

Enduring Identities in Diasporic Cinema

¹ K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema. A Narrative of Cultural Change* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2003), 96.

² See the essays “Bollywood Galore. Disarranged Marriages and the Impossible Return of the Native” and “Londoni Husbands and the Forgotten Wives”, in Alessandro Monti, *Society, Culture, Diaspora. A Reading of Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2008). Concerning the extension of diasporic imagination within TV productions, see my *Essays in Diaspora. Rushdie, Kureishi, Syal* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2006).

³ *Provoked. (A True Story)*. Director: Jag Mundhra. Writers: Carl Austin, Rahila Gupta. Cast: Aishwarya Rai (Kiranjit Ahluwalia), Miranda Richardson (Veronica Scott), Naveen Andrews (Deepak Ahluwalia), Raji James (Anil Gupta). Country: UK/India, 2006. Language: English/Punjabi. Filming location: London. Naveen Andrews is a very popular actor in British diasporic cinema, starring in films like *London Kills Me* (1991, written and directed by Hanif Kureishi) and TV series like *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993, based on the novel by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Roger Michell).

Indian popular cinema and Bollywood productions have recently acquired great visibility as contemporary modes of storytelling and ways of representation of the complex cultural and social contexts of India. This also emerges in the research work of scholars who analyse the plots and narrative mechanisms of films, investigating the plethora of issues and features that characterise this cinematic typology. Equally important are the films produced and directed by diasporic or migrant film-makers, mainly British Asians or Indian-Americans, since “their work necessarily negotiates a dialogue between postcolonial identity, be it ‘Indian’ or ‘diasporic’, and the demands and preconceptions of Western audiences”.¹ To a certain extent, the cultural contaminations of diaspora cinema emerge in eclectic Anglo-Indian productions such as *East is East* (1999) and *Just a Kiss* (2003), or even TV films like *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1993).²

However, it may not be easy to apply such tight categories to a film like *Provoked* (2006),³ directed by Jag Mundhra, in view of the fact that it seems to stand in transit between two contrasting viewpoints, with the Punjabi cultural code of reference for identity and behaviour alongside the troublesome burden of identity reconstruction for expatriates in the Western world, which turns out to be ‘incomprehensible’ for them. Adapting some critical tools primarily devoted to Hindi or Bollywood films, I shall discuss the peculiarities of this film and highlight the implications underlying the diasporic experience, seen as a metamorphosing dimension of being, when the migrant’s frame of mind is split between eastern roots and western dislocation.

Provoked focuses on the story of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a Punjabi woman who settled and married in Southall towards the end of the 1980s. Subjugated and molested by her violent husband, she sets fire to him and is arrested and subsequently charged with murder because the man eventually dies. In spite of her rotten English, when she is in prison she manages to build up a close relationship with other inmates, thus creating a kind of alternative female community. Support and help are also provided by the social workers and lawyers of Southall Black Sisters, a charity dealing with cases of abused women. The film intermixes memories of the woman in India and England, and charts her precarious condition against the backdrop of the rigid structures of legal discourse in the West. Yet, the tense node of the film lies in the double condition of Kiran, torn between the traditional values of her own culture, which prescribes a regulated role for women, imagined either as wives or

mothers, and her desire to struggle for freedom and reject Deepak's violence and humiliation.

The tension between these poles is encapsulated in the two key phrases in which Kiran expresses her sense of dislocation and her quest for identity. When she is taken to jail, she declares "I feel free", but when she is told that her husband has died and that she therefore risks a mandatory life sentence, she says "I made a sin". This double act of reaction, viz. a move towards emancipation and then a return to fixed social roles, constitutes the thematic backbone of the entire film, marked by a sharp and painful clash between social norms in the West and cultural heritage in the East. The film-maker also organises a complex discourse based upon the fundamental role of language, a constant preoccupation in diasporic or postcolonial fiction too, and the regulating notion of law as a social structural leveller.

However, *Provoked* does not merely represent a filmic instance of abrogation against patriarchal or chauvinistic constriction: in deepening the inner cultural and social agencies that mark the emergence of diasporic communities and their practices of life, it goes beyond the superficial translatability of cultures and explores the puzzlement and disorientation of 'weak' subjects in a multilingual context. In order to fully understand the dynamics that shape the storyline of the film, it is necessary to approach the concept of *pativrata*, namely the modalities prescribed for the roles and functions attributed to husband and wife. In particular, the term may be deconstructed into *pati*, which indicates the 'master of the house', and *vrata*, whose meaning ('penances, austerities') defines the contours of female identity. The former thus regards Deepak, whilst the latter points to the (expected) behaviour of Kiran. This normative model does not tolerate interferences and here the husband exacerbates the conditions of family life, within the space of the home, disjointed from the outside world, through physical abuse and violent manners. To a certain extent, Deepak and Kiran are sketched in an almost stereotypical fashion (the rough man vs. the shy woman), and this aspect echoes the orientation of most Hindi popular films, in which "the heroes, heroines, villains and comedians are readily identifiable. Their demeanour, dress and gestures are highly conventionalised and immediately convey the nature of the character".⁴ Nonetheless, they also activate strategies of interaction that pertain to the unstable condition of locating migrancy, in terms of upholding cultural norms and societal reactions.

