

Same Difference?

Tom Jennings

“The media and politicians don’t talk about Christian extremism, fundamentalism or terrorism – but everyone who considers themselves a Muslim feels tainted due to the propaganda use of 9/11.”¹

Paul Laverty

Adding to the abiding casual cruelty of skin prejudice, people of Asian descent in Britain have faced a panoply of extra pressures in the last three years, a result of government panic about threats of international (unofficial) terror. Handily projected into the ‘strangeness’ of diasporic Islamic culture, this, along with displacing onto migrants and refugees the blame for the withdrawal of welfare, has instead de-emphasised the government’s need to feed the greed of corporate gangmasters.

However, from recent current affairs and documentary exposure of the dishonesty and duplicity of mainstream institutional and megabusiness interests,² it is becoming more widely understood how political ideology in the age of hyper-real spin routinely manufactures history in ways fictional genres hitherto scarcely imagined. Narrative construction and the use of contemporary visual technologies to elaborate fantasy clearly resonate with media-saturated publics, and at levels of effectivity different from the more traditional reliance on dispassionate journalism and intellectual integrity. In any case, given the age-old capacity of stories to appeal to our deepest feelings and to change perceptions and behaviour, fiction may also have a role in subverting the patterns of domination in late capitalist governance – just as the hidden transcripts of folk culture and common vernacular have always sustained the oppressed and confounded power.

This article reviews two high profile fictional film representations of the lives of British Muslim people. Their production was motivated by a wish on the part of non-Muslims to set the record straight with realistic portrayals of men, women, families and social networks just as complex and multilayered in morality, ethics, problems and behaviour as any other groups within a modern multiracial, multicultural society. Readings of these films are then set against a work of European cinema released at the same time to similar levels of acclaim but with no such issued *raison d’être* – but whose subject matter might offer comparable, if contrasting, depth in this respect. The closing section assesses the significance of these and other popular cultural representations of Asian or Muslim Westerners, attempting to sketch out the grounds upon which a recognition can be nurtured of the presence of conflictual diversity in us all, acknowledging how differences between us necessarily and irrevocably cohabit and mingle with our similarities.



Family Matters

1. Home and the Broken-Hearted

Director Ken Loach and scriptwriter Paul Laverty changed tack for *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004) – their third collaboration set in the West of Scotland following *My Name Is Joe* (1998) and *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) – in response to the dehumanising vilification

of Muslims whipped up by the UK media and politicians since 9/11, and the consequently heightened everyday hostility experienced by British Asians. Laverty felt obliged to “do a story that saw Muslim people as rounded human beings; and family life as family life is everywhere, with its tensions and jealousies and guilts and the rest of it.” Similarly, to Loach: “Families are families; the surface details change but the emotional blackmail is the same ... and there’s always rebellion.”³

Ae Fond Kiss sees the comfortable Khans from Glasgow’s Southside arrange a marriage between a distant cousin from Pakistan and their only son Casim (Atta Yaqub). He intervenes in a fracas between his sister Tahara (Shabana Bakhsh) and classmates when meeting her from her Catholic school, and a mutual attraction with Irish music teacher Roisin (Eva Birthistle)⁴ leads to them becoming lovers, taking a short break in Spain. Casim and Roisin split over his impending marriage but reconcile when he comes clean with his parents. Then she is sacked because her priest (Gerard Kelly) denounces her for living in sin with a Muslim. His older sister Rukhsana (Ghizala Avan) plots to wreck the relationship to save her own marriage plans, and parents Tariq (Ahmad Riaz) and Sadia (Shamshad Akhtar) plead with Casim for family honour, offering as collateral the house extension built for him. His friend Hammid (Shy Ramzan) lives with a white woman but keeps it secret, and advises against sacrificing the entire family for a girl.⁵ Their final ploy involves flying in prospective bride Jasmine (Sunna Mirza) plus family behind Casim’s back, contriving Roisin to witness the scene. She storms off but when Tahara tells him all, he rushes to Roisin’s side...

The narrative arc of the story depends on Tariq’s insistence on ruling the Khan roost. Starting as effective comedy,⁶ this increasingly turns to pathos and farce as he refuses to acknowledge the limits of his power, culminating in hysterically smashing up the extension. Unfortunately his tragic experiences during the 1947 post-imperial partition of India⁷ are declaimed like a sermon halfway through the film rather than being woven into the story, which short-circuits any audience sympathy won by Riaz’s ebullient performance. Similarly, in the early sequence where Casim and Roisin first meet, Tahara makes a political speech listing her many conflicting loyalties and identifications.⁸ But while her intelligence and determination are heartening, we can’t appreciate the context of her (or her siblings’) development in and outside the family. Unexplained individual traits are forced to extremes in recognisably Loachian melodramatic fashion, and the chances of resonance among those whose families are ‘the same everywhere’ correspondingly recede.

