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## A Journey in Individuation: *Bhaji on The Beach*

Madhuri Chawla

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### Abstract:

The Punjabi culture dictates different normative for the genders even in the land of adoption. Hence diasporic Punjabi women face containment and oppression in the domestic space which contrasts with the culture of the adopted land and creates zones of conflict, assimilation and negotiations and they are forced to look anew at their cultural norms, identities and values. The negotiations of the hyphenated identities caught between the two worlds often leads to psychological and emotional problems both in the first and second generation women. The present paper deliberates on how women of different generations in the immigrant culture construct and deconstruct their identities and negotiate their space within the Patriarchal Punjabi culture. It looks into the Punjabi Woman's (dis)location within English culture, in the movie *Bhaji on the Beach* directed by Gurinder Chadha and analyzes and critically evaluates the dynamics within the Indian Community abroad.

### Key Words:

Negotiation, Punjabi Diaspora, Containment, Oppression, Conflict.

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Films today have become a very powerful medium to express the cultural problems faced by the transient Indians around the world. While the indigenous media houses are competing to make available to the expatriates the Indian Culture, Diaspora is also delving in the genre of filmmaking to expose/express the cultural issues to the rest of the world. The South Asian diasporic films often offer a complex interrogation of British Asian women's position viz-a viz the racial, sexual, and gender oppressions as also challenge the patriarchal systems. The multicultural experiences of these filmmakers offer an insiders' perspective on identity issues.

Gurinder Chadha is a potent voice of Indian origin who has influenced the realm of Diasporic film making by expressing the myriad colours of immigrant experiences and has secured a credible place for herself as a film director. *Bhaji on the Beach* her debut film, in which she is also a co-story writer with Meera Syal, made Chadha the first Indian woman living in Britain to direct a film in that country. It was a ground breaking film at the time of its release in 1993 and as Meera Syal said in an interview with Ben Mirza, "It has a certain naïve roughness as you'd expect, when you're given the space to tell stories you've wanted to tell for so long, you want to put everything in it, in case you never get the chance again, ....So we covered subjects such as domestic violence, divorce, interracial relationships, repressed housewives, rebellious teens — we wanted a whole span of the female Brit South Asian experience." (Syal)

*Bhaji on the Beach* was a big hit at the box office and it reinforced that the films about Punjabi Diaspora were capable of and could provide an impetus to the British film industry grappling for survival. In fact, Gurinder Chadha today is considered one of the most successful and commercially viable filmmakers in Britain.

As part of the twice displaced Diaspora in England, Chadha draws on her personal experience for her films. Her family, especially her father, faced tremendous prejudice because of his turban and beard. This affected her own personality so much that she refused to wear traditional Indian clothes. At the same time, she herself too found the Indian custom of all the women cooking and serving

while the men sat and ate extremely oppressive and hence refused to cook for her family. However, Chadha also realised that this Indian community also had a vibrant and colourful dimension, it had wonderful and intriguing, though sometimes sad tales to unfold, an aspect at variance from the stereotypical portrayal of the Indian in the British film industry.

Films are a powerful medium to screen a way of life through visual culture. Chadha used it to give a subtly nuanced picture of a marginalized Indian community. She focusses primarily on women, their everyday struggle and the fear of adjustment. The film engages with their travails as they cope-up with their dual identity as Indians and English, and also highlights how they strive to resolve the contradictions in their converging traditional roles and the contemporary roles in their land of adoption. Her works affirm that diaspora is not merely scattering or dispersion but a consciousness that encompasses a variety of characteristics, at times even conflicting.

Chadha was born into a Punjabi Sikh family in 1960 in Kenya, then a British colony. The family moved to Southall London in 1962 where Chadha went to school and later graduated from the University of East Anglia and attended the London College of Printing for her Post Graduation. She started her media career with radio in the mid-1980s and since then there has been no looking back. She then moved into television as a BBC news reporter, and established her own production company Umbi Films in 1990 and has directed and produced several T.V. serials and movies since then.

Her proclaimed films include *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) and *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* (2008).

