INDIAN FILMMAKERS AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL: REWRITING THE ENGLISH CANON THROUGH FILM

by Angelique Melitta McHodgkins

This paper examines Mira Nair’s *Vanity Fair* (2004), Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice* (2005), and Rajiv Menon’s *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000) in order to see how Indian filmmakers represent the nineteenth-century English novel, the West, India, and the Indian film industry to Indian and Western audiences. By taking into account the history of English education and the legacy of England’s colonial presence in India, this paper attempts to uncover if, in adapting nineteenth-century English literature, these filmmakers are advocating England’s imperialist ideology through their films.
INDIAN FILMMAKERS AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL: REWRITING THE ENGLISH CANON THROUGH FILM

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English

by

Angelique Melitta McHodgkins
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2005

Advisor ______________________________
Dianne Sadoff

Reader ______________________________
Susan Morgan

Reader ______________________________
Nalin Jayasena
Introduction

The greatest propaganda used to reinforce English ideals and authority in India was English literature, the study of which began under the rule of Empire. In her essay “Currying Favor: The Politics of British Educational and Cultural Policy in India, 1813-54,” Gauri Viswanathan outlines the history of English education in India in the nineteenth century, which ironically began in response to the misbehavior of the East India Company’s servants in India. Unable or unwilling to deal with the problem of their own men, Parliament responded by educating Indians, to improve their welfare, and as a means of remedying the misconduct of the Englishmen. English literature quickly became the means through which England was able to impose its cultural standards on the native population, as it encouraged Western-style rule and the adoption of Christianity.

England’s Charter Act of 1813 allowed for educational reform in India and opened access for missionary work. Although educational reform was a secular project, it quickly became apparent that it could not take place as the English intended it without necessitating the introduction of religious ideology. Under the Orientalist objective, however, the government was weary of overtly imposing Christian dogma on the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh population. The use of the Bible in instructing the Indians, therefore, was prohibited. Classic English literature, with its implicit Christian doctrine, served as the intermediary between secularism and Christianity.

The literature taught to Indians would have been of John Lock, John Milton, Joseph Addison, Adam Smith, Francis Bacon, John Abercrombie, and William Shakespeare (Viswanathan 119 and 122).

---

1 The English were divided by two theories on how to deal with their occupation of India. The first, Orientalism, established by Warren Hastings, governor-general of India from 1774-1785, thought the best way to gain authority on the subcontinent was to learn the language and customs of the native population. The second, Anglicism, established by Lord Cornwallis, governor-general of India from 1786-1793, felt that the policy of Orientalism was too lenient, and he advocated for distance between the English and the Indians. What ultimately prevailed was a merger of the two ideas, which came to be known as Orientalism (Viswanathan 115-17).

2 The literature taught to Indians would have been of John Lock, John Milton, Joseph Addison, Adam Smith, Francis Bacon, John Abercrombie, and William Shakespeare (Viswanathan 119 and 122).
Viswanathan 122). English literature in India became the vehicle that carried, subliminally, the Christian message.

At the secular level, the study of English literature helped to reinforce England’s rule of India by displaying civilization as it ought to be run. One British official in Bombay said that “the Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise, more just, more humane, and more anxious to improve their condition than any other rulers they could possibly have” (qtd. in Viswanathan 113). English literature secured England’s ruling interest by combating the representation of Englishness ruined by the East India Company’s men and showed that the English were well behaved and had a long history of civilized rule. As a reward for studying English in universities, Indian men were eligible for jobs in the government, serving alongside the Englishmen.

Understanding that the study of English literature began as a way to secure England’s imperial mission should change the way we read English texts written during the nineteenth century, as both Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak remind us. Said suggests that

[w]ithout empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism. (69-70)

He further asserts that “imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other” (71). Said insists that the nineteenth-century English novel supports colonial occupation, views which were realized in Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad but were supported and birthed in Jane Austen and William Makepeace Thackeray. For Said, the entire canon of nineteenth-century English novels is culpable in supporting the ideologies of Empire in that the novels “stress the continuing existence (as opposed to revolutionary overturning) of England. Moreover, they never advocate giving up colonies, but take the long-range view that since they fall within the orbit of British dominance, that dominance
is a sort of norm, and thus conserved along with the colonies” (74-5). According to Said, the nineteenth-century English novel is a conservative medium, advocating passive acceptance and pride in England’s imperial presence and expansion.

Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” connects the English novel and Empire further by blaming feminist critics for advocating imperialist ideologies supported in nineteenth-century English novels. She wryly emphasizes that it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious “facts” continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature. This itself attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms.” (243)

Adaptations of nineteenth-century English novels should be viewed with a similar understanding—that colonialism framed the backdrop of these films. The cinematic representations of these texts have the advantage of selling an entire visual world to the viewer, often representing a bourgeois past in impressive country homes by actors who stand and sit with perfect posture, speak in “proper” English, and leisurely roam from sitting room to dining room to social balls. Like the literature used by imperialists in England, heritage films have become the new carriers of Englishness, and thus, bring within them the continuance of England’s imperialist mission, selling a glorified history of England from a period when England’s Empire was at its height and strength.

Heritage films have become the only way some people “read” the nineteenth-century novel, selling an image of England as sophisticated, moral, and wealthy. But the England featured in heritage films is an England preserved by the National Trust, an independent organization devoted to “preserve and protect the coastline, countryside and buildings of England, Wales and Northern Ireland” (National Trust), landscapes on which many of these movies are filmed. Thus, houses become individual museums tourists can visit. In fact, tourist revenue has increased in each home used in heritage films (Higson 58). With box office success and award recognition, heritage films appeal to
international adult audiences looking for something higher brow than the usual offerings at movie theaters aimed at teenage and young adult audiences. Thus, heritage films begin to symbolize a world only meant for the erudite middle and upper classes, which receive the propaganda unwittingly and find comfort in a world so prettily groomed by the undisclosed wealth of the colonies.

After the heritage film explosion of the 1990s, period films have become a common commodity in our culture. Since 2000, however, at least three adaptations of nineteenth-century English novels have been made by Indian directors: Rajiv Menon’s *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000), based on Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*; Mira Nair’s *Vanity Fair* (2004), adapted from William Thackeray’s novel; and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice*, based on Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Given the history of English education in India, it is surprising that Indian filmmakers would want to retell the stories of canonical English novels, and by doing so directly or indirectly promote the orthodoxy of Englishness. What, then, could Indian filmmakers gain from adapting the nineteenth-century English novel? Either the filmmaker must resign him or herself to the inevitability of glorifying the very culture India fought so hard to gain independence from, as in *Bride and Prejudice*, or the filmmaker must create his or her own Indianness to an English text, as in *Vanity Fair* and *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, thereby rewriting India’s colonial literary past.

---

3 These aren’t the first Indian adaptations of nineteenth-century English novels. Adaptations of *Jane Eyre* (*Sangdil*) and *Wuthering Heights* (*Dil Diya Dard Liya*) were made in 1952 and 1966 respectively.
ONE
On the Ass of an Elephant:
Mira Nair’s Anti-Heritage, Indian-Infused *Vanity Fair*

Though veiled behind the label of “heritage film,” Mira Nair’s adaptation of William Makepeace Thackeray’s satirical novel *Vanity Fair* (1848) uses the framework of heritage cinema to illuminate the reality of England’s imperial presence in the world. Through costumes, vibrant colors, exotic birds, a Bollywood-style dance sequence, and two moments in India, Mira Nair forces the audience to see how much of England’s economic growth was directly correlated to the project of imperialism. But Nair’s film doesn’t merely highlight the role of imperialism in nineteenth-century England; she also uses her film to undress London’s upper class, emphasize the work contributions of the often-ignored lower class, and makes her women strong, active negotiators of their lives.

In undertaking the monumental task of adapting Thackeray’s 700-page novel into a two and a half hour film, Nair relied on her experience with India’s class and caste system to relate to the social structure of nineteenth-century England. “If there’s any person who understands hierarchy and refinement, it’s an Indian,” she says. “We taught the English how to recognize hierarchy, because we have so much—class and caste and subsect and sect and language, all of that. So we understand the jokes of class” (*Premiere* 104). Given the emphasis on English literature in India, it is ironic that a female Indian filmmaker would adapt a novel written in the tradition of Empire. Nair understands the conflict that arises from this juxtaposition and is well aware of the influence of Empire on her life. “I grew up after India was independent,” she tells *Premiere* magazine. “But we are schooled in these fantastic colonial schools where you’re taught to love—I mean, as I do—the English language. Like, I still dream in fuckin’ English, you know? You despise the thought that you were occupied, but you dream in their language” (106). As an Indian, however, Nair understands the consequences of imperialism firsthand. And as an outsider, Nair is not limited by a national allegiance to England.

---

4 Industrialization also played a key role in England’s economic growth during the nineteenth century.
5 It is important to mention that Thackeray was born in Calcutta, India, in 1811. His father, Richard Thackeray served as Collector in the Bengal region. Thackeray remained in India until he was five years old, when he was sent to England to be educated (Fletcher).
At first glance, Mira Nair’s *Vanity Fair* looks like every other costume drama adapted from a nineteenth-century English novel, with its historic setting, dinner parties, conversations in sitting rooms, and an obligatory ball, confirming what Andrew Higson observes about the film genre. He writes:

> These are films set in the past, telling stories of the manners and properties, but also the often transgressive romantic entanglements of the upper- and upper middle-class English, in carefully detailed and visually splendid period reconstructions. The luxurious country-house settings, the picturesque rolling green landscapes of southern England, the pleasures of period costume, and the canonical literary reference points are among the more frequently noted attractions of such films. (1)

Nair’s reliance on heritage conventions and traditional aesthetic is disappointing from the director of award-winning *Salaam Bombay!* and critical favorite *Monsoon Wedding*, films which offered a realist perspective rather than the melodramatic stories often found in Indian cinema. But a closer look reveals that Nair is not interested in making another film about drawing rooms and tea. Instead, she infuses her film’s frames with small, imperfect details audiences don’t often pay attention to—Becky’s half-polished nails when she works at a gambling house in Germany or Sir Pitt and Miss Crawley’s freedom to be crass and impolite. She also audaciously cast American actress Reese Witherspoon to play Becky Sharp, rather than choosing an English actress for the role.

In making *Vanity Fair* a heritage film, Nair reaches an audience that has likely bought into the charade of authenticity these films produce, believing in the strength of England’s historic and literary past. Higson notes that “these films operate as cultural ambassadors, promoting certain images of Englishness,” images that glorify England, without forcing the audience to question that these films privilege the lives of the Anglo-Saxon, upper class (3). Heritage films set in the nineteenth century, unless dealing directly with Empire, rarely show how the lifestyle of the leisure class was supported by colonial exploits. John Hill observes how these films are “part of a new consumer culture offering cultural prestige to these groups (primarily the professional middle class) who

---

6 Released in 1988, *Salaam Bombay!* won the Palm d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film (imdb.com).
constitute the main audience” (78). According to Hill, by watching these films, audiences gain a false sense of cultural superiority. It is precisely the image that these films intend to sell—middle brow entertainment in the guise of high art. Thus, Nair reaches an audience ready to embrace a heritage film, but alters her *mise-en-scène* in such a way that she introduces the viewer to her anti-heritage heritage film.

