

The Queer Limits of Pratibha Parmar's *Nina's Heavenly Delights*

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Writing in 1993 the documentary filmmaker and activist Pratibha Parmar commented that, 'As a lesbian I have searched in vain for images of lesbians of color on the screen but I very quickly realized that they exist only in my imagination, so one of my aims as a filmmaker is to begin to compile that repertoire of images of ourselves' (Parmar 1993, 6). Sixteen years later, this statement was no less relevant in British screen culture as it was in early 1990s. Known for her work as a writer as well as a filmmaker documenting the lives of LGBT people of colour, Parmar's first full feature is an extension of these continuing ideological projects to bring the lives of silenced or invisible minorities to the screen. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006) follows the coming out story of a Scottish South Asian woman, Nina, as she returns home to Glasgow for her father's funeral. In the publicity for the film Parmar spoke of wanting to create, 'a celebratory urban fairytale, albeit in a world full of real people' (Regent Releasing, 2006). Parmar's 'urban fairytale' presents a Scottish Asian community that appears to seamlessly accept difference and erase the kinds of tensions that have characterised films representing same-sex desire and South Asian subjectivity.

The overarching plot that drives the film is based on a curry competition for restaurants in Glasgow. Nina's father lost half the restaurant to Lisa's father in a bet, and Nina and Lisa enter the competition in a bid to save the other half from falling into the hands of

Nina's ex-fiancé, Sanjay. Nina had run away from her arranged marriage with Sanjay three years earlier, returning to confront him for the remaining control of the family business. Nina's trajectory, then, shifts. From leaving her family, effectively self-exiling herself after being unable to fulfil her role as a dutiful daughter, she is restored to the family when the patriarch has died. The landscape for this urban fairytale predominantly operates around a romantic comedy which splices between narrative trajectories and uses song and dance routines that parody, or borrow from, Bollywood cinema. The ghost of Nina's father appears at various points to encourage her explorations of his cooking journals, which in turn, provide Nina with a vehicle for familial restoration through the assumption of her father's mantle. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* can be seen to belong to a growing tradition of British-Asian films that draw on Bollywood motifs and techniques such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *East is East* (1999), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). However, reading the film in this genealogy elides the two most distinctive and defining features of the film: its location and its inclusion of female same-sex desire.

The ways in which sexual, national and transnational identities have become implicated in one another's operations, and the new types of subject positions that emerge as a result of this, has been a rich territory of interest in contemporary criticism, especially in the context of its 'queering' potentials. This argument utilises the Scottish context of *Nina's Heavenly Delights* to problematize its relationship with contemporary criticism on the operation of same-sex desire in the South Asian diaspora. The fairytale elisions combined with the mobilisation of a saccharine envisioning of Scotland, effectively shuts down the queer possibilities of the film, marking its complicity with a neoliberal Scottish

nationalism that subsumes difference within a paradigm of inclusivity. A question that arises from this assessment is the extent to which this neoliberal modelling can be seen as a derivative coming out story, or if there is a space for a more challenging discussion of sexuality and transnational subjectivity in Scotland. Starting with an overview of how this film operates at an oblique angle to queer diaspora studies, the argument reads its lack of 'queerness' (the prevalent paradigm for reading same-sex desire in the South Asian diaspora) as a strategy for creating the possibility for lesbian-identified subject positions for Scottish South Asian women.

TRANSNATIONAL SEXUALITIES AND NINA'S HEAVENLY DELIGHTS

The 'urban fairytale' that Parmar constructs allows the difficult dimensions of a realist representation of intercultural and same-sex love in Scottish South Asian community to be partially suspended in favour of an optimistic envisioning of an inclusive family and community that can absorb and reconcile difficulties, while Glasgow serves as the urban backdrop where those fairytales can come true. In a recent survey of the international scope of Scottish cinema, David Martin-Jones (2009) reads this fairytale's dimensions in terms of realist representation: 'we could also consider this fairytale more positively, as a way of facilitating an examination, or reimagining, of new, tolerant forms of identity in a global diaspora, of which Scotland is only one outpost' (82). Imaginary representations that act as a kind of vanguard or template for the real conditions of

certain subject constellations, is something Parmar and Martin-Jones engage with as an ideologically motivated modelling that can have real, productive and very positive consequences. An aspect of the fairytale, of course, is the relative autonomy from realism. If Nina's departure from her family was precipitated by the rejection of an arranged marriage, albeit one she was given the option to reject, the acceptance of her same-sex relationship by the film's conclusion without any negotiation of how same-sex desire is viewed in Scottish South Asian diaspora, is an example of where fairytales can sidestep realism. As scholars such as Asifa Siraj (2011) have pointed out elsewhere in this journal, the conditions for lesbian-identified women from ethnic minorities in Scotland are especially difficult, partially due to their comparatively small size. The lack of an existing and visible LGBTQ Scottish South Asian community opens up a space to speculate on how issues of identity and culture are inflected in the context of Scotland.

