



Revisiting 'Cool Britannia': The Cinematic Construction of London as a Global City in Four British-Asian Films

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ABSTRACT: The advent of 'Cool Britannia' during the height of the New Labour era in Britain transformed the image of London into that of a progressive, open and dynamic city, empowering the youth and their contribution to mainstream culture while still preserving a connection to cultural heritage. This paper analyses London as a global city and delineates it as a focal point of cultural, racial and ethnical diversity in the films *Wild West* (1992), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) and *Brick Lane* (2007). The aim of this article is to explore cinematic representations of immigrant communities living outside the recognizable West End which anticipate or epitomize the multicultural doctrine and cultural policy of personal responsibility promoted under the Blair administration. These films oscillate between presenting a 'cruel' and a 'cool' Britain while tracing the search for identity of the young protagonists in multicultural London.

KEY WORDS: 'Cool Britannia'; British-Asian cinema; geocriticism; cinematic city; cultural hybridity; multiculturalism

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The advent of 'Cool Britannia' during the height of the New Labour era in Britain transformed the image of London into that of a progressive, open and dynamic city, empowering the youth and their contribution to mainstream culture. This paper will analyse London as a global city and will delineate it as a focal point of cultural, racial and ethnic diversity, focusing on four British-Asian cinematic representations released between 1992 and 2007. I will examine a selection of films which anticipate or epitomize the multicultural doctrine and cultural policy of personal responsibility promoted under the Blair administration. These films not only address the immigrant communities living outside the recognizable West End, but also complete the cosmopolitan image of the metropolis by presenting them as an invisible cornerstone of the global city's economic success.

According to Georgiou, global cities are characterized by "intense juxtaposition of difference between people or outside sophisticated mediated systems" (2013: 10). They gather diverse, transnational populations, multifarious social and economic relations which are in turn mediated into "cinematic cities" (Bruno 1997, Hemelryk Donald and Gammack 2007) defined by "cultural hybridity" (Burke 2009). Following the claim that cinematic London became "differently rather than more international" (Brunsdon 2007: 111), I will examine the highlighted facets of its global identity in the films *Wild West* (1992), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride & Prejudice* (2004), and *Brick Lane* (2007). These films oscillate between presenting a 'cruel' and a 'cool' Britain while tracing the young protagonists' search for identity in a global, multicultural London.

The reconstruction of the cultural image of the United Kingdom under the guise of 'Cool Britannia' following the election of the New Labour government in 1997 heavily influenced the social and economic dynamics of the country. It is interesting to note how Margaret Thatcher's programme, which combined economic revolution with the preservation of cultural heritage, was reconfigured under the subsequent administrations. That being said, the government's acknowledgement of the importance of the film industry did by no means begin with the Blair administration, but only evolved. For instance, the 'heritage' cinema of the 1980s constitutes a relevant underpinning strategy for the cinematic construction of the United Kingdom. The intertwining of cinema and heritage discourses produced films which highlighted a "museum aesthetic, a concern for period fidelity leading to the spectacular display of heritage attractions (landscapes, architecture, interiors, costumes)" (McFarlane and Slide 2013: 350). Thus, 'Britishness' and 'quality' were seemingly associated with conservative period films and overall displays of the national past. Although some of the films of the 1990s transcended this trend, it is worth observing that the implications of the 'heritage' cinema were not merely aesthetic, but also economic. The exportability of these 'heritage' films laid the foundations of a modern British cinema and, starting from then, the American involvement in the distribution of British cinema witnessed an upward trend, especially during the Blair government. Between 1990 and 1997, the film industry in particular was put in the limelight by the Conservative government of John Major, which agreed to use funds from the National Lottery in order to fund the film production



and established the British Film Commission. The British Film Commission was assigned the task of promoting film studios based in London. However, the intent proved to be that of supporting an “economic film policy” rather than the expression of local artists (Houseley, Nicholls and Southwell 2001: 67-8). Indeed, this moment represented yet another step in the long history of the government’s interference in film policy towards reaping the benefits of film as an effective tool of financial profit and of branding for the nation as a whole.