Various lined up in traditional family structure positions – a device to represent diversity among UK Muslims – scant depth is shown in the Khans’ personal relationships, and we struggle to sense their feelings for each other. Worse, Roisin’s biography (including a failed marriage) is only mentioned in passing, so no parallels can be imagined between the lovers in terms of the demands of the past, the development of self in the family or its influence on present orientations and decisions. Birthistle is a strong and convincing actress playing a resolute character, whereas Casim’s dissembling makes him a rather unconvincing lover for her – seeming morally cowardly in concealing his concerns. But Yaqub is a novice actor and fails to convey ambivalence – unfairly matching the disproportionate pressures forming Casim’s character against Roisin’s scripted mystery and fortitude – and we are further unable to interpret her surprise at the trouble their relationship causes among his family.⁹ Roisin’s apparent lack of connection to her ‘roots’ may indicate a decline of family values compared

Notes

1. Interviewed by Demetrios Matheou, *Sunday Herald*, August 2004.
2. In particular Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Adam Curtis’ groundbreaking BBC 2 series *The Power of Nightmares* (both 2004) – see my reviews respectively in: ‘Extracting the Michael’, *Variant*, No. 21, and ‘A Pair of Right Scares’, *Freedom* magazine, Vol. 65, No. 22 (<www.tomjennings.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk>).
3. James Mottram, ‘In the Mood For Love’, *Sight & Sound*, March 2004, p.23.
4. Roisin was scripted as Scottish, but Birthistle was a Catholic girl at Protestant school in the north of Ireland. Preferring actor proximity to role, Loach points out that, “then the question is: who’s the immigrant?”. Laverty: “When Catholics first came to Scotland 150 years ago they were seen as aliens with a loyalty to something foreign to the indigenous population ... And now we’re demonising asylum seekers” (Mottram, note 3).
5. Atta Yaqub had kept a white girlfriend secret from his family/community, again facilitating role immersion (Diane Taylor, ‘Up Close and Personal’, *The Independent*, 6th August 2004).
6. The *Daily Record* billboard headline outside his shop reads: ‘Church tells Celtic fans no nookie in Seville’. One dog too many urinates on it, so Mr Khan wires it up and the next dog gets a nasty shock.
7. Loach: “He isn’t just a repressive father. His own history has been traumatic, and he has to live with it every day. That’s why he’s so keen to keep hold of Casim”; Laverty: “Partition left a shadow of massive suffering. It’s sectarianism, in another continent and in another time, but it still has a deep resonance in the personality of the children’s father today” (Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘When Sex Meets Sectarianism’, *The Telegraph*, 17th September 2004).
8. “I am a Glaswegian Pakistani teenage woman of Muslim descent who supports Glasgow Rangers in a Catholic school ...” Another Laverty and Loach teenage encyclopedia instructed Robert Carlyle on Nicaragua in *Carla’s Song* (1996).
9. Or the pedagogical clumsiness using Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ soundtrack to a slide show of racist lynchings – ringing true as vacuous multiculturalism, but hardly connecting with her or her pupils’ daily lives.
10. To Loach this is “a situation where the circumstances are evolving ... Essentially there will be a good outcome. The people of Casim’s generation are integrating into the rest of society, however it’s defined, and bigotry and intolerance, particularly on the Christian side, will fade ... people will assimilate and learn to live together well ... We are who we are now, but God knows what we will be like in 30 years’ time. The film challenges the whole idea of monogamy, of permanent marriage that is either arranged or a love match” (Taylor, see note 5). The title’s more melancholy origin – Robert Burns’ poem, ‘Ae Fond Kiss And Then We Sever’ (1791) – includes the lines: “Had we never lov’d sae kindly / Had we never lov’d sae blindly / Never met or never parted / We had ne’er been broken-hearted”.
11. Loach: “The young protagonists are all graduates and they’re not from broken families. But for reasons of culture, language and religion there are fetters on their choices” (Mottram, p.22, see note 3).
12. Not surprising, despite Ken Loach’s track record, given his membership of the National Council of the Respect Coalition, whose electoral novelty – cosying up to ‘community leaders’ – resembles police tactics when legitimising ‘race relations’ PC/PR. Those at the sharp end may by default defer to conservative patriarchs or arrogant careerists of respectable church, business and local government agencies when busy defending themselves against outbreaks of the persistent UK anti-Asian prejudice (see, for example, succinct commentary on the pre-9/11 Bradford ‘race riots’ in <www.muslimnews.co.uk> 27th July 2001, or the recent Birmingham Sikh controversy), but surely no one imagines they represent any community’s multiply conflicting interests. This Left pandering to elites combines a Stalinist disposition and Leninist opportunism, with predictably alienating effects at all grassroots levels (as in the SWP’s regularly discredited fronts and u-turns, from Anti-Nazi League days through to recent anti-globalisation incarnations – see coverage of the European Social Forum, London, October 2004: <www.enrager.net/features/esf/> or SchNEWS, no. 470).
13. *Yasmin* (2004) screened on Channel 4, 13th January 2005. Quotations are from the production notes <www.yasminthemovie.co.uk/iframes/synopsis.php> and Alan Docherty, February 2005 <www.culturewars.org.uk> respectively. Glennan also made *Gas Attack* (2001, an even more sensationalist ‘docufiction’ about Kurdish asylum seekers in Glasgow) and the forthcoming *Ducane’s Boys* (about neo-colonial exploitation in contemporary football).

14. Also rushed onto television after European cinema success and acclaim, when UK cinema distribution and exhibition faced years of market-cowardice delay – see Stuart Jeffries, *The Guardian*, 13th January 2005.

