ‘bastard’ was no father, Ella, who has achieved ascendancy in the family by this point in the narrative, retorts, ‘That bastard you’re talking about is my husband, and no matter what you think of him, he is still your father, and if I hear another foul-mouthed word out of you, I’ll have ya’.

Other frequently used phrases, such as ‘Get stuffed!’ and ‘Piss off!’ take us back to the dog’s bollocks that we followed into this essay. One of the most
strikingly playful images of the film is a large inflated red ball, called a space hopper, which children used to ride by sitting on it, holding onto a handle, and bouncing along the street. This child’s toy performs incredibly multi-layered work in the film, evoking again the carnivalesque spirit in its movement, the fads of the 1970s, the impact of popular culture and consumerism, and cross-cultural changes. The space hopper signifies the ubiquitous nature of this lure, as both Anglo English children in Salford and Pakistani children in Bradford are seen hopping on them. Asked by interviewer Paul Byrne about the inclusion of the toy in the film, the director O’Donnell replied, ‘Yeah, I wanted the Spacehopper in there, because we were looking at what kids had in those days, and of all the curious toys around, the Spacehopper was really the most distinctive … . And also, I always wanted one as a kid, but I never got one. So I wanted the kid in the film to always want one, but never get one too. It was there as a small ode to my own childhood’ (Byrne, 2003). After George beats Ella and Maneer, the family watches an inane British children’s television show about ‘the Clangers,’ lonely space aliens. The ‘space hopper’ and the ‘alien’ show both symbolise the underlying themes of belongingness and alienness. As the family gathers around the TV in dejection, we hear the voice-over of the show mentioning the loneliness of the Clangers in their dark caves. Then the camera cuts to a shot of George alone in the parlour, hand resting on the barber chair. He is obviously experiencing loneliness, remorse, confusion and alienation.

The best thing about the space hopper toys is, of course, their possible reading as a carnivalesque symbol for testicles. When Sajid is healing from his painful circumcision, we watch—from Sajid’s perspective inside the furry parka hood—a child hopping on the ball. We have to think how painful it might be for Sajid to try such a feat in his condition. However, the space hoppers are also used structurally to mark transitional turning points in the film, or plot points, at which George has committed acts that will lead to his subalternisation. The balls burst—two of them. The first is run over by a Mosque van when George travels to Bradford to secretly plan his sons’ arranged marriage. We see the second burst ball lying next to a dumpster in Salford after George’s explosive confrontation with Tariq and immediately before the climatic scene of meeting between the potential in-laws and George’s family. After George has been humbled and demoted in the family power structure, the carnivalesque ending shows two children bouncing along on the balls in a chaotic and comedic final street scene. The British bulldog’s bollocks are safely in place, after George’s have been deflated.

Other visual images of family jewels and ornate chests repeated throughout the film mark the transition of the family from the authority of the father to that of the mother/motherland. During the preparation for Nazir’s wedding, Sajid holds up the family jewels, a gold necklace given to his mother by his father, stored in her ornate jewellery box and worn on occasions of Muslim gatherings and ceremonies. As symbolised by this literal piece of family jewellery, the mother and children operate under the authority of the father, even though they covertly subvert his control frequently. George is concerned about the cultural inheritances of his children. Later, George keeps the wedding garments for his sons in an ornate hope chest, which he padlocks after a son desecrates the items in protest. In the final scenes, the artistic son, Saleem, shows his family his sculpture, a life-like, fair-skinned, hairy, latex vagina in an ornate box. The shifting signs contained in these three boxes parallel the shift of the family from
the authority of the father to that of the mother, and, I would argue, Mother Country.