In the years to come, the Labour government continued to invest in the commodification of culture. The campaign led by Tony Blair to rebrand Britain as a trendy, groundbreaking global landmark managed to tie together the social, cultural and economic domains as well as the two conflicting directions that the UK could embrace, namely the glorification of its heritage or of its astounding modernization. Examining the notion of ‘Cool Britannia’ in itself, the oxymoronic association of ‘coolness’ – suggesting an open-minded, youth-oriented society – with the archaic form ‘Britannia’ – a direct reference to the link between the evolving present and its history – invokes a sense of cultural renewal, most visible in television, film, fashion and music. Oakley described, during the Blair administration, some of the effects of his policies as follows:

It was a time of optimism and hype. Instead of being associated with Britain’s declining industrial base, the new meritocratic Labour party wanted to associate itself with the knowledge-based economy (and made the unfortunate error of making these seem like entirely distinct entities). Pop stars and fashion designers were invited to Number 10. While not exactly claiming that ‘greed is good’, ministers stressed that wealth creation was no longer to be frowned upon. [...] At the national level, therefore, this was bound up with the ‘new economy’ rhetoric, and it is the problems associated with this rhetoric – the idea that the ‘old economy’ did not matter; that the business cycle had been superseded; and that growing income inequality was the price to be paid for increased ‘flexibility’ – that in some ways now haunt the creative industries debate. (Oakley 2004: 69-70)

Britain was determined to impose itself through a new form of global domination. The hyperbolic image of London as ‘the place to be’ spread across the world. Following Stryker McGuire and Michael Elliott’s article in the US magazine *Newsweek* about “Why London Rules”, the city by the Thames enjoyed a global media portrayal of its “outrageous fashion, a pulsating club scene and lots of new money” (McGuire and Elliott 1996). Britpop witnessed a rise in fame due to the popularity of bands like Blur, Spice Girls, Radiohead and especially Oasis who were invited to Number 10 Downing Street and henceforth became representatives of the new current. The halo of this image had an effect not only on the cultural industry, but also on the national socio-economic policy inasmuch as ‘Cool Britannia’ was used as a promotional instrument for Blair’s political agenda. Cateridge observes that during the Blair administration, the Department of National Heritage was changed into the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Film constituted a main catalyst since a film policy entitled “A Bigger Picture” was passed in March 1998. The National Lottery continued to be a consistent source of



funding of British cinema and the provisions set in the Films Act of 1985, which determined whether or not a film was 'British' enough to receive a grant, were still preserved. Nevertheless, the new film policies surpassed previous efforts since the specific mechanisms which were used to ensure the development of the industry involved "a doubling of the domestic market share for UK films, and a voluntary industry fund of around £20 million per year to support distribution and marketing" (Cateridge 2017: 353). More than ever, the British film industry became the prime focus of media and government policy.

Studios began to target the younger audience in agreement with the national rebranding strategy, proof being the modern issues addressed, which ranged from friendship and romance to consumerism, drugs, work or new opportunities offered by living in London at the turn of the century. Hence, the prominent films the audience tends to associate the period with are romantic comedies and romantic dramas which proved to be box-office successes. *Sliding Doors* (1998), *Notting Hill* (1999), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Love Actually* (2003), *Closer* (2004), and *Match Point* (2005) are among the high-grossing US-UK productions which present the glamorous facet of the city in the aforementioned "'new economy' rhetoric" (Oakley 70). Following the conventions of the genre, London was to acquire the romanticized image that New York, Rome and Paris already had, providing the setting for mass-appealing stories about white, educated, middle-class protagonists who go through the trials and tribulations of finding a significant other in what was depicted as a centre of global capitalism.

These films are filled with iconic landmarks, which seem to attain at times a greater significance than the actual plot. For instance, *Bridget Jones's Diary* features images of West End pubs and restaurants, of the exterior and interior of a regular flat in Borough owned by Bridget and of a smart flat in Clink Street belonging to Daniel Cleaver. It also includes a book launch at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, exterior and interior shots of the Royal Courts of Justice in contrast with the interior of a BK News store, the experience of a mini-break at Stoke Park House, Buckinghamshire, various images of Tower Bridge, the Borough Market and the final clinch and declarations of love in front of the snow-clad Royal Exchange Buildings. Likewise, in *Closer* the audience can see old and new sites, such as the 'Gherkin', the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben and Saint Paul Cathedral. *Match Point* completes the vista with sights of the London Eye, Tate Modern, the Queens Club, the Royal Opera House and many others. That being said, it is quite clear that all these films are meant to give the viewer "a sense of London as a global city" (Brunsdon 2007: 111). They present a single, coherent version of a gentrified London characterized by a US-friendly glamorous lifestyle, financial freedom, class homogenization and consumerism, set amidst iconic urban locations.