Kiran's behavioural pattern clashes abruptly with the surrounding environment when she starts her new life in the western context, after the collapse of her unhappy love-cum-arranged marriage. It generates conflicts that have to be mediated via legal procedures in the attempt to restore a certain order, that is to say with the idea of law rebalancing the evils of

⁴ Gokulsing and Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema*, 96.

society. Kiran is almost unable to speak English and is depicted as a violent, ruthless criminal, whereas the lies of a police constable and her mother-in-law contribute to her jail sentence. To tackle Kiran's thorny case, Anil Gupta, the solicitor from the Southall Black Sisters, pinpoints the aspect of 'provocation' as the true reason for the woman's violent reaction, since in her opinion the migrant defendant "boiled over, she did not cool down". Consequently, the magistrates reopen the case in 1992, and now deal with an appeal specifically based upon three grounds, namely the definition of provocation, the idea of loss of control, and the 'battered woman syndrome'. Not only do these elements reconstruct the real experience of Kiran, but they also throw light onto the psychological (and cultural) sphere of the woman, now engaged with the problematic enigma of diaspora, split between faithfully accepting a fixed role and reshaping the self in the new urban environment. The judge orders a retrial, which does not actually take place, as the court considers the time Kiran has already spent in prison as a full term, and so eventually she is set free.

Perhaps it is tempting to read the woman's sad story of crime and punishment as a mere feminist parable, but the key issue here concerns the identity crisis a migrant subject experiences when s/he has to come to terms with the sense of displacement that arises in dire circumstances, affecting domestic and social relationships. The burden of liminality that surrounds Kiran seems to match with the woman's passive character, a kind of helpless acceptance of her fate. It is possible here to identify an echo of the Hindi popular films that build up "idealized women figures: passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient".⁵ However, what emerges in the film is also a sense of resistance, whose discourse articulates the framework of melodrama as a communicative strategy to express sociocultural forces. Indeed, challenging the *dharmashastras*, namely the Hindus' code of proper behaviour that prescribes and regulates the practices and customs of life by defining roles and actions, the film adopts another perspective by addressing the question of women's rights in circumstances of segregation and abuse, in order to deal with the feeling of solidarity and like-mindedness, irrespectively of the cultural or social background of the various characters.

However, the critique against the abusive treatment of women does not coincide with a thorough attack on religious strictness, but it is expressed as a more subtle claim, inasmuch as Deepak himself, the subject who would be expected to follow a proper behaviour in his capacity as head of the family, is portrayed in negative terms, being a rough and alcoholic husband, unconcerned about his own family and duties. Therefore, the filmic structure interrogates contemporary forms of diaspora that are based on the sense of impermeable communities, constructing and following

⁵ Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 60.

internal or external behavioural patterns. In the 'Little Indias' created by diasporic flows, social roles and stratifications are perpetuated according to time-honoured models, in which the powerful roles are assigned to men, who are also supposed to perform their duties. In this film, the male protagonist does not fulfil his obligations, and therefore the representations of the cogs of the traditional diasporic lifestyle are undermined within their very workings.

Within this critical perspective, Kiran and the women befriended by her in jail make up a wealth of unconventional voices that question the monolithic structure of society's restrictions and evils. The film director and writers accentuate this aspect also in the outside world: the marching rallies and demonstrations that the Southall Black Sisters organise give visibility to the case and bring to light the difficult issue of abused women in ethnic communities. The prisoners' 'special' community, based on sympathy and collaboration, functions as a site of emancipation and rescue, rooted within a synergy of codes, languages, images. Particularly prominent is the relationship between Kiran and her cellmate Veronica Scott, apparently a rude English woman. Initially, the coarse context of life in prison seems to affect all contacts between the Asian woman and the other women, who are all oppressed by misery and discouragement, but after a shy approach the two become close friends, with Veronica teaching Kiran proper English.

I would like to expand this theme in particular, since language in a diasporic milieu, whether cinematic or literary, represents a primary sign of definition and meaning. Authors and film-makers alike emphasise the salient importance of the verbal code used in their works as it illustrates sociolectal and dialectal features of the different characters, simultaneously expressing cultural meanings and a sense of belonging. Kiran's limited proficiency in English is instrumental not only in representing her restricted identity, but also in setting her towards a further challenge. In prison, a sad and alienating environment where people regress to brutality and lose their individuality, the Asian woman is now introduced to language as a fundamental instrument to approach and understand the manifold manifestations of life as well as to reach a moral redemption. In the end, using the jail library resources and under the tutoring of Veronica, Kiran successfully manages to master the nuts and bolts of the English language. The Indian woman's request for help is taken by Veronica, and this formation of strong human bonds is symbolically represented when the two play Scrabble. Kiran makes up the word 'sholder', meaning 'shoulder', but Veronica corrects her misspelling, so that her comment constitutes a pun with deeper implications that the Asian woman promptly understands: "I need a U/you". Revealing a hidden gentle warmth, the English woman contacts her brother, a famous lawyer, in order to organise her friend's appeal.

