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Izzat and the gaze of culture

ABSTRACT
It is the aim of this article to make visible a range of hitherto neglected factors that contribute to the representation of the South Asian woman in British film. Cultural factors such as the law of izzat remain limited in theoretical frameworks, making the subject only partially visible. South Asian cultural identity is addressed through language, music, clothing and memory; each contributing to the visibility of the South Asian female on-screen. Using the popular British Asian film by Gurinder Chadha Bhaji on the Beach (1993) to address the current visibility of the subject, the seemingly simplistic identity of the South Asian female is questioned. The presence of 'narrative ruptures' contained within some of the material addressed combined with theoretical understandings of the diaspora produce a more nuanced understanding of the subject. Through postcolonial, film and cultural studies, an analysis of visibility has recognized the need to integrate cultural laws such as izzat into readings of British Asian and South Asian film. By illustrating the codes that have limited the subject's visibility, the once invisible will become visible and a new theoretical understanding gained.

KEYWORDS
Izzat
South Asian female identity
cultural representation
visibility
narrative ruptures

Bhaji on the Beach (Gurinder Chadha 1993) is concerned with inequalities of race, gender and social status in contemporary Britain. Attempting to interweave humour with cultural awareness, the film questions the identity of first- and second-generation South Asian women and the social and cultural space they occupy. It is one of the first feature films to be directed by a South
1. Although the director, Gurinder Chadha, had made documentary films such as I’m British But... (1989), Bhaji on the Beach marked the beginning of Chadha’s career as a feature film director and included the term British-Asian to delineate an identity that is involved as much in ‘Britishness’ as it is in ‘Asianness’.

2. Broadcasting companies such as the BBC and ITV had failed to address and meet the needs of minority Black and Asian communities (see Malik 2002).

**Asian woman in Britain (Malik 1996: 212).** The director, Gurinder Chadha, considers Bhaji on the Beach to be both a British and South Asian film as she states:

> In Bhaji what I found emerging is the pull between a very British film on the one hand and being quite Indian on the other and that pull is present in every single scene, every single character, every single frame of the film [...].

(Chadha quoted in Malik 1996: 212)

Exploring the boundaries of identity politics, the film reflected the political stance taken by British broadcasting companies around the late 1980s and early 1990s. Chadha’s film aimed to explore the position of the South Asian woman and, as Chadha states, illustrate the ‘pull’ that is felt by those who belong to two communities. Largely delivered in a social realist style, the film captures the women’s everyday struggle with domesticity, family life, victimization and desire for escape. Through depicting the lives of everyday South Asian women in Britain Chadha has created a cultural narrative that explores the migrancy of culture and translates the history of the South Asian diaspora. This combines their journey from the homeland, their struggle to be assimilated and the settlement of both themselves and the next generation.

The issues of diaspora, hyphenated identities and culture are further reinforced through the inclusion of native language. The film includes both English and Punjabi dialogue. It is therefore necessary to establish how the film can be viewed culturally and why this process is essential in understanding the images that are projected on screen.

This article will focus on three main characters in the film: Asha (Lalita Ahmed), Ginder (Kim Vithana) and Hashida (Sarita Khajuria). Asha is a mother and member of the first generation of South Asian immigrants. She has a troubled existence, identified through her role as a dutiful wife and mother as well as a religious devotee. Ginder is second-generation British Asian, represented as a daughter, mother and wife. Hashida, also second generation, is represented as dutiful/dishonourable daughter.

The three women reflect the heterogeneity of the South Asian female as the film considers the experience of migration, diaspora and hybricity through the bodies of each of the above women. Asha suffers from headaches signifying her internal turmoil, Hashida is pregnant, allowing her body to be viewed as the reproductive visible body, and Ginder suffers domestic abuse, emphasizing the patriarchal dominance that regulates her body.

Jigna Desai (2004) considers how Bhaji on the Beach explores notions of homesickness and nostalgia through the bodies of the women in the film:

> ‘The film comments that diasporic construction of women as motherland and family as nation creates women’s bodies as the terrain of diasporic struggle’ (Desai 2004: 135).

Whilst endorsing Desai’s claim that the female body hosts the diasporic struggle, I propose to go further by suggesting that the bodies of the females specifically articulate the cultural laws imposed on the female. As a cultural entity, the South Asian female body signifies not only loss of the homeland but the burden of negotiating transitional identities that resist patriarchal law. The three characters to be discussed communicate cultural meaning through the presence of cultural laws that are both visible and non-visible. In ‘voicing’ their identity through the body, alternative ways of understanding the identity...
and representation of the South Asian female are made apparent. This article will seek to establish how the South Asian cultural law of izzat signifies a code of conduct, history and expectation that is embodied by both the first and second generation. Izzat is presented in the film through language, visual imagery and specified gender roles. By recognizing the presence of izzat as a cultural law throughout the film, the viewer can gain an understanding of the diverse ways in which izzat surfaces.

CODE OF CONDUCT

The South Asian cultural law of izzat can be defined as ‘family honour’ and is mainly directed at the female to ensure her behaviour does not shame the family. Cultural codes of izzat require the South Asian female to behave and dress in an ‘honourable’ way, maintaining respect for the self and the community to which the subject belongs. As Felicity Hand notes:

The origin of the image of the submissive Indian girl lies in the traditional Asian values of sharam and izzat. Deeply embedded in Asian societies is the notion of family pride, especially that which involves male honour, but also personal integrity and respectability known collectively as izzat. Izzat lies in the hands of women, who must be taught from a very early age never to jeopardize it.