Still, do the aforementioned films truly reflect the actual changes in the social imaginary during the advent of the Blair administration? Arguably, the international image of London which reached the big screens worldwide between 1997 and 2007 may be considered in retrospective merely a marketing tool of the myth of 'Cool Britannia' which would lure visitors and investors. It comes as no surprise that 'Cool Britannia'



resonated with the external, rather than the internal audience. Critics argue that “Cool Britannia failed exactly because it abandoned all those traditional images associated with the country in favour of those hippy and trendy. It is ironic that the nation has lost its distinctiveness in its search for distinctiveness” (Fan 2006: 10). Take, for instance, how Roger Michell’s *Notting Hill* (1999), depicting an area that is famous for its cosmopolitanism and ethnic diversity, makes no reference whatsoever to the lifestyle of its prominent social segment, the immigrants, but chooses to focus instead on a charming transatlantic romance. Hence, Brunsdon’s remark that the image of London could be perceived at the time as “*differently* rather than *more* international” (Brunsdon 2007: 111) proves to be quite revealing.

Of course, it would be misleading to affirm that cinematic London did not benefit from the identity crisis of the time. On the contrary, ‘Cool Britannia’ provides the perfect arena for discussing what Peter Burke (2009) calls the cultural hybridity of the postmodern society, characterized by cultural fusion, globalization and the shift from the centre to the margins. Although, as previously stated, the term was usually associated with white music artists drawing on the 1960s for inspiration, the issue of multiculturalism is also a constituent. It is worth noting that the semantic playground provided by the term ‘Cool Britannia’ opened discussions about its impact, as either a catalyst for a melting pot or as a carefully crafted and skilfully marketed image with no substance. Taking into account the boomerang effect of the public attention to the Stephen Lawrence murder, to the ‘Girl Power’ movement or to the iconic items and radical ideas promoted by Britpop artists, Richard Power Sayeed states that “[p]ervasive misogyny, institutional racism, deep economic inequality, a culture that undermined and dispossessed marginal and radical groups – these were hardly dented by the spirit of 1997” (2017). Patriarchy continued to exist despite the feminism promoted by the Spice Girls, the criticism of the lenience towards racial injustices did not dispel far-right organizations such as the British National Party and the problem of poverty, especially among immigrants, persisted. Still, I argue that ‘Cool Britannia’ did have the merit of drawing media attention to issues of immigration, displacement and lurking racism which the British-Asian cinema carefully transformed into accessible, yet multi-layered tales of diasporic experience.

In this respect, the term ‘Cool Britannia’ is used here to frame the analysis of British-Asian films centred on protagonists who have roots in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. The endorsement of ‘Cool Britannia’ is not regarded as retrogressive in this case, since it is precisely these film plots that best present the multiculturalism that Blair advocated. The films to be analysed cast a positive light on cultural interaction and homogenization while reinforcing the idea that cultural hybridity does imply drawbacks such as the loss of traditions or racial and social discrimination. I argue that not the stereotypical, Americanized motion pictures, but the less promoted films of the period which envisage a multicultural London are the ones that present a truly cool, edgy global cinematic city mirroring the realities of London. To



this end, I will examine the approach of four British-Asian films towards presenting London as a transcultural, globally recognizable city.

A relevant film tracing the balance between cultural assimilation and cultural preservation is David Attwood's *Wild West* (1992). I have chosen to examine *Wild West* as an anachronistic yet relevant example of the myth of 'Cool Britannia'. The ethics of the Pakistani cowboys of Southall correspond to the Labour party's call for personal responsibility in the pursuit of one's dreams and their style combines groundbreaking music with outrageous clothes and openness to the American cultural influence. The film, released during the John Major administration, represents one of the first examples of British-Asian films portraying London as a global city in the making, providing a possible inspiration for *Bend It Like Beckham*. The film is a low-budget comedy which aired on Channel Four. The protagonist of the movie is Zaf Ayub (Naveen Andrews), a Pakistani who lives in England but fantasizes about being a country singer in Nashville. Similar to Jess in *Bend It Like Beckham*, he transgresses the cultural values of Pakistani Muslims and embraces cultural hybridity. First minutes into the film, he is criticized by his Auntie for wearing sunglasses inside the store and for buying pork for his dog. If Jess wears sport attire, Zaf displays his passion for country music through his leather jacket, cowboy hat and guitar he carries at all times. The depicted community resides in Southall, an area known as 'Little India' due to its large proportion of Pakistani and Indian residents. Coming to London over fifty years ago in order to support their families in Pakistan, the members of the community depicted in the film are well-established and settled. Still, the new generation does face the challenge of forging their own unique identity. In addition to their ethnic difference, Zaf and his brothers also face class struggles since they are not bestowed with the financial means to fulfil their dream. Zaf works as an auto mechanic but is fired after an incident with one of his clients. His mother exhibits the stereotypical behaviour of the matriarch and responds to the news with harshness, dismissing the notion of a Pakistani cowboy. Like Jess, Zaf acknowledges the expectations of his family and is ashamed by his failures but the passion for music seems to go beyond his control.