Chadha's first film *Bhaji on the Beach* was the first full-length feature film made by a British Asian woman. It won several international awards including a BAFTA Nomination for 'Best British Film of 1994' and the Evening Standard British Film Award for 'Best Newcomer to British Cinema'. Chadha has also received several Honorary Doctorates from British universities and was awarded an O.B.E. in the 2006 Queen's Birthday Honours List on 17 June 2006 for her services to the British film industry. (<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/502103/index.html>)

The present paper explores whether Chadha's representation, while highlighting certain stereotypes also suggests new ways of exploring 'Punjabiyaat' in an alien land. Further, the paper deliberates on how women of different generations in the immigrant culture construct their identities and negotiate their space within the Patriarchal Punjabi culture. It looks into the Punjabi Woman's (dis)location within English culture, and analyzes the dynamics within the Indian Community abroad, as also critically evaluate it.

*Bhaji on the Beach* highlights the gender conflicts faced by the migrant woman, who bears the patriarchal and racist yoke. The film covers a day in the lives of Indian women, across different generations, class and religious background who converge as members of 'Saheli Asian Women's group' undertaking a journey from Birmingham to Blackpool to 'see the illuminations'.

The women on this journey are three generations of the Asian Punjabi Community. A couple of senior 'aunties' representing an orthodox traditional mentality, the saree clad middle-aged Asha and her friend Rekha visiting from Mumbai, who does not live up to the idealistic image of an India that the older generation of the diasporic community nostalgically carries in its mind rather represents the contemporary India real time; and four younger women in their teens and early twenties representing the new generation Asian Britons. One discerns a wide gulf between the 'Aunties', who have immigrated to Britain as adults, with their conservative mentalities and traditional clothes and younger girls in the group born and brought up in the land of adoption. They confront the older women and their way of life through their desire to assimilate and negotiate their dual identity.

The first generation immigrant women look for India of their memories, an 'imaginary homeland', as Salman Rushdie would have put it in the land of adoption. They seem to be a confused lot while

the second generation seems to be more sorted out about their identity and clear about their aspirations, even as they are cowed down by the wishes of the elders of the community. The first generation is stuck in an idyllic, utopian invented homeland, crying for the moon, nostalgic for an India that has changed and moved on. The second generation is particularly dissatisfied/uncomfortable with the duality of its identity as it tries to build bridges across the two distinct cultures. This creates a tension between the two generations and is one of the themes explored in the movie.

Chadha right at the outset makes the purport of the film abundantly clear as the navigator of the group, the passionate feminist community worker Simi adorning a leather jacket over an Asian salwar suit, explains the rationale behind the trip. Without mincing words, she states that “it is not often that we women get away from the patriarchal demands made on us in our daily lives, struggling between the double yoke of racism and sexism!” (*Bhaji* 00.16.37). The relevance of her words however is clearly lost on the elderly ‘aunties’, conditioned not to question their situation and are rather the most dedicated upholders of the culture of their homeland.

This first generation has a strong bond with the country of origin. They listen to Indian channels, we hear Indian music play loudly on the radio right at the beginning, they sing ‘*lathe di Chaadar*’ and ‘*mera Laung Gawacha*’ as they travel towards Blackpool and even at the beach wearing sarees they hum a number from home. However the music that plays in the background on the trip is a Punjabi remix of an English number by Cliff Richards, ‘Summer Holiday’ connoting a cross cultural intersection. So while unlike traditional Indian women these women go out on an all-women’s trip, yet they are firmly rooted in their culture. The concept of ‘saheli’, the female bonding always being a part of the female inner space in Indian Households.

The dressing style of the women also reflects the extent of assimilation or denial of the culture of the adopted land. The older aunties are satisfied in the time block, and continue to wear ‘Salwar Kameez’, while Rekha who lives in Bombay dresses up in skirts and stilettos and the young girls wear Jeans with loose drapes, ethnic Jewellery, scarves etc. This young generation has assimilated into the country of adoption yet the native culture impressed upon them at home ensures they retain their connect with their moorings. Their dresses are indicative of their attitude towards ethnicity. While the elder women desperately try to hold on tenaciously to customs, traditions and codes of conduct of the native land, the younger generation negotiates its place in the new system. Not just in dress one finds the senior women even after so many years in the hostland prefer Indian cuisine and carry ‘paranthas’ and ‘samosas’ from home with them on the trip and add red pepper, which they carry from home, to the Fish and French fries they buy on the trip. Likewise, the opening scene of *Bhaji on the Beach* shows the display windows of a street in Southall with the baskets of a grocery store exhibiting coriander and mangoes from India alongside British pomegranates and French apples, and the typical South Asian video rental shop with Bollywood billboards. Similarly, a framed photo of ‘babaji’ prominently hangs on the wall of each house and throughout the movie there are recurring images of Gods reiterating and re-enforcing the idea of inter linkage between religion and patriarchy. Thus, the community has created a mini India in the country of adoption.