(Hand 1999: 133)

This South Asian cultural law cannot be made easily visible through the cinematic lens. Indeed, ‘cultural visibility’ requires knowledge of fundamental factors that contribute to the identity of the British Asian subject. In the filmic context, izzat works as a subtext that is always present but rarely ‘seen’, presented through dialogue, behaviour and codes of dress. Whilst izzat incorporates family and community ideals, sharam is a personal perception of inner feelings of shame. Amrit Wilson has further identified izzat as ‘the sensitive and many faceted male family identity which can change as the situation demands it – from family pride to honour to self-respect, and sometimes to pure male ego’ (Wilson 1979: 31).

In considering both Wilson and Hand’s understanding of izzat, this article has identified izzat as the locus of South Asian cultural practise and behaviour. Sexuality and the sexual body are controlled by izzat, which exerts its power through becoming an internal regulator of one’s identity. To go against this logic in any way is to essentially deny ‘who you are’. Although izzat is in essence patriarchal, it represents a major aspect of South Asian cultural belief for both genders. It is an active, masculine-identified, family/community gaze that introduces and contains points of identification.

One of the ways izzat is presented in the film is through disturbing the main narrative in the form of fantasies and flashbacks. This article will refer to such devices as narrative ruptures. The diasporic subjects communicate their history through occupied spaces which contain remnants of ‘home’. The desire for home is communicated through images, dialogue and narrative ruptures. Often disturbing the main narrative of the material, such ruptures allow the viewer to seek latent knowledge through reading the visions as a necessary disturbance, a fitting part of the text. In surfacing as a character’s inner thoughts or desires, izzat ‘performs’ through the female body. The viewer is forced to consider the implications this gaze may hold for the South
Asian female subject. It is in light of this that *Bhaji on the Beach* places izzat as central to gaining an understanding of the females on-screen.

The South Asian females reproduce this cultural identity and code of behaviour by instilling it in the next generation. *Izzat* thus becomes multi-generational, travelling between various spaces that form part of the cultural understanding and ideology of the first and second generation. The mobility of *izzat* is evident through the characters of Asha, Hashida and Ginder. As Asha enforces cultural laws upon the next generation, she is actively practising all that she understands about South Asian female identity. Equally, the fear that is present in the second generation identifies the understanding and presence of *izzat* regardless of whether *izzat* is accepted or rejected.

This article will discuss how diaspora identity is alluded to in the title of the film, how spaces within the film further display notions of homelessness and diaspora, and how the cultural gaze of *izzat* is prevalent in codes of dress, language, behaviour and narrative ruptures throughout the film, presenting the migrancy of culture.

**SOUTH ASIAN SPACES**

*Bhaji on the Beach* captures the events of a daytrip starting with the gathering of a group of South Asian females in Birmingham, their journey to, and departure from, the northern seaside town of Blackpool. This journey signifies the notion of diaspora as the South Asian enters the white space. 'To comprehend the cinematic representation of the South Asian Diaspora, one needs to bring into focus that the heart of the Diaspora is the image of a journey' (Rajgopal 2003: 54). The journey from Birmingham to Blackpool can be considered a metaphorical journey from South Asia to Britain. The women travel from the familiar 'home space' of Birmingham to the alien territory of Blackpool where they are viewed as foreigners. The trip to Blackpool explores the challenges Asha, Ginder and Hashida face once leaving Birmingham. Forced to reconsider their place within the realm of South Asian female identity, the females expose their private, hidden identities, becoming visible to the community that surrounds them.

The females are collectively part of the Saheli? Asian Women’s Group. The characters in the film comprise first- and second-generation South Asian women as well as one woman who is visiting Britain from India. Subtextually, the film depicts and questions cultural control over the bodies of the females. The film introduces this element through Ginder, who is currently living in a women’s refuge with her son Amrik (Amer Chadha-Patel) after suffering domestic violence at the hands of her husband Ranjit (Jimi Harkishin). He and his brothers seek to find her and her son and bring them ‘home’ to Ranjit’s family. Their search continues until they find the group in Blackpool and confront the women. The brothers’ journey is paralleled by that of Oliver (Mo Mesay), Hashida’s Afro-Caribbean boyfriend. Upon his discovery of Hashida’s pregnancy, he begins his search for her in a bid to prevent her having an abortion. The film communicates the forbidden nature of Hashida and Oliver’s relationship through a conversation after Hashida discovers she is pregnant:

Oliver: You haven’t told your parents have you?

Hashida: What do you think? [...] I’m the one doing all the lying through this, I’ve told so many lies I don’t know how to tell the truth!
The unacceptability of this relationship is not just based on Hashida having a secret boyfriend but the fact that he is Afro-Caribbean. This is confirmed when one of the younger, second-generation females reacts to the first-generation women who are shocked when they are notified of Hashida’s pregnancy. In a bid to support Hashida, Madhu (Renu Kochar) speaks out to the women: ‘So what if the father’s black!’ The older generation appear horrified by this comment, informing the viewer that the father’s racial origin is more traumatic to the females than Hashida’s pregnancy.

There is an assumption that patriarchy is present throughout the film, although the females are unaware of the search that is taking place for them. This is confirmed by Simi (Shaleen Khan), the organizer of the trip, who declares before the group leave for Blackpool: ‘It is not often that we women get away from the patriarchal demands made on us in our daily life, struggling between the double-yoke of racism and sexism that we bear’. The ‘double-yoke of racism and sexism’ lies at the essential core of the film. Simi’s speech is met with confusion as it appears that none of her audience understands her. The film plays on the difference between Simi and the older generation: such feminist politics are not adopted by the females as they cannot view their cultural restrictions through western conceptions of oppression, but rather, through their diaspora state. Simi, however, is second generation; recognizing the traditional outlook of the first generation.

