

The Politics of National Cinema and Beyond

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How can we tell a good film from a bad film? A Hollywood blockbuster¹ may sell better, but a small third world "art" film may be discussed more among critics and scholars. When there is a difficulty in judging a film's superiority or inferiority to other films, critics and theorists tend to put names onto the film, for labelling or categorising films can be a means to set standards for judging the films' values and quality. The categorization of films has historically been a common practice, but it perhaps became transparent when François Truffaut advocated auteur theory in film criticism in the 1950s. This approach to films was mostly taken up by a group of cinema enthusiasts (directors and writers) who contributed articles to the *Cahiers du cinéma*, a French film magazine founded in 1951. As there were many directors among the writers for the magazine such as Éric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, they naturally argued that films should be the reflections of the director's personal creative vision, and hence, Truffaut, for instance, can unashamedly state so far as an auteur director's film, even at its worst, is always more interesting than the best film by a non-auteur director².

This auteur theory not only provided a criterion, but also authenticated another, perhaps timelier approach to see films in relation to the politics of national cinema. Although the concept of national cinema is not exactly novel, classifying or appropriating films first in the context of nationality or nationhood can be a valid method in theorizing (and even, whether you like it or not, politicising) cinema, particularly in this age of globalisation because the identifying process of a national cinema bears various problems and implications³, many of which are also subsidiary to the discourse of multiculturalism in the ways that they open up the prospects for an alternative context, in which to discuss cinema. It is my attempt in this paper, therefore, to examine a transnational film, Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), a Bollywood-style adaptation of Jane Austen's classic *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), exposing how it works beyond the existing concepts of national cinema; and thus call forth the need to redefine the perspectives while suggesting a possibility of reevaluation of the aforesaid film.

It must be first pointed out that the concept of national cinema is not easy to define because it can be looked at from various perspectives. Oftentimes identified by its difference from other national cinemas, a national cinema is supposed to draw on established indigenous cultural traditions. Still, this industrial infrastructure poses diverse questions. Does the label national cinema refer to a film industry in terms of production, distribution, and exhibition? Does it indicate selected traditions or movements such as the French new wave and German expressionism? Or can it include all films with a particular national setting or theme? As Andrew Higson rightly points out in his earlier essay, the concept of national cinema has been appropriated in a variety of

ways, and "there is not a single universally accepted discourse of national cinema" (1989).

Through identifying a national cinema, one is mythologizing nationhood by accepting the search for a unique and stable identity and assuming national specificity. The politics of national cinema, therefore, can sometimes be reduced to a marketing strategy. The fact that the concept of national cinema is used prescriptively rather than descriptively reinforces the tendency. Having said that, there are four major approaches to the ideas of national cinema.

One is to define national cinema in economic terms. In this case, national cinema indicates the domestic film industry. A film will be categorised according to its place of production, ownership and control, distributions and exhibitions. Secondly, one may identify a national cinema through a text-based approach. Then the main concern is the film's content which offers projections of the national character. Thirdly, a consumption-based approach is also valid: The audiences are watching a certain group of films, which consequentially formulate a concern in terms of an anxiety about cultural imperialism. Lastly, a criticism-led approach is also possible, although this tends to circumscribe national cinema within the genre of a quality art cinema, a culturally worthy cinema steeped in the high-cultural and/or modernist heritage of a particular nation-state, rather than simply "popular" films. Heritage films undoubtedly fall into the genre.

However, these approaches toward cinema are not without problems specifically in this age of global capitalism. Stating plainly, many films no longer belong to a single nation-state, for it is frequent nowadays that money, actors, and creative personnel come from different nations. At the level of exhibition, films are commonly distributed to cinemas around the world and also popularly screened at various film festivals. Also, more and more films deal with mixed elements from different cultural contexts. There is also a growing factor of diaspora to be considered. Cultural diversity and multiculturalism problematise the idea of national cinema, which promotes the search for a stable and coherent national identity. It has become impossible to neatly assign a fixed national identity to much cinema using the approaches articulated above because there are less and less connections between a film's place of production and/or setting and the nationality of its makers and performers. There is an ideological danger in employing the concept of national cinema, therefore, of prescribing authenticity to these culturally hybrid films because it is inherently impossible to be multiculturally authentic. This brings us to examine a transnational film, *Bride and Prejudice*.