Although this passion is a source of drama in Zaf's life, the scene in which he presents his music to the uninitiated audience of Southall verges on the comic. Specifically, Zaf and his brothers – Kay and Ali – enrol in a local singing competition. The scene opens with an establishing shot of the building, designed with a prominent classical portico and Doric columns, covered by a large banner hung over above the entrance which reads "Asian Rising Stars. Talent contest tonight" (0:20:27). The band makes its way from Jag's convertible, parked midframe, to the hall where the audience has already gathered. A multi-ethnic crowd is shown in the foreground while the stage in the background is taken over by a *bhangra*, composed of a middle-age singer in a white suit and three younger musicians covered in matching sequin clothing. They somehow blend with the metallic tinsel curtain behind them. Close-ups of the singer and of the audience reveal the good time that they are having so far. After the upcoming chain of events is set up through the arrival in the audience of both Zaf's love interest and his



archenemy, the flamboyant presenter of the show introduces the Honkytonk Cowboys. The protagonists stick out like a sore thumb against the preceding light-heartedness and exuberant display of costumes and colour. They perform the song "No. 29" by Steve Earle and the Dukes with an American accent and emulating their idol. Therefore, they miss the chance of boosting their musical career because the response of the audience is not encouraging. The modest crowd gathered instantly demand that the presenter should "bring back the *bhangra*" (0:23:54) and from the first guitar chords, the spectators begin to leave one by one.

They have no support from their community and, to make matters worse, their performance is stopped by a brawl. Shiel observes that "the nexus cinema-city [...] provides a rich avenue for investigation and discussion of key issues which ought to be of common interest in the study of society [...] and in the study of culture" (Shiel 2001: 2). This event raises questions about the ideological positioning of immigrants towards the global mainstream culture. Before 'Cool Britannia' could encourage, once more, a transatlantic cultural connection, the Asian community living in West London still appears reticent to change. The Ayub brothers wish to express their individuality and choose country music not as a way of shocking people, but as a way of expressing their vision of life. When asked about his taste in 'strange' music and clothing, Zaf confesses to Rifat: "It's for myself. It's like the way I see things" (0:36:42). The protagonist rejects the entrepreneurial inclinations encouraged by the community and displayed in earlier British-Asian films, such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). Time and again, Zaf and his friends describe themselves and the others in relation to America. Riding the car with their manager they say "[w]e could be like a bunch of crazy Hispanics" (0:20:12), they salute one another with "howdy" and call each other "amigo" while the members of rival gang are dubbed the "antisocial Rednecks" (0:19:58). In fact, the title of the film encompasses the main aspects of the film, which presents the rising 'wild' side of West London, a faction which is obsessed with the Far West and is offered the chance to make the sound of country music heard in London with the help of Wild West record company.

It is interesting to observe that the idea of embracing multiculturalism and globalization, which would become the hype in London in just a few years, is considered weird at the time the film is set. According to Mather, "*Wild West* increasingly becomes an implied criticism of post-industrial Britain with its barren landscape and limited opportunities for young people" (Mather 2006: 91). No iconic places in London are present in the film. Instead, poor neighbourhoods, small pubs, abandoned factories, family businesses owned by immigrants form a cinematic representation of the real city. Nashville is to the Ayub brothers the promised land. If the heroines of *Bend It Like Beckham* have the chance to leave the country on a scholarship, the financial troubles of the Ayub family prevent them from living a glamorous life and delay their departure. Zaf goes as far as to accept a job as a butcher even though he is a vegetarian. Thus, we witness the social division of "those who have the freedom of gentrified London and those condemned to remain where they are" (Church Gibson 2013: 329). Zaf feels that the country is too small for their dreams. At the same time, he wishes to fulfil his dead



father's dream: "He always promised mom that he'd get out, get back to his land so they could grow old in peace. He never got to grow old. They made a great man small, stamped him down" (0:27:38). He equally promises his mother that one day she will go back to Pakistan and be proud to have "a big house in Pakistan just like Elvis Presley's Graceland" (0:52:18).