Although shocked by the artwork, Ella uses it to fight the snobby potential Pakistani in-laws and defend her house and ‘half-breed’ children. When the vagina flies accidentally into the lap—a perfect fit—of the extremely strict and fundamentalist Pakistani potential mother-in-law, we see what her ‘shalwar kameez’ conceals. As Robin U. Russin and William Missouri Downs note in *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*, ‘Sex and bodily functions … are both subject to taboos and are sources of embarrassment, although the level of the humor is unsophisticated and visceral’. They explain that using transgressive sexual or bodily function comedy to upset “civilized” social norms ‘punctures the pompous conventions’ of ‘those who think they’re better than the average person’: ‘We delight in their embarrassment because they’ve brought it on themselves by pretending to be superior’ (Russin and Downs, 2000, p. 223). We know that the Khan family is cramped in their dwellings, and we see the children urinating in buckets at night. When George first mentions the Shahs to Ella, he builds up their social status by telling her that they have three bathrooms and two daughters. However, Mrs Shah rubs Ella Khan’s economic standing in her face, critiquing the terraced housing, the accommodations for the family, and Ella’s liberal parenting style. Of course, the filmmakers had to ask themselves the question, ‘What would most offend and defuse a strict, traditional Pakistani Muslim woman and simultaneously produce the most laughs?’ The answer, of course, is the comic, flying pudenda. Ella adds to this insult by demanding that Mrs Shah get out of her house, shouting ‘I will stick that fanny over your bastard head’. Clearly, Ella wins the verbal battle by threatening to veil the Muslim woman with the latex vagina. While this scene may not be blasphemous, *per se*, it does provoke this viewer to think about how ‘images of black [substitute ‘Pakistani Muslim’] women are used and the ways that they are implicitly and explicitly contrasted with white [British] women’ (Young, 1996, p. 189). Ella achieves ascendancy in the family, over a family that though clearly influenced by Pakistani and Indian popular culture and life practices aligns itself more immediately with multiaccentual forms of Englishness. No Pakistani Muslim woman character acts in a mode that earns the audience’s increased respect or sympathy in the way that Ella’s actions do. Although carnivalesque elements, images and comedic scenes do add to the social commentary presented by the film, they also limit the manner in which Pakistani Muslims can be portrayed.

**Conclusions**

Deflated and cast out by his family, George is greeted with ‘Salaam Alacum, Mr Khan,’ by Ernest, the neighbour boy—an act that restores a small part of George’s shredded dignity. It suggests that in future generations of multicultural Britain, cultural tolerance and harmony will rule. The final impression left of the British, then, is that one day, to borrow Bhabha’s phrasing; the ‘liberal ethic of tolerance and the pluralist framework of multiculturalism’ might win out (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 177–178). Titled after Rudyard Kipling’s adage in ‘The Ballad of East and West’ (‘Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet/Till Earth and Sky stand presently
at God’s great judgement seat’), the film certainly posits the question, ‘What happens when East and West do meet within the same family/nation?’ However, just as the poem’s initial lines suggest the seemingly alienness, incompatibility or geographical remoteness of the two regions and cultures, the film reinforces the notion that within the plural British nation, an essential polarity exists between ‘East and West’.21 Although the film offers critique and alternative historiography of multicultural Britain, it also functions to subalternise and contain Pakistani Muslim elements. Saleem, the narrator of Salman Rushdie’s novel Shame claims that ‘every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales’ (Rushdie, 1983, p. 71; see Srivastava, 1990). Khan-Din’s defence that his story is simply an autobiography, rather than a tale of a ‘Pakistani everyman’, inadequately explains homogenous portraits of traditional Pakistani Muslim identity in the film. Perhaps because of screenwriting formulas and the comedy genre itself, which generates humour through binary oppositions and farcical juxtapositions, George Khan’s ‘Full Monty’ provides a limited representation of Pakistaniness and leaves little to recommend Islamic culture.