15. One of two such unscripted moments where passersby were unaware that a shoot was underway (see Jeffries, note 14).

16. Comprehensively nailed by Munira Mirza in <www.culturewars.org.uk>

17. Including a proclivity for class/caste-based racial insult. Darcus Howe’s *Who You Calling a Nigger?* (Channel 4, 2004) gave rare public insight into this subject. Conversely, the film’s most moving moment comes at the end – encapsulating its heroine’s ultimate dignity, integrity and humanity with a close-up of Panjabi’s face as Yasmin comforts the husband she’s previously so maligned.

18. The script was written by Simon Beaufoy (*The Full Monty*) after exhaustive research and workshops with Northern Muslim groups, drug rehabilitation programmes, university lecturers and many others.

19. Just as in the rest of us, showing the inadequacy of conflating disparate generations – for example my own industrial working class ‘English’ family has ancestry from Wales, Ireland and Southern and Northern France (just to start with), and as little as two generations ago included itinerant agricultural workers roaming against destitution.

20. For comprehensive discussions of hybridity and diaspora, see Barnor Hesse (ed.) *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms*, Zed Press, 2000. Incidentally, both *Ae Fond Kiss* and *Yasmin* are interesting, enjoyable and/or affecting on many levels; not least in their different fusions of generic realism, naturalism and fiction, and some outstanding cinematic and acting skills on show. For the purposes of this essay, though, it’s mainly in struggling to meeting their predetermined artificially partial and formulaic aims that they get messed up.

21. Left over from the issue-shopping concept (scuppered by 9/11) of Glenaan and producer Sally Hibbin (who previously worked with Ken Loach on *Riff-Raff*, *Raining Stones*, etc) of a young Yorkshire suicide-bomber (production notes, see note 18).

22. Though Yasmin tells him “I preferred you as a drug dealer”.

23. Taking a lead from Kilroy-Silk, BNP fuhrer Nick Griffin publicly characterised Islam as a “vicious wicked faith” before proclaiming his parliamentary candidature in Keighley. Note, though, that the far and libertarian Left fare little better in terms of “universal bigotry towards Muslims” and the ambivalently progressive potential of religious culture in general – see Adam K’s scattershot ‘Anarchist Orientalism and the Muslim Community in the UK’, and Ernesto Aguilar’s wise US perspective in ‘Winning the Grandmas, Winning the War: Anarchists of Color, Religion and Liberation’ (both 2004) at <www.illegalvoices.org/knowledge>.

24. See for example: S. Sayyid, ‘Beyond Westphalia: Nations and Diasporas, the Case of the Muslim *Umma*’ (in Hesse, see note 20).

25. Contemporary ‘urban’ music features increasing numbers of Asian performers and producers (see *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk & Ashwani Sharma (eds.), Zed Press 1996). Since the 1980s bhangra renaissance working class Asian youth have also been staunch supporters of local R&B club scenes (racist door policies and clientele permitting), rather than the more upmarket trendy student-yuppie venues *Ae Fond Kiss*’ Casim probably envisages. On the marketing of UK Asian culture, see also Kaleem Aftab, ‘Brown: the New Black! Bollywood in Britain’, *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2002, pp.88-98.

26. *Gegen die Wand* translates as ‘Against the Wall’ (UK release as *Head-On*, 2005). Akin has also directed *Short, Sharp, Shock* (*Kurz und Schmerzlos*, 1998; lauded as the German *Mean Streets*), the road movie *In July* (*Im Juli*, 2000), and *Solino* (2002). *Head-On* has won innumerable film festival Audience Awards and was voted the European Film Academy’s Best Film of the Year 2004 (ahead of *Ae Fond Kiss*, Mike Leigh’s *Vera Drake*, Pedro Almodovar’s *Bad Education* and Theo Angelopoulos’ *The Weeping Meadow*, among many others).

27. Quoted in Kaleem Aftab, 11th February 2005 <www.bbc.net.uk/dna/collective/>

28. Famous for militant anti-racist SHARP skinheads and a radically community-oriented professional football team. Akin – a dual-national child of Turkish immigrants – hails from Hamburg’s Altona district, and is a veteran anti-fascist, former DJ (hence the outstanding soundtrack which accounted for much of *Head-On*’s budget) and hip-hop MC (he gave up the latter to attend film school). With Germany’s drift rightwards nationality by blood is now increasingly reasserted, and dual status is no longer available to the progeny of *gastarbeiter* (‘guest workers’) – noted in *Head-On*’s Istanbul taxi driver deported as a teenager for a petty drugs offence to a country he’d never seen whose language he didn’t speak.

29. Cast from an encounter at a supermarket checkout; and giving a superbly nuanced performance. Her only prior acting experience had been in a couple of gonzo pornos – allowing the tabloids to controversialise *Head-On* preceding Kekilli’s disowning by her Turkish family (see Ahmet Gormez’ solidaristic celebration: ‘We Love You Sibel Kekilli’, 8th March 2004 <www.counterpoint-online.org/>). This prurient bad faith is itself mirrored within the film text in Yilmaz’ invitation to Cahit (which he declines) to join the men of Sibel’s family in a brothel

to their importance among those of Pakistani descent, but the erasure of her backstory makes it impossible to compare strategies of negotiation under varying terms of parental control. Plus, if the filmmakers’ preferred culture clash was in fact regressive conservatism versus secular modernism (in Islam/Rome disguise), then equity would surely require showing the kinship of both.