The development of queer and diaspora studies from the 1990s, updates some of the debates and tensions that have played out between feminism, LGBT studies, and postcolonial studies. As Chandra Mohanty (2003) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) criticised liberal feminism's bias towards Anglo-American conceptualisations of women's freedom, critics such as Meg Wesling (2008) and Jana Evans Braziel (2008) have pointed to the ways in which diaspora studies has focussed on the straight male body with its heteronormative circuits of mobility, while queer studies has been slow to consider how the varying trajectories of modernity have produced competing conceptions of sexuality, normativity and difference that cannot be easily equated or homogenised. The critical interplay between these disciplines has carved out a space for an increasing interest in queer diaspora studies. Last year's special edition on the

topic by *Textual Practice*, brings to attention the work of a diverse group of scholars in past two decades whose projects have brought fringe readings into radical reconceptions of queer transnational identities (Gopinath 2011, Parker, 2011). Part of this addresses the inadequacy of labels such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' in non-Western contexts. As Paola Bacchetta (1999) has argued, the vocabularies for same-sex desire in Anglo-American culture with their attendant histories cannot be easily mapped onto other contexts, especially those from the Indian subcontinent, where a rich series of terms have developed to describe different kinds of same-sex practice. Bacchetta privileges the use of 'queer' in the South Asian context over gay and lesbian to avoid slotting into a Eurocentric narrative about the development, identification and production of gay and lesbian bodies in modern culture. Queer in this sense becomes deployed to identify structures and movements that challenge heteronormative behaviour and that disrupt and trouble prevailing systems of power without necessarily evoking the identity politics surrounding LGBT communities. Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) has become a landmark text for the study of the ways in which, 'queer diasporic cultural forms work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies' (4). She uses the Zapitista rallying cry, 'demand the impossible' as an imperative for a critical revision that can allow narratives of desire to emerge that cannot be catalogued and mapped by the existing parameters of Anglo-American liberal and bourgeois ideologies. Rather than acting as a kind of recovery or genealogy of gay/lesbian lives, Gopinath uses 'queer' to create space for investigating

same-sex desire in the South Asian diaspora in a network of resistances, absences and impossibilities in her transnational case studies.

In her discussion of South Asian diasporic films in Britain, specifically *Bend it Like Beckham*, which evokes female homosocial desire in a women's football team, Gopinath argues that the film erases the possibility of lesbian desire which becomes essential to maintaining prevailing heteronormative structures for the home and family (129). For Martin-Jones (2009, 82), *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is the exception to the rule and he qualifies Gopinath's central thesis by highlighting Nina's lesbianism as proof of the film's queerness. He argues that Scotland becomes cited as one of a series of locations where the South Asian diaspora has been absorbed into a localised national imaginary to produce ever-renewing visions of the cosmopolitan nation. His assumption that female same-sex desire can always be modelled as lesbianism betrays precisely the ways in which female desire becomes refracted through a narrow lens that cannot accommodate cultural difference. The field of queer diaspora studies provides a challenge to exactly these kinds of assumptions, especially in the context of how this desire is named. A gulf of terminology separates Gopinath and Martin-Jones in their assessment of the positive value of cosmopolitan sexualities. Models of impossibility for one, become the fertile territory of progressive sexuality for the other.

NAMING DESIRE

In Deepa Mehta's 1996 film, Fire, one of the heroines, Sita, tries to situate her sexual and emotion intimacy with her sister-in-law but ends up failing, saying, 'there is no words in our language to describe what we are to each other'. The tense irony build into this statement is that it refers to Hindi, though is uttered in English. Fire has become a kind of urtext in discussions about female same-sex desire and the South Asian diaspora, especially in terms of the adequacy of terms such as 'lesbian'. For the American film critic David Ebert, Sita avoids using the term because, 'Lesbianism is so outside the experience of these Hindus that their language even lacks a word for it' (Gopinath 2005, 142). For some film critics such as Ebert, this represents a draconian attitude to, and understanding of, sexuality in India, but as a series of critics (Desai, 2004, Gopinath 2005, Meghani 2008) have discussed at length the queerness at the heart of Fire come in the form of identities which do not draw from the repository of 'lesbian' or 'coming out' stories that reviewers may have been more comfortable with naming and identifying. As Ratna Kapur (2000) has highlighted, the naming, locating and labelling of this desire as part of a Western or non-Indian influence was essential for Hindu nationalists who felt the viability, validity and coherence of their own cultural practices were under threat. As part of this, Deepa Mehta's status as a transnational subject was cited as evidence for the contamination of Indian culture. The critical move to locate the 'impossibility' of naming same-sex desire in Fire is seen as emblematic for the difficulty in creating a space, vocabulary and genealogy for female desire that attempts to posit a universalised lesbian experience. Nina is never explicitly defined as a 'lesbian' in Nina's Heavenly Delights. Nina's language and confidence do unravel however when confronted with the fuller realisation of her desire and are located at two