Notes

1 For instance, see http://entertainment.iafrica.com/movies/archives/7782.htm.
2 My use of the term ‘carnivalesque’ depends upon M. M. Bakhtin’s formulations, as mediated through critical studies by Kobena Mercer, 1994; Abner Cohen, 1993; Robert Stam, 1989; and Niti Sampat Patel, 2001. Of particular relevance is Mercer’s examination of cinematic processes that deploy the aesthetics and properties of carnival to up-end, dialogue, or multiply social meanings and ‘critical dialogues’, in Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies, Mercer, 1994, p. 62. As Cohen notes, ‘Although [carnival] is essentially a cultural, artistic spectacle, saturated by music, dancing and drama, it is always political, intimately and dynamically related to the political order and to the struggle for power within it.’ See Cohen, 1993, p. 4. I argue that carnivalesque dimensions in East is East obviously provide pleasure while also performing critical socio-political work.
3 Bhabha cites Hall’s discussion of the ideological sign as arbitrary and shifting: ‘[T]he ideological sign is always multi-accentual, and Janus-faced—that is, it can be discursively rearticulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently.’ Stuart Hall, 1988, p. 273; as cited by Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p. 176.
4 According to Jessica Jacobson, Pakistanis ‘make up the largest sub-group within the heterogeneous British Muslim minority’ (Jacobson, 1988, p. 1).
6 Hanif provides no citation for Wolfe’s comment.
7 Jessica Jacobson (1998) cites T. Modood’s categorical statement, ‘Muslimphobia is at the heart of contemporary British and European cultural racism’ (Modood, 1997, p. 76).
8 For a discussion of ‘public scripts’ that narrate the nation, see Bhabha, 1990.
9 Generally, the Subaltern Studies group reinterpreted British Colonial or indigenous ‘elite’ historiography of colonial India and documented instances of resistance, mobilisation, revolt, and subordination of subaltern classes and sectors. They focused on ‘different assessments [and historiography] of the nature of political struggle in colonial India and the role of the peasantry in that struggle’. Gyan Pandey, 1982, p. 149; As Sumit Sarkar notes in ‘The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy’, essays comprising the three volumes of Subaltern Studies published during the early 1980s (ed. Ranajit Guha), draw upon Antonio Gramsci’s ‘emphasis on the control exercised over such strata by more or less hegemonic dominant classes’. Arguing for more sustained studies of ‘much longer time-spans of subordination or collaboration’, Sarkar further notes, ‘Subaltern groups normally enter the world of conventional historical sources at moments of explosion’ (Sarkar, 1984, pp. 273–274).
Khan-Din’s comment reflects the caution that some artists have proceeded with in the wake of the 1989 protests against Salman Rushdie’s novel *Satanic Verses* and the 1995 public disorders in the northern industrial town of Bradford, led by young Muslim men protesting the presence of prostitutes in Pakistani neighbourhoods. According to Philip Lewis, Bradford, the site of these protests, has been called ‘Britain’s Islamabad,’ and it ‘contains all the major sectarian traditions of South Asian Islam’. ‘For Muslim and non-Muslim alike, no city was more important in the construction of a British Muslim identity’ (Lewis, 1994, pp. 1, 4, 24).

Damien O’Donnell’s directing and Om Puri’s exceptional portrayal of George’s relationships with his family and his intense inner life extends the rather one-dimensional sketch given by the script. Asked by interviewer Michael Sragow about his interpretation of the character, Puri answered:

> The script, honestly, does not support him and is not sympathetic to him. The first time I read the script I thought that he was a very negative person—a brute. He is authoritarian and ill-mannered. He does not use civilized behavior to control his children. But when I read it a couple of more times I started realizing that this is not a one-dimensional character. One thing struck me—really hit me. I said to myself, ‘He’s been married to Ella for 25 years. And this woman is not meek and timid. She is a tigress’. Like at the end: You see how she stands up and fights this conventional Pakistani couple to defend her family, her children and her honor. She gives it to them. She’s not going to take anything lying down. What is the truth here? I started digging until I could say, ‘This script is just one slice of George Khan’s life’. (Sragow, 2003)


For Enoch Powell’s ‘river of blood’ speech, delivered in April of 1968, see Powell, 1969.

Gilroy cites Powell’s speech delivered at Southall, 4 November 1971.

Gilroy cites Lawrence, 1982; citing a study on ‘Islamophobia’ in Britain, conducted by the Runnymede Trust in London, Jacobson states that ‘[o]f forms of cultural prejudice in Britain today, arguably the most pervasive is anti-Islamic prejudice… which “has become more explicit, more extreme, and more dangerous” over the past twenty years in the western world in general’ (Jacobson, 1998, p. 76).

From Powell’s ‘River of blood’ speech, delivered in April of 1968 (see Powell, 1968).


The popularised histories of British heroism and national patriotism also obscure the lesser-known histories of the diverse participants in Britain’s struggle during World War II. As Lewis notes, ‘At the outbreak of the Second World War seamen from South Asia accounted for some 20 percent of the merchant navy’ (Lewis, 1994, p. 11).


I refer generally to arguments about the cinematic ‘gaze’ made in Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1985) and ‘Visual and Other Pleasures’ (1989).

In a discussion of scholarly studies of South Asian factionalism, David Hardiman complains that ‘new Orientalism’ shares with its older counterparts ‘the premise that there are fundamental differences between East and West’. ‘The Indian “Faction”’ (Hardiman, 1982, p. 229).

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