Seen as an unremarkable classic romance, *Ae Fond Kiss* unbalances the middle class aimlessness of its personable lovers with Casim’s ‘issues’, rather than critically examining these.¹⁰ Their future indeed seems full of hope; however, we learn nothing either about Roisin’s or the Khans’ class backgrounds. The nearest we get to economic threat is her priest’s “Tom, Dick or Mohammed” prejudice complicating Roisin’s career, while the Khan seniors’ intransigence revolves around social, cultural and economic capital – Casim’s accountancy degree and college DJ-ing coalesce in entrepreneurial nightclub ambitions, Rukhsana aims to maintain family integrity and achieve happiness in her arranged marriage into higher social status, and Tahara intends to escape to train in journalism. However, in lower class contexts family honour may be felt as a more desperate matter – where, given the prevailing institutional and everyday white racisms, the status at stake is that of survival and acceptance as part of society/humanity rather than stratifying economic superiority. Poorer young British Asians who find economic autonomy more problematic thus face different “fetters on their choices”¹¹ in responding to generational and official control. Perhaps *Yasmin* (2004), grounded in West Yorkshire’s more downmarket provincialism, could contemplate some of the commonplace socio-economic realities that *Ae Fond Kiss* ignores.¹²



Archie Panjabi as Yasmin

2. Marriage of Inconvenience

Yasmin was developed by director Kenny Glenaan because “there’s an invisible war happening in Britain which British Caucasians may or may not see, but for the Muslims of our country, it’s similar to being Irish in the ‘70s and ‘80s – guilty until proven innocent”; with the intention of giving “a positive portrayal of British Muslim experience, post 9/11, as a way of almost putting your fist through this notion of Islamophobia that’s grown up since”.¹³ The eponymous local authority care worker (Archie Panjabi) drives from a terraced house on a Keighley estate in traditional Muslim hijab, en route changing into casual Western gear for work and pub sessions with colleagues – including John (Steve Jackson), with whom friendship may develop into intimacy (though she confides nothing of her home life). She then reverts to dutiful unpaid caregiving for her strict father (Renu Setna) and teenage brother Nasir (Syed Ahmed) – who also defers to custom in morning prayer duties at the mosque, but otherwise indulges in petty drug dealing and consorting with local girls.

Yasmin’s respect (though not, perhaps, ‘love’) for and loyalty to her father has even stretched to agreeing to unconsummated marriage to rural Pakistani goat herd Faysal (Shahid Ahmed) until his UK citizenship is assured, but she barely tolerates his presence or parental authority – and her increasingly caustic tongue suggests she’s marking time. After September 11th, the uneasy local equilibrium goes sour, with increasing hostility at work, abuse in public, and a complex range of fear, confusion and anger on the home front. Faysal’s regular international phone calls to relatives lead to armed-police teams swooping on him, Yasmin and John; but rather than seize the chance to get shot of her spouse she stands vigil until he’s finally released and falls into her arms. Meanwhile Nasir’s seduction by recruiting jihadis sees him preparing to leave for training in Afghanistan.

Yasmin may capture the outrageously arbitrariness of Blunkett *et al*’s bungling sweep through Muslim neighbourhoods. But, shoehorning in so many urgent domestic ramifications of the War on Terror means the thoroughness required to portray a detailed development of Yasmin’s personal situation gets squeezed into perfunctory, signposted moments and backstory references, to make time for a menacing armed-police thriller farce.¹⁴ At least the denouement is left open when she visibly begins to reorient to her marriage and the place of Muslim customs in her life. *Ae Fond Kiss* also refused to foreclose on any options, though in woolly optimism compared to the resignation here. But, again, what is sacrificed is the emotional ebb and flow of individual growth amidst the seductions of Western lifestyle and consumerist fulfilment, as against submersion in or submission to whatever illusory or real comfort and security home and community can promise. The former offer little beyond her second-hand cabriolet, given Yasmin’s white Keighleyites’ implausibly unanimous cruel indifference shading into violent hatred – apart from one elderly shopper chastising youths throwing milk over Muslim women in the street.¹⁵ Before and after being banged up, John also far too easily succumbs to basic prejudice for Yasmin ever to have taken him seriously.

In fact all her work, family and neighbourhood relationships are rendered in cursory cartoonish sketches.¹⁶ Yet it is precisely the fine-grain of these that would have encouraged genuine understanding of and empathy with her choices (such as they are) – especially when both script and Panjabi’s superb acting illuminate a forceful, imaginative and highly intelligent, as well as believably impatient, ambivalent and troubled personality.¹⁷ Not that weak, boring, stupid simpletons like Faysal deserve their fate either, but the unintentionally victimological nature of *Yasmin*’s diagnosis squashes any agency for local British Muslims beyond surrender to the righteous proponents of violent jihad parachuting in to regiment their confusion. Its most effective exaggerations reflect the shifting local tectonics after 9/11, whereupon everyone’s complacencies are shaken – but the orchestration of collective neurosis in the background hum of Bush/ Blair’s banal ‘peace and freedom’ bullshit are mirrored in the film’s subsequent lazy hyperbole. Notwithstanding the alibi that “everything in the script actually happened”,¹⁸ the question of what might happen next eludes active viewer involvement almost as much as the cast’s heavily circumscribed capabilities.