It was important for Nair that her *Vanity Fair* be more realistic and less refined than the image often portrayed in traditional heritage films. “The streets [of nineteenth-century England] were cacophonous. There were cobblestones and filth and yelling vendors and all that. I wanted to see that,” she said in an interview (*Premiere* 106). In fact, what attracted her most about *Vanity Fair* was that Thackeray exposed parts of London which did not often receive attention in most nineteenth-century novels (Nair). Thus, her film opens with images of a poorer section of London, and we see children begging, women lounging on the streets, trash adorning the sidewalks, men passed out drunk along the road, men and women working, and pigs roaming the lanes. The attention she gives to the underprivileged is not unique to Nair. Higson explains that though “heritage films at one level play out dramas of the national elites, they also, and at the same time, find a central place for social figures often marginalized in mainstream cinema; women, gays and lesbians, ethnic or national others, the lowered classes” (28). In Nair’s *Vanity Fair*, however, the lives of the marginalized working class are not “central” to her film’s narrative; they simply provide the viewer with the knowledge that behind the perfectly arranged dinner tables and drawing rooms are the fingerprints of the people who assemble them.

Likewise, Nair’s London is busy, crowded, and noisy, resembling the streets of present-day Bombay (Nair). Thus, when Becky first arrives at Mayfair with Miss Crawley and Rawdon, Nair does not display the exquisite houses in the rich neighborhood, but instead concentrates on Becky’s reaction to what she sees. Nair uses a widescreen shot of the entire street, where vendors loiter and chase after carriages and horse dung paves the road. Similarly, when Sir Pitt travels to Mayfair intending to propose to Becky, he sidesteps horse droppings along the London street, while a man shovels the manure into a bucket. In another scene, Nair shows a man delivering coal to a home and, when some of the coal falls from his bag, a little boy is right behind him to
pick up what falls. On this brief scene Nair noted: “It was important for me to introduce the coal mongers, to show the armies of the working class that fueled the upper classes to live the way they lived.” In doing so, Nair demonstrates how dependent the upper classes were on the labor of their workers and servants.

In the Sedleys’ slide into poverty, Nair highlights the life of the poor in England trying to survive. Their cottage is dark and damp. Nothing adorns the walls. Amelia’s and Mrs. Sedley’s hair is not neatly arranged. For Nair this representation of desperation was essential for her film. About a scene showing Amelia and her mother pulling produce from their garden, both looking haggard and dirty, Nair observes:

It was very important for me to bring this sort of mud and reality of English life to the fore, especially in these scenes of [the] Sedleys losing everything they had and living this life in the country where they didn’t even have money for food. So for me it was very important that we actually saw them with their fingers in the dust, pulling out the turnips, and weeding the garden, because that was the only way to survive. This fall from grace I did not want to pretty up, I did not want to sugarcoat.

In showing Amelia’s survival instinct, Nair raises her dignity for the viewer, especially because, in the same scene, she is mocked by her mother and her son, the latter whom calls her efforts “degrading.”

While giving attention to the poor in her film, Nair also shows the upper class in their least attractive and most vulnerable moments. Juxtaposed against Amelia’s suffering is Rawdon and Becky’s own difficulty at maintaining elite status. Their home’s exterior gives the appearance of Crawley position and wealth, but the inside is nearly barren. Rawdon and Becky dine at a small table and eat meat Rawdon complains “was made of scrag end.” Becky paints the walls with landscapes, as the latest fashion requires, unable to pay a professional to do it for her. Nair also emphasizes the constant threat of creditors coming to expose the Crawley’s lie. A bailiff comes twice to collect on overdue loans.

Nair also shows how much work goes into maintaining one’s social position in society. At Queen’s Crawley, the house is reorganized and cleaned to prepare for and impress Miss Crawley. Sir Pitt, who Becky originally mistook for a household servant,
dresses up and wears a wig to greet his rich sister. Sir Pitt’s wife, who looked like she hadn’t bathed in weeks, is unrecognizable when her sister-in-law arrives—she wears a bright green dress and her hair is styled. Even the dinner’s main course is subject of stress for Sir Pitt, and the family breathes a sigh of relief when Miss Crawley approves of the lobster offered. Nair also takes us into Miss Crawley’s dressing room and shows her removing not one, but two wigs, revealing her frightfully short hair. Nair felt that these details were vital in showing what bourgeois life required of its members.

The Osbornes are a source of ridicule by both Thackeray and Nair because, as ancestral outsiders of the bourgeois world, they do not always behave appropriately. But Nair is careful not to attribute her criticism of them because they were not born into proper society, otherwise the Sedleys would also be villainized; rather, she focuses her attack on George because of his false sense of superiority. The Osbornes and the Sedleys represent the fledging upper-middle class arising in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. George, who believes the governess beneath his social recognition, never misses an opportunity to demean Becky. When he first meets her, he understands the familiarity with which she greets him as an insult. So when Becky declares that “I want to be quite sure you’re good enough for dear Amelia,” George replies: “And who’s to decide? You?” Amelia, who is shocked by her lover’s rude behavior, tries to pacify him by asserting that Becky only meant her comment as a joke. But George haughtily retorts: “I don’t care for governesses to joke at my expense.”

Neither Thackeray nor Nair allows George to bask in his vanity, as he’s the source of derision for Rawdon, Becky, and Miss Crawley. Rawdon says of George: “He’s as green as his grass and will go to the deuce to be seen with a lord.” Nair humorously uses low-angle shots when she wants to show George at his most monstrous and hypocritical moments. Becky, previously belittled by Gorge, laughs last when she outwits him in a moment he tries to outshine her. In Nair’s version of the scene, George stealthily walks to the piano where Becky plays a light melody. A low-angle shot is used

---

7 Earlier I suggested that both Sir Pitt and Miss Crawley were allowed to act crass and impolite. The Osbornes, as “new money,” would have had to adhere much more strictly to proper decorum if they wanted to fit in the aristocratic sphere.

8 Though the Osbornes are the wealthiest family in the novel, they lack titles and proper pedigree. The Sedleys wealth never reached the height of the Osbornes, evidenced by their son’s positions: Jos Sedley must work in India to amass independent wealth, while George Osborne’s time in the army serves as an arena for social networking and to instill proper etiquette.
on George, while we view Becky from a slightly high-angled shot, framed by the piano’s opened top.

GEORGE:
So, Miss Sharp. How do you like your new place?

BECKY:
My place? How kind of you to remind me. It’s quite tolerable, thank you. And they treat me very well. But then this is a gentleman’s family and quite a change from tradespeople.

GEORGE:
You seemed to like tradespeople well enough last year.

BECKY:
Joseph Sedley, you mean? It’s true. If he’d asked me, I would not have said no.

GEORGE:
How very obliging of you.

BECKY:
I know what you’re thinking. What an honor to have had you for a brother-in-law. Captain George Osborne, son of John Osborne, Esquire, son of . . . . What was your grandfather? Nevermind. You cannot help your pedigree.

In Becky’s triumph over George, the viewer gets the satisfaction of seeing him recoil speechlessly from the piano, his self-importance defeated.

Unlike traditional heritage films, Nair’s Vanity Fair does not linger in sitting rooms, at dinners or balls, although her film contains those scenes has well. Her purpose isn’t in displaying the mise-en-scène as a museum showroom and she chooses, instead, to focus on her characters. Higson relates that

The decoupage and the camerawork [in heritage films] tend towards the languid. There is a preference for long takes and deep staging, for instance, and for long and medium shots, rather than for close-ups and rapid or dramatic cutting. The camera is characteristically fluid [and] dictated . . . by a desire to offer the spectator a more aesthetic
angle on the period setting and the objects which fill it. Self-conscious crane shots and high-angle shots divorced from character point of view, for instance, are often used to display ostentatiously the seductive mise-en-scene of the films. (38)

What Higson describes goes against the kinds of camera shots Nair uses in her film. In keeping the viewer’s attention on the characters, Nair relies on close-up and middle-distance shots of the actors’ faces. Twice in the film, Nair uses a widescreen shot so the view can see what happens in the background, while she places Becky in an extreme close-up in the foreground. By doing this, the audience is privileged with Becky’s point of view, and thus, enters into a clandestine relationship with Nair’s protagonist.

Moments when characters meet in sitting rooms or at dinner, Nair rarely uses widescreen shots; her camera captures the reactions and the movements of her characters. By focusing on the characters rather than their ornate mansions, she creates characters the audience can identify with. Nair explains:

> All the physical comedy of wearing country wigs and then fancy wigs for when visitors came, all that stuff that you never see onscreen was important to me to make real, to make it feel like it could be us, to make it look like we were not looking at fossilized museum pieces of a time long ago. But this could be people like us who, you know, don’t like to bathe, who put on things they have to put on for guests. (Nair)

By placing the characters prominently in the foreground, especially Becky, Nair coaxes the audience to take Becky’s side so that she rejoices at Becky’s fortuitous end.⁹

Lovers of Thackeray’s novel will object to Nair’s sympathetic and victim-of-circumstance portrayal of Becky Sharp—a Becky not as pointed as Thackeray’s likable, though never sympathized with, anti-heroine. Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, subtitled “A Novel without a Hero,” manages to tell a story in which none of the main characters is admirable or noble but whom the reader will still like. Nair, however, in a two-hour film, is not given the luxury of time Thackeray’s novel, serialized over the course of nineteen months, had. Nor does the time frame allow for the amount of material that a classic

---

⁹ It is one of the major diversions from Thackeray’s text, which I will be discussing later.
serial can cover.\textsuperscript{10} Thus, Nair’s \textit{Vanity Fair} takes short cuts, one of which is to make Becky Sharp a sympathetic character. But whether one reads Thackeray’s satiric version or sees Nair’s glossed adaptation, it is essential that readers like Becky Sharp because she is the one person in the story who single handedly undermines bourgeois and aristocratic England. Thus, Witherspoon’s Becky remains a constant friend to Amelia throughout the film, ever weary of George Osborne’s treatment of her friend and imploring Rawdon to “be kind to her [Amelia]. She is my only friend.” In the chaotic exodus from Belgium, Nair’s Becky attempts to leave along with the other fleeing Englishmen and women but ultimately stays behind to care for a distraught Amelia. While Thackeray’s Becky would have left Amelia to fend for herself, Nair’s Becky has a conscience and does not do anything either Amelia or the audience can blame her for.

As a wife and mother, Thackeray’s Becky tires of her familial attachments quickly and finds them to be impositions on her finances and rise in society. Nair’s Becky, however, loves her husband and son. The relationship between mother and son is much more ambiguous than it is in Thackeray’s novel. In Nair’s version, the audience sees both Becky’s indifference and attachment to her son. In the film, Nair shows Becky’s reaction to her son’s first steps, which Witherspoon plays with a reaction of forced pleasure as she paints the walls—neither overly excited, as Rawdon reacts, nor annoyed at the nurse’s interruption. When Rawdon leaves for boarding school, Nair shows a moment where mother and son share an unspoken good-bye, each holding a hand against the window as if touching through the glass. As husband and wife, Nair turns Rawdon and Becky’s troubled marriage into a romantic melodrama in true Indian cinematic convention. As Rawdon prepares for battle, Nair gives us an intimate portrait of the couple, using soft lighting. High-angle, close-up shots are used on Becky, whose eyes follow Rawdon’s movements. When the camera cuts to Rawdon, we view him through low-angle shots. Nair calls this scene “the heart of the relationship between Rawdon and Becky,” noting its romantic intensity. Thackeray’s Becky had long since tired of her husband at this point in the novel and would never have engaged in this dialogue with Rawdon:

\textsuperscript{10} In 1998, the BBC released the mini-series “Vanity Fair.” It is divided into six episodes, each fifty minutes in length, directed by Marc Munden, adapted by Andrew Davies, and starring Natasha Little, who stars in Nair’s film as Lady Jane Sheepshanks.
RAWDON:
(holding Becky’s face with two hands. Her hands touch his) There never was a woman who could manage like you, Becky Sharp.