Asha a woman in her forties is a part of the ‘aunty’ group who assists her husband at the video rental shop, and is prone to headaches and dreams depicting her as the ideal nurturing mother combing her son’s hair, an ideal wife serving her husband’s meal and in several of her dreams the image of ‘Rama’ also appears who always reminds Asha that she “must be a proper Indian wife and follow [her] traditional education, what it is expected from [her]” and telling her to “know your place!”. (*Bhaji*, 1.14.50) All the dreams reinforce the need for duty and sacrifice. This is further bolstered when moments after her hallucination, Asha’s son, daughter, and husband demand ironed shirts and hot breakfast – telling about Asha’s place within the bounds of her culture and her family. Her dreams express her fears and repressed desires. They manifest the woman’s dissatisfaction with her life and are an important part of the film’s message. This is endorsed by one of Asha’s dream in which she says that this was not the life she expected to live. But every time she has such a dream

the image of 'Rama' flashes across her mind instilling fear in her (perhaps the cause of her headache). She is an educated woman, well versed in arts and aesthetics. Shifting to England has not been a fulfilling move for her in that sense. Asha's accidental encounter with the stranger Vandeviller Ambrose proves to be significant. Asha is not averse to the gentlemanly flirtations of this eccentric white man. And later in her dream sequence when confronted by 'Rama' she says I have not done anything wrong and pleads not guilty. This reveals her struggle to survive. She is a victim of the patriarchal system, the movement to England is for a better life but for her the movement is not a liberating one. Her devotion and daily pooja, her hallucinations, show that she has internalized patriarchy and is striving to live up to the image of the self-sacrificing woman. The film reveals that Asha's true aspirations were not those of working at her husband's video shop. "I was a good singer at college and I didn't have headaches" she says. (*Bhaji* 1.15.07). With the British man who finds her exotic and delicate she imagines herself like a Hindi film heroine dressed in white, drenched in rain playing out her romantic fantasy in real life. She is enamoured by the chivalry and gentleness of the white man and flows along for a while as she enjoys the short respite from her codified roles.

The brief interlude from the defined domestic space unshackles her in a way and leads her to analyse herself as the victimizer wherein she shares the community's expectations from Harshida. Harshida is trying to fulfil her family's dream by getting into medical school. But she actually has a flair for sketching and would have preferred to be an artist than a doctor. She is seen as the role model of the obedient child living upto the family's expectations. At the same time she is also breaking the Patriarchal taboos of chastity, virginity and interracial relationship. She has an affair with an Afro Caribbean boy which she keeps under wraps as the norm of her community is an 'arranged marriage' which they believe ensures the 'purity' of the race. Her pregnancy is a further threat to the community. Jigna Desai in her book *Beyond Bollywood – The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* has argued that these feminist cinematic narratives "attempt to disrupt South Asian gender normativities of heterosexuality through challenging the dominant gendered ideologies such as female chastity and virginity, multiracial romance, and arranged marriages". (202)

Harshida who has all along been the role model of 'family values' in the community suddenly comes to symbolize the rebellion and betrayal of the Honour code by the senior generation. Pushpa, the senior most 'aunty' in the group, calls Harshida a 'whore' and comments in one of the scenes that "this country has cost us our children". (*Bhaji* 00.58.20). Asha in one of her dreams visualizes Harshida as the temptress. Harshida's character is a vivid portrayal of a woman caught between two worlds. She represents the second generation Indian women immigrants caught in a perpetual socio-psychological conflict. While she has rebelled against the norms of her Punjabi community yet Harshida desires to be accepted by them and her struggle to adapt to the contradictions faced by her leads to dejection.