Furthermore, both *Yasmin* and *Ae Fond Kiss* unnecessarily situate their young protagonists’ dilemmas predominantly against the stark demands of first-generation immigrant parents trying to sustain dignity in the face of massive dislocations in their lives, translated into a determination to bequeath to their children the emotional and cultural resources that have kept them going. Obviously this has been a central, unifying dynamic in most British Asian family histories; but its defensive, backward-looking construals have for at least two decades been overlain with the desire and practical orientation to explore the fullest range of possibilities available in UK society. Put briefly, second, third and fourth generations increasingly grow up with a phenomenological ‘knowledge’ of being British – blurring into an immense diversity of other entangled individual and social identifications.¹⁹ Regrettably, the structural imperative in these two films to instruct ignorant white viewers of the historical underpinnings of Asian traditionalism leads to over simplistic opposition rather than complex interaction – implying that acknowledgement and incorporation of Asian-ness inevitably compromises Britishness and vice versa.²⁰

This crude dichotomising of lived spectra extends most damagingly in *Yasmin* to Nasir’s unlikely lurch from general Western adolescent decadence into Al-Qaeda training²¹ – when lifestyle, cultural, economic and political developments are infinitely richer, even in the grimmest parts of West Yorks.²² Yet again, the material expressions of the white liberal imagination show accidental affinity with explicit far-right racism in reducing their subjects to

cardboard stereotypes.²³ In the process, centuries of radical humanist and internationalist Islamic philosophy and practice²⁴ – as well as recent British Asian mobilisation in grassroots labour militancy, Black anti-racist politics, and contemporary multicultural interplay²⁵ – all disappear into the medievalist fundament. But surely, even if casualties of integration and assimilation must be seen at the purely individual level beloved of UK social realism, their putative tragedy should still be capable of imaginative moulding into some manner of positive potential without disavowing the potency of poisonous circumstances. The German film *Gegen die Wand* relishes this task and tackles it head-on.

3. DIY Arrangements

Although chronicling the self-arranged marriage, separation and love of two Turkish-German misfits and family exiles via a variety of traumatic vicissitudes, *Head-On*’s writer and director Fatih Akin²⁶ had no intention of engaging in social critique: “I never thought much about the cultural environment; that’s really from my subconscious ... The media focused on the background; the audience beyond the media see the love story and not the culture clash.”²⁷ Like the two UK films, *Head-On* hysterically ratchets up the melodramatic excess arising here from the psychically fragile main characters’ self-destructiveness. Thus no one could mistake them as representative of anything other than human distress in extremis – so if their struggles to live and love are to be interpreted in terms of social, cultural and political reality, this will have to be a deliberate conscious exercise rather than any spoon-fed pat contrivance.

Starting in the working class Hamburg district of St Pauli,²⁸ young Sibel Güner (Sibel Kekilli²⁹) notices middle-aged postman loser Cahit Tomruk (Birol Ünel) at a psychiatric hospital, after he drove into a wall when debilitating depression overtook the palliative of drink and drugs. She has slit her wrists (again) to escape the traditional family suffocation ordered by father Yunus (Demir Gokgol) and violently enforced by brother Yilmaz (Cem Akin) – while her mother Birsen (Aysel Iscan) is sympathetic but helpless. Intrigued by Sibel’s spirit and passion for sensation, Cahit agrees to her proposal of sham marriage, and his old friend Seref (Güven Kiraç) helps fool the folks.³⁰ After the wedding he gradually falls for her despite her reckless promiscuity, and gets her a hairdressing job with occasional girlfriend Maren (Catrin Striebeck). But when he’s jailed for the manslaughter of one of her more misogynist flings, her furious family patriarchs rumble the deception thanks to the media coverage. Fearing for her safety she flees to yuppie cousin Selma (Meltem Cumbul) in Istanbul after pledging to wait for him.

Crop-haired, devoid of ornamentation and drained of zest, she confides in a letter to Cahit that she is “the only lifeless thing in this city”. Abandoning drudge work as a chambermaid at Selma’s hotel, she roams the streets in a chemical haze and is raped by a barman at a disreputable club. Her downward spiral culminates in trumping the insults of three thugs with florid speculation about them, their wives and mothers, and she is found in the gutter beaten to a pulp and apparently fatally stabbed. On leaving jail, Cahit borrows Seref’s savings to reach Istanbul and patiently seeks to link up with her. Eventually she comes to him and they make love for the only time. Though now living with her taxi driver saviour and their son, she agrees to consider starting afresh with Cahit in his ancestral family village. However, she doesn’t turn up at the bus station rendezvous, so Cahit embarks alone...

The film segments are separated by scenes of a traditional Turkish band playing gorgeously haunting love songs to camera on the shore of the Golden Horn (the Asian side of the Bosphorus) with Istanbul’s St Sophia over the water. This foregrounding of Turkish cultural aesthetics grows in satisfying effect, while recalling Rainer Werner

Fassbinder’s Brechtian use of narrative dislocation to enhance emotional intensity.³¹ Conversely, Cahit’s somewhat naff (despite Ünel’s valiant efforts) punk posing is reminiscent of the *amour fou* of the fashionable French *cinema du look*. If yet another influence was the uncompromising grit of (the far from black and white) *La Haine* – itself referencing *nouvelle vague* and new African American cinema – and the ghettocentric *cinema du banlieue* cycle that film inaugurated,³² the sense grows of a postmodern existentialism where many popular and artfilm roads cross.