BECKY:
(on the verge of tears) You won’t do anything brave, will you? (Rawdon smiles, not taking his eyes off Becky) Promise? (Becky begins to cry)

RAWDON:
What? Tears? (Kissing Becky’s tears) Tears from my strong little Becky?

BECKY:
I’m a woman in love, aren’t I?

RAWDON:
Oh, my darling. If you should awake to find me dead—

BECKY:
(still crying. She shakes her head and puts her hand over his mouth) Shh!

RAWDON:
You must be sure, at least, of this: that you are a woman who has been truly loved. (they kiss passionately. He leans down and kisses her pregnant tummy).

Thackeray’s Becky used people only as long as they had something of economic or social value to give. At this point of the novel—and film—Rawdon has nothing left to give Becky. But rather than portray Becky’s apathy for her husband, Nair and screenwriter Julian Fellowes turn this moment into sappy melodrama one doesn’t expect to find in Thackeray’s satire. The inclusion of the melodrama, however, helps audiences to maintain their sympathy with Becky.

In giving her female characters the power of negotiation, Nair challenges the patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century England. Though Thackeray allows Becky similar freedom, he never fully lets her triumph as Nair’s Becky does. Nair shows us ways in which her Becky determines her destiny. The opening scene of the film shows a young Becky Sharp staging a puppet show in her father’s art studio, playing like a typical girl, until her father’s wealthiest patron comes to purchase “Virtue Betrayed,” a portrait
of Becky’s dead mother. When her father attempts to sell the painting for a mere four guineas, Becky interferes in the exchange and demands ten guineas for the picture, a price the collector tells her is too much money.

The PATRON:
And if I give you 10 guineas for this picture of your mother, will you be happy then to see it go?

BECKY:
No. But it will be too much to refuse.

The PATRON:
Very well then. Ten guineas it shall be. (And he places the money directly in Becky’s hands).

From a very early age, Becky is seen managing her father’s finances and studio. Becky takes this assertiveness wherever she goes—running Sir Pitt’s household, providing for her family when Rawdon is found incapable of doing so, and mooching a bottle of champagne from a rich English traveler in Germany.

Nair’s Amelia Sedley is a much more active character than Thackeray’s passive and naïve goody-goody. She is aware of Becky’s motives in trying to get Jos, Amelia’s older brother, to marry her and watches amusedly at Becky’s attempts to endear herself to Jos. She also defends Becky against her mother’s, George’s, and Dobbins’ bad opinions of her. Nair says of her Amelia: “I loved the fire and the grace that Romola Garai brought to Amelia. She didn’t reduce Amelia to the simpering heroine that Thackeray sometimes described.” Like Becky, Amelia becomes the provider for the Sedleys after her father’s financial demise. When Dobbin attempts to persuade Amelia against a reunion with Becky in Germany, Amelia tells Dobbin that he as no authority over her, asking him: “Who do you think you are? My father? My husband?” Amelia also arranges Jos and Becky’s marriage, tipping Jos off to Becky’s whereabouts. Nair’s Amelia is not dependent on anyone; she is capable of surviving any circumstance.

While Nair’s film focuses on the lives of the working classes and portrays strong women, her film is most notable in its display of Empire. Nair’s *Vanity Fair* is filled with
images that reference the impact the colonies had on the English. In the film’s opening scene, we’re shown among the English men and women a few Asian men working and watching the procession of an expensive-looking horse-drawn carriage move through one of London’s poorer areas. Above the carriage sit two black servants. We see two more servants of African descent frame the gateway of Lord Steyne’s mansion. They stand quietly erect, both as pillars and trophies of Steyne’s wealth, as London life moves normally behind them. These are small details, but they are significant in showing how diverse England was becoming during the first half of the nineteenth century and how, as Nair notes, she wanted to show how Thackeray wrote of an England “where the middle classes were getting fat on the spoils of the rich from the colonies.”

Though he has no spoken lines, Jos Sedley’s Indian servant, Biju, played by Paul Bazely, plays an important anti-colonial role in apathetically serving the Sedleys during their imitation Indian dinner. Dressed ornamenteally—his head is shaved bald except for a ponytail; his face is painted to look like a native savage; he is dressed in Indian clothes—Biju’s body language shows his disdain for, boredom with, and amusement by his English superiors. Like Becky, he has the ability to read truth in people, so when Becky attempts to flatter Jos, appealing to his service in India, Biju understands Becky’s motives, which are to secure Jos as her husband. When Becky insists on tasting the spices of India, Biju enthusiastically serves the falsely overeager Becky her first chili pepper as a way to expose her falseness. By including this Indian character, who is cleverer than his masters, Nair makes a point that Indians in the nineteenth century did not lack discernment or the ability to reason—the view Gauri Viswanathan exposes in her essay “Currying Favor.”

Both in the novel and in Nair’s film, the appearance of Rhoda Swartz, a rich mulatto heiress from Jamaica, is a significant moment in the narrative because she physically represents the wealth the English extracted from the colonies. Mr. Osborne presents Miss Swartz as a potential marriage partner for his son, treating her as a commodity rather than a human being. Nair said that “in a perverse way” it was essential that Miss Swartz be the “most beautiful woman in the film,” suiting Nair’s beautifying of England and her mise-en-scène with ornaments from the colonies. Nair’s Rhoda is confident and negotiates her own terms rather openly with George. She is smart and
embodies a kind of enigmatic sexiness, which Thackeray’s Rhoda does not. Thackeray’s own rendering of Miss Swartz is unflattering at best. In his engravings of Miss Swartz, she looks out of her element among the nouveau-riche Osbornes, with her wild wide-eyed expression, round face, big nose and lips—a rather scary-looking spectacle (210-11).

Nair shoots the gathering at Vauxhall as an Indian-themed party. Bright reds, blues, greens, and golds dominate the *mise-en-scène*. Indian musicians provide entertainment while replicas of Hindu temples and Indian street performers appear in the background. Nair includes a peacock in the scene, explicitly to represent “the colonies and the money that was coming from the colony into the Empire” (Nair). She brilliantly contrasts the exotic splendors of the Vauxhall picnic to a dark, colorless, rainy London in the next scene.

The Bollywood-style dance sequence at Lord Steyne’s party for the King is perhaps Nair’s best Indian inclusion in the film. Nair turns Thackeray’s charades into a seductive dance performed by Becky and other ladies of Steyne’s acquaintance. Nair justifies this addition, stating that “[b]ecause the film was so much about the intersection of colony and Empire, I thought let’s have the same intent [as Thackeray]”—that is to “shock and titillate”—“but let’s have more fun with it, let’s make it a slave dance.” For the dance routine, Nair called successful Bollywood choreographer and director Farah Khan to choreograph the scene. It’s a fantastic scene because it successfully conveys the sexual scandal of the narrative moment and works as a Bollywood dance number. In a Bollywood film, the only acceptable time for characters to push Indian cultural mores beyond the limit is in the song and dance sequences. In the case of Mira Nair’s Middle-Eastern themed slave dance placed in a nineteenth-century context, this performance would have been the only time such a scandalous and sexual display could be condoned. Nair provides us with short, quick shots of the all-Anglo, scantily-clad dancers. The song climaxes as all the dancers, bodies entwined, pause and address the camera; the drama is captured with a crane shot. The way the scene is shot, we unwittingly become mesmerized and are guilty of watching the dance voyeuristically, just as the men watching the performance do in the film.

If Nair is overly sympathetic with Becky Sharp, it is perhaps because Becky expresses a real desire to see India. Likewise, Nair’s Joseph Sedley, a rich nabob in India,
becomes cute and likable, unlike Thackeray’s stupid, vain, and gluttonous nincompoop. Nair’s Jos is even heroic: he gallantly sacrifices his relationship with Becky to ensure George will marry Amelia and rescues Becky from poverty in Germany, taking her with him to India.

Jos, a member of the East India Company and the fattest character in the story, symbolizes the wealth Englishmen acquired in India. He represents a common reality among the upper-middle classes in England, as most families would have had a relative serving in India. In Thackeray’s novel and Nair’s film, Jos has literally acquired a taste for India, and his mother orders a proper Indian meal for his homecoming. Mira Nair takes his connection with India further by dressing him in flamboyantly colorful suits of blues, reds, greens, and oranges—all colors of India. In one brief shot, we see Jos’s hands grabbing at a plateful of Indian sweets—he’s the only one eating the exotic treat. As in Thackeray’s novel, Becky uses Jos’s interest in India to grab his attention and fuel the possibility of a proposal. In Thackeray’s novel, her real interest in India is confined to oriental adventures she’d read in Arabian Nights and “Guthrie’s Geography.” Thackeray also informs us that Becky only feigned interest in India in order to secure Jos’s attachment (Chapter 3). Nair’s Becky seems to take a genuine interest in India, which expresses her adventurous spirit. Becky shows her interest to Jos at a dinner at the Sedley’s home:

BECKY:
(Looking flirtingly at Jos) I love to visit new places.

JOS:
Really?

BECKY:
Oh, indeed! How I envy men who can explore for themselves all the wonders of the world.

JOS:
And, uh, should you like to visit India, do you think?
BECKY:
India! I cannot think of anywhere I’d rather see. The Palaces of Delhi, the Taj Mahal, the Burning Ghats—

MR. SEDLEY:
Have you made a study of India, Miss Sharp?

(The camera cuts to Amelia Sedley, who is trying to suppress a laugh)

BECKY:
Not so much as I would like. I’m enraptured with every scent and flavor of the East.

Nair rewards both Jos’s and Becky’s love of India by bringing her to India as Jos’s wife. By ending her film in India, Nair retrieves India’s unique heritage and festivity. In Nair’s ending, Becky and Jos are the colonized, not the colonizers. Explaining her decision to end the film in India, Nair said:

But as I finish[ed] this film in its colors and its plumage and its promise of the colonies and its whole interaction between England and India, I just couldn’t end it on Jos taking Becky away in this red carriage into the wintry damp English countryside. I felt very much that we needed the umph of India, that we needed Becky to go back to the origins from whence her creator, Thackeray himself, had been born. (Nair)

So we see their wedding procession through the streets of Jothpur, India. Becky has finally reached her peak, riding on the ass of an elephant, and can happily settle in India where no one can compete with her. Nair ends her film with an ode to her heroine in the form of a Hindi song written by prolific Bollywood lyricist Javed Akhtar called “Gori Re,” or “O Fair One”:

*O fair one, O fair one
Now that you have climbed the scales of difficulty,*
*May you find a waterfall.*
*Now that you have withstood your crippling heat,*
*May you find the shadow.*
*Now that you have crossed the mountains of problems,*
May you find your peace.
TWO
Bollywood Bride or Prejudiced Parody?:
Gurinder Chadha’s Bolly-Holly Attempt

Mira Nair used the framework of heritage films to reinterpret William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, forcing her audiences to acknowledge how much England’s economy was supported by colonial exploits. British director Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice* (2005) uses the framework of Bollywood in a modern-day adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Though many reviewers applauded Chadha’s efforts to merge Hollywood and Bollywood, *Bride and Prejudice* becomes the vehicle Chadha uses to promote Western cultural values. By adapting a canonical text of nineteenth-century English literature in Bollywood style, Chadha takes what has traditionally been an anti-Western, anti-imperial industry and uses it to espouse the ideology of nineteenth-century England, and by doing so, continues the imperialist mission.