However the repressed desires manifest in Asha's dreams gradually surface as she veers towards defying male authority by confronting her nephews who represent the Punjabi Patriarchal society and by supporting the daughter in law of the house Jinder.

Jinder who too is a co traveller on the trip, is the 'dark' woman who has not been able to maintain her image of a 'good' wife. Her mother-in-law accuses her saying 'you can't trust the dark ones' (*Bhaji* 00.41.04). Patriarchal Punjabi attitude is glaringly visible in the behaviour of Jinder's in-laws- the parents, the elder brother and the husband. She has left her husband and marital home with her son Amrik and taken refuge in Women's shelter at the Asian Women's Centre. The family wants the grandson back, there is hardly any concern for Jinder. And the outrage of Jinder's husband Ranjit, too is primarily at losing face. Jinder who has long suffered at the hands of her in-laws still does not utter a word against them.

The women on the sojourn share the patriarchal Punjabi mindset. They are disapproving of Jinder, consider her a traitor and even Asha in one of her hallucinatory experiences visualizes Jinder inflicting atrocities on her in-laws. The endeavour of the women is to convince her to return home but to consider her narrative is not even a consideration. Jinder is the next generation. She refuses to continue with the oppressive life. The older women are initially dismissive of her and are hostile as they pass nasty remarks, “These modern girls can’t adapt, and those with jobs are worst. She must have done something!” (Bhaji, 1993). They consider her as a black sheep of the community. Jinder’s upbringing does lead to a conflict as she contemplates going back to Ranjit whom she is willing to give the benefit of doubt if he leaves his family. The Patriarch in Ranjit is soon exposed as he angrily bursts out “enough’s enough!” when he manages to trace Jinder and tries to snatch the son and even uses physical strength against Jinder which is the deciding blow to the relationship. The scene in the ‘Manhattan’ bar leads to a transformation of attitude towards Jinder. The bar incident reveals the truth of the situation, accidentally exposing Jinder’s bruised arms. It is an eye opener for Asha and the other ‘elders’ as they now respond as individuals to the situation and not merely as the exponents of their culture and traditions.

Asha as expected is the one to respond more openly as she warns Jinder of her husband Ranjit’s presence and later she slaps Ranjit when he uses force. Asha’s evolution as a character who steps outside the borders plainly shows that Chadha’s film is, a “‘resisting’ story in depicting Indian women as strong, as survivors and as pleasure-loving”. (Kaplan, 250)

The movie portrays the negotiations of hyphenated identities in a dynamic multicultural world, and how it often leads to psychological and emotional problems both in the first and second generation. The first generation hankers after the lost past. It has no desire, nor does it attempt to integrate into the society of its adopted land. This clinging to its cultural and religious tradition, and hoisting these upon the second generation, renders the nature of this diasporic self fragmented. The fragmented self or the conflict of the displaced populace, is vividly expressed in the movie.

When the women set out on their journey each is located within a socio- cultural milieu which is the Punjabi diaspora. These women as they travel and negotiate their relationship with their culture and the culture of their adopted land begin to move away from the ideological space they occupied earlier. The journey transforms each one of them. The older generation begins to understand maybe for the first time the problems of the younger women and become more accepting and understanding. This in itself is a liberating experience for them. It is also a journey of individuation, they are coming into their own, and suggests that these transformed women will continue this growth even back home. There is a sense of confidence, camaraderie among the group. The symbolic meaning of ‘Saheli’, sisters giving sustenance and support to one another finally comes true.

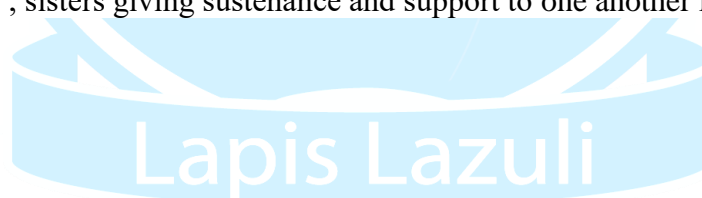
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#### **BIO-NOTE**

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