Jane Austen has been a particular favourite in the worlds of cinema and TV dramas⁴. Her novels and her life have been made into visual works approximately five times each decade since 1940, eight times in the 1990s, and thirteen times in the past ten years. Almost half of these works take up the story or characters from *Pride and Prejudice*, while *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, *Emma*, a couple of other stories of hers and biographical works comprise the other half. Perhaps the making of "heritage films" from classical literary works is in itself a contribution to the formation of British national cinema. However, the adaptations in our present discussion are not genuinely British period (historical costume drama) films, for many of them have foreign or contemporary settings, and therefore, do not always follow the usual formula of heritage films as national cinema. *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001) presented a modernized British version (although the main role of an English woman was played by an American actress Renée Zellweger)

of *Pride and Prejudice*, borrowing its basic narrative and its character images. In the 2003 chick flick production of *Pride and Prejudice*, the stage was moved to an American college of the present day with its heroine being a graduate student who aspires to be a writer. Following Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), a more orthodox *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) with Keira Knightley enjoyed commercial success and critical acclaim, presenting a rather traditional interpretation of Austen's work. Then in 2008, a modern twenty-first century girl found herself inside the world of her favourite book *Pride and Prejudice* and lived an eighteenth century life in the fantastic metafiction "Lost in Austen."

While acknowledging *Bride and Prejudice* as "a British film made by British finance" in an interview with Subhash K. Jha, Gurinder Chadha simultaneously claims to have made "a complete Hindi movie." The director identifies herself as a British, born in Kenya between Indian parents, moved to England at the age of two, and grew up in London, "where Hindi films were screened in three theatres." After the critical and commercial success of *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), she had the luxury of options and made what her heart told her as she explained to Wray in an interview. She decided to "take something so British, so English, a great English literary classic like *Pride and Prejudice* and adapt it into a Bollywood setting" feeling that "the themes [of Jane Austen's novel] are so pertinent to contemporary India, especially a place like rural Amritsar." To Chadha, "Austen's focus on money and marriage, false pride and false nobility are alive and well in modern India."

Transforming Elizabeth Bennet into a daughter of a farmer in Amritsar, Lalita Bakshi, and Fitzwilliam Darcy into an American businessman of wealth, Will Darcy, Chadha's adaptation takes us far away from its original British setting. We are invited to Amritsar at the beginning of the film, followed by a trip to Goa, and then taken to Los Angeles to attend a wedding, after which a happy-ending awaits back in Amritsar. London is a mere stop-over on the way to Los Angeles, although we are entertained with a brief panoramic view of London's sight-seeing spots as well as a window view of Buckingham Palace. Just as the catch copy on the commercial poster goes; "Bollywood meets Hollywood And it's a perfect match," Chadha is paying homage to Hindi cinema and to Hollywood musicals, making deliberate and sometimes direct references. The scene in which the four Bakshi sisters sing and dance to "No Life Without Wife" reminds us of the bedroom scene in *Grease* (1978) where Betty Rizzo and the Pink Ladies sing "Look at Me I'm Sandra Dee," and the gospel choir singing on the beach while Lalita walk with Will Darcy references Count Basie's orchestra playing in the desert in *Blazing Saddles* (1974). However, the film is not without some British presences as well. Mr Bingley becomes a non-resident Indian Mr Balraj, an ideal marriage prospect (for the local Indian girls and their mothers!) from London, and George Wickham remains a white British Johnny Wickham.

The formal and contextual mixture of representations is obviously inherent in crossover cinema, especially when the director intends to be consciously "diaspora-centric" as opposed to being eurocentric. Diasporic films are inevitably hybrid, and this very hybridity falls an easy prey to some nationalist criticisms. As the director concedes herself, "some people may find the film too Indian, some may find it not Bollywood enough." Taran Adarsh fears that "the West may not embrace the film whole-heartedly, for the film is too Bollywoodish; Meaning, the songs and some sequences look straight out of a Hindi film." The film received varied reviews from the Indian

audience, too: To some, Chadha seemed "quite out of sync with modern Indian women, who no longer bet their lives on bells" (Bhaskaran), and to others, *Bride and Prejudice* could not be a Hindi film in the true sense with their favourite Bollywood beauty Aishwarya Rai not playing their accustomed conventional role of a demure Indian heroine. The authenticity of the film's format can also be questioned since the so-called Bollywood style song-and-dance sequences are actually performed with Western style vocals many a time, and even the director's intentional homage to Hollywood films creates some confusion in the film's cultural receptions. Whether it is a British film or a Hindi film, *Bride and Prejudice* is easily criticized either way. Just as the director's diasporic multicultural identity, her hybrid film does not exactly work in the nationalist framework which often presupposes nation as a coherent homogeneous "imagined" community, to use Benedict Anderson's popular term.

The problem here is that the identification process of national cinema presents some standards that are not exactly appropriate in viewing many modern films. As mentioned above, the concept of national cinema endorses the idea of authenticity. A film is thus easily criticized, for example, for being not genuinely British or not truly Bollywood just as *Bride and Prejudice* has. What we must realise, however, is that Chadha is never seeking authenticity of this kind in this movie. Although she does confess in her interview with Melwani that it "was always the intention to stay close to the book," it is never in Chadha's intention to make an authentically British film or a legitimately Indian film. This is clearly indicated from her choice of popular media and language (of Bollywood cinema) into which she translates Austen's novel. In fact, through this conflict of ideology comes up an alternative theory.