In *Bride and Prejudice*, Gurinder Chadha attempts to bridge the gap between Hollywood audiences and Bollywood films, a sort of introduction to Bollywood for the West. It stars Bollywood superstar Aishwarya Rai in her first English-speaking film and borrows some elements of Bollywood films, mainly in its use of songs. Chadha said of making the film:

> The pleasure for me was at making... a Hindi Bollywood-style movie, but keeping it so close to Jane Austen, because making a Hindi movie on its own was something I wasn’t really interested in. I was only interested in making a Bollywood-style Hindi movie that somehow interacted wholeheartedly with another cultural tradition, and in this case it was English literary tradition. (Chadha)

Chadha was born in Kenya but grew up in Southall, home to London’s Indian community, so Chadha, of Punjabi descent, is certainly no stranger to simultaneously existing in two

---

11 In June 2001, the term “Bollywood” was officially added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. According to the definition in the *OED*, Bollywood is defined as “The Indian film industry, based in Bombay; Bombay regarded as the base of this industry.” The definition is misleading since Bollywood refers to a specific type of film—a *masala* film in Hindi—within the Indian film industry and not representative of all the films and separate film industries within India. This chapter will focus on Bollywood as a kind of Hindi film produced in Bombay.
varying cultural traditions. Her last film, *Bend It like Beckham* (2002), deals with Jess, an English-Indian girl who attempts to please her parents and their expectations for her life, while she pursues her own dreams of a professional soccer career. Set in London, *Beckham* successfully tells the story of the merging of two cultural traditions. Chadha uses a similar formula with *Bride*, only isn’t as successful. Throughout the film, Chadha is never clear about what she wants to say about India and the West (here the West is limited to England and the United States, London and Los Angeles, respectively). On one hand, Chadha is a champion for India, attempting to show a different and positive side of India to Western audiences, while criticizing Western cultural domination. But on the other hand, she exalts the West in this film, leaving the audiences’ perceptions’ of India and the West little changed by her effort.

The Indian film industry is the largest film industry in the world, annually releasing twice as many films as does Hollywood. According to a report on *Nightline*, “One billion more people see Bollywood productions than watch Hollywood movies [each year].” If a Hindi film is successful it will likely be dubbed or subtitled in at least a dozen languages (“Confidential”). Outside of India, audiences for Bollywood films are found in Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Republic, the Middle East, many parts of Africa, and some of South America (“Confidential” and Tyrrell 266). This shouldn’t be surprising considering India’s population is over one billion people, with a diaspora of about thirty million people (*Nightline*). And yet, Bollywood is virtually unknown in the West, and those familiar with Bollywood often dismiss the films as highly melodramatic kitsch of lower quality with goofy song and dance sequences, a view reinforced in American popular culture in television shows like *The Simpsons* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But Bollywood doesn’t set itself up to compete with Hollywood, contrary to what Westerners think. Instead, Bollywood sees itself as completely oppositional to Hollywood, making films by Indians for Indians, relying heavily on the *masala* formula.

It’s by using the *masala* formula in films that Bollywood sustains its defiance of Western expectations. Literally, *masala* means a mixture of spices, but in Bollywood,

---

12 I excluded North America and Europe from this list because many Bollywood moviegoers from these continents are of South Asian decent. In fact, in these regions, Bollywood films are rarely advertised in non-Indian newspapers or on television.
masala refers to the amalgamation of multiple film genres converging in one film. So it isn’t surprising to see drama, comedy, action adventure, and romance in one film, mixed with obligatory song-and-dance sequences. In fact, Bollywood audiences expect at least a few of these classifications in their films. Heather Tyrrell, in her essay “Bollywood vs. Hollywood: Battle of the Dream Factories,” explains that “Masala films must have the right mix of a diverse range of ingredients to satisfy their audiences. Without them a film ‘lacks in entertainment value’” (263). Director Mira Nair confirms that “[a] Bollywood movie has to have all ingredients: drama, car chases, huge amounts of romance, always great amounts of music, and preferably a little bit of danger, a little villain, to keep the balance going” (Nightline). Shalini Dore, of Variety Magazine, adds: “You have to have a certain number of songs. You have to have the drama. You have to have the comedy. It’s very Shakespearean. And then you have a happy ending” (Nightline). In the 1995 superhit Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Brave-heart will take the Bride, hereafter referred to as DDLJ), a romantic melodramedy, the hero, Raj Malhotra (Shah Rukh Khan), is bloodied and beaten in the last twenty minutes of the film, an addition Khan thought necessary to appease audiences’ expectations of the hero’s role. The scene sticks out because DDLJ isn’t an action or violent film. But in keeping with the masala element, the scene remained in the film.

Bride and Prejudice, advertised on ABC’s Nightline as “Hollywood’s first major attempt at integrating the essence of Bollywood into a feature film,” comes, therefore, with specific masala expectations, which Chadha never fully realizes. Rather than Bollywood, Chadha’s Bride is a Hollywood musical, using India as an exotic backdrop in what becomes a meat market for her Western male characters to marry gorgeous Indian women, taking them from India to live in the West that Chadha overtly promotes.

At first glance Bride and Prejudice appears to endorse India. The setting is Amritsar, a city in the north of India, in the Punjab region, a few miles from the border of Pakistan, with a bloody imperial history. Amritsar was the site of the Jillianwala Baugh Massacre, in which British soldiers killed more than 400 worshiping Hindus and injured

---

13 DDLJ is the most successful Bollywood film of all time. It released in India on May 13, 1995 and continues to run in theaters today. In May 2005, DDLJ celebrated its 10th Anniversary. DDLJ also won 8 Filmfare Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, and Best Actress (imdb.com).
over 1200. The Bakshis (Chadha’s Bennets) address also reads 7 Udham Singh Road, Amritsar. Udham Singh, a martyred hero for Punjabi Sikhs, assassinated Sir Michael O’Dwyer, the governor of Punjab during the Jillianwala Bagh Massacre on March 13, 1940 and was hanged by the English government on July 31, 1940 (“Udham”).

In defending India against common Western stereotypes, Chadha uses Lalita Bakshi (Aishwarya Rai), our Elizabeth Bennet character, to rebuke the characters who see India in archaic or backward terms. The film’s hero, Will Darcy (Martin Henderson), and his mother, Catherine Darcy (Marsha Mason), see in India an untapped commercial commodity which is theirs for the taking; they represent the colonial occupiers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. Kiran Bingley (Indira Varma), Balraj Bingley’s sister, a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) now living in England, sees her “motherland” as a place to be ashamed of, a place from which she has happily disassociated. And finally there is Mr. Kholi (Nitin Chandra Ganatra), a Los Angeles based NRI, who has intentionally distanced himself from his Indian roots. None of these characters escapes Lalita’s reprimands, as she is quick to reveal their arrogance, stupidity, and false feelings of cultural superiority

Will Darcy, as the film’s hero and an outsider to India, receives Lalita’s harshest criticisms. Driving through Amritsar from the airport, an overwhelmed-looking Darcy says to his friends, brother and sister Balraj and Kiran Bingley: “This is mayhem. This is like bedlam.” And people whiz by on bicycles, scooters, rickshaws, cars, and horse-drawn wagons. Meanwhile, the car transporting them suddenly halts to avoid hitting two emaciated cows standing in the middle of the road. In a later conversation with Balraj, standing on his hotel room’s balcony with Amritsar in the background, he calls it “Hicksville, India” and implores Balraj to look for an Indian bride in England or America, where “[a]t least you’d have something in common.” At an engagement party at the beginning of the film, Darcy, dressed in a traditional India outfit, looks awkward and uncomfortable, is paranoid about eating the food, and is unwilling to dance, the latter fact Lalita and her mother presume because he is uninterested in participating in the cultural

---

14 Rather than admit they had made a grievous error, Sir Michael O’Dwyer, governor of the Punjab, and Viceroy Chlemsford, both of whom approved of the “incident” when they first heard about it. It was later deemed as “an error of judgement” by a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry. Brigadier R. E. H. Dyer, who ordered the attack at Jillianwala Baugh, was sent back to England shortly after the inquiry and was received as a national hero (Wolpert 299-300).
festival. But Darcy chooses not to dance because his pants will not stay on, a symbolic gesture by Chadha showing that as Darcy is unwilling to accept India, India rejects Darcy.

Darcy’s perspective is meant to represent the uninformed ideas Americans have about India. At the wedding the following evening, Lalita puts Darcy, now looking more comfortable in a western business suit, in his place; she is not amused by his arrogant and ignorant ideas about the discrepancy in standards of living between India and the West, arranged marriage, and Indian dancing. He complains that he “can’t get any work done in the hotel I’m staying in” because “their computer system keeps crashing [and] the electricity goes.” When Lalita informs him that he’s staying at the nicest hotel in Amritsar, he’s embarrassed, especially after Lalita explains to Will, whose family owns luxury hotels, costing anywhere from “four, five hundred dollars a night,” that most people in India do not make as much in a year. In his own defense, he asserts that for “people who can afford it, they want the best.” And smugly asks Lalita: “There’s nothing wrong with having standards, is there?” Lalita agrees with Will, saying it’s fine to have standards but quickly adds “as long as you don’t impose them on others” and successfully shuts him up for the moment. Observing the wedding party, Darcy says that he “finds the arranged marriage thing a bit strange” and “backward.” This, too, Lalita discredits, likening the process to “a global dating service,” and not an archaic tradition. Lalita then censures all Americans when she angrily replies: “It’s funny. Americans think they’ve got the answers for everything, including marriage. Pretty arrogant, considering they’ve got the highest divorce rate in the world.” Darcy’s third strike comes when he tries to make peace, and, willing to participate this night, asks Lalita to dance, admitting he’s a “hopeless dancer.” And while looking at the dance, he doesn’t feel it looks too complicated; it looks like all that is required is to “screw in a light bulb with one hand and pet the dog with the other” and asks if she’d teach him. Lalita, doing her best to control her fuming anger rejects his proposal and tells him to “find somebody simple and traditional to teach you to dance like the natives.” She walks away, leaving a befuddled Darcy on the stairs.

I do not think Chadha intends for us to dismiss Darcy as someone who feels he is culturally superior to people who are not like him: American, white, and rich. He is, after all, the proper suitor for Lalita in the end. What appears to be cultural arrogance is
simply ignorance about global issues and cultures; it’s Chadha’s personal attack on Americans. And if one misses her attack, Lalita is given another opportunity to humble Darcy’s pride at a poolside in Goa, when a discussion about Will’s ideal woman turns into an attack on American consumption and global dominance:

LALITA:
(To Darcy) I’m sure you think India’s beneath you.

WILL DARCY:
If I really thought that, then why would I be thinking about buying this place?

LALITA:
(Laughs) You think this is India?

WILL DARCY:
Well, don’t you wanna see more investment, more jobs?

LALITA:
Yes, but who does it really benefit? You want people to come to India without having to deal with Indians.

WILL DARCY:
That’s good. (Looking at Kiran) Remind me to add that to the tourism brochure.

LALITA:
Isn’t that what all tourists want here? 5-star comfort with a bit of culture thrown in? Well, I don’t want you turning India into a theme park. I thought we got rid of imperialists like you.

WILL DARCY:
I’m not British. I’m American.

LALITA:
Exactly.
When Darcy defends himself as American, and not British, Lalita quickly corrects his blind assumption. By attacking America, Chadha, who is proudly British, sidesteps England’s colonial culpability by placing all imperial blame on the United States.