Head-On’s unique and truly innovative cinematic culture crash envisages the past, present and future – as well as ethnic identification, pride and straitjacketing – as utterly and intrinsically inseparable. Each tangle layers, filters and deepens the significance of events; in the process rendering as redundant all simple or absolute moral judgements. Generational and gender conflict, the exigencies of class and social status and tragic romance also blend, but in this film conventional characterisations are utterly upturned while the chances of personal redemption depend on the sharing of love, pain and hope between men and women in social networks they shape according to their own biographical (family, friendship and cultural) accidents. These chime inwards and outwards and can be mobilised – in turns or simultaneously – for narcissistic, cathartic, affectionate, defensive or altruistic purposes. Choices made are provisional and ambiguous – including the ending, where the utopia of love fails to transpire; but hope is not lost.



Sibel Kekilli in *Head-On*

The prodigious volume of violence, blood and darkness on show (though annoying most critics) refers steadfastly to all the mortifying wounds both of history and of the spirit – representing social-psychosomatic resources which belong to the protagonists to deploy on their own account, whether purposively or on autopilot. When Cahit muses, “Without her, I could not have survived”, this could refer to all the poignant, magical and dangerous uncertainties in life, including the cultural materials available for reclamation by personal and collective selves. Similarly there is absolutely no hypocrisy in Sibel resisting male street hassle by disclaiming her protected status as a married Turkish woman. The performative subversion of identity in the languages of institutional discourse and discipline allows liberation to be conceivable if the future is destabilised – or it can be fixed in reactionary stasis.³³ Even the major structural lacuna in the final cut – Sibel’s uncharted conversion to loyal partner and mother – can be interpreted as Akin’s respectful bow to the ‘unknown continent’ of femininity; or as an acknowledgement of the limited capacity of Eurocentric knowledge, Occidental genre or liberal capitalism.

Collisions, Collusions, Conclusions

British cinema-goers now have twenty-years of cross-cultural romance under their belts since director Stephen Frears and writer Hanif Kureishi started the ball rolling with *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987) – and their detailed imbrications of class, race, gender and sexual orientation in dynamic domestic political contexts continued with Isaac Julien’s *Young Soul Rebels* (1991).³⁴ However, it wasn’t until Gurinder Chadha’s marvellous *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) that a British film could treat these themes by adopting a perspective wholly within the social network of a specific ‘ethnic minority’ community – whose characters, furthermore, weren’t primarily concerned with the condescending vagaries of either upper

session.

- 30. Such DIY arrangements are not uncommon, according to Akin: “A Turkish girl once asked me to marry her ... A lot of Turks marry very early, just to get away from their families and have legal sex”. Perhaps surprisingly, Akin receives more criticism from younger (rather than older) generations of Turkish Germans for the film’s sex, nudity and drugs: “It is a mirror of their own double morality and they don’t like what they see” (interviewed in Sheila Johnston, *The Telegraph*, 11th February 2005).
- 31. Thereby connecting with his landmark anti-racist tragedy *Fear Eats the Soul* (W. Germany, 1973) with its middle aged German woman and young Moroccan lovers (see Asuman Suner, ‘Dark Passion’, *Sight & Sound*, March 2005, pp.18-21).
- 32. *La Haine* was written and directed by Matthew Kassovitz (France 1995). The first *cinema du banlieue* flush included *Rai* (Thomas Gilou, 1995), *État des Lieux* (Jean-François Richet, 1995) and *Bye Bye* (Karim Dridi, 1996).
- 33. And, quoting a 96-year old German reminiscing on his resistance against the Nazis (“It’s our duty every day to change the world”), Akin concludes: “I want to do that with my life, too” (Sheila Johnston, note 30).
- 34. Frears has recently turned in an equally nuanced response to contemporary UK immigrant life in *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002; written by Steven Knight). *Young Soul Rebels* was written by Paul Hallam, Derrick Saldaan McClintock & Isaac Julien (see Isaac Julien & Colin McCabe, *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel*, BFI, 1991).
- 35. Chadha has since embarked on a fascinating populist trajectory, progressively weaving in various aspects of the scramble for cultural capital on the part of those whose background lacks it, in *Bend It Like Beckham* (1999) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) – the latter a Hollywood/Bollywood hybrid drawing “parallels between the class differences of Jane Austen and the cultural divisions of India, which are fuelled not just by caste difference, but by the globalisation caused by air travel [among Non Resident Indians]” (Kaleem Aftab, ‘A Marriage of Two Minds’, *Independent on Sunday*, 8th October 2004).
- 36. For example in *Brothers in Trouble* (dir. Udayan Prasad, 1995; written by Robert Buckler); *My Son the Fanatic* (dir. Udayan Prasad, 1997; written by Hanif Kureishi), and *East Is East* (dir. Damian O’Donnell, 2001; written by Ayub Khan Din).
- 37. Of the latter, the Kumars’ sitting room chat show format stands out. Both series were conceived by Anil Gupta, screening between 1998-2001 and 2001-03 respectively.
- 38. The new Lancashire-set film comedy *Chicken Tikka Masala* (dir. Harmage Singh Kalirai, 2004; written by Roopesh Parekh) also ticks many pop-cultural crossover boxes – culture-clash, arranged marriage, North v. South, gay v. straight, *Carry-On*-style soap opera farce, trendily inept DV DIY aesthetics – and has promptly been critically savaged as more of an all-round turkey on the basis of its cretinous reproduction of stock characters complete with thoroughly regressive connotations. For another European corrective, see *Only Human*, dir. Teresa de Pelegri/Dominic Harari, Spain/United Kingdom/Argentina/Portugal 2004 – a Jewish/Palestinian family farce with a “tragi-comic final row in which the lovers blame each other not just for the events of the night but for the whole history of the Promised Land” (Liese Spencer, *Sight & Sound*, May 2005, p69). Or, for more sophisticated postmodern and Islamic ironic referentiality, see Kamal Tabrizi’s *Lizard* (Iran, 2004) – poking fun at clerical government and breaking box-office records in Iran before being banned – with its escaped con disguised as a mullah, and describing Quentin Tarantino as “The great Christian film-maker” tackling “salvation in ultimate darkness” (John Wrathall, *Sight & Sound*, May 2005, p.65).
- 39. For meticulous analyses respectively of the white working class masculine habitus and the political effectivity of conjoining gender and racial discourses, see: Simon J. Charlesworth, *The Phenomenology of Working Class Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 2000; and Claire Alexander, ‘(Dis)Entangling the ‘Asian Gang’, 2000 (in: Hesse, see note 20).
- 40. See the writing of bell hooks for comprehensive discussions in the context of African America (for example: *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Turnaround Press, 1991; *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Turnaround Press, 1992; *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, Routledge, 1995; *Killing Rage, Ending Racism*, Routledge, 1996). Note also the contradictory US emergence of modern ethnic cultural distinctions at around the same time as racial identification and skin privilege – for example, in that the first waves of Swedish immigrants were not included in the category ‘white’ (see Noel Ignatiev & John Garvey (eds.), *Race Traitor*, Routledge, 1994; then fast-forward to 1950s Little England guesthouse signage (‘No Blacks, No Irish’).
- 41. Actually bothering to ask those who wear it about the hijab’s significance tells as many different stories as there are respondents. See, for example: for the UK, photographer Clement Cooper’s *Sisters* (The Gallery Oldham 2004/5; also published in book + CD form); or the BBC2 documentary about the French government’s school ban on veils, *The Headmaster and the Headscarves* (written and directed by Elizabeth C. Jones, 2005).
- 42. Here, the experience of mixed-race love relationships can illuminate the dense co-entanglements of class and gender within and between individuals and families. For deep reflections from divergent positions on these matters, including the implications for practical negotiations around racism and societal meetings of