Due to the film being a western production, clothing provides a visual index of how the subject ‘belongs’ and is accepted by the South Asian and non-Asian community. The consumption of ‘Indian food’, alluded to in the title, is also a marker of identity as it implies a form of resistance to British cuisine and British practise outside the home. Traditional Indian food is consumed on the beach in Blackpool as well as in a stereotypical ‘greasy spoon’ cafe. The food is then used as a vehicle to demonstrate the female’s identity beyond the home; thus to consume traditional Indian food outside displays the private identity merging with the public. The space outside their home is the space of the ‘other’; of the western world. Consequently, the consumption of food in the ‘British’ public arena asserts their confidence as British Asians in Britain.

The title of the film further includes this ‘new’ space that is absorbed into the hybrid and diasporic realm with Bhaji representing Indian cuisine, as previously mentioned, and Beach referring to British soil and cultural stereotypes. Blackpool (the beach in the title) is well known in the United Kingdom for its ‘Pleasure Beach’, illuminations and fantastical setting. It is also where the Labour party traditionally held their conferences and where many working-class people choose to holiday. This illustrates the space of Blackpool as one of fantasy, progressivism and pleasure. Although Blackpool marks the culture of the English, the dramatic lights, sense of fantasy and freedom are less essentially English. As Ciecko points out, the choice of location is suggestive of the exposure of all that is fantastical and artificial (Ciecko 1999: 76); however a connection suggested by the film is Blackpool’s likeness to Bollywood film imagery. Of the females on the trip, it is Rekha (Souad Faress), visiting from Bombay (Mumbai), who makes this point. Rekha views Blackpool’s ‘Golden Mile’ and exclaims ‘Bombay!’? Bombay is home to Bollywood film: exaggerated, extreme and an essential part of Indian culture, particularly when viewed by globalized film consumers. Rekha’s identification of Blackpool with Bombay reconfirms how the homeland can be reproduced while in the space of the ‘other’.

The in-between space that is occupied by the subject is further affirmed as the women are on the way to Blackpool, when a version of Cliff Richard’s

4. The word Bhaji can be identified as an Indian snack. However it is also a Punjabi word meaning brother/male friend. Thus the title reinforces the presence of patriarchy for the informed viewer.  

5. Female South Asian identity combines notions of culture, hybridity and diaspora. Hybrid identity in this context can be recognized as an identity ‘in-between’ (Bhabha 1994: 38). To belong is to connect and comply with the majority culture, space and language. To be ‘in-between’ implies a space and practise of more than one culture. The women are placed between eastern and western traditions, the strength of this indefinite identity being dependent on the generation to which they belong. However, the second generation are identified as British Asian; their awareness of British cultural traditions and their ability to fuse such traditions with eastern practise enables them to disregard the difficulty the first generation may experience. The immigrant generation become diaspora subjects, viewed and received in a particular way that questions their ‘Britishness’. They are depicted as subjects forced to leave their country of origin in order to provide a more privileged life for their children, although, in doing so, they refuse to become disconnected from their homeland. Alien or ‘foreign’ connotations attached to their identities are illustrated in a variety of ways including dress, food and language.  

6. Blackpool as a pleasure-seeking space

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of escapism echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's 'carnival' (Dentith 2001) as the females are temporarily 'free' from daily routine.

7. 'Bombay' was the name given by the British Colonials to the Indian city of Mumbai or Bom Baia as the Portuguese had named it. It is now known as Mumbai (Damania 2007)

8. The International Indian Film Academy Awards took place in Yorkshire, England on Saturday 9 June 2007. The choice of location illustrates how the homeland 'Bollywood' has been recreated in the space of the other. 'Home' is further echoed through Rekha who appears more western both in dress and attitude in comparison to the first-generation females accompanying her. Rekha communicates the changes that have taken place in India. The India that she knows has been transformed from the traditional to the modern, embracing elements of western culture that appear to be rejected by the older generation. Their memories echo of an India they have left and their desire to return. However, as Rekha makes clear, such a space no longer exists. This is also a reminder that 'home' signifies a constant process of desire and search for settlement.

9. Cliff Richard, originally Harry Roger Webb, was also born in India, implying that he is as much a part of South Asian culture as he is British, marking him as familiar to the first generation.

'Summer Holiday' is played on the soundtrack, sung in Punjabi with an infusion of bhangra. This type of music is 'hybrid [...] playful and subversive, both familiar and new' (Ciecko 1999: 74), a mixture of East and West. Hence this space is not simply external but hybrid, merging two cultures.9

DESIRING HOME

'Home' has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are few rainbows anymore. How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us home, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word? (Rushdie 1995: 93)

Diaspora and elements of homelessness surface as important factors that contribute to the identity and placement of Asha, Ginder and Hashida. Focusing on questions of belonging, the various factors that influence each woman's identity and sense of 'belonging', including patriarchal control and generational differences, will be discussed.

The film addresses such themes mainly through the character of Asha, as the viewer is invited to enter a series of dream-like fantasy sequences that emerge as Asha's private thoughts. In the context of British Asian film, flashbacks and dream-like sequences may be used to express elements of izzat. These narrative ruptures allow for the fantasies to surface and become indicators of Asha's inner turmoil as she attempts to fill the gap that emerges from the loss of home and a single identity. The fantasies thus represent Asha's continuous mental crossing from Britain to India and back again, reinforcing the need to read the film culturally as they expose elements of South Asian culture that do not always find expression in the main narrative of the film. Thus the narrative ruptures intimate the hidden, unspeakable dialogue that is needed to gain understanding of South Asian female identity.

Asha is on a journey throughout the film. Part of the first generation of South Asian women, Asha attempts to appear controlled. It is her fantasies that disclose Asha's private world of fear, distress and desire. The journey that is taken by Asha captures feelings of homelessness; her private world is exposed through dream sequences that illustrate her inner distress due to living in Britain.

The fantasies also cross the borders of reality as she imagines another existence. Asha's fantasies can be recognized as cultural fetishes, using Laura Marks' terms:

The fetish that is produced in the movement between cultures is a concrete expression of the state of longing produced when what is inside moves to the outside, when what was taken for granted of one's culture becomes an object of contemplation. (Marks 2000: 125)

The film often enters Asha's fantasy when Asha is suffering from a 'headache'. The headaches signify a split between the unconscious and the conscious. Delivered in a Bollywood style, the dream-like sequences occupy a hybrid
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diegetic space, hence confusing the 'social realist' style of the main body of the narrative. Bollywood films usually contain elements of fantasy through song and dance sequences, as Asha Kasbekar states 'Love songs are central to the popular Hindi film and they are often contrived as “dream sequences”. During such flights into fantasy the unities of time and space are completely disregarded' (Kasbekar 2001: 383). Just as time and space are forgotten in Bollywood dance sequences, so too are they lost in Asha's fantasies, which seem to communicate that which is desired or feared by Asha.

Bollywood film narratives are often structured by the discourse of izzat. The subtext of the narrative in such films is the acceptance of fate and respect for one's family and the wider community (Gillespie 1995: 84). Although izzat is arguably more complex and problematic than a set of rules, it is internalized and registers as a form of consciousness. Vijay Mishra in Bollywood Cinema has observed how Bollywood film is based on tradition and modernity in conflict: 'A key binary that has been detected by almost all commentators of this form is the modernity/tradition binary. Modernity is disavowed even as it is endorsed; tradition is avowed even as it is rejected' (Mishra 2002: 4).

Along with social and domestic storylines, the Bollywood film, usually Hindi, contains fantastical images of the hero and heroine singing to each other, expressing their often illicit love. Furthermore, Bollywood film is often the only form of escapism available to the South Asian diaspora subject. Sandra Heinen has noted that as a result of this, 'Bollywood has, since the 1990s, produced a large number of films which cater specifically to diaspora taste by featuring Indian protagonists living in Britain or the US' (Heinen 2008: 67). Asha's fantasies are also delivered through narrative ruptures containing repressed thoughts as well as Bollywood-style song and dance sequences.

The first of the fantasy sequences takes place at the beginning of the film. Asha is preparing a puja/worship for the Hindu God Rama. Within Hinduism Rama is identified as the ideal son, husband and King (Howley 1998: 2). What appears on-screen is an exaggerated, imagined Rama. The shattering of this perfect image comes with the voice of Rama heard over the image of Asha worshipping him: 'Beauty, Honour, Sacrifice [...] Asha know your place [...]!' Instantly images of Asha’s family are present, each depicting her in a particular role from mother to wife. Beauty is then manifest in her external/visual appearance, honour is upheld in the keeping of izzat, and sacrifice is depicted as sacrifice of the self for the requirements and needs of family, community and culture. It is only beauty that is visual; honour and sacrifice remain hidden but powerful aspects of her internalized identity. The domination of the male God, coupled with images of Asha's fear of not fulfilling her role as devoted mother and wife connotes the gaze that controls her. The gaze does not simply denote patriarchy or whiteness but izzat, filtered into the visual through behaviour and dress. The image portrayed connotes patriarchy, signifying the presence of masculinity and power over the subordinate female. This is not derived from the actual image of the God but the voice projected and the words spoken.

The fantasy progresses from Asha's idealized cultural role to her labouring immigrant role as shopkeeper. The viewer enters the fantasy where giant packets of Benson & Hedges cigarettes, Cadbury's chocolate and Coca-Cola soft drinks appear alongside Bollywood film posters, revealing the contents of the Indian newsagent. The products sold in the newsagent overpower Asha, who is depicted as lost amongst them. She has become miniaturized,
emphasizing the power the shop has over Asha’s desires, reinforcing her social reality. What is also implied is a loss of identity. The stereotype of the corner shop has taken over any identity she could develop in the western space. Publically, she is viewed as a representation of an ethnic minority, whilst the family and community confine her to her gender and cultural roles.

In a state of ambivalence, Asha is torn between her current life in the United Kingdom and her ‘lost’ life in India. The possibility of her identity as a desiring woman, once aspiring actress and individual, is glimpsed here, but soon erased as she is instantly placed back into the frame of wife and mother as the fantasy scene is abruptly curtailed and Asha returns to reality. The transition from fantasy to reality takes place when Asha drops her puja tray. The disorientation felt in that moment is shown to the viewer in an edit that ‘cuts’ back into the main narrative of the film through a graphic match of Asha picking up her puja tray in her ‘reality’. This introduces the viewer to the unbalanced and confused world of the diaspora subject, further illustrating the ‘pull’ discussed by Chadha earlier; Asha, unable to find a home anywhere, is placed between the British and South Asian world.

This scene reveals both British and Indian influence: the Bollywood posters reflect South Asian culture as representative of the East as Cadbury’s chocolate and Coca-Cola are of western culture. The double consciousness that is arguably attached to all diaspora subjects becomes visible here. Asha’s private and public selves are joined to illustrate the differences between East and West and to develop her identity as a South Asian woman/diaspora subject. Although the fantasy shows Asha’s distress, Asha fails to communicate her suffering to her husband and children, those who appear to keep her in the submissive role she secretly detests. Again, it is the unspeakable frustration that is depicted in the fantasy that fails to surface in the main body of the film. Furthermore, Asha’s fantasies reinforce her understanding of cultural barriers: they are not acceptable in the ‘real world’, therefore must remain private.

The Bollywood influence that is presented to the viewer in Asha’s internalized thoughts can be regarded as a sign of the first-generation South Asian’s inability to conform to the majority culture. As Mishra states:

The [...] failure to connect with the idea of the new state has its obverse side in the sublime otherness of the homeland which eludes substantiation, but which nevertheless needs to be grasped under a ‘translatable’ sign. In the diasporic production and reproduction of ‘India’ one of the key translatable signs or a ‘synchonic warehouse of cultural scenarios’ [...] is Bombay (Bollywood) Cinema which [...] has been crucial in bringing the “homeland” into the diaspora as well as creating a culture of imaginary solidarity across heterogeneous linguistic and national groups that make up the South Asian (Indian) diaspora. (Mishra 2002: 237)

Asha’s consciousness of her connection to her homeland has been styled in a Bollywood vein. This is a ‘translatable sign’ for the viewer who can begin to recognize such imagery as connoting India and home for Asha. The image has been romanticized in Asha’s memory, as are homelands for those who have departed from them; as Hamid Naficy asserts, accented films reproduce home in various ways, hence within Bhaji on the Beach Blackpool emerges as a place of self discovery for the immigrant females, a place where they are free
‘single women’ again, free from the burden of marriage and family ties. Rekha also refers to Blackpool as ‘Bombay’, thus home/India.

The textual space dedicated to Asha’s fantasies is limited. The first generation is dominated by the ‘other’ culture and only able to access their cultural identity in a confined interior space. Their exterior is a register of their differences. It places the first generation in the diasporic frame; however the ideological structure of the film makes visible the women’s inadequacy and plight. A western and eastern gaze splits the film in this way. Bhaji on the Beach thus critiques the home and host country of the females represented, confirming its place as accented cinema, as acknowledged by Naficy.

It is through the notion of home that the opposing gazes surface. For the first generation, it is resistance to western culture that defines the concept of home as safe and desired. The British Asian generation are committed to the space they have inherited. They are able to practise their cultural identity both internally and externally. What disturbs the second generation is their sense of belonging into two separate cultures and the struggle to unite them. This disturbance is reflected in another of Asha’s fantasies, which features Hashida.

Overhearing a conversation between Hashida and Simi, Asha is informed of Hashida’s pregnancy. This knowledge causes another headache. The fantasy is in the guise of a scene taken from the Bollywood film Paurab Aur Paschim (Manoj Kumar, 1970). The film explores the South Asian diaspora in Britain and the loss of the migrant’s South Asian identity in a quest to belong (Internet Movie Database (IMDB) 2007). Asha’s fantasy depicts Hashida as the desiring westerner, dressed in a miniskirt and a blonde wig; strolling drunkenly to the Hindu place of worship she lights a cigarette from her father’s puja tray. The camera focuses on Hashida, her parents and Lord Rama. Hashida, opposing Hindu teachings and practices, recognizes religion as an important part of the identity process. Izzat, connoting purity, is manifested through religious belief. Thus Asha in her fantasy, has Hashida neglect the sacredness of the temple, thus rejecting izzat as a form of control. The scene ends with Hashida coughing on her cigarette; her distaste for the cigarette breaks the fantasy and we have a graphic match with Hashida coughing on Rekha’s cigarette.

Hashida is represented to the viewer through the evaluating gaze of Asha. It is Asha’s fantasy that constructs Hashida’s loss of izzat. Asha in this way seeks to control Hashida by judging her sexual body. Hashida, unable to represent herself, exposes the ideological structure of the film.

The final fantasy sequence takes place after Asha discloses Hashida’s pregnancy to the rest of the group. Walking alone in Blackpool, Asha meets Ambrose Waddington (Peter Cellier), a white middle-class gentleman. Asha is led into the theatre in which Ambrose used to perform. The two of them are on stage overlooking their imaginary potential audience. As Ambrose begins to reminisce about his days in theatre, Asha fantasizes about the two of them as film stars. The viewer is again invited into Asha’s private thoughts and desires. The fantasy depicts them both in a park. They are romantically linked, as Hindi music plays in the background as the two are chasing each other in the rain in a flirtatious manner. Ambrose is playing a character of an Indian man, wearing a black wig and brown face paint. The fantasy ends when the rain begins to wash Ambrose’s make up away, hence revealing his difference from Asha. Once the fantasy ends, Asha firmly places herself back in the role of the traditional South Asian female, ashamed of her behaviour and reminded of her
12. *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008) has been criticized by Bollywood film actor Amitabh Bachchan due to its representation of India as a 'Third World dirty underbelly developing nation' (Bachchan, quoted in Alam 2009). This is in contrast to columnist Shobha De's praise of the film as she states: 'It also makes one wonder why some of our entirely overrated, desi directors (homegrown products, at that), have failed so spectacularly in spelling out the ugly truth about Mumbai's dark world as transparently and convincingly' (De, quoted in Alam 2009).

Mainstream Bollywood film dismisses the social deprivation and suffering that inevitably exists in India. Arguably, this is due to the audience's demand for escapism. Ambrose temporarily epitomizes 'Englishness' thus temporarily alienating Asha's feelings of loss and confusion; his acceptance of her suggests that she can belong in the western world that she is so keen to reject. He views Asha as a fragile female, waiting to be discovered and saved by the white, western male. *Bhaji on the Beach* depicts the stereotypical white male and his assumptions that the 'other' South Asian woman is silenced, subservient and oppressed; thus Ambrose is an example of one of these 'white men saving brown women from brown men', making her, in Spivak's terms, a subaltern (Spivak 1994: 94) as Ambrose states: '[...L]ook what we've become, not like you, you've kept hold of your traditions; proud, exotic, fascinating, gentle, exquisite and beautiful'.

Ambrose's vision of Asha as pure and untouched by the currents of British popular culture enables him to exercise a form of control over her. This not only confirms her identity to him, but his identity to himself. Ambrose's desire for Asha positions her as the eroticized oriental woman. Yasmin Hussain claims that through Asha's fantasies 'Chadha [...] highlights the difficulty in distinguishing between art and life in South Asian society. Reality and fiction no longer imitate each other but appear to have merged' (Hussain 2005: 78). Whilst Hussain recognizes Asha's often confused state to be one where reality and fantasy merge, I would argue that the purpose of Asha's fantasy, for Chadha, is not to illustrate the merging of art and life in South Asian society but to reveal non-visual elements of South Asian female identity. The fantasies bring the hidden, unspeakable discourse to the surface, allowing the viewer to glimpse the South Asian 'reality' that cannot otherwise be understood by those outside the cultural frame. Asha's visions enable the viewer to know her in a more personal way, making the non-visible visible. Her body, supposedly sacred, is exposed, forcing patriarchal control to weaken through the strength of her own hidden turmoil. It is not just Asha's role as female that is voiced here; the sequences also create spaces in which inner notions of homelessness and diaspora become visible. Thus Asha's diasporic journey has inevitably meant a personal loss of both home and identity.

**QUESTIONS OF BELONGING**

*Bhaji on the Beach* communicates the identities of Asha, Ginder and Hashida in a variety of ways. Both Ginder and Hashida are second-generation British Asians. Ginder is introduced as a victim of domestic violence whilst Hashida
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is introduced as she discovers that she is pregnant. However it is Asha, the immigrant, who is introduced as a cultural commodity. Asha, dressed in a sari, wearing a red bindi and mangulsutra, appears carrying a tray of different foods ready for prayer. The bindi is a red dot worn on a married woman’s forehead, the colour marking her marital status and religion (although this can no longer be a strict indicator, as the bindi became more fashionable than cultural from the mid-1990s onwards). The mangulsutra is a necklace traditionally given to the Hindu woman when she is married. To wear the necklace is to declare her as a wife and her husband’s property. For the South Asian viewer izzat becomes visible through the mangulsutra, sari and bindi. The combination of the bindi and the mangulsutra signifies her unavailability and removal from the marketplace, the two becoming metaphors for the masculine presence upon the female. The wearing of the sari and bindi renders the South Asian female ineligible as a sexually available object, although she may still be desired. The display of patriarchal control over her body enables the male, metaphorically, to travel with her even whilst she is ‘holidaying’ in Blackpool—controlling her sexual body, regulating her desire and limiting her accessibility.

The traditional Hindu dress displayed by such a character sets out a very clear agenda. The film invites us to see Asha as the epitome of Hindu womanhood: she is dressed correctly as discussed, and is shown worshipping the Hindu male God, Rama. The image is a deliberate depiction of the ideal; the God worshipped and the woman worshipping are representations unifying patriarchy and Hinduism.

Asha’s initial appearance divides her from both Ginder and Hashida as she maintains the traditional identity of the South Asian female. Her exterior communicates her refusal to compromise or combine any aspect of western uniform or behaviour to indicate her sense of belonging in Britain. This dress code continues throughout her fantasies; even when transformed in the Bollywood style fantasy with Ambrose, Asha remains in South Asian dress. The division between generations continues through Asha’s encounter with Ginder. As Ginder attempts to communicate with Asha, Ginder is instantly reminded of her lack of belonging within the South Asian community:

Ginder: Namaste Aunty ji, how are things?

Asha: [...] you should ring your husband sometime and find out!

Asha maintains her role as a guard for the community as she embodies the belief that Ginder has forsaken her family honour by thinking independently. Asha’s fantasies exemplify how the presence of izzat is made more prominent through her than the other women in the group, which is why the fantasies contain other females, such as Hashida. The fragile existence of the Saheli group calls into question the unity amongst the female members, bringing to the surface the emerging generation gap. Furthermore, it epitomizes how definitions of womanhood exist in more patriarchal terms for the first generation.

The character of Hashida combines the identities of Asha and Ginder; Hashida opposes the restrictions of the traditional as she dresses in western clothing. Such accessibility to the character’s external identity allows the viewer to gain understanding and place her as British Asian. As Tariq Modood suggests ‘British-Asian identities, no less than any other ethnic identities are not “pure” or static, but change in new circumstances or by sharing social

13. The mangulsutra is often a necklace of black beads with a gold pendant. Worn once the Hindu woman is married (although Sikh women can also wear the necklace), it is believed to protect both the marriage and the woman’s husband. It is taken off if the wife becomes a widow.
space with other heritages and influences and the political context' (Modood 2001: 57–68).

This form of identity is reinforced through Hashida’s introduction: due to go to medical school in a month, Hashida discovers she is pregnant by her Afro-Caribbean boyfriend, Oliver as mentioned earlier. Although the image that is given of Hashida is later reflected in Asha’s fantasy, it is an image translated from cultural law and language into an accessible understanding of lost izzat. This is confirmed when Asha stresses the need for ‘morals from back home’ after learning of Hashida’s pregnancy. Rekha, the only woman in the group who lives ‘back home’ responds: ‘Home! What home? How long has it been since you have been home? Look at your clothes, the way you think!’ Such a response ignites Asha’s disgust in Hashida, leading her to expose Hashida’s news, implying that degradation is the result or reality of moving into the modern British world.

**BODIES OF SUFFERING**

Suparna Bhaskaran (1993) explores issues of identity politics and feminist subjectivity in relation to the South Asian female. Recognizing the physical body as the visible site of identity, Bhaskaran comments:

> It is necessary for women to claim subjectivity that recognizes experiences that oppress and to closely connect these themes to a material arena. This material sphere is that area of physicality that both rejects the sexual dimorphism of patriarchy and appropriates a reconstructed notion of women’s bodies. A notion of women’s subjective physicality is necessary to pinpoint dominating mechanisms and the internalization of these mechanisms – thereby providing a historical juncture for resistance.

(Bhaskaran 1993: 196)

As Bhaskaran notes, ‘women’s subjective physicality’ can be understood as internalized identity. Asha, Ginder and Hashida each internalize major aspects of their identity, remaining ‘hidden’ to the other women who view them; each identity is determined by the law of izzat that is somatically coded and concealed from the characters on-screen. *Bhaji on the Beach*, through allowing the internal identity to come out in the form of Asha’s fantasies, provides a privileged space for making visible the South Asian diasporic female’s cultural identity.

I will now consider other ways in which such dominating aspects of identity that have been internalized surface in *Bhaji on the Beach* through the notion of izzat. Through Asha’s fantasies, aspects of Ginder’s identity are explored. Asha’s fantasy of Ginder takes place when Ginder attempts to initially speak to Asha. Asha’s rejection of Ginder informs the viewer of the risk Ginder has taken by leaving her marital home. Not only is she suffering through fear of her husband, but also, the community gaze of shame and izzat is activated through Asha’s reaction to her.

In Asha’s fantasy of Ginder, the viewer is introduced to Ginder’s marital home, her expected role within the home and the role Asha gives her: as dishonourable daughter-in-law who lacks respect for her family and the wider community. The sequence begins with Ginder being placed in the marital home amongst her in-laws, ready to serve them food; she appears rebellious, dressed in western clothing in contrast to other adults who all
wear traditional Punjabi costume. Her dress and attitude position her as an outsider; the viewer is aware of Ginder’s rebellion as Ginder actively rejects the laws of the family by mocking them openly. Her behaviour is contrasted with that of her husband and in-laws who watch her in apparent shock. The fantasy is exaggerated; both Ginder and her in-laws’ behaviour are extreme and unbelievable. The viewer is thus aware that what is being projected is a fantasy and that ways of questioning the culture are being portrayed.

In comically representing the apparent absurdity of izzat, izzat is itself questioned and challenged. It is Asha who externally projects the cultural expectations whilst internally despising them. Unable to break free externally, her fantasies mock cultural restrictions and allow her to break free internally. As Bhaskaran has commented, it is by focusing on the experiences that oppress the female body that an implicit rejection of the patriarchal conditions enforced upon that body can be read.

Ginder’s decision to reside in a women’s refuge implies a sense of liberation: she has chosen to expose her condition as an abused wife. However, it is Asha and the first-generation females who refuse to liberate her completely. Their disbelief about Ginder’s maltreatment is compounded by their inability to see Ginder’s bruised body. Ironically, Asha fails to understand the control Ranjit has had over Ginder in the same way that Asha is unable to recognize the cultural control she exercises over Ginder and Hashida.

Izzat and patriarchy are challenged through the exposure of Ginder’s body. Asha’s fantasy of Ginder’s in-laws is finally shattered when Ranjit and his brothers locate the Saheli group at a ‘ladies only’ club. This is ‘Manhattans’, a bar/diner that is holding a male strip show. The women, although in conflict, are united in a space that, being ‘female only’, challenges the patriarchal strength that has disempowered them in the past.

Upon exiting ‘Manhattans’, Ginder and the other women are confronted by Ranjit and his brothers. Ranjit attempts to win Ginder over, however his unwillingness to change and listen to her requests compels her to reject his demands. As Ranjit grabs their son in a bid for control, the other women in the group watch; however it is Asha who confronts Ranjit, challenging his control as he attempts to threaten the other females. Attacking Ginder’s status as a possibly divorced woman, Ranjit reinforces the previous perceptions made by Asha, Pushpa and Bina, that she has dishonoured the family and community:

Ranjit: What do you think? That your make-up and haircut makes you new? [...] Who would want you now? Only me! You’re still my wife!

Ironically, it is Asha as the keeper of izzat who is required to re-evaluate her position. As Ranjit pushes Ginder, Asha slaps him repeatedly. Izzat now becomes problematic as Asha is forced to question it. For Asha, this is a moment of realization as she is made aware of her own prejudices. Her enforcement of izzat upon Ginder and the other females around her has compromised her own sense of self. Through breaking the barriers of izzat by attacking Ranjit, Asha sets herself and the other females free; echoing Simi’s earlier speech made to the group, the women have successfully escaped ‘the patriarchal demands made upon them in their daily lives’.

The older generation’s inability to let go of their South Asian cultural teachings is arguably due to their history in Britain. As diaspora subjects, the need for them to maintain a cultural identity is far greater than that of the
second generation as exemplified through the character of Hashida. Once Hashida’s pregnancy and relationship with Oliver are discovered by Asha and later disclosed to the rest of the group, Pushpa’s reaction makes plain the history of the South Asian immigrant in Britain: ‘Thirty years I have lived in this country, never have I known anything like this!’ It also stresses a change in the South Asian female identity as Hashida breaks with any notion of tradition.

The revelation of Hashida’s pregnancy causes her to flee the group. This scene challenges cultured and gendered practices amongst the South Asian community; Pushpa continues: ‘It is not colour, it is culture!’ The identity that emerges for Hashida is one of release, forcing the inside out. She has kept her relationship with Oliver hidden and internal; but once exposed, it becomes part of her external identity. In this way, Hashida’s body becomes what Marks calls a ‘transnational object’:

The transnational object is a transitional object not only for the person in transition from one cultural reality to another, but also for the one whose cultural reality is entered and changed. The object becomes a means of both their projections about the other culture.

