



Rina listens to Raju in: *Chutney Popcorn*



A doctor listens patiently in: *Sixth Sense*



Farid denounces white British society over dinner with Parvez in: *My Son the Fanatic*



George and Sajjid at home in: *East is East*

All pictures still taken by Monica Ghosh

# Filmed Representations of South Asians in the Diaspora

Asian Art >  
South Asia

The relatively recent popularity of several South Asian films outside of South Asia raises questions about depictions of the diaspora and possibly the construction of new stereotypes.

By Monica Ghosh

This year witnessed the success of several South Asian films outside South Asia. *Lagaan*, a Bombay film starring Amir Khan in a plot set in colonial India, was nominated for an Oscar, even though it did not win. *Monsoon Wedding*, an engaging film by Mira Nair about an extended family who gathers for a wedding of an arranged marriage, has received rave reviews from critics and audiences alike. While Bombay films, such as *Lagaan*, and films that rely on South Asian content or themes, such as *Monsoon Wedding*, may be getting wide viewership, an interesting and important topic that remains to be explored further is how the experiences of South Asians in the diaspora are represented on film. These experiences often reflect the complex negotiations around issues of race, class, religion, and sexual orientation in the 'host' countries.

Although the South Asian diaspora extends to almost every continent and country in the world, in order to establish a manageable framework, this analysis relies primarily on representations of South Asians in the diaspora in films made in the US and the UK, by filmmakers who may or may not be ethnic South Asians. The five films that this article explores are three independent films - *My Son the Fanatic* (based on a screenplay by Hanif Kureishi), *East is East* (based on a stage play by Ayub Khan-din), and *Chutney Popcorn* (a first film by Nisha Ganatra); and two Hollywood films - *Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan) and *Keeping the Faith* (Edward Norton).

*My Son the Fanatic* is a story told primarily through the relationships of a Pakistani taxi driver, Parvez, who belongs to an older generation that 'came to Britain full of hope and expectation' but whose son, Farid experiences 'being made to feel inferior in your own country'.<sup>1</sup> Farid is very aware that he lives in a racist society where he will

never be considered equal to his white counterparts. Parvez recognizes that the 'English' have 'funny habits and all' but is unable to convince his son to reconsider his decision to become associated with an Islamic fundamentalist group.

Kureishi's work brilliantly presents a view of how Islamic fundamentalism piggy-backs a conservative agenda on existing forms of racism, thereby presenting itself as the only option for South Asian Muslims in Britain in a way that appeals to a generation that is not so much 'thirsty' for the spirit as it is sick of the status quo. Instead of challenging racism and going one step farther than Parvez's generation, Farid remarkably allies himself to an Islamic group that, on one level, challenges the hegemonic ideology, but, on another level, motivates and incites the followers to expressions of hatred and violence in the name of religion. In the film, the religion is Islam, in reality it could quite easily be any other religion. Thus, Kureishi complicates the idea of explaining the world in simple binary oppositional terms of good and bad, with one group assuming all the blame and the other being cast as the all-good alternative. Rather the film holds both groups responsible; the dominant group that dehumanizes and distances people of colour who have dispersed from other places is not much better than the manipulation of religious leaders who incite violence and promote intolerance.

*East is East* tells the story of a mixed-race (Pakistani father and white British mother) family in the UK. In the introduction to the screenplay the author Ayub Khan-din acknowledges the stigma of being a 'black actor' and explains that he was fed up with 'crap stereotypical roles', yet in *East is East* he creates his father as a character that is not far removed from the worst kind of stereotype - the inconsiderate and abusive husband and father whose unbridled rage is beyond comprehension. The viewer cannot understand George's dogged persistence in trying to marry his children off to other Pakistanis. His children resist him and this apparently sends him off the deep end; he desperately tries to control and command his

children from the way they dress and their hairstyles to whom they associate with. There are not many Pakistanis where they live, which limits George's social activities in his neighborhood where he is always seen as a 'foreigner' and a threat to existing orders, which the inter-racial marriage could threaten, but never does. Instead the family is caught in a senseless cycle of perpetual abuse and violence that ultimately alienates George from his family more and more, pitting one culture - the Pakistani who are seen as inbred and hostile - against the other - the white British who appear as 'freer' and more sympathetic.

Race and generational differences are handled quite differently in Nisha Ganatra's film *Chutney Popcorn*. The plot develops around Rina, a South Asian American lesbian. This film is about the family, redefining it, inventing new norms of parenting, and re-creating the extended family. The relationships in this film create an

alliance with white America. The race dynamics surrounding Rina's sister's choice of a white husband and Rina's relationship with a white lesbian are not touched upon. An African American presence in the film is heard only through the speech of a young male family friend Raju. This film raises lots of questions that remain unexplored or unanswered about how South Asians in the USA ally themselves racially - these alliances are represented differently than in British films. Nevertheless, this film takes a bold approach in exploring a South Asian American lesbian character that disturbs notions of hetero-normativity among South Asians in the diaspora.

ridicules nor does it render exotic. In his films, South Asians in the diaspora are depicted as ordinary and expected. Although *Keeping the Faith* seems far removed from any reference to the South Asian diaspora, there are two scenes with Paulie Chopra, a bartender played by Brian George, a white man who is made up to carry the external signs of a South Asian—dark skin and a stereotypical Indian accent. Paulie claims to be 'half-Punjabi Sikh, one-quarter Tamil separatist' with Jewish in-laws and an Irish Catholic grandmother. In a matter of seconds, Paulie's genealogy trivializes and makes nonsense of certain people with complex historical relationships with colonization and diaspora, while privileging others with similar experiences, such as the Irish-American Catholic priest and the rabbi, that are the focus of the film.

This brief analysis of five films indicates that there are approximately three categories into which the filmed repre-

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sentations of South Asians in the diaspora fall. One are films that break stereotypes to engage real issues. Such films, which include *My Son the Fanatic* and *Chutney Popcorn*, produce complex reflections of South Asians living in the UK and the USA. Another are films that perpetuate and support existing hegemonic paradigms and stereotypes while ignoring or reducing relevant issues and concerns, such as *East is East* and *Keeping the Faith*. Third are films that open new space for alternative engagements and new articulations that represent the experience of the diaspora in creative and progressive ways, such as the work of M. Night Shyamalan, Nisha Ganatra, and Hanif Kureishi. <

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<sup>1</sup> Kureishi, Hanif. *My Son the Fanatic* (Screenplay), London: Faber & Faber (2002) pp. x-xi