points in the film: when Lisa questions Nina about her adolescent desire for women, and when Nina's best friend Bobbi urges her to come out.

In a scene set in the family restaurant, Lisa peels away part of the wallpaper that comprises the ageing walls of the restaurant to reveal an adolescent note written on the wall, 'Nina loves Lorna'. Lisa gently teases Nina about this, though any hint that this desire was real is quickly negated by Nina, who dismisses the note and distances herself from Lorna who, it transpires, was the captain of the girl's hockey team (much to the delight of Lisa). But the writing is literally on the wall. Although Nina is not explicitly 'outed' in the scene, it does provide the underlying tension which reframes her relationship with Lisa. Two women who have been working together, become two women who are aware of an unspoken context. The layer of decorated and textured wallpaper that Lisa peels back stands in for the once impressive and oppressive façade of tradition, cultural authenticity and nostalgia, and it is no accident that the note comes to light over a decade later, after Nina's father has died, and a new generation of Scottish South Asians have emerged, whose hybrid identities are harder to regulate according to traditional values and principles. When Nina presses the tired and deteriorated wallpaper back down, it acts as a gesture of ineffectual respect. Old family recipes are discovered and restored by Nina and Lisa whose alliance becomes stronger through the trials and errors of perfecting the family recipes. The context of their emerging relationship is set in opposition to a different same-sex cross-cultural relationship.

As a relief to the increasingly charged romantic plot, Nina's best friend Bobbi performs a series of camp interventions throughout the narrative. He runs a Bollywood video shop,

dances in an intercultural Bollywood dance troop (Chutney Queens), fantasises about being in the latest Bollywood film to be set in Scotland (the fictional, Love in a Wet Climate), drives a vividly decorated van brimming with Indian kitsch, and has a Caucasian Scottish partner. Standing in Bobbi's video shop, surrounded by iconic Bollywood film posters, it is Bobbi who talks to Nina about the importance of outing her desires. When Nina comments, 'I'd give anything to be more like you', Bobbi playfully replies, 'With this dress sense, deceit is not an option' (Nina's Heavenly Delights 2006). While Bobby may be wearing his sexuality on his sleeve, Nina's is covered by thin and increasingly fragile layers of cultural conformity which become increasingly strained and tested during the film. From the wallpaper that covers her juvenile scribbling to the very setting of her conversation with Bobby, surrounded by the weight of Bollywood films and their attendant cultural expectations and standards (a poster of one of the classic female martyrs of Indian cinema, Mother India, remains in shot for most of their discussion), Nina is surrounded by reminders of traditional roles. But the wallpaper and the Bollywood films are themselves in the process of transformation into kitsch. The out of date wallpaper belongs to another era, while the Bollywood films become ripe for parody, as appropriated by Bobbi and his dancers. While Nina's desires remain just beneath the surface, Bobbi's openness signals the possibility for Nina's.

Discussing the role of a minor male characters in Deepa Mehta's Hollywood/Bollywood, and Mira Nair's Monsoon Wedding, Gopinath (2005) argues that queerness is displaced onto minor characters to contain non-heterormative desire outside the space of the home:

Solidifying queerness on the body of the servant/drag queen figure has two key effects. First, it dislodges queerness from contaminating the home space by keeping it safely contained within the gay bar space. Second, as in *Monsoon Wedding*, it functions as a foil to the heroine Sunita's gender transgressions by holding them safely within the realm of normative heterosexuality. (126-7)