cultures generally, see: Timothy Malinquin Simone, *About Face: Race in Postmodern America*, New York, Autonomedia, 1989; and Yasmin Alibhai Brown, *Mixed Feelings: The Complex Lives of Mixed-Race Britons*, Women's Press, 2001.

43. The conjunction of charity corporations, international aid and humanitarian 'just war' may perhaps be an especially disabling contemporary coalescence complementing the rather straightforward neoimperialism of global capital.
44. Not to mention wider question of Western Europe's cultural, religious and philosophical origins in prior cultures – see the controversies surrounding Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation*, Vols. 1 & 2, Free Association Books, 1987/1991; and *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to his Critics* (ed. David Chioni Moore), Duke University Press, 2001.
45. For some of the ramifications Kelman forges, see 'Oppression and Solidarity' and 'On the Asylum Bill' in *Some Recent Attacks, Essays Cultural and Political*, AK Press, 1992.
46. True, for example, of the police in their modern liberal guises just as much as the old-fashioned fascism – see *The Secret Policemen's* exposé of police trainee racism (BBC1, October 2003); and Munira Mirza, 'Debating the Future: Living Together', September 2001 <www.culturewars.org.uk>. The same, in principle, can easily apply to the equal opps. agencies and professionals who police us elsewhere in the social fabric.
47. This essay's delineation of the concepts needed to express such a political 'polylectic' are necessarily vague. But the notion of dialectic is also completely inadequate to do justice to human history on God's – or anyone else's – earth; and any sensible deconstruction of Hegelian philosophy (and thus Marxism) will doubtless reveal its core Enlightenment problematic of religion as the Emperor's New Clothes, with scientific materialism as an intelligible (but only provisional) poor man's two-step beyond. So, I console myself with the ancient Eastern saying to the effect that pondering which are the appropriate questions may sometimes be more productive than prospecting for the (politically) correct answers.



middle class sensibilities or lower middle class aspirations.³⁵ Since then, the range of Asian experiences and contexts depicted comically, melodramatically or tragically has broadened, though problematic and/or forbidden love is still usually a key narrative driver.³⁶

The exploration of comic potential has also been exhaustively mined, finding its most effective expression in television comedy's time-honoured antecedents in music hall vulgarity and the deflating of pretensions, and the sitcom preoccupation with class and family respectability. The BBC2 series *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars at No. 42* partook of both old and new generic markers,³⁷ and its affectionately exuberant skewering of British Asian stereotypes succeeded in appealing to unprecedentedly large audiences while consistently exploding the one-dimensional attributions that white racism (and 'well-meaning' liberal efforts) typically doles out to British Asian men, women and children.³⁸ Capturing with such flair the intimate fluctuations of warmth and callousness common to 'quality time' in most families of all backgrounds may have been the crucial stroke of genius here. And whether the viewer's connection to narrative hinges on laughter or pain, it's striking that relationships between the generations provide the most poignant tensions in virtually all of the fictional families so far discussed.