Caught between the call of the West and that of the East, the cowboys of Southall recruit lead singer Rifat in a last attempt to become noticed. Eventually, their tapes become successful but only Rifat is offered an international contract with Hank Goldstein thanks to her "dusky looks" (1:17:19). The brothers, however, are deemed to have the wrong look for mainstream country singers:

Hank Goldstein: Listen, boys, I am not for a moment denigrating your skills as musicians. [...] But what I am talking about is product. I'm talking marketing. I'm talking saleability. [...] But Wild West Boys, boys, is mainstream.

Zaf: So, it's the way we look?

Hank Goldstein: Looks can be a big thing. [...] Back in the US they see a picture of you, they say, 'Oh, boy, red Indians trying to play country'. (1:15:36-1:16:31)

The mercantilism of the cultural industry, later supported and sponsored by the Blair administration, is vividly exposed in this exchange. Goldstein suggests that America is not free from racial and cultural clashes. The idea of Pakistani cowboys may not be well-received across the ocean by a narrow-minded public. Still, the band does not give in. Through unforeseen circumstances, Zaf and his brothers receive money from their mother who sells the family home. The boys immediately buy five first-class tickets to Nashville, determined to continue their artistic work. The viewer does not know whether their musical career succeeds or not. The film ends on a tragicomic note, with Zaf, Kay and Ali's inability to sign a contract, with their hope of becoming famous in Nashville and with a shot of the family house being blown up by the rival gang followed by a pan shot of the airplane taking off (1:20:51).

Set in West London, *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) represents the most profitable of the films to be examined, partly due to the cast which included rising stars Keira Knightley, Parminder Nagra and Jonathan Rhys Meyers and partly to its "feel-good celebration of ethno-cultural diversity, encouraging citizens to acknowledge and embrace the panoply of customs, traditions, music and cuisine that exist in a multi-ethnic society" (Kymlicka 2010: 33). The film tells the story of Jesminder 'Jess' Kaur Bhamra, a second-generation British Sikh girl who is determined to follow her dream of becoming a football player despite all cultural constraints. Jess is encouraged in her pursuit by her tomboyish friend, Jules Paxton. The latter protagonist might be regarded as a counterpart who shifts the focus from the lifestyle of a minority to that of the stereotypical white British family. It is Jules who suggests that Jess should join the local team after watching her play football with some Indian boys in the park. The scene in which Jess and Jules talk for the first time (0:10:46) is set on an improvised football pitch. There is a stark contrast between Jess and Jules, who wear sports apparel, and three scantily clad girls their age who watch the boys from a bench. When asked by Jules if she



plays for any side, Jess is ridiculed by the boys behind her who may arguably act as *vox populi*. She is singled out as the only possible member of a "Southall United Sari Squad" (0:10:51). The following over-the-shoulder shots (0:10:54-0:11:22) show the exchange between a reluctant Jess, who doubts whether she is good enough, and a confident Jules who assures her that she has potential. The scene cuts to a montage of the Hounslow Harriers Girls playing football (0:11:23), with close-ups, wide-angle and low-angle shots used to create dynamism and emphasize the physical strength and agility of the girls. An outsider still, Jess watches them practice from the margins before she runs full of excitement into the field.

Although Jess has assimilated the everyday practices of the dominant culture, she struggles with her cultural hybridity. The Western education she has received proves to be rather incompatible with the Indian values. Thus, for her community, the academic success and athletic abilities which she possesses do not compensate for the lack of a suitor. Unlike her sister who is excited about her marriage, Jess only loves football. London itself is depicted as a paradoxical space, a global city which offers equal opportunities for all genders and races but, at the same time, preserves traces of cultural isolation. In line with the traditionalist views, the football boys ridicule the idea of an Indian girl joining a football team. The only supporter of Jess's dreams is her friend, Tony, who also secretly breaks the Indian tradition in his own way, admitting to Jess that he, too, likes Beckham but in a romantic manner. In a conversation between Jess and her mother, we find out that the one relative who has become an independent career woman has brought shame to the family in the process:

Mrs. Bhamra: What family will want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can't make round *chapattis*? Now exams are over, I want you to learn full Punjabi dinner, meat and vegetarian!

Jess: But, Dad!

Dad: Well—

Mrs. Bhamra: Dad? Ah, no! This is where you spoil her. This is how it started with your niece, the way that girl would answer back and then running off to become a model wearing small, small skirts...

Jess: Mum, she's a fashion designer!

Mrs. Bhamra: She's divorced, that's what she is. Cast off after three years of being married to a white boy with blue hair... Oh, her poor mother! She hasn't been able to set foot in that temple since. I don't want the shame on my family. That's it! No more football!

Mr. Bhamra: Jessie, your mother is right. It's not nice. You must start behaving like a proper woman. OK? (0:21:15-0:22:02)

It would seem that the Western influence corrupts the youth. After finding out that her daughter has lied to her, Jess's mother ponders on the negative effects of consumerism: "What haven't we done for these girls, huh? We bought a car for Pinky. Jessie wanted computer, music centre, TV, video, huh?" (0:50:46). The trendy facet of 'Cool Britannia' is not cast aside. In this respect, the film features a brief shopping spree in the glamorous parts of London in search of football boots. Jess and Jules take the train to Piccadilly

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Circus and enter a store situated on Carnaby Street, from which they emerge with bags (0:30:24-0:31:00). Throughout the film, Jess is seen wearing the sports brand Adidas and a Manchester United top, another sign of the merging of the commercial and the cultural promoted by the Blair administration. Afterwards, they relax at the Three Greyhounds in fashionable Soho (0:31:01). The scene is accompanied by a song entitled "Independence Day", by Melanie C, nicknamed Sporty Spice. Even though Mrs. Paxton refers to her as a negative example, "the only one of them without a fella" (0:15:27), she is a symbol of 'Cool Britannia' and an icon of the emerging femininity and new wave of feminism which contradicts the views of both Mrs. Bhamra and Mrs. Paxton. The film touches the feminist agenda since the pressure to behave like a conventional daughter surpasses racial barriers. Jess concludes that "Anyone can cook *aloo gobi*, but who can bend a ball like Beckham?" (0:22:19). Hence, London appears as a site of emancipation, liberation and cosmopolitanism.

The Anglo-Indian friendship, a symbolic union of the East and the West, is best celebrated through football. Actually, the release of the film coincided with the 2002 World Football Cup, not to mention the obvious glorification of icon David Beckham. Once the football team composition is shown on screen, it is revealed that girls of all races, ethnicities and faiths joined. The team, in some respects, becomes a microcosm reflecting London as a melting pot. Yet, the boiling racial tensions are equally presented. During a match, Jess receives a racist insult. After a fit of anger, she is the one who gets a red card. She shares her distress with the coach, arguing that he could not understand the gravity of that remark. He responds: "I'm Irish. Of course I'd understand what that feels like" (1:05:02). In the global city of London, differences seem to bring people closer to each other, rather than separate them. That is why the less common interest in football offers Jess the chance to attain her dream, express herself, succeed academically, reconcile with her family and travel abroad:

Jess: I didn't ask to be good at football. Guru Nanak must have blessed me. Anyway, there was a scout from America there today, and he's offered me a place at a top university with a free scholarship and a chance to play football professionally, and I really want to go, and if I can't tell you what I want now, then I'll never be happy, whatever I do. (1:33:34-1:33:58)

Mr. Bhamra recalls how he was not allowed to play cricket when he first arrived in the country and eventually comes to realize the opportunities that are now at reach for immigrants. The situation is reminiscent of the film *East is East* (1999), another British-Asian film set in 1971, in Salford, which conveys that, at the time, people were admitted in clubs based on their race and social status. In 'Cool Britannia', Jess plays a football match in Germany and gets to live the American dream. According to Gopinath, film director "Chadha mobilizes a conventional framing of home as a space of racial and gender subordination that stands in contradiction to a presumably freer elsewhere (here the United States)" (Gopinath 2005: 128). Mobility equates with success. As Georgiou reiterates, "migration and travel are inherently linked to the establishment of global cities as major financial centres" (Georgiou 2008: 226). The final scene at Heathrow



Airport has Jess and Jules waving goodbye to their loved ones as they embark on a plane which will take them to California (1:37:34).

The third film which will be analysed combines the Labour endorsement of multiculturalism and of the transnational connection with the mainstream cinematic image of London as a romantic, glamorous location. Directed by Gurinder Chadha and co-produced by Pathé, UK Film Council and Miramax, *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) centres on the protagonists' pursuit of love as they travel between Amritsar, London and Los Angeles to find one another. The British and the Indian iconographies merge, as the film plays on the conventions of Bollywood cinematography and American romantic comedies to tell a story loosely based on Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The famous beginning of the novel is adapted to the tagline "All mothers think that any single guy with big bucks must be shopping for a wife". The Bakshis, a middle-class Indian family, are seeking eligible husbands for their four unmarried daughters. For Jaya (Namrata Shirodkar), the eldest daughter, it is love at first sight when she meets Mr. Balraj Bingley (Naveen Andrews) at an Indian wedding. Balraj is a British-Asian barrister from London and an acquaintance of the Bakshis, which makes him a good match, provided that "his family lives in Windsor, near the Queen's castle" (0:04:12). Jaya is aware that there are no prospects for her and her sister in India and so are her parents:

Mrs. Bakshi: Just imagine – If Jaya went to live in UK, we could visit her any time.

Mr. Bakshi: I would hate to have my daughters so far away.

Mrs. Bakshi: But we have so many. One or two can go abroad. They'll earn more. God knows they need to, because we can't afford to give them all decent dowries.

Mr. Bakshi: Perhaps we should have drowned some at the time of their birth.

Mrs. Bakshi: We wouldn't have had these problems if we had gone to US when we had the chance.

Mr. Bakshi: Did I tell you about this fellow who went to America and made it rich?

Mrs. Bakshi: My brother did all the paperwork to sponsor us but you didn't want to leave.

Mr. Bakshi: This fellow went to America and bought a huge American house, and made three swimming pools in the garden.

Mrs. Bakshi: Now he owns three Subway franchises in New Jersey. And what do we have? An old house, an old farm and new bills. (0:12:21-0:13:00)

Songs are used to talk about the idea of 'overseas brides', moving "from Amritsar to UK" (0:14:47). The marriage of India to the West is to be a blessing. If Balraj is a good match, the same is not necessarily true about his friend, William Darcy (Martin Henderson). Even though he is an American whose family owns hotels all over the world, he is not of Indian descent. The tensions between Lalita (Aishwarya Rai) and Darcy arise from cultural differences. For instance, Darcy questions the idea of arranged marriage which Lalita finds to be the equivalent of "a global dating service" (0:21:53) and when Darcy complains about the state of his hotel room, which mirrors the way businesses work in India, she replies that the cost per night of a room in the hotels owned by Darcy's family is "more than some people make here in a year" (0:21:09). The two put aside their



differences in cosmopolitan London, where they go in search of Lakhi and Johnny Wickham. They spot them exiting the London Eye and heading to see a movie at the National Film Theatre. Ironically, it is an old Hindi film which mirrors the kidnapping and rescuing subplot. As Bruno remarks, in the 1990s “the movie theatre housed the city, which was itself a movie house, a theatre of modernity’s journeys” (Bruno 1997: 13). The extradiegetic elements of the scene reiterate the similarities between the British and the Indian culture.

In fact, the references and imagery of London which appear throughout the film are rather stereotypical and commercial. Before ever having visited the UK, Lalita fantasizes about getting married to Wickham. The dream scene (0:42:10-0:43:18) is drawn straight out of a British romance novel. She is in the English countryside, wearing a white wedding gown and running to church, where Wickham is waiting to marry her. On her way, children dressed in white hop around the maypole and Morris dancers accompany the celebration. Wickham appears out of nowhere and takes off his bowler hat before sweeping Lalita off her feet and twirling. The scene cuts to Lalita wearing a veil on her way to the altar while she sings about her dream of living in the countryside, “in the home of her Majesty”. The dream is, nevertheless, broken when the face of Wickham is replaced by that of Darcy. The British cultural heritage drawn straight from a tourist guide is laid before the eyes of the audience. Later in the film, the Bakshis visit the impressive mansion of Mr. Bingley and are welcomed by his sister, Kiran. The residences which were once inhabited by aristocrats now belong to British-Asians. Their upbringing reflects, however, cultural hybridity. The family has transformed the place into a microcosm with artefacts from around the world. The fact that the Bakshis never had the means to be directly exposed to Western culture incites comic situations:

Kiran Bingley: The Thames. Windsor Castle. Oh, flag’s up, Queen’s at home.

Mrs. Bakshi: The Queen? So many lovely paintings. Is that an Andy Warhol?

Kiran Bingley: Wrong decade. We have several originals mommy found in Barcelona.

Mrs. Bakshi: Oh, Italian. How nice. (1:07:42-1:08:00)

In the vein of films like *Notting Hill* or *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Bride & Prejudice* features educated, middle-class and upper middle-class protagonists and presents in a nutshell iconic locations which the audience would be eager to visit. In a montage sequence reminiscent of a commercial, bird’s-eye views of Tower Bridge, Big Ben, Saint Paul’s cathedral, Canary Wharf, the Thames, the ‘Gherkin’ and the Sikh temple in Southall appear on screen (1:06:46). Higson states that the film introduces the new version of the British community, different from the one depicted by Jane Austen or *Notting Hill*. He describes the film as a “self-consciously *post-national* or *transnational* film” (Higson 2011: 82) provided that London is “a new postmodern global village, where friends and acquaintances run across each other at international airports, and where diasporic communities, extended families and romantic liaisons stretch across continents” (Higson 2011: 83). Once again, ‘Cool Britannia’ is at the border of the local and the global, accommodating and valorising ethnic diversity.