Darcy’s mother, Catherine Darcy, faces a similar criticism from Chadha, only Mrs. Darcy’s is directed at her refusal to experience India firsthand. Claiming she’s always wanted to travel to India, she, in the same breath, changes her mind because “Will refused” to buy the hotel in Goa. She finally rejects India altogether by telling Lalita: “[W]ith yoga, and spices, and Deepak Chopra, and wonderful Eastern things here, I suppose there’s no point in traveling there any more.” Hers is a Las Vegas or Epcot mentality, where one can see Paris, Rome, Egypt, even New York, without ever having to go there. For Catherine Darcy, as long as India does not meet her standards, India is worthless. And Chadha allows Lalita to set her straight, as Lalita quickly replies: “People haven’t stopped going to Italy because Pizza Hut’s opened around the corner.” It’s a quip Will later praises her for—for being “the only person I’ve seen stand up to my mother.” Mrs. Darcy’s close mindedness is a direct attack on American ethnocentrisms.

Chadha’s attack is not only aimed at America. Her film provides us two examples of NRI’s who reject India in Kiran Bingley and Mr. Kholi, both of whom have happily left India behind for what they would believe are greener pastures. Kiran’s disdain of India is immediately apparent, as she “is fantastically condescending . . . in her as-clipped-as-can-be accent,” as one reviewer described her (Sen), distancing herself as far as she can from her “dear, dear motherland.” She says of India that “the only thing [it’s] good for is losing weight” and is not amused by her brother’s participation in the “Balle Balle” dance sequence, a part of the wedding festival they’ve come to India to attend. In one of the film’s deleted scenes, she distances herself completely from her Indian background by mocking the Bakshis’ relatives, who live in Southall. She also tells Darcy that she’s “not going to stand by and let some Indian-Pindian girl trap my brother.” Although Lalita never condemns Kiran’s attitude in the same way she does the Darcys’, Kiran is not meant to be likable, especially when she hosts Mrs. Bakshi, Jaya (the eldest Bakshi daughter/Jane Bennet character), and Lalita at her family’s home in Windsor and tactlessly chides Mrs. Bakshi’s attempts to talk about modern art. Lalita’s total ambivalence to Kiran is reprimand enough.
Finally, there is Mr. Kholi, the Los Angeles based accountant who professes he prefers American hip-hop to traditional Indian music and uses phrases like “home-court advantage,” “Whassup!?” and “It’s all good,” a man whose only selling point when wooing the Bakshis is that “anything’s possible in America,” (he pronounces it Amreeka).

During a dinner at the Bakshis, Kholi tries to convince Mr. Bakshi to leave India and relocate to the United States and dismisses India in the process, something neither Lalita nor her father is willing to accept from their guest:

KHOLI:
(To Mr. Bakshi) You must join me in US. You must, you must, you must. Eh? I could help you start a business there. That’s where the money’s to be made. UK’s finished, India’s too corrupt.

MR. BAKSHI:
Kholi saab, India is still a young country since independence. I hardly think its potential is over.

LALITA:
And what do you think your US was like after 60 years of independence? They were all killing each other over slavery and blindly searching for gold.

Mr. Bakshi and Lalita’s reprimands briefly silence Mr. Kholi, and their triumph is awkwardly felt around the table. In a later scene, while the Bakshis host a dinner for Balraj and Kiran Bingley, Will Darcy, and Mr. Kholi, Kholi takes his admiration for the United States too far for Lalita when he insults India’s treatment of tourists, denouncing his Indian heritage:

MRS. BAKSHI:
(To Balraj): I’ve heard so many stories about your Mr. Darcy saab in Goa, Balraj.

BALRAJ:
Mmm, let’s just say that Darcy and India have had a little bit of a rough time.

KHOLI:
Ah, these Indians, they don’t know how to treat tourists. There’s no sophistication.
LALITA:
What do you mean “these Indians”? Are you no longer an Indian?

KHOLI:
I’m a green card holder now. India is decades behind.

Lalita, meanwhile, rolls her eyes and shakes her head, fuming in anger as she tries to stay quietly composed. Of course, Kholi isn’t an admirable character in the film (at the beginning). He’s Chadha’s version of obligatory comedy relief, the fool, the buffoon often found in Bollywood films. Even Will Darcy finds his comments offensive, as he’s the one to defend India in Lalita’s silence.

But for all her attempts at showing the real India to Western audiences and dismissing unfounded stereotypes people often have about India, Chadha does more to promote Western cultural values than she does to build up India, and Bollywood, against the misguided perceptions often associated with it. And in the process of doing so, she undermines the tradition of Bollywood, her own pro-India stance, and discredits Lalita’s sanctimonious place as the defender of all things Indian, as she too, leaves India behind and marries the Anglo-American Will Darcy.

The songs in *Bride and Prejudice* received the brunt of reviewer criticism because they do not capture the aesthetic of Bollywood song-and-dance sequences. Raja Sen called *Bride* “a lot more *Aladdin* than *Singin’ in the Rain*, decidedly Disney, and certainly not Rodgers and Hammerstein.” And, indeed, the songs in *Bride and Prejudice*, with the exception of a few (“Balle Balle,” “Payal Bajake”/”My Lips Are Waiting,” and “Dola Dola” immediately come to mind), come off as pedestrian, even cringe worthy—more like *Grease* than A. R. Rahman.¹⁵ Nothing distinguishes a Bollywood film more than its reliance on song-and-dance sequences, with each film incorporating “at least a half a dozen musical numbers” (*Nightline*). But to categorize Bollywood films as musicals using Western film classifications is to limit or dismiss the uniqueness of Bollywood films. In fact, as Tyrrell notes, “[t]hese very song-and-dance sequences are a form of opposition to Western cultural imperialism” (262). Bollywood actress Preity Zinta explains the global

¹⁵Rahman is the most prolific composer in Bollywood. Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine* relays that Rahman is the “top-selling artist in record history,” selling more albums than The Beatles (*Nightline*).
interest in Bollywood stating: “There are no movies like Indian movies. Where else in the world will you find a film where you can sing, dance, have emotion?” (Nightline). Actor Hrithik Roshan explains: “Every emotion is somehow expressed through song and dance—every festival, every celebration, even death” (Nightline). It is not uncommon for the moment of love realized to take place in song, or a character’s attempt to reveal the truth to another character to happen in song. “Emotion is communicated through song,” Suketu Mehta remarks, “because song is more potent than dialogue” (“Confidential). And communicating the proper emotion often requires that the hero and heroine be transported to foreign countries and requires several costume changes.16

It’s an aesthetic Western audiences cannot suspend disbelief long enough to accept because the “picturisations” of the songs are the most fantastical moments in Bollywood films. Actors lip sync to songs and participate in intricately choreographed dances, which often occur as a character’s dream sequence within the narrative.17 The Simpsons and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BTVS) have both mocked Bollywood song-and-dance sequences. In The Simpsons, Apu, the Indian owner of the Kwiki Mart, watches a Bollywood film with the family. He hopes they will enjoy the film as “[i]t made every Indian critic’s Top 400 list.” In the film, a woman skips along a country road singing about love. It then cuts to three stern-looking men, sitting side-by-side. Suddenly, a bare-chested man jumps through the window and is apparently angry with the tribunal. Music begins to play, and the four men break into dance, forgetting the preceding conflict. Not amused, Bart Simpson remarks: “This movie you rented sucks.” In BTVS, Buffy, Xander, and Willow are watching a Bollywood film. We hear “high-pitched wailing,” as they try to figure out what’s happening in the film:

XANDER:

Is she dying?

BUFFY:

I think she’s singing.

16 The snow-capped Alps of Switzerland, ancient Scottish castles, and the pyramids of Egypt are popular locales.
17 Mehta and Tyrrell both discuss the mutual dependency of the music and film industries in India. Playback singers, as they call the voices behind the stars, become pop stars in India. Soundtracks often release weeks before the film as a promotional tool.
XANDER:
To a telephone, in Hindi. Now, that’s entertainment.

WILLOW:
She’s sad because her lover gave her 12 coins. But the wizard cut open a bag of salt and now the dancing minions have nowhere to put their big Maypole… fish thing.

XANDER:
Uh-huh. Why is she singing?

BUFFY:
Her lover? I thought that was her chiropractor?

WILLOW:
Because of that thing he did with her feet? No, that was personal.

XANDER:
And we thought just because we didn’t have any money, this’d be a lackluster evening.

Only Willow, the least cynical character in BTVS, appreciates what happens in the film. Buffy and Xander, who are sarcastic, do not understand the film. Mehta even describes Bollywood as “pre-cynical” ("Confidential"). Western audiences, with the cynicism that saturates Hollywood films, find Bollywood overly melodramatic. Actress Preity Zinta believes that it’s hard for Western audiences to accept their male protagonists participating in what many Westerners perceive as a demasculinating ritual. She says: “You can be the best actor in the world, you can be the best action guy in the world, you still have to dance.” In Hollywood, the era of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly no longer exists.

Though the weakness of the songs is problematic, the contrast between East and West, India and London/Los Angeles in Chadha’s film is contradictory, if she wants to show Westerners the real India. While the Amritsar locale has anti-Imperial importance, it isn’t representative of modern or rural India. Chadha could have used Mumbai, Bollywood’s capital and one of India’s most modern cities in technology and infrastructure. Nor do we see the rural village setting where much of India’s population
resides. Instead, Amritsar is the setting, a place her Indian characters don’t even endorse. Lalita’s friend, who I will refer to as “the bride” since neither she nor her groom is named, tells Lalita that “you need to get out of this town. You know there’s nothing for you here.” Mrs. Bakshi regrets that the family did not move to the United States years ago when the opportunity arose and is willing to marry her daughters to men living outside of India, explaining that “[t]hey’ll earn more” abroad. It’s a subject she never tires of reminding the family, as her daughters roll their eyes and mock the routine about her brother’s three Subway franchises in New Jersey. We’re also briefly transported to Goa, a holiday destination for European travelers and young, wealthy Mumbai urbanites. But Goa, as Lalita reminds us, isn’t the real India.

In introducing London and Los Angeles, Chadha’s film looks like a visual tour book, highlighting the infrastructure of both metropolises. When the film moves to England, we’re greeted with modern rock music and views of Big Ben, Tower Bridge, the London Eye, and St. Paul’s Cathedral, monuments which speak to the tradition, modernity, and organization of the city. Similarly, Los Angeles is introduced: a Nelly song thumping while postcard shots of downtown Los Angeles’s cityscape, the Hollywood sign in the hills, and the 101 Freeway are revealed. When Darcy gives Lalita a personal tour of Los Angeles, he takes her to the architecturally unique and new Walt Disney Theater, Beverley Hills, Santa Monica beach and pier, and even shows her the Grand Canyon by helicopter. The images Chadha chooses to represent the West are much more advanced than the ones she uses to present India: a sweeping shot of an outdated farm, an airport under construction (Chadha’s commentary reveals the Amritsar Airport has looked like that for years), the chaos of the city streets, and the decaying Bakshi home.

In the film, Los Angeles, it seems, has the ability to transform entire persons. It is not a coincidence, then, that Lalita falls in love with Darcy, transformed into the perfect host and defender of India, in Los Angeles. Like Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet, who admits to falling in love with Mr. Darcy on “first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley” (286), Lalita’s change of heart regarding Will Darcy comes after she visits his family’s

---

18 This is a reference to director Yash Chopra, one of the most successful directors and producers in Bollywood. Landscape shots are his trademark.
luxury hotel in Beverley Hills. At Kholi and Chandra’s wedding, he arrives in an Indian-looking suit, which he now wears comfortably, and which Lalita notes, “really suits [him].” Symbolically, Darcy is now accepted by India, something granted to him in Los Angeles, not India. Kholi, an unlikable cad in India, is now cool and likable, comfortably at ease. He no longer wears glasses; he dresses stylishly, spikes his hair, and has lost his “uneducated minicab/7-Eleven store type” accent (his words). Chandra, too, appears different. She no longer wears traditional Indian clothing, the kind we only see her wearing in India. Now she dresses like a typical casual Western woman, telling Lalita, and defending herself for marrying Kholi: “I love it here.”