Nina's fear of exclusion is driven by the traditional expectations of her family, an anxiety which is exemplified in silence and the hesitation in naming in her desire. Other secrets in the family include the marriage that her brother keeps from their parents, and the comedic foil of her younger sister's closeted passion for Scottish country dancing. In this family of hidden desires Nina's revelation appears the most dangerous and the one most ready to challenge the basic traditional elements of the household. While Bobbi fulfils the role of camp comedic relief that is a familiar trope from Bollywood films (Desai 2004, 126), the translation of this role into the diasporic context is marked by the addition of a lover (a local plumber and member of Chutney Queens) and his Scottish identity. His integration into the localised diaspora is marked against Nina's explicit disconnection from it. Her repeated efforts to rehearse and successfully deliver her father's recipes become her only real connection to the local community. The plot's resolution moves towards restoring Nina to the family home while Bobbi's family remains absent from the scene. Bobbi's queerness is integrated, as he points out, in his performance and body. Bobbi's performance brings together Indian kitsch, Bollywood referents, cross-dressing and comedic relief all delivered with a Scottish accent. Authenticity is clearly off the agenda as irony and camp become his *modus operandi* which offers the framework for a playful view of his sexuality and gender performance.

However Nina's ability to pass as 'straight', and her disconnection from the kind of repertoire that Bobbi is able to draw from, leaves her at an oblique angle from a more complexly realised coming out story, which is precisely where the real fairytale elements of the narrative come into play. The narrative plays out against a backdrop of Scottish stereotypes that cancels out the frictions and uneasiness located at the intersections of Nina's identity. Her search for a terminology to label her desire and still be allowed home, to be recognised as part of her home community, is framed by a Scottish backdrop that is blind to the tensions at work.

CHUTNEY AND TARTAN IN A WET CLIMATE

By not strongly drawing on distinctive cultural or religious dimensions and narratives, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is able to bypass critiques of the fidelity of Nina's portrayal. When Martin-Jones does discuss *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, it is within the positive context of an integrative and diverse modern Scotland, supported by evidence such as Bashir Maan's *The New Scots* (1992), an account of the friendly and harmonious history of South Asians in Scotland. A councillor and an unelected community spokesman, Martin-Jones's inclusion of Maan is indicative of a popular understanding of an inclusive Scottish nationalism. The critique of this prevailing commonsense attitude and the difference between the settlement of South Asians in Scotland versus England, was first analysed by sociologists such Robert Miles and Anne Dunlop (1987) in the 1980s. Early

conclusions on why Glasgow had not experienced the kind of overt racial tension that had been witnessed in larger South Asian communities in England, included the comparative lack of fascist groups and the predomination of class and intra-Scottish sectarian based agendas in politics. In more recent work, Jan Penrose and David Howard (2008) have traced the ways in which the Scottish Executive (and subsequently Government) have used various campaign slogans to interpret and represent a new nationalist agenda that is explicitly inclusive and tolerant, especially in terms of migration. Analysing the move from the slogan, 'One Scotland, Many Cultures', to 'One Scotland', Penrose and Howard detect an underlying uneasiness in how to mobilise one of Scotland's greatest economic assets, namely, its heritage, while maintaining and recognising plural and conflicting heritages in the makeup of contemporary Scotland. Scottish nationalism has not been racialised in the same way as some of the discursive formations of English nationalism, which has allowed space for a myth of celebratory and seamless integration, a myth that writers such as Bashir Maan have been keen to propagate. This myth is crucial for understanding one of the reasons that a more problematized envisioning of *Nina's Heavenly Delights* that plays out the tensions between potentially competition cultural norms, is shut down. The tolerant and cosmopolitan myth of Scottish nationalism becomes mapped onto the social relationships within the film: the disruptive and challenging aspects of Nina's desire for another woman for the Glaswegian South Asian community become dismantled in a discursive framework of acceptance and sentiment at the national level.

Nina returns to Glasgow from London, but apart from her intuitive skills in recreating the dishes that her father taught her, there is little to signify her relationship to the diaspora

around her. This is, as discussed, partially due to the anodyne portrait of the Scottish diaspora on display. While critics such as Indepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2001) have looked at the ways identity is defined by the drag factor of conflicting and sometimes contradictory co-ordinates, Nina appears to be able to resolve the conflicts in her identity with little difficulty. In 2006, Bashir Maan publically criticised the inclusion of gay and lesbian topics in secondary education in Scotland on the basis of its corrupting impact (MacDermid, 2006). Interestingly, the majority of the Scottish extras in *Nina's Heavenly Delights* from the South Asian community are of Indian origin, despite its predominantly Pakistani composition. With self-appointed community spokesmen like Bashir Maan being closely aligned to Islamic religious agendas, there is no doubt that a more realised or realistic portrait of the difficulty facing young lesbian-identified or queer South Asian women would emerge if Nina's character was more integrated with the cultural and political landscape of her surroundings.

Arguably this discussion fails to provide a suitable interpretative frame for the film by not considering it in terms of comedy and despite the reference to fairytale elements, which may be seen to borrow from some of the conventions of Bollywood, overall, the film operates within the remit of realism. The desire for realism is important, especially considering Parmar's documentary background and her own ideological stance when it comes to the representation of LGBT bodies of colour on the screen. In the release notes for the film, Parmar comments on how a voice coach was hired to ensure the Scottish accents were authentic. Local extras were used, and some of the funding for the project came from Scottish Screen. The features and figures of the film are designed to be recognisably Scottish. This constructed authenticity is playfully engaged

with in the closing sequence of the film which choreographs the film's characters to the hit song 'Aap Jaisa Koi' from the 1980 Bollywood blockbuster, *Qurbani*. The sequence opens with the Chutney Queens, with Bobbi cross-dressing and taking the role of the seductive female lead. Although the music does not change, Nina's sister appears in her Scottish country dancing uniform, accompanied by her friends, who all perform a jig. Nina's brother appears in full Scottish traditional dress, while his partner appears in a lengha, and both Nina and Lisa are in Indian clothing, though the gender of Lisa's outfit remains ambiguous. The backdrop to the entire sequence is a Scottish country landscape, and as the camera pans out of the final scene, the green screen, camera, lights, and rigging are revealed while the film fades to credits.

Straight, gay, lesbian, cross-dressing, and dressing up are sequenced in a harmony that exemplifies some of the central tropes of tolerance and acceptance that emerge in the narrative. There are, after all, three coming out stories: Nina's desire, her brother's secret marriage, and her sister's passion for Scottish country dancing. The Scottish backdrop of mountains and castles is a silent reference to their popularity in Indian cinema: Scotland has become an increasingly popular location for Bollywood films as the cost of filming in Switzerland has increased (Martin-Jones 2009, 70-74). Indian and Scottish stereotypes are activated here without friction: tartanry, Chutney Queens, saris and Bollywood soundtracks all come together. As the green screen on which the images of Scotland have been projected is revealed, the temporary world of the film itself disassembles into the actors, director, producer, writer, lights and cameras that have produced the film. This scene is paradigmatic of the entirety of *Nina's Heavenly Delights*: carefully arranged elements are brought together on a manufactured scene

that can have a series of relationships and scenarios pass across it without comment or interference. The cultural context and background of the Scotland manufactured in *Nina's Heavenly Delights* shares a lot with the inert and idealised image projected at its conclusion: a series of stereotypes are juxtaposed in the film, rather than portraying a dynamic or transformative interaction. Nina's character portrayal may not sit comfortably with the kind of new queer subjectivities that critics such as Gopinath have so convincingly traced, however, a positive, or more possible model for female same-sex desire is landscaped through Parmar's urban fairytale. Although it is hard to qualify Nina as lesbian without her self-identification, her longstanding desire for women and the 'outing' of her desire to her family and community does lay foundations for a productive subject identity that marks the film out against the prevailing trends in contemporary films and critical discussions of female same-sex desire in the South Asian diaspora.

CONCLUSION

Discussing the role of neoliberal feminist ideologies in films such as Bend it Like Beckham, Justine Ashby (2005) argues:

But, while what seems to be a peculiarly British representation of postfeminism clearly possesses a broader – and no less significant - resonance within an international context, that the rhetoric of Blairism and “girl power” both pervades

and surrounding a film such as *Bend it Like Beckham* indicates the ways in which postfeminist culture operates both in localized and more generalized ways. To understand how national specificities can mobilize and absorb postfeminist themes and values differently, to make and make sense of their various inflections, is surely also a step towards repoliticizing postfeminist culture. (131)

Offering a critique of the way *Bend it Like Beckham* internalises the operations of a particularly British kind of postfeminist nationalism that privileges choice and the easy access to the means of self-determination, Ashby highlights the importance of politicising readings of texts which mobilise neo-liberal feminisms/nationalism . In the case of *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, I have argued that the mobilisation of stereotypes about Scotland and a vision of Scottish national identity is used to erase the traces of friction between traditional, or normative, and non-normative sexualities. Parmar's own ideological agenda is an extremely positive one that seeks to represent groups that hitherto have had no access to positive role models on the screens. Imaging and imagining happiness for Parmar is a vital strategy. The tension between the labelling and realisation of same-sex desire in the Scottish South Asian diaspora evaporates to a backdrop of benign stereotypes of Scotland that puncture the social realism of the film with clichés that disarms its queer potentials, but in doing so, challenges the 'impossibility' of naming and realising same-sex desire in the South Asian diaspora, albeit through the medium of urban fairytales.

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