Generational conflict embraces the expectations, hopes and aspirations for children which stem from the parents' own experiences of being parented in specific circumstances, but who are now reversing roles in new contexts, environments and more or less pressurised conditions. The offsprings' responses further vary according to the degree of cognitive, emotional and material autonomy carved out so far, and the relative amenability of parental authority to reinforcement in the extended family, neighbourhood, culture, religion and patterns of government. Economic constraints are, as always, crucial in that the comforts and agonies of home life derive their most powerful significance depending on the choices available or withheld – and the physical, spatial and psychic room there is to come to know about and reflect on these possibilities, as well as in ascribing responsibility for them.

In particular, the interplay of gender and generation inflects responses to masculinism, in British Asian families just as for other groups, despite the massive divergencies of historical and biographical particulars. Gender differences are especially acute in poor areas, where macho orientation and camaraderie provides differential access to the public sphere for men³⁹ – while also allowing the reproduction of imperious male rule irrespective of religion; whereas middle class education, career and mobility horizons offer a spectrum of escape routes for both sexes. No doubt this helps sustain myths of the passive victimhood of Muslim women, but the arrogant class- and race-blindness of some feminists only adds insult to injury⁴⁰ – blaming the primitive sexual politics of medieval cultures which the women in question understand as a defensive haven in a heartless world. Even if the latter is a private hell, blanket condemnation simply reproduces the heartlessness and practically ossifies the isolation. Nowhere is this clearer just now than in the absurd characterisation of the Muslim hijab as symbolic of the fundamentalist crushing of women's individuality – unless miniskirts and makeup as modernist Western female disguise are to be interpreted as the complementary Christian test case.⁴¹

Nevertheless, many Asian women avoid publicly blaming Asian men or masculinist aspects of their culture or religion for the same reason that many Black and working class white women repudiate feminisms which treat machismo and patriarchy as singular transhistorical law, rather than over-determined symptoms of wider malaises of domination.⁴² Once the concept of social class is actively engaged with the cultural diversity we now see clearly all around (and within) us, the political utility of the notion of post-imperial decolonisation thus begins to seem more than a metaphor – and a complex set of dominative dispositions of human resources is glimpsed: by men over women, powerful geographical forces

over external populations, and internally in a society via ethnic and economic enslavement.⁴³

Be that as it may, 'British' culture has always been decisively hybrid throughout its recorded history and probably before.⁴⁴ This should come as no surprise given that even the language is a hopelessly irrational melange – even more mixed when lower class and regional dialects are considered. Ironically, the resulting linguistic flexibility and openness of English is a logical justification for its candidature as 'world language' – rationalism as usual being the handmaiden of imperialism. So it's no accident that James Kelman, for instance, feels little affinity with high-British or Scottish literature, but more between African postcolonial writing and the existential prose materialisation of his own Glasgow vernacular.⁴⁵ But in cool Britannia, a national cuisine of chips, curry and pizza, sweatshop-produced sweatsuits, Chinese consumer goods and the melting pot of teenybop pop look like the far horizon of liberal capitalism's capacity to nurture a lasting tolerance of difference that extends further than exchanges of fond kisses.

Multiculturalism in school education can do little more than enumerate and exacerbate the surface diversity of culture, because the liberal consensus requires the playing down of the cruel origins of lived practices (at home, abroad or in diasporas) in situations of oppression and suffering. Neither history curricula nor citizenship classes are likely to honestly assess the past, present and future certainty of dislocation and desperation accompanying the exigencies of colonial, capitalist and globalising economics that the political elites are currently implementing. Similarly, the institutional embrace of equal opportunity excuses for inaction or PR, leads to the invention of oppression everywhere, to vicious victimisation *and* the imposition of victim status on those who otherwise, off their own bat, were getting on with the slow depressing drudge of dealing with and transcending it.⁴⁶ This is why portrayals which mention *only* the most unfortunate examples of state- or religion-sponsored racial and cultural terrorism are so spectacularly unhelpful (to say the least).

So, the multicultural recipe-mongering which isolates each ethnicity as a separate entry on a list of oppressions or identities not only cannot avoid but *insists on* the reification of essential otherness to be the root of conflict – rather than the denial of one's own unbearable experiences and conflicts projected into convenient others and misperceived as *their* attributes or responsibility – thus preventing the recognition and acting-upon of affiliation. Fantasies of the heroic progress of civilisation, industry and science likewise feed into a simplistic complacent ideology of transparent social worlds with no room for reflection on shared experiences of suffering across culture, race, geography and history – forcing 'difference' to appear as cause in the defensively monolithic reaction of 'faith schools' and the equally nonsensical religions of rationalist liberal secularism.

The only route to genuine solidarity (if and where required and requested) – and hence to worthwhile political movement with any potential to transcend oppression (including in the politics of identity and representation) – is to take one's cues from those bearing the brunt. Dictating to people how it is they suffer and what they should do about it – whether from abstract principles of law or philosophy, legal or bureaucratic rights or rules of governance, the profitable careers of market commodities and capitals, or the entrenchment interests of academic or professional experts – turns the tactics of freedom on their head into the patronising removal from above of patterns that the victims have had no agency in knowing or defining. This can only ever perpetuate dehumanisation and detract from the social self-determination and liberation from below that is so urgently felt and sought.⁴⁷

www.tomjennings.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk