Roy Stafford

Where's the Black in the Union Jack?

Table of Contents

For anyone who wants to think about the United Kingdom as a vibrant multicultural community with an internationalist outlook, the 1990s was a distressing period in terms of British Cinema. The previous decade had seen the emergence of a Black British Cinema and a lively debate about post-colonialism, but the expected development of that cinema and the emergence of a wider range of black leading characters in British mainstream cinema has not happened.

In her tellingly titled recent contribution to debates about British Cinema, 'Black British Cinema in the 90s: Going Going Gone', Karen Alexander sums up the situation:

> *Although there is a renaissance in British Cinema - backed by millions of pounds of Lottery money - the Britain that is being disseminated on cinema screens around the world is steeped in heritage, literary culture, and conventional ideas of class relations. It is also overwhelmingly white, in sharp contrast to our workplaces, high streets and bedrooms which tell a very different story. (Alexander 2000, p.113)*

This does not mean of course that cinema screens in Britain are devoid of black characters. Eighty per cent of the films we watch are American and a range of black stars from Will Smith to Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington have wide exposure[1]. This isn't the place to discuss what kinds of representations these stars are able to construct, but it is worth noting that black British audiences, like white working class audiences before them, have long turned to American culture as an escape from the stultifying effects of the dominant British culture.

As Alexander and others have noted, these criticisms of cinema cannot be made in the same way about other aspects of British culture, such as music or art: Steve McQueen[2] and Chris Ofili have each gained a much higher public profile than any black filmmaker.

With isolated exceptions such as Babymother (UK, 1998), black British stories have not formed the basis for recent films. Black characters have been central to some of the more important British films of the period, such as *The Crying Game* and *Secrets and Lies*. In a similar way, black culture and life in black communities have not been the basis for many television dramas, but again individual black characters have been seen in a wide range of series and serials. British moving image culture seems to be moving in the same direction as America in terms of a 'quota' of black characters in a range of programmes (except that it is hard to see the British equivalent of Spike Lee, John Singleton or Mario van Peebles emerging as influential directors and producers[3]). Perhaps the argument put forward by Farrukh Dhondy in 1986, that what was required, "for a genuine and

---

1 The lack of black British stars means that Denzel Washington (*For Queen and Country UK*, 1989) and Forest Whitaker (*The Crying Game*) have had to be brought over from the US to play black British soldiers.

2 Steve McQueen is to get the chance to direct a film, *Timbuktu*, about a young black man's journey to Africa (Screen International 24/3/00).

3 Spike Lee told a meeting of black filmmakers in London in 1999 that "you have to do it for yourselves here". (black filmmaker, vol.3, issue 8)

sophisticated integration into British society", was not 'separate' black programming but the appearance of black Britons in a wide range of television programming, has been proved?[4] But that isn't the view of Karen Alexander commenting on *The Crying Game* and *Secrets and Lies* as black-themed films:

> *The stories are not told from a black point of view and the fact that they have interesting black characters does not make the films black. This is not to say that only black filmmakers or writers can do this, but the work has to provide, as the writer bell hooks suggests, a 'concrete interrogative evidence that it was not so much the color of the person who made the images that was crucial but the perspective, the standpoint, the politics'[5]. (Alexander 2000, p.110)*

The African and Caribbean communities in the UK have tended to be viewed by government as more likely to be 'integrationist' in outlook and culture than either South Asian or East Asian communities. At one level, this is an issue of language, education and the history of different forms of colonial administration. During the 1980s, political activity in African and Caribbean communities sometimes contradicted this view, but it is nevertheless useful in distinguishing some attitudes towards film culture.

Writers on British Cinema have tended to follow the convention of including British Asian films in any discussion of 'Black British Cinema' and that is also the case in this essay, on the grounds that such films are treated by the industry as outside the mainstream. Some British Asian filmmakers would reject the label of 'black filmmaker' and it is also important to recognise that the existence of a large and successful Indian cinema with an international presence, as well as a growing British Asian market for cultural products, creates a unique South Asian film culture in the UK.

South Asian film culture in the UK

South Asian communities in Britain are diverse in terms of religion, language, history of immigration and, crucially, levels of affluence. Within some of these communities there are relatively large groups of young affluent consumers and it is not surprising that the 1990s

---

4 Farrukh Dhondy was appointed Multicultural Programmer at Channel 4 in 1984. The argument is outlined in 'Boys from the Currystuff' an interview with Dhondy by Andrew Robinson in Sight & Sound, vol.55 no.1, Winter 1985/6.

5 Quoted in Bell Hooks (1996) Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies, London and New York: Routledge, p.6.

has seen the very rapid development of a new phenomenon in British Cinema exhibition ? Bollywood[6] in the multiplex.

The box office summaries published in the BFI Handbook show that Hindi language films dominated the 'foreign language' charts in the UK for the first time in 1998, securing something like 40% of a market traditionally led by subtitled French films. *Kuch, Kuch Hota Hai* (India 1998) grossed nearly £1.5 million placing it ahead of many 'British cinema' releases.

There was a strong Hindi language cinema presence in the UK in the 1970s, but this was based on an exclusive circuit of cinemas, generally older buildings closed by traditional cinema chains or independents as audiences fell. These 'Asian' cinemas were in turn killed off by video, cable and satellite, although a number of new or refurbished cinemas is now reappearing (see Tyrell 1998).

Some of the larger scale Indian films are now shot in 'exotic' European locations, like London and Scotland, and are scheduled for simultaneous international releases in India, the UK and North America. As well as success at the international box office, these developments are also linked to two other developments in British Cinema: the involvement of British producers in Indian films and the encouragement of British Asian filmmakers.

The major link between Britain and India has been via Channel 4 and its interest in films like *Salaam Bombay* (India, 1988) and *Bandit Queen* (India/UK, 1994) The former, a documentary influenced drama, helped its western trained director Mira Nair move on to make *Mississippi Masala* (US, 1992) and *Kama Sutra* (India, 1996). The latter promoted the talent of Shekhar Kapur who came to Britain to make *Elizabeth* (UK, 1998), one of the most successful British exports to America in recent years[7].

The 'internationalisation' of Indian cinema has seen important films made in Canada (*Masala*, Canada 1991) and by Canadian-based Deepa Mehta in India (the *Earth* (1998), *Water* (2000) and *Fire* (1996) trilogy) and has now tempted one of the UK's directors,

---

6 'Bollywood' ('Bombay Hollywood') has become an industry term, but is considered offensive by some South Asian audiences. The commercial film industry operates out of Mumbai (the former Bombay), Madras and other centres.

7 *Elizabeth* was the top UK film at the North American box office in 1998 with over $30 million significantly better than UK films that had beaten it at home.

Gurinder Chadha (*Bhaji on the Beach*, 1994) to make her latest film in Los Angeles[8]. Just as the Indian novel has become 'international', selling across the English-speaking world in the form of Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth, so the 'international Indian film' has created a new form of Indian cinema to sit alongside Bollywood, the smaller regional language cinemas and the 'new' or alternative cinema[9].

But what of the films made by South Asians in the UK? Alongside the commercial and critical success of *Bhaji on the Beach*, the other British South Asian films of note have come from Udayan Prasad, who was born in India but educated largely in the UK. Prasad has considerable experience directing drama on television and his two features, *Brothers in Trouble* (UK, 1996) and *My Son the Fanatic* (UK, 1997) were both made with backing by the BBC. Neither film was a box-office success[10], but will have been seen by larger audiences via television screenings.

Brothers in Trouble and *My Son the Fanatic* both explore the stories of Pakistani men who came to West Yorkshire in the 1960s. The first considers the period of arrival and initial adjustment to life in the UK, whereas the second takes on the modern reality of life for a middle-aged Pakistani father. As such the two films are essentially 'British Asian' stories and an essential part of 1990s British Cinema.

It is now possible to reconsider Udayan Prasad's work in the context of one of the most successful British films of the last decade, *East is East* (UK, 1999). At the time of writing, *East is East* is still in the Top 15 in the British box office having grossed over £10 million to make it the most profitable 'wholly British' film to be released. It has already opened to record business in South Africa and might be expected to do similar business in other territories.

Mixed race and identity

East is East is a social comedy (arguably one of the most typical British Cinema genres) about the battle between a traditional Muslim father, 'George' and his seven children by

---

8   *What's Cookin'?* (US 2000) is an 'ensemble multiracial comedy'.

9   The third strand of Indian Cinema has tended to deal with social issues which have been avoided by commercial cinema. Such films have been termed 'new' or 'parallel' cinema.

10 *Brothers in Trouble* made only £6,000 and *My Son the Fanatic* made £123,000 on cinema release.

Ella, a white Catholic[11]. The action is set in Salford in the early 1970s. The script was adapted by the playwright Ayub Kahn-Din from his successful stage play and directed by Damian O'Donnell, a young and highly-regarded Irish filmmaker making his first feature.

It is worth noting that *East is East* was the third UK production in three years to address the issues of growing up as a mixed race child in Britain, and specifically in the Britain of the 1970s.

Elsewhere in this publication, Becky Parry considers *The Girl With Brains in Her Feet* (UK, 1998) about 13 year-old 'Jack', still at school in Leicester. Jack lives with her white single parent mother and meets both overt and more institutionalised racism at school and in her neighbourhood.

Speak Like a Child (UK, 1998), directed by John Akomfrah for BBC/BFI Films, was not released in cinemas but received a (carefully hidden) television screening in February 2000[12]. Written by Danny Padmore, *Speak Like a Child* concerns Sammy, a mixed-race boy who is taken into care and placed in a children's home on the remote Northumberland coast. Here he becomes involved with two other young people in a series of incidents. In a parallel narrative strand the three grown-up characters return to the ruined home fifteen years later to confront their past.

Adolescence is a 'difficult' period for most people not just going through the tortuous process at the time, but also relating later in life to children, students or young people in general. Perhaps the major issue of adolescence is identity. "Who am I?" "Who do I feel comfortable with?" "How do I want other people to think about me?"

Personal Identity

Identity has always been a major concern for black British filmmakers, not least in deciding whether the concept of a 'black Briton' has any real meaning and how much weight to give to its constituent parts. It has also long been an issue for filmmakers in the nations of Britain in Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

---

11 After two viewings it is still not clear to me how the couple met and married or whether all the children are Ella's.

12 *Speak Like A Child* – a film which had appeared at festivals around the world and was made by one of the most respected black directors in the UK – was broadcast on BBC2 at midnight without any indication that it was a feature film at all.

It has even become an issue for the 'English' since devolution and 'regionalisation' have effectively pointed to the lack of an English identity which isn't immediately associated with an imperialist past in which 'British' = 'English'. This confusion over English identity is best visualised in the form of the Union Jack, a 'national' flag constructed to mark the subjugation of the other nations of the British Isles through 'union', appropriated by right wing nationalists and widely despised by large sections of the UK population. Thus the title of this essay, reworking a phrase coined by Paul Gilroy[13].

But despite the problems of identity for 'communities' in the UK, 'personal' identity is possible in relation to certain definable criteria. There is some possibility of choice. But Britain is still a racist society within which personal affiliation to identities based on a sense of ethnicity has implications for equality before the law and access to opportunities. The choices for mixed race people are therefore more 'loaded' in terms of the possible outcome.

British film culture has suggested that there have been two kinds of narratives about mixed race individuals. *Sapphire* (UK, 1959) deals with the consequences of 'passing for white'. A young mixed-race woman is murdered by her white boyfriend's racist sister who discovers her 'true identity' as the daughter of an African father and a British mother. An avowedly 'liberal' film, *Sapphire* did at least have the merit of encouraging a debate about racism following the race attacks in Notting Hill in 1958.

Since the 1960s the 'preferred' identity of many mixed race people in the UK has been to see themselves as 'black', on the grounds that ethnicity in the UK is so much tied up with power relationships that 'choosing' to be black is a political act. In this context it is worth noting that an identity which embraces the possibilities of cultural mixing resulting from hundreds of years of contact between African and European peoples is now recognised as central to the postmodern culture of the 21st century – what might be seen as the triumph of creolisation. This is the celebration of cultural mixing that has produced modern popular music, dance, fashion, food culture etc.

The history of mixed race families in Asian communities is rather different to that in African or Caribbean communities. In India before independence and partition in 1947,

---

13 Paul Gilroy (1987) 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': the cultural politics of race and nation, London: Hutchinson.

mixed race families were recognised almost as a distinct Anglo-Indian society[14]. This conflict is explored in *Bhowani Junction* (US/UK, 1956) in which Ava Gardner plays the Anglo-Indian woman torn between an Indian identity and her love for an English officer.

South Asian communities are more likely to find the idea of mixed relationships problematic because of strong religious and traditional cultural beliefs about the family. The strength of traditional culture, despite the spread of South Asian peoples to different parts of the world, including the Americas and Africa as well as Europe, is evident in a range of film narratives, including *Mississippi Masala*, in which the Indian family who run a motel in the American South are shocked by their daughter's relationship with a character played by Denzel Washington.

The 1970s and the second generation

Why three recent British films about mixed race families in the 1970s? The obvious point to make is that the 1970s represents the period when the so-called 'second generation' of black Britons was growing up. This generation is now producing its writers. Unlike the parents or even possibly older brothers and sisters who might have come to Britain as teenagers, the new generation is British by birth and education. No matter how strong parental attachments might be to 'home' in the Caribbean or in Pakistan or Kenya, for the second generation all their cultural references are British (or American as experienced in Britain). In South Asian families there is a much stronger sense of another culture in the home, but school, television, music etc. are still important in emphasising 'Britishness'.

The inevitable conflicts between second generation children and first generation parents over everyday cultural practices like food, language, music etc. began to appear as early as 1975 in the first Black British feature film, Horace Ove's *Pressure* and then later in television sitcoms such as *No Problems* and *Desmond's*, as well as soap operas. The conflicts in South Asian families have been represented as generally much more hard edged than those in African and Caribbean households. In particular they have focused upon issues of religion and marriage.

---

14 Anglo-Indians were associated with the administration of the Raj, especially in the organisation of public services. Caught between two strong identities at the moment of independence, Anglo-Indians were not accepted by the new regime and not accepted as 'British' by the departing imperial administrators.

East is East

The seven children of the Khan family are differentiated sufficiently so that their 'rebellion' against their father covers a range of issues. Out of the seven, only one is inclined towards his father's notion of how a young Muslim man should behave (and he is presented as the weakest of the sons and the one who suffers the violence of his father's actions). There is one daughter who is given little narrative space, but sufficient to emphasise her 'modern' outlook and feisty nature.

The other five sons range from the eldest who is gay, through the aggressive and the passive, but otherwise ordinary young men, to the art student and the youngest, an imp who cannot be parted from his anorak. Against these generally likeable young people the film places a tyrannical father played by the Indian actor Om Puri (also the leading player in both *Brothers in Trouble* and *My Son The Fanatic*).

East is East is a broad comedy in a strong 'Northern English' tradition. One commentator compared it to *Spring and Port Wine* (UK, 1970), the Bill Naughton play which transferred to the screen with James Mason as the stern paterfamilias who forces his errant daughter to face the herring she has refused to eat at each succeeding family meal time. It is also a family melodrama which portrays the violence of the father towards his partner.

When I first saw the film in my local cinema with an audience that included some young people from the local Asian community, I laughed at the comic scenes and was not sure of my reaction to a film which a mixed-race student had told me she found deeply offensive. On my second visit a few weeks later (the film ran almost continuously in Keighley for several weeks) the audience was all white and I found the laughter much colder and the film much more disturbing – especially when one cheap laugh shows the road sign for Bradford crossed out and replaced by 'Bradistan'. In these circumstances I like to go to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) 'User Comments' to get a wider view. In this instance, amongst the generally appreciative respondents there were several who were bored and two who were offended. This is balanced by a respondent who says he grew up in a similar family in the 1970s and recognised the viewpoint of the youngest son.

The real problem with the film is not with the basic narrative or the characterisation, but with the lack of sympathy afforded to the father and the other traditional Pakistani

characters (e. g. the two young women to whom the Khan sons are to be married, and their parents). Om Puri is a formidable actor of enormous presence but even he has difficulty with a role that is not supported through the direction of scenes.

This is where the setting in the 1970s is a problem for contemporary audiences. George is shown listening to the news about the war in the sub-continent in 1971 when East Pakistan broke away to form Bangladesh, with the aid of an Indian invasion. A little later he is mocked in the hospital when he queries whether the doctor is 'Indian' and there is only a limited attempt to explain his behaviour or to investigate how he might feel about what is happening to Pakistan. Of course, if *East is East* were predicated as a youth movie, the tyrannical father could remain as a distant monster, but the film is presented as family comedy and it is distressing that several of the laughs are based on the children calling their father a 'Paki' and George himself managing little more comment on the world than the endless use of 'bastard' as an adjective.

East is East fails precisely where *My Son the Fanatic* scores. Hanif Kureishi's script and Udayan Prasad's sensitive direction deserve far more notice than they received on the film's release. Indeed, the limited critical response to what is one of the best British films of the late 1990s is an indication of the sorry state of British film culture.