In condoning Chandra’s disavowal of traditional Indianriess upon marrying and moving to Los Angeles, Chadha’s film loses any remaining parallels to Bollywood. Many Bollywood films reference the diaspora and espouse the importance of maintaining one’s cultural values while living abroad. Vijay Mishra writes that Bollywood’s interest in making films about the experience of diaspora is a way to “display the diaspora better than it displays itself” (247). It’s a way to educate NRIs and not allow them to lose their Indianness while they interact with another culture. Or, as Mishra writes, “Bombay cinema,” in “creat[ing] its version of the diaspora, tell[s] the diaspora what it desires” (247). In DDLJ, English-born Indian Raj Malhotra is not an acceptable match for Baldev Singh’s (Amrish Puri) daughter Simran (Kajol), also an English-born Indian, because according to Singh, Raj isn’t Indian enough. Instead, Simran must marry the man her father chooses, Kuljit—“a strong lad from Punjab.” Initially, Simran is turned off by Raj’s behavior: he eats meat (a McDonald’s hamburger, no less), drinks alcohol, and is cocky. For Simran, Raj does not display the Indian values she finds important. It is only in declaring that he has not compromised her honor (she wakes up in his bed, wearing his clothes after accidentally getting drunk the night before) that she warms to him. He convinces her by telling her: “I know what you think of me. You think I’m a wastrel. I’m not scum, Simran. I’m Hindustani. And I know what honor means for the Hindustani woman.” Mishra adds that Raj’s use of the word Hindustani is a “coded word scripted as a defiant self-assertion of the absolute dharma of the Indian (to say that ‘I am Hindustani’ is a declaration of transcendental Indianness)” (253). He reiterates this to Simran later, refusing her offer to elope. He says: “No, Simran. I haven’t come here to
steal you. I might have been born in England, but I am Hindustani. I’ve come here to take you as my bride.” Once Raj proves that he is Indian enough for Simran’s father, Singh grants his permission for Raj and Simran to marry.

Maintaining one’s difference, one’s Indianness, especially while living abroad, is essential in Bollywood. Suketu Mehta explains that *DDLJ*’s success was directly correlated to the way it dealt with anxieties about diaspora and globalization, stating:

*DDLJ* was about Indian expatriates in London who get drunk, wear leather jackets and jeans, flirt and hold hands, but in the end travel back to Punjab and stay true to Hindustani values. With its easy mixture of old and new India, the film soothed the insecurities many Indians felt in the mid-nineties, when economic reforms ushered in satellite television along with Coca-Cola and Levis. The movie suggested it was possible to remain true to Indian culture while embracing globalization. (“Welcome”)

Director Karan Johar tackles this issue in his mega hit *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, Indian-born-but-raised-in-England-educated-at-Oxford Tina (Rani Mukherjee) must sing a song in Hindi before her peers before she’s accepted in India, something Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan), who criticized her for “not [being] Indian enough” because “[s]he’s born and brought up in England” does not expect her to be able to do. After singing, she triumphantly walks over to Rahul and explains: “Living in London and studying and growing up there has not made me forget my roots.” Similarly, in Johar’s following project *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), Anjali (Kajol) hates that her son, born in England, has no sense of his roots and is “already half an Englishman.” As a surprise to his mother, he and his English fourth-grade class sing India’s national anthem at the school recital, a gesture that brings Anjali to tears.

In Chadha’s film, only Lalita seems to have misgivings about leaving India, and even she eventually betrays her pro-Indian sensibility. At one point, during the “No Life Without Wife” song, she “dream[s] of what it would be like to be like / To be an overseas bride dressed in white” and “To have a little home, in the country, / And live in the land

---

19 *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* won Filmfare Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor and Supporting Actor, Best Actress and Supporting Actress (imdb.com).
20 Both *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*KKHH*) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*K3G*) are referenced in *Bride and Prejudice*. You can see billboard of *KKHH* during the “Marriage Has Come to Town” song. During the credits, cardboard cutouts of *K3G* stars move across the frame.
of Her Majesty.” For all Lalita’s incessant preaching about cultural awareness and her defense of India, she quickly betrays her sensibilities at the thought of marrying the English Johnny Wickham. For the other women who marry in this film, moving overseas after marriage is less problematic. Four Indian women marry in this film, which is understandable, since the film is about the Bakshi women looking for husbands. But none of the women marries a man residing in India: “the bride” marries London-based “groom”; Chandra marries the green card holding Kholi; Jaya Bakshi marries Balraj, who lives in London; and Lalita weds American Will Darcy of Los Angeles. These women become exotic trophies for the men of the West, all of whom go to India to find their brides. The women are even referred as commodities available for purchase. Chadha and co-writer Paul Mayeda-Berges’ modern translation of Austen’s opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* confirms that these women live each moment of their adult lives waiting to be bought by eligible men. Lalita says: “All mothers think that any single guy with big bucks must be shopping for a wife.” At the *gharba*, Chandra teases Lalita about Darcy’s inability to woo her, asking: “So Mr. Darcy didn’t manage to seduce the jewel of Amritsar?” As a jewel, Lalita can be bought at a price and used as an adornment and a symbol of wealth. Upon Kholi’s arrival at the Bakshi house, the Bakshi daughters are lined up side by side, from tallest and oldest to shortest and youngest, dressed in their finest, traditional clothes and look like mannequins in a store window. The ultra-bright lighting even makes the Bakshi living room look like a department store. Chadha uses a widescreen shot, so we, like Kholi, see which one we would buy. Their mother commands them to “Stand straight. Smile. Don’t talk unnecessarily. And don’t say anything too intelligent.” As each is introduced, Kholi eyes each of them, deciding which one he’d like to marry and take back with him to Los Angeles. Chadha doesn’t give these women Indian men as options; not even the film’s bad guy, Johnny Wickham, is Indian. Instead, each of the women is taken from India and transplanted to England or California.

By endorsing Western cultural values in a film modeled on the Hindi film, Chadha fails to understand the essence of Bollywood, an anti-Imperial, anti-Western art form. By adapting a nineteenth-century English novel while promoting the West, Chadha aligns herself with a tradition meant to educate Indian subjects of the Empire by Western
standards. It is hardly surprising that *Bride and Prejudice* was a commercial failure with Indian audiences.\(^{21}\) Even with Aishwarya Rai, Anupam Kher, and other Bollywood stars in the production, Chadha’s *Bride* wasn’t Bolly enough. What Westerners see as “[k]itschy, illogical, [and] often defying common sense,” global audiences, outside of Europe and North America, love. Bollywood, unlike *Bride*, is clear about its purpose and future. Shah Rukh Khan, currently India’s biggest film star, is quick to defend Hindi films: “I’d like to stress we [Bollywood] are part of world cinema and we are making films—films we like, not for film festivals … Mark my words one day Indian cinema will rule the world. Once we get the technology we are going to kill them” (qtd. in Tyrrell 261). In a recent interview on the popular Indian talk show, *Koffee with Karan*, renowned actor Amitabh Bachchan, asked by host and successful Bollywood screenwriter, director, and producer Karan Johar, how he responds to “Hollywood highbrows” who dismiss the quality and importance of Bollywood cinema, responded: “In five years you’ll be eating your words.”\(^{22}\)

What begins as an attempt to use Bollywood elements in a Hollywood film quickly becomes a parody of Bollywood. In *Bride and Prejudice*, Chadha wants to portray India and Bollywood positively but ultimately uses her film to promote Western cultural values and the Hollywood film industry. On some levels, *Bride* is a critique of America as the current global superpower, but it is troubling that Chadha ignores England’s history as colonial occupiers in India. But even her critique of America is lost in her glorification of Los Angeles and Hollywood. As a Western filmmaker, Chadha depends on the money generated by American audiences, so she glosses over her initial attacks on America and ends up endorsing the culture Bollywood tries so hard to distance itself from.

\(^{21}\) On its opening day in Mumbai, *Bride* only managed to fill seats 60-70% capacity. Though its numbers improved to 95% by the end of the weekend, Indu Mirani, a film analyst and publisher of *Box Office* magazine, said: “[T]he film is a commercial flop” (“Flops”).

\(^{22}\) Mehta calls Bachchan a “larger-than-life figure in Bollywood.” (“Welcome” 59). Bachchan was also voted the “greatest star of stage or screen” in a 1999 BBC online poll, beating stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Lawrence Olivier, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, and Cary Grant (BBC).
THREE

What’s Jane Austen Doing in Tamil Nadu?:

Rajiv Menon Transforms Sense and Sensibility into an Indian Story

Rajiv Menon’s Kandukondain Kandukondain (2000, I Have Found It), based on Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility (1814), manages to rewrite a nineteenth-century English text using traditional masala elements. What distinguishes Menon’s film from Gurinder Chadha’s Bride and Prejudice and Mira Nair’s Vanity Fair is that he doesn’t rely on Western film standards or success. His is an Indian story, set in India in the southern state Tamil Nadu, starring Indian actors, spoken in Tamil, and employs the expected masala elements.

Although Bollywood (referring to the Bombay film industry) is the best known Indian film industry outside of India and has come to define Indian cinema, the Tamil film industry produces more films than Bollywood, or any other film industry, each year (Dickey 131). To an outsider the film industries look the same. They both rely on the convergence of multiple film genres in one film and both use song-and-dance sequences. In some cases, as with Menon’s Kandukondain Kandukondain, regional Indian cinema often employs Bollywood or other Indian film stars in their productions. But Tamil pictures do differ from Bollywood, even if the difference is slight. For instance, Tamil productions are often more conservative than Bollywood films, focusing on family units, the chastity of women, and the hardworking everyman. Conservative ideology always prevails in Tamil cinema. Sara Dickey, author of “Consuming Utopia: Film Watching in Tamil Nadu,” adds that Tamil films rely on the use of melodrama and spectacle as a means for moviegoers to escape the harsh realities of their daily lives (133-35). Thus, most Tamil films end happily by some form of “chance, coincidence, or villainy mak[ing] a ‘true’ resolution unnecessary.” Dickey continues, noting that “this type of melodrama offers audiences the delusion that the exposed problem is not a problem at all, or at least that it can be solved happily and its unpleasant ramifications avoided” (137).

So what, then, is Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility doing as a Tamil film? For some readers, Jane Austen is both melodramatic and conservative. For others, she is realistic and progressive. Somehow, writer/director Rajiv Menon manages to capture

---

23 Regional cinema refers to any Indian film industry not produced in Bombay.
both sides of Austen, while appeasing and challenging the expectations of Tamil film audiences. Dickey explains that Tamil films follow one of three plots. The first set deals with “the sacrifices and perseverance of a faithful wife; the transformation of a self-centered and erotic woman into a proper Tamil woman; and the dissolution of a happy family of men (or, by extension, the traditional joint family) because of a woman who marries into it” (139). The second thematic set involves: “the breakup of the joint family; family members’ transgressions of their duties toward one another; tensions between the demands of natal families and marital families; “love” marriages versus arranged marriages; and husbands’ adultery” (140). The third and least used set relies on “comparisons of the nature of the rich and poor; the relative sophistication of each, and the value of their different types of education; tensions arising from interaction between lower-class and upper-class characters also receive some treatment” (140). Issues involving familial relationships, marriage, womanhood, and class are all represented in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Ruth Vanita, professor of English at Miranda House, Delhi University, relates the nineteenth-century English literary heroine to the contemporary Indian woman, seeing many of the social expectations of the heroine as similar to what Indian culture expects of its young women. Vanita suggests: “Many of the moral conflicts presented in [nineteenth-century English] novels would in some ways be more alien to a woman student in England today than to her counterpart in India” (91). A novel like *Sense and Sensibility*, therefore, appeals to the everyday concerns and dilemmas facing Indian women today and manages to show that women can be both progressive and traditional at the same time.

*Sense and Sensibility* is a novel about women. The reader follows the misfortunes of Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret as they try to forge their own independence after Mr. Dashwood’s death. *Kandukondain* *Kandukondain* follows the lives of another family of women (we’re never given a surname) while they strive to keep their dying grandfather’s legacy afloat while their uncle remains absent from the home. As in all of Austen’s novels, the parental figures

---

24 Vanita’s essay, “*Mansfield Park* in Miranda House,” is an “analysis” of the discussions she had with her mostly middle-class, female English Honors students in 1988-9 (92).
are ineffectual. The girls’ father, of whom their grandfather never approved, died years before the film begins. Their mother is useless, often complaining about and blaming others (most often her eldest daughter Sowmya’s bad luck) for her misfortunes. It becomes the eldest daughters’ duties, then, to keep the household running and to provide proper familial affection for each other.

Sowmya (Tabu), Menon’s Elinor character, is the eldest of the girls and bears the greatest responsibility in caring for her family. As the stand-in matriarch, she is traditional and intelligent, not afraid to speak her mind in defense of her family, but is often quiet in asserting her own concerns. The family servant equates her, complimentarily, with a man when reassuring the ailing patriarch that the women have his affairs under control. She says: “Your granddaughter Sowmya is off taking care of the temple, farm and college, just like a man would do.” Likewise, when the family relocates to Madras after losing their home after the grandfather dies, the family’s survival is tied to Sowmya’s ability to find a job. Much of the pressure Sowmya feels is because she cannot help the family by marrying. She’s not opposed to arranged marriages, a fact her sister Meenakshi, called Meenu, cannot understand. But each time an arrangement is planned, something derails the marriage from actually taking place. One fiancé committed suicide with “a picture of a foreign nurse in his pocket.” Her next suitor, after seeing Meenu, would rather marry Meenu, and a third suitor is in a car accident on his way to meet her. She resigns herself to early spinsterhood and makes it up to her family by providing their needs. Despite the bad luck that her mother believes follows her, Sowmya is promoted to Junior Programmer at work and buys a flat for the family in Madras.

Although Sowmya is traditional and quiet, she is not weak. Menon makes sure the audience supports Sowmya by showing her through close-ups while her mother and Meenu argue about her life, or by showing her reaction when she overhears Manohar, her love interest, telling her mother and Meenu that he has changed the title of his film—a title she chooses—after hearing from an astrologer that “S” is an unlucky letter for him. In four scenes we see Sowmya through a mirror’s reflection, revealing not one perspective of Sowmya’s reactions, but two (and in one case three). No other character in the film receives such intimate treatment. The use of mirrors emphasizes our
connection to Sowmya, as her reflection becomes our own, while at the same time granting us the privilege to see her as she sees herself. Menon also asks the audience to respect Sowmya by often shooting her from a low angle, so the audience must always look up to her.

But Menon doesn’t allow his demure heroine to hide behind her silence. He grants her the ability to defend herself when her honor is attacked. Her aunt accuses Sowmya of falsifying the college books and extorting money from the organization, and suddenly the shy Sowmya becomes vocal as her honor is questioned, telling her aunt: “You can’t just say anything you want. I didn’t falsify the college books. Even you aren’t foolish enough to believe that!” And while Sowmya is traditional and, in many ways, conservative, she is not limited by her status as a woman, often vocally advocating for a woman’s inherent rights and abilities. In another scene with her aunt, after learning that her family has inherited the property after their uncle’s premature death, Meenu returns the keys to her aunt, explaining that they’ve built their own life and don’t need to return to the past. Their aunt implores them to reconsider, to think about keeping the property to lure future suitors. But Sowmya quickly interjects that “[m]en should marry us for who we are, not for our possessions or property,” and hands the deed back over to her aunt. Her behavior is consistent when Manohar, mistaken for a potential suitor, tells Sowmya and her mother that he’ll agree to any price they wish (he wants permission to film on their property). Assuming he’s asking for a bride price, Sowmya tells her mom she “won’t agree for money.” And once Sowmya is promoted to Junior Programmer, she pressures her male coworkers into staying late to finish a project, and when they whine about the extra work, she observes: “We ladies are ready to work at night, too. What’s your problem?” Although Sowmya is a traditional Tamil woman, she’s not a push over. She works hard, provides for her family, and defends her position in society, as well as her status as an Indian woman. Menon rewards her with a successful career she can take to California, a stable home, and the man she loves.

While Sowmya stands for tradition and practicality, her younger sister, Meenakshi (Aishwarya Rai), Kandukondain Kandukondain’s Marianne Dashwood, represents idealism and modernity. A free spirit, Meenu embodies the defiance some Indian woman find heroic. According to Vanita, “[w]hen our own fantasies and unexpressed desires are
acted out by the female protagonist, we can, in admiring her, feel we are equally, or almost equally, heroic and rebellious because we have the same desires, even though we may not have acted upon them” (96). Unlike Sowmya, Meenu rejects the idea of arranged marriage, telling her mother as they prepare Sowmya to meet a potential bridegroom: “I’ll find a husband on my own.” When Sowmya obligingly understands that she will not be picking her husband, Meenu insists: “I’d never accept that.” Indian women might admire Meenu’s rejection of the marriage system, but few believe a love marriage will happen in their own lives. Vanita adds: “While most of [the students] plan to acquiesce in the arrangement, and some argue in favour of it, almost all betray, sometimes even openly confess, the desire for a ‘love marriage’” (93). While audiences may cheer for Meenu, few will take her seriously, and they’re not supposed to. Menon clouds her resistance with romantic fantasies straight from popular chick lit. Meenu relates to her sister that she “want[s] lightning, rain and storms, and a godlike man stepping forth out of them. He’ll [also] sing Bharathi’s poetry.” When her dreams are realized in the embodiment of Srikanth, called Srika, the audience hesitates to trust a man we see floating on a lake during a monsoon-like downpour, singing about an unidentified woman. Though Srika is a self-proclaimed Bharathi expert, his job as a financial consultant makes him suspect, especially since he openly asks the audience, as he asks potential clients, to trust him.

Menon uses Meenu, however, to fight injustice. She’s defiant, brash, and stubborn, questioning all the expectations placed on her and her family. We’ve already seen that she is unwilling to participate in the ritual of arranged marriage. She also refuses to follow her aunt’s orders when she finds them degrading, telling her mother: “She’s not my mother and I’m not her child! Yesterday she said Chinnatha [the servant] was busy and asked me to iron her skirt! Am I a servant?” When her mother defends the aunt’s position, Meenu retorts: “We may have lost the house, but what about our dignity? That’s not gone.” And she storms out of the kitchen. Even with Srika, she is unwilling to surrender her position if she feels she is right. On the rooftop of their home, Srika and Meenu discuss poetry:
SRIKA:
“In a woman’s company lies man’s beauty. At the soothing sight of a flower . . . .”
That’s the Bharathi touch!

MEENU:
(laughs, amused) I will sing it. But it’s not Bharathi. It’s Bharathidasan.

SRIKA:
(laughs)

MEENU:
What?

SRIKA:
(laughing) I know all of Bharathi by heart. I can recite it even in my sleep. I would never—

MEENU:
(angry, annoyed) What? You never make mistakes?

SRIKA:
That’s not the point. What I say regarding Bharathi is final.

MEENU:
Raising your voice doesn’t make it true. I’ll show you. (Goes inside and flips through a book. Returns.) Page 23 in this book of Bharathidasan’s poems. “In a woman’s company lies a man’s beauty.” (To Srika) Those ignorant enough not to know Bharathi from Bharathidasan should pay attention.

SRIKA:
(storms off, angry)

Although Meenu regrets her behavior with Srika later, her instinctive move is to correct what she knows to be false, even if the mistake is made by the man she loves. Rather than allowing the man’s word to be final, she insists on uncovering truth. And on a comedic note, Meenu wittily tells the priest in the temple, who wishes Sowmya a long,
happy marriage that “[s]he has to get married first,” going against proper female Indian decorum—at the temple no less.

In acting as Sowmya’s defender and advocate, Meenu gains our respect. When she asserts herself as Sowmya’s campaigner, Menon shoots Meenu using low angle shots, providing her the same level of respect he gives to Sowmya. Meenu is the first person to support Sowmya when she’s blamed for not securing a bridegroom or when their aunt lashes out against Sowmya’s abilities to manage the college. Meenu pleads Sowmya’s case to her mother:

You should have told them [about Sowmya’s previous failed engagement]! Why should we hide it? Her hands are numb from serving so much coffee! . . . . He had a picture of a foreign nurse in his pocket. He committed suicide over that woman. Why don’t you mention that? Sowmya had nothing to do with his death. Why do you hurt her chances every time by hiding that?

Rather than allow her mother to belittle Sowmya, Meenu speaks for her quiet older sister when Sowmya won’t speak up for herself. Meenu is always the first person to compliment Sowmya or provide familial affection, at which their mother falls short. Meenu even defends Sowmya against Sowmya’s own insecurities and belief in her own bad luck, telling her “[t]he day will come when everyone will call you the luckiest of all.” Menon provides several scenes in which the sisters share an understanding glance, a soothing hug, a brief touch, or a clasp of hands, all in an effort to keep Meenu high in the audience’s estimation.

If the audience feels any impatience with Sowmya’s refusal to express her feelings to Manohar, Meenu voices these concerns to Sowmya. Essentially, Meenu speaks for us. When Sowmya dismisses her understanding with Manohar as a “kind of affection,” a baffled and annoyed Meenu responds: “What? ‘Affection’? Don’t hold back. Tell him clearly that you love him,” echoing Charlotte Lucas’ advice to Elizabeth Bennet about Jane Bennet’s undisclosed feelings for Mr. Bingley in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. And when Sowmya shrugs off the gossip of Manohar’s relationship with his film’s heroine, Meenu asks Sowmya how she’s dealing with the situation and if she’s spoken to Manohar about it, showing real concern for her sister’s hidden emotional
turmoil. Because we feel attached to and protective of Sowmya, we identify with and approve of Meenu as Sowmya’s most vocal defender and advocate. We continue to support Meenu, even when we do not understand her romantic ideals or approve of her choices.

While Meenu is likable, she’s not perfect. If Dickey’s assessment of Tamil cinema’s thematic formulas is correct, then of all the female characters of Kandukondain, Meenu represents, in a minute way, the “self-centered and erotic woman” who must transform into the “proper Tamil woman” by the film’s end. Menon, however, handles Meenu’s transformation in such a way that she doesn’t forfeit the ability to speak her mind or challenge the status quo. In convincing the audience that Meenu needs to grow up, whenever Meenu engages in a melodramatic temper tantrum or reacts rudely to Sowmya (“I’m not like you. I can’t just accept this as my fate”) or Bala, a close family friend looking out for her best interests (“You’ve confused pity with love . . . . What I feel for you is pity”), we view Meenu from high-angle shots, forcing us to look down on her behavior.

Meenu eventually matures, but it takes a near-death experience to catalyze this growth. She admonishes Srika, when he proposes they elope just after he’s married another woman: “A secret marriage? Am I to be your mistress? . . . . It [his marriage] was a sacrifice for you. But you sacrificed my future too! That was a mistake, a great mistake. You had no right.” And when she walks away from Srika, we know that she walks away from this experience hurt but without regret. Instead, she discovers love and companionship in Bala, her protector and advocate, and even asks him to love her in return.