(Marks 2000:123)

For Marks, the transnational object is a fetish; it comes to represent a state of being for the individual. For Hashida, her body with her unborn child becomes the transnational object shifting from one culture to another. The child carries two or more cultural positions, therefore signifying the breaking of taboos and social orders that are otherwise untouched. The unborn child is being discussed by the older generation in a scene taking place in a ‘greasy spoon’ cafe when Hashida walks in to get a drink. The women (speaking in both Punjabi and English) state the embarrassment and shame they feel for Hashida’s family, blaming it on the West:

Pushpa: We should never have come to this country; if the baby dies it will be a blessing!

Bina: At least her family’s izzat will be saved!

Not only is Hashida responsible for herself, but she is also responsible for her family as she carries the honour of their name on her shoulders. Hashida responds abusively in English, pours hot tea over Pushpa and leaves. The use of different tongues in this scene reinforces issues of identity for both Pushpa and Bina (Surendra Kochar). English is spoken for the sake of the non-Asian viewer; however, the dialogue spoken in Punjabi is arguably stronger. It is authoritative and personal, creating a private and active space where one has previously been denied. In this way, the South Asian women invade the space of the indigenous, enforcing their presence and prompting reflection on how foreign they really are.

Hashida’s identity is further projected through her relationship with Oliver. Oliver, as noted earlier, is of Afro-Caribbean descent and kept hidden from the ‘community’ by Hashida. The awareness of izzat is heightened through Hashida’s refusal to display Oliver to the community, such that his blackness comes to represent fear, loathing and rejection for the Asian community.

The South Asian characters’ refusal to understand and relate to ‘Blackness’ as an aspect of another ethnic minority or racial ‘other’ that has been rejected
by the white majority, allows race to be structured in terms of a hierarchy. The South Asian women are able to sympathize and identify with whites at the level of rejecting Blackness, such that ‘Britishness’ and ‘Englishness’ are imagined identities experienced by the South Asian women at this point. What is further suggested here is the ambivalent space occupied by the South Asian as opposed to the black or the white. The South Asian is in-between, never effectively one or the other. However, their disgust at Oliver’s racial origin determines their relation to white identity.

**SHATTERING THE GAZE**

*Bhaji on the Beach* initially appears to privilege South Asian audiences through the use of this area’s languages, religious iconography and clothing. However, using native language and traditional costume illustrates the position of South Asian females in Britain; how they have attempted to become assimilated and the barriers they have tried to overcome. The viewer is also able to witness the differences between the first and second generation; how the second generation are hybrid subjects attempting to define a British Asian identity.

It is through Asha that the viewer begins to access the ‘un-seeable’, as we are invited, through her fantasies and her own cultural prejudices, into the immigrant’s perspective. The fantasy sequences, although illusory, capture cultural history and thus stand as recollection images. As Marks notes, this type of image attempts to confront that which cannot be represented, bringing the unrepresentable into dialogue in an alternative form (Marks 2000: 51).

Through recognising Asha’s fantasies as her private vision, for the eyes of the viewer only, the film communicates an intergenerational conflict that has led to changes in identity for the next generation. *Bhaji on the Beach* further attempts to make the non-visible visible through the bodies of the females analysed. Each woman, through her body, becomes a source of cultural knowledge as the body is read as a signifier of change and transition as well as cultural loss and resistance to assimilation. Laura Marks notes how ‘the body remains a political witness despite efforts to “re-educate” it’ (2000). For Marks, the body is a site of contest for the minority culture as it contains numerous cultural references that remain hidden. Just as Asha becomes visible to us through her encounter with Ambrose, and Hashida is made visible as a British Asian through her relationship with Oliver and subsequent pregnancy, so Ginder is re-imagined through the exposure of her body as a result of sharing space with the white western male.

Asha, Ginder and Hashida’s identities symbolize the heterogeneity of the South Asian female. As diaspora subjects, each woman provides alternative ways of viewing the nation, as Desai has earlier stated. Asha is fundamentally South Asian and externally projects a traditional South Asian identity; however, her slips into a fantasy space reveal the restrictions placed upon her by the South Asian. Likewise, Ginder projects both a South Asian and British Asian identity as she publically separates herself from her husband and in doing so threatens the family unit. Ginder’s decision to leave her husband is not one of rebellion but survival. Hashida’s identity can be regarded as predominantly British Asian. Her transition is essentially from dutiful daughter to ‘outsider’ through her relationship with Oliver. Each woman, as a result of the trip, sheds an identity that was immersed in cultural expectation and cultural ideas of belonging, evolving into a more defined identity.

Although Gurinder Chadha has relied on stereotypes of the subordinate third-world woman and the rebellious British Asian teenager to illustrate the...
cultural changes taking place in the identity of the South Asian, she has also highlighted the shift in this identity towards assimilation into mainstream British culture. Ironically, by exposing the cultural burden placed upon the female through izzat, the film allows the female to surface as an individual subject. This is achieved through recognition of the cultural constraints placed upon the female and her constant battle to free herself from them. Ginder’s encounter with Ranjit towards the end of the film and Asha’s attack on him and the system he represents reveal this transition from group to individual subject. It also announces a shattering of the gaze of izzat that fundamentally circumscribes Asha’s identity throughout the film. Asha’s fantasies that echo the sentiments of izzat and South Asian femininity are to be rethought once Asha awakens to her prejudices and realizes the cost of so-called female honour.

Through the characters of Asha, Ginder and Hashida, Bhaji on the Beach attempts to introduce the intense cultural law of izzat. By focusing on a group of South Asian women of different generations, the film provides an insight into the way such a law affects the daily lives of all South Asian females. Neither the settlement in Britain as a result of the diaspora nor the hyphenated identity of the British Asian has released the women from this burden. Through making such a law visible in the guise of Asha’s fantasies, Bhaji on the Beach allows izzat to be presented and challenged.

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