The Om Puri character, again the father in *My Son the Fanatic*, is at times a figure of fun when he causes embarrassment through his over-eagerness to promote success for his son. But he is also treated with respect as a father and his ideas and feelings are explored. There is no attempt to do the same for George in *East is East*.

Promoting *East is East*

The marketing campaign for *East is East* in the UK eschewed any mention of Asian families. It used the image of the dog which appears briefly in one scene and the youngest Khan boy on his archetypal 1970s 'space hopper'. Working on the basis that the mass audience would not go into the multiplex to watch an Asian comedy, the film was promoted as a *Full Monty* style look at working class life with taglines like: "It's the dog's bollocks!". A similar strategy was used in France where the film was retitled *Fish and Chips*.

The cynical view of the film is summed up by one of the IMDB 'Users' who describes the film as importing *American Pie* humour in the form of plastic vaginas, humping dogs etc. The box office in the UK suggests that the marketing strategy was very successful and that the film has attracted a large audience, but it is puzzling that relatively little 'buzz' surrounded the successful release and relatively little comment about the Bafta nominations or huge commercial success. It is difficult to know if the audience figures include the repeat viewings which seem to have been the case with *The Full Monty*. Perhaps the performance of the video release will be an indicator of this. In the May 2000 *Sight & Sound*, video reviewer Danny Leigh refers to *East is East* in terms of 'wilful frothiness' and suggests: "it would be hard to take offence at the gentle cross-cultural humour on display". Fortunately, there are other views. In *Uncut*, Chris Roberts more perceptively suggests: "it shoots for relentless ribald farce and raises low-brow guffaws, even if its racial politics rest between the dodgy and the insane".

Representing Asian Britain

How should film studies students approach *East is East*? If the film is written from within the South Asian community and has been enjoyed by South Asian audiences (which is what my own anecdotal research suggests), does that make it an acceptable set of representations? The film is not meant to be 'realist' and it could be argued that it is a representation of the 1970s and not 2000. But this would be a cop-out.

Social comedy works best by identifying a villain against which the social group can struggle and triumph. In *East is East*, there is indeed the villain of Powellite racism, which is ridiculed on several occasions and never appears to be a serious threat to the family[15]. It pales into insignificance next to the villainy of the father whose terrible aim is to bring up his sons within a tradition that he believes to be 'proper'. This is the stuff of family melodrama and the mixture with (historical) social comedy is uneasy.

Perhaps we should be celebrating generic hybridity in these postmodern times. But in this case the evacuation of politics from the representation of life in Salford and the lack of a clear social analysis of the family, sets up the representation of a mixed-race community which undermines any celebration of hybridity and risks confirming the prejudices of the

---

15 The Khan family appear to be fully accepted into the community - an idea suggested by the opening sequence in which the children join a church procession.

mainstream audience. In the other two films about growing up as mixed race, there is an understanding that the struggle to build an identity in a hostile racist environment involves compromises and risk-taking. In *East is East* it seems to involve little more than putting the right posters on the wall and going to the disco.

The original stage production of *East is East* was very successful and very well received. The story is largely autobiographical and Ayub Khan-Din maintains that he deliberately did not set out to offend and "at the end of the day, I'm portraying my father, he's not a Pakistani everyman"[16]. This is a familiar problem for all black and Asian filmmakers – how to avoid characters being seen as 'representative'. If for the non-Asian audience the only visible Pakistani father is George in *East is East* that is indeed a problem. Perhaps if *The Girl With Brains in Her Feet* or *Speak Like a Child* or *My Son the Fanatic* had all been widely seen and discussed, the representation of George as a Pakistani father would not seem so troubling. It could then be seen, as one friend of mine put it, as the work of a first-time scriptwriter and director that doesn't quite work. But there simply aren't enough examples of such representations in wide circulation in British Cinema and that's why we need to see much more of the Black in the Union Jack.

References

Karen Alexander (2000) 'Black British Cinema in the 90s: Going, Going, Gone' in Robert Murphy (ed.) *British Cinema in the 90s*, London: British Film Institute.

Heather Tyrell (1998) 'Bollywood in Britain' in *Sight & Sound*, vol.8, no.8, August.

16 Ayub Khan-Din interviewed in November 1999 for the website: www.kamera.co.uk. He is presented in this interview as part of the new 'Anglo-Indian' cultural new wave which includes writer-performer Meera Syal and musician Talvin Singh.