MEENU:
I don’t want a singing polo player. I want . . . you.

BALA:
Shut up! Don’t confuse pity with love!

MEENU:
I am very sure. In the past I’ve hurt you many times. I said a lot of things and behaved without understanding you. But in return you gave me only love.
BALA:
Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

MEENU:
I didn’t expect my emotions to be this confused. But I have to say what I really feel. I misunderstood when you gave me the tambura.

BALA:
Oh God!

MEENU:
My singing, and even the fact that I’m still alive, is all due to you, Bala. I’ll fight with you everyday. I’ll get angry and make you tense. Still I’ll be happy. Because I’ve learned to see your inner beauty.

BALA:
No. What is there in me?

MEENU:
I only want you . . . . Will you take care of me?

BALA:
I will.

Lest we misunderstand Meenu’s desire to be “take[n] care of,” it is important to note that she proposes to Bala, she negotiates her terms, just as Jane does by marrying Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brônte’s *Jane Eyre*. Bala’s care is not going to stifle her independence but will support it. In succeeding scenes, Menon shows the couple arguing about who will carry a suitcase downstairs. He insists he can handle it without help, but she persists in helping him with the luggage. We’re to understand their relationship is a “meeting of bodies and minds,” the kind of relationship she tells Sowmya, in an earlier scene in the film, she desires. Her transformation into a “proper Tamil woman,” therefore, does not betray her feminist and independent sensibilities.
Kandukondain Kandukondain provides another strong female figure not inspired by Austen’s novel in Manohar’s film’s protagonist, action heroine Nandhini Varma. The audience is introduced to Nandhini during the shooting of a film’s action sequence. A lone Zorro-like woman fights over a dozen men attacking her. The action stops after the heroine, Nandhini, is accidentally cut by one of her opponent’s swords. A crew worker is awed by Nandhini’s insistence on continuing to shoot after a short break, says to other members of the crew: “What an action heroine! If a hero had been hurt, he’d have packed it in. She’s a courageous girl!” When Manohar narrates the idea of his film to her, describing “a graceful village girl, but very courageous” and calls his film “an out-and-out emotional love story,” Nandhini interrupts the narration, concerned how her fans will receive this kind of character from her. She interjects: “But, uh, I’m an action heroine. What about my image?” Outspoken, in control, confident, and beautiful, Nandhini’s films, in an industry dominated by men, “will draw 30-40 lakhs more in business,” she tells Manohar, than films starring other (male) action stars. Menon uses the portrayal of Nandhini as one of the ways he espouses and critiques Tamil cinema. He allows her to be successful in a man’s role, without compromising her femininity. By making her an action hero, he provides a space for women to enter traditionally male professions (Sowmya is another example), giving his women more prominence, intelligence, and agency than is usually found in Indian cinema.

Whereas Sense and Sensibility is primarily a novel about women, it is also about the lives and struggles of their lovers: Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, and Willoughby. In Kandukondain, Menon transforms shy, stale Edward into Manohar, a gutsy young filmmaker. Colonel Brandon becomes Major Bala, a disabled ex-commando and florist. Willoughby turns into Srikanth, the poetry-loving financial consultant. As much as Kandukondain is a film about women, it is equally about men. The film’s two opening scenes, for example, introduce Bala and Manohar, not Sowmya and Meenu.

It is impossible to talk about Kandukondain without talking about Manohar’s quest to direct his own film, an accomplishment he must complete before he will marry Sowmya. Manohar and his story are unique because he is the one character of the film we’re told has lived in the United States (New York, to be exact). While pursuing a degree in engineering in the States, Manohar also studied film. He comes back to Madras
to make his own Hollywood-style film, without using *masala* elements. His film, *Speed*, as he tells one of the leading actors in the business, will have the audience “biting their nails” in suspense, and therefore, cannot be sidetracked by the use of songs. Manohar’s fervor in not allowing his film vision to be compromised is admirable, but his dreams at making a Hollywood-style film will be destroyed unless he consents to conform to successful formulaic elements. His producer hijacks his film to make sure it adheres to the standard of Tamil films. And Manohar sees his idea quickly vanishing. Menon unfolds this realization brilliantly:

ELDERLY LADY (an actress):

(To Manohar in passing) I’m very happy to work with young directors like you. Bye.

MANOHAR:

(Confused. Talks to himself) This is an action film. There’s no mother role in my script.

PRODUCER:

(To Manohar) Brother, you may have studied in America and worked with [director] Seka-Raja, but we’re making a Tamil movie. You must have motherly sentiment and *gana* songs. These have to be in my film.

MANOHAR:

But there’s not a mother role in my film.

His producer then introduces him to the team of filmmakers he’s employed to guide Manohar through the making of the film. One of the editors tells Manohar to “shoot your film American style. I’ll cut and paste. I can even make a new story,” implying that no matter what Manohar believes his film should look like, it will be a typical Tamil picture when it’s ready for release. *Speed*’s action hero (before Nandhini is cast as the lead) insists on there being songs, impatiently relating to Manohar that “I get lots of letters from fan clubs. Only *gana* songs make the film popular in the countryside.” Even Nandhini, who approves of Manohar’s script and film ideas, asks if he’s “got the songs?” Manohar, it seems, cannot avoid the power and success of the *malsala* formula. His father, who is opposed to his son’s career as a filmmaker, advises Manohar that, if he
insists on making a film, he should “at least [do it] right. Suspense on a train—who’ll go see that? Foreigners may accept a meal of just one flavor, but see the variety of food they serve here? You do the same.” His Hollywood-style Speed, therefore, becomes a Tamil picture called Mudhal Kadhal.

Although it seems that Menon is battling his own discontent with the static formula of masala films through Manohar’s film-within-a-film, Kandukondain Kandukondain is very much a masala film. There are action sequences. We watch a man forge his way in the world and see the reformation of a Tamil woman (which I’ve already discussed). We get love stories and song-and-dance sequences. The opening scene of the film takes place during a battle. We see a beautiful waterfall, interrupted by a slowly descending military helicopter. Men in camouflage with automatic rifles jump out into a jungle. Our hero, Bala, believes in the mission his government has sent him to accomplish. The sound of gunfire and images of chaos disrupt Bala’s monologue, and we follow the soldiers through the jungle, watching through the lens of a hand-held camera. The film cuts to an image of a wire close to the ground, feet running toward it, tripping over the wire, causing an explosion. Our hero does a somersault in the air; a ball of fire chases him. In the next shot, we see he’s lost part of his leg. It’s an unexpected opening sequence for a film adapted from a Jane Austen novel. This portrayal of Bala, however, serves two functions: it gives the film a moment of action, adhering to the masala formula, and gives the audience a noble, stereotypically patriotic and manly hero. The Bala the audience comes to know in the film is a sensitive, limping gardener and florist—not exactly the picture of masculinity. By showing Bala as a great, courageous Indian military hero, the film makes audiences comfortable with cheering for him.

Manohar’s insistence in forging his own path in the world is also noble, even if he comes from a rich family. By rejecting his father’s plans for his life of running the family business and refusing to allow his father to fund his film, Manohar becomes every man. The fulfillment of his dreams inspires us that we can succeed without special connections or privileges. Dickey might argue that this portrayal of Manohar speaks to the common man and “implies the ultimate ‘worthiness’ of the poor and uneducated through its portrayal of the hero, who is an honest, hardworking, devoted, and finally victorious archetype of the poor” (149). Compare this portrayal to that of Srika, a man
who sells himself as easily as he plays with people’s finances. He ends up in a marriage he detests and loses Meenu’s regard. But both Bala and Manohar win their rewards in the end. Bala is rich and marries Meenu; Manohar’s film succeeds, and he marries Sowmya.

Finally, there are “Those Songs,” as Satyagit Ray titles his chapter in his book *Our Films, Their Films*, explaining the use of songs in Indian films. Ray writes that the use of songs in Indian films is connected to a lack of access for the majority of Indians to popular Indian music. He explains: “They have not the choice that the western public has of music halls, revues, plays, and even, sometimes of a permanent circus. Yet the craving for spectacle, for romance, for a funny turn or two, for singing and dancing, remains and has somehow to be met. If the film does not meet it, nothing else will” (72-73). Menon uses six songs in *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, just fulfilling the unspoken requirement for a *masala* film. Ray jests: “And yet six songs per film, per every film, is the accepted average, and at no point in the history of Indian films has there been an uproar against it except from a tiny highbrow minority who write about it in snickering terms in the pages of little magazines whose readership would barely fill a decent-sized cinema” (73). The songs in *Kandukondain* transport audiences to Egypt and Scotland, while providing a space where the hero can romance the heroine, as the dance in an Austen novel allows lovers to foster their relationships. When Manohar compromises his film’s vision and agrees to add six songs to his film, it becomes an overwhelming commercial success.

And if that isn’t proof enough of Menon’s acceptance of Indian film standards, the direction of movement in the film—from left to right—shows Menon’s abandonment of the West (in this context, the West could represent both Hollywood, or American influence, or Bombay’s monopoly of Indian cinema). Cars often enter from the left side of the frame and move right. Trains follow the same pattern. When Sowmya, Meenu, their mother, and younger sister, Kamala, leave their home in Poongudi, the camera tracks their movement right, or east. Menon’s film disassociates itself, consciously or not, from Western ties because he is not concerned with adhering to Western film conventions.

In Menon’s *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, the only remnant of Imperial England is the story’s source, which apart from being published in the nineteenth century, isn’t overtly imperialistic. Rather than using *Sense and Sensibility* to promote an English
aesthetic, *Kandukondain* uses Austen to become an Indian story in which ordinary men are heroes, order is restored, and the family structure remains intact. In showing women as active contributors to society and to the economy, Menon challenges the philosophy of a patriarchal society. And as a film about film, Menon’s movie proves that he can make an exceptional motion picture still using the *masala* formula.

Conclusion

In the second chapter of *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes: “We must therefore read the great canonical texts . . . with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works” (66). Given the history of India’s literary heritage and the popularity of films adapted from the nineteenth-century English novel, it was inevitable that Indian filmmakers would reinterpret these stories for film. In adapting the nineteenth-century novel into film, Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, and Rajiv Menon have taken canonical English texts and changed the way audiences understand *Vanity Fair, Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sense and Sensibility* by offering Indian interpretations of these texts. Mira Nair works within the tradition of heritage films to bring attention to the existence of Empire. A visual *tour de force*, Nair’s *Vanity Fair* brings attention to the fact that England’s economic boom was tied to its colonial exploits. Rajiv Menon’s *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, the most anti-Western of the films, sets *Sense and Sensibility* as *masala* film in southern India. Though Gurinder Chadha misses an opportunity to show Western audiences the uniqueness and importance of Bollywood, *Bride and Prejudice* successfully forces Western audiences to recognize that another film tradition exists and is independent of Hollywood. 25

The Indian film industry, the largest in the world, has consistently dealt with the issue of Empire in their films (*1942: A Love Story, Lagaan*, and the just-released *Mangal Pandey: the Rising*, and so forth). Rather than show resistance to the Raj, however, Nair, Menon, and in some ways Chadha, use the English literary tradition to rewrite India’s literary past.

25 During the promotion of *Bride and Prejudice*, “Bollywood” became a popular buzzword. Aishwarya Rai was interviewed on *60 Minutes, David Letterman, The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *Nightline*. She was also feature in *Time, Premiere, and People* magazines. She has become an ambassador for Bollywood in the West.
Filmography


Bibliography