Once we dismiss our preconceptions to regard this film as a national cinema, the film can take on a different perspective. What if *Bride and Prejudice* does not seek to be authentic? What if the ostensible flaws in the perspective of an authentic national cinema are actually deliberate? By rejecting to be an authentic national cinema, *Bride and Prejudice* works as an "embodiment of contemporary globalised (post?) coloniality in its narrative scope," as Suchitra Mathur perceptively argues in her article, "From British 'Pride' to Indian 'Bride'" (2007). The first issue concerns the implications of adapting a canonical British text into a popular Bollywood-style cinema. It may primarily seem to affirm the transnational and transhistorical relevance of the colonial "master" text, consequently reinforcing the authority of the "master" and simultaneously reducing the film to a "native" tribute. It certainly indicates India's cultural belatedness for one. But is it indeed appropriate to consider this adaptation as a tribute? The Bollywoodish adaptation translates the drama of psychological complexity, whose dramatic effects are always achieved through witty dialogues and epistolary revelations, into a spectacular melodrama with songs and dances. The very translation of a British high culture into an Indian popular culture actually devaluates the "master" text's cultural currency, and thus undermines the authority or the primacy of the so-called "master" text. It is significant that *Bride and Prejudice* mimics *Pride and Prejudice*, presenting diasporic views of the world through its unauthentic variations. These unauthentic variations can be read as examples of postcolonial subversion. In other words, *Bride and Prejudice* functions as a metaphor for Chadha's re-visioning of post-colonial or diasporic ideas, once it is freed from nationalists' condemnations.

In this perspective, the variations in the characterisations of Darcy and Wickham prove to be

worth examining. Re-casting Darcy as an American businessman, Chadha indicates a contemporary shift of the imperial centre, in relation to India. Nevertheless, Darcy's stereotypical and dismissive attitude towards Indian culture manifests no change in the relationship between what he represents and India in the colonial discourse. The case of Wickham is more straightforward: Wickham is the only character to represent white British identity. He is rightly associated with a callous duplicity and devious exploitation that parallel the imperial ideology. And while Wickham represents the white Britain's imperial identity, Mr Bingley is re-casted as a British Indian immigrant, and thus completing Chadha's re-visioning of British identities. "The film thus becomes a classic instance of the colony 'talking back' to the metropolis, of Caliban speaking to Prospero, not in the language Prospero has taught him, but in his own native tongue," as Mathur so wisely phrases. If indeed so, the film paradoxically betrays to be very British, presenting ideas that can only come out of the director's post-colonial experiences in Britain, at least in terms of content. Still, the nationalist approach to the film immediately undermines the possibility of reading *Bride and Prejudice's* political message.

Nationalism has been a beneficial concept especially in the evolution of film studies, as it well legitimized the cultural implications of those celluloid commercial products. However, the concept fails to accommodate the scope of interpretations of culturally hybrid, contemporary films. Although *Bride and Prejudice* may be condemned in the perspective of national cinema, the film articulates the director's re-visioning of postcolonial hybridity through its very rejection of the nationalist concept.

The question of the concept's validity can even be extended to non-diasporic films as well. Last year's Oscar-winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), for example, is transnational in the sense that each approach to define a national cinema does not come together as a combined whole in the case of this particular film: Production-wise, content-wise, distribution-wise, and reception-wise. In this British production of an Indian story with all Indian casts and setting, we can see again a similar formula of mimicry as a device to betray the film's self-reflexivity: The film ends as the Indian boy and the Indian girl find each other, have a brief conversation in English, even though they have been talking Hindi all along, and then kiss in slow-motion. This classic Hollywood ending is then erased with a Bollywood-style ending roll. Can this be a simple parody of British humour, or an attempt to transcend nationalist readings?

Notes

1. The definition of the term "blockbuster" may come to be an issue, as it is examined in Tom Shone's *Blockbuster* (2004), for the term can suggest a genre of films that are not only commercially successful but also possessing particular, cultural characteristics as Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). Furthermore, the term is even more confusing because sometimes a high-budget production aimed at mass markets which ends in a box office disaster can also be referred to as a blockbuster in the Hollywood film industry. However, its meaning in this paper will be limited to a more popular and original usage of the term as a commercially successful high-budget production, as I do not wish to go into the discussion of blockbusters as a genre here.
2. Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Ernst Lubitsch, Robert Aldrich, Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang, Anthony Mann, Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Kenji Mizoguchi, Max Ophuls, and Jean Cocteau were

- among the auteur directors acknowledged by the writers for the magazine, for their films' mise en scène distinctively demonstrated the author's creative voice despite any kinds of studio interference.
3. Andrew Higson explores the implications of using the term "national" in discourse about cinema, while asserting that "there is not a single universally accepted discourse of national cinema" in his canonical essay, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30:4 (Autumn 1989): 36-46. I will be coming back to explain more about this issue.
 4. The data is taken from the *Internet Movie Database*.

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