⁶ Ismail S. Talib, *The Language of Postcolonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 130.

Kiran's English evolves from an almost naive survival level to a more conscious competence, and this educational process of catharsis affects her whole identity. With reference to postcolonial fiction, Ismail S. Talib suggests that "visibility of language use or the experimental use of language does not draw attention away from language but makes it part of the content of the work",⁶ and we could probably extend this quotation to other creative genres and media, like cinema. Although Kiran's speechways are still strongly accented, she is now 'allowed' to speak within the sociocultural arena of diaspora. Indeed, the frequent use of code-switching between Punjabi and English (expressed in the recourse to dubbing especially in the first part of the film), the chief bond between Kiran, her mother-in-law and Deepak, is eventually substituted by the woman's desire to be involved in spoken interaction. Thus, the linguistic dimension, shaped as a kind of cross-cultural encounter, emerges as the token of voicing the interactions between culture and identity. The woman's emancipation, reinforced through the linguistic medium, breaks the fixedness of her pigeonholed role and turns her into a heroine *ante litteram*.

This is probably due to the hybrid nature of the film, whose narrative patterns differ from Hindi popular films, since here the diasporic essence allows transformations and mediations of characters rather than the adoption of the (unchangeable) Indian palimpsests, with their network of links akin to traditional theatre. Furthermore, the film, by means of its subtitle, boasts a 'realistic' and challenging orientation, since it claims to be based upon, or inspired by, a real similarly brutal episode. Almost as if he were trying to make a documentary-drama, the film-maker intertwines several narrative structures, and aims at audiences both in the UK and India by swiftly developing a film that plays with ambiguities. Simultaneously, while it uncovers the painful anxieties of migrant life, it also obliquely perpetuates models of social positioning, in particular the subalternity of women, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's well-known vision.

With its denouncing force, the film reviews the conditions of diasporic communities settled in the postcolonial metropolis. Indeed, the Southall location is not incidental, because this London borough has been involved in migratory processes from Asia since the mid-1950s, when Punjabis started arriving from the Indian subcontinent. Although the film strives to express the atmosphere of such groups not in visual terms but through the psychological and cultural characterisation of the protagonists, the setting is highly symbolic. A traditional protean stage on which the dramas of diasporas are performed, Southall is a suburb in which social actors de- and re-construct norms and practices: "what is changing in Southall, then, is not just the balance of populations, but also the sense of what space means".⁷ Of course, space has to be interpreted as the contact zone between subordination and resistance, not only against centripetal agencies of

⁷ Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 125.

assimilation, but also operating within ethnic communities. Indeed, the deeds and objectives of the Southall Black Sisters against domestic violence also take into account social stratifications like class, gender, caste, and thus concentrate on projects aimed at redesigning societal profiles.

The strategy of intermixing sequential levels is exploited by Jag Mundhra to achieve a fuller vision of a sadly all-too-common case of domestic abuse. The stylistic choices employed include frequently revisited symbolic references (the image for example of fire as destroyer and purifier in Indian culture, almost a trope in Bollywood dramas, is used here against a man, and not, as tradition would impose, against a woman). This may to a certain degree produce stereotypical vignettes, but nonetheless they also elaborate on diasporic questions of identity in a subtle and powerful way. Quoting Kiran's own words, we should refer to her distressing experience as a shift from "her husband's jail" to "the jail of law", thus highlighting the precarious female condition in expatriate communities, as expressed in the work of many Indian women writers, from Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) to Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). Voicing, the core theme framing the entire film, is explored by focusing on how the perpetuation of the traditional Indian sociocultural apparatus affects the conditions of life for women, relegating them into an opaque zone of liminality. The youngest of nine children born into a family background in rural Punjab that wanted her be a "proper Indian woman", Kiran's de-voicing is then reiterated through claustrophobic diaspora, and her silent cry for freedom testifies synthetically to the female emancipation that timidly emerges from expatriate groups. Ultimately, far from being a passive, strengthless subject, Kiran's main provocation lies in her resistance and reaction against androcentric norms. The film, therefore, with its multiple viewpoints spanning the upholding of traditions, the clashes between ethnic communities and English society, the sociological problem of domestic violence and the complexity of legal practices, offers glimpses into the dynamic context of migratory flows, returning full circle to the site of diaspora, the double process of producing Indianness abroad and of receiving and perceiving these values in the host country.