If the British-Asian films discussed so far show a light-hearted, optimistic portrayal of going West, *Brick Lane* (2007), a film adaptation of Monica Ali's best-selling 2003 novel, shifts the tone and chooses to present the nostalgia of leaving the home country after being forced into an arranged marriage. Nazneen Ahmed (Tannishtha Chatterjee) longs for the idyllic version of Bangladesh she left behind when she was sixteen, for her sister, Hasina, who stayed behind and for her mother who committed suicide before her departure. Now thirty-four years old, Nazneen lives with her husband Chanu Ahmed (Satish Kaushik) and her two daughters in a small apartment in Tower Hamlets, East London. After Chanu is fired, Nazneen starts sewing at home in order to support her family. This is how she encounters Karim. Keeping an eye closed on the unfaithfulness of his wife and resigned with his failure in London, Chanu returns to Bangladesh. Nazneen decides to consider the well-being of her daughters and remains in London. Neither Nazneen, Chanu nor Karim manage to integrate. Chanu is a well-educated man forced to have a job for which he is overqualified. Although he expects a promotion, he ends up unemployed. The character of Karim is shaped by the anti-Islamic manifestations following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He is seemingly a young, modern man but his fanaticism triggers hatred towards his country and love for Nazneen, who epitomizes the girl raised in a Bangladeshi village. Nazneen does not have, at the beginning of the film, a saying in what happens in the household or any control over her relationship with Karim. In times of trouble, she escapes in her fantasies about Bangladesh. Her sister accurately compares her in one of her letters to a princess in a tall tower, her husband to "a simple girl from the village" (0:08:56), both instances used in an endearing way.

Brick Lane, dubbed *Banglatown* by its inhabitants, completes the sequence of iconic locations comprising cinematic London. Far from the glamorous London seen by *Lalita* or *Jess*, Tower Hamlets is a bleak, modern, crowded area which Nazneen navigates daily in her sari. A large wave of immigrants came to the United Kingdom after the 1970s, because of natural disasters and civil war following the independence of Bangladesh. They made up a homogeneous ethnic group, as shown in the film. On the downside, *Brick Lane* became an overcrowded area. The claustrophobic feeling induced by the urban landscape is countered by flashbacks of Bangladesh. The dirty pavement and brick walls of London are replaced by clean grass, palm trees and streams. Nazneen's present, bitter self remembers her younger self who once lived in a paradise on earth with Hasina. She initially does not consider London her home and awaits the day she and her husband will return to their home country. She asks herself, "What can you tell to a pile of bricks?" (0:05:16). London is distorted into an impersonal, soulless place which offers no comfort or perspectives, but only when presented in contrast to her childhood memories. Yet, there are several scenes where the people, the atmosphere and the spatial organization of Tower Hamlets cannot be distinguished from that of an Asian town.

The market scene (0:42:28), in particular, shows Nazneen in a large open market consisting of tables filled with Oriental carpets, bolts of cloth, silk and tulle, items of clothing, handmade objects and customers strolling around, wearing not only saris, but



also short skirts. The scene opens with a birdseye shot of a small area of the market, where the protagonist is browsing the goods displayed in the stands. The community has transformed that nook of the city into a culturally appropriated space. A handheld camera is used for close-ups of Nazneen talking to a neighbour and admiring the fabrics for sale. The atmosphere of the market is conveyed through over-the-shoulder shots and front views which follow the heroine as she makes her way across the crowded market. The movement of the camera conveys her anxiety that she is being watched. Karim walks abruptly from behind Nazneen towards the bottom of the frame and tells her that he has something to show her (0:42:45). This entrance is relevant for the manner in which he symbolically enters Nazneen's existence and disrupts the course of her life. There is a contrast between her sari and his modern choice of clothes, but this difference in values does not hinder their connection. The gentle touch she receives from Karim in the market is highlighted through close-ups of their hands (0:43:00), followed by one of a Bollywood film poster which foreshadows her affair (0:43:05). The affair opens her eyes to the letters she received from her sister. Nazneen realizes that the men she wrote about were not suitors, but clients. Financial independence gives Nazneen a further boost to her self-confidence. Eventually, when the long-awaited moment to go back finally comes, the heroine is determined to decide her own course in life. Unlike her husband, she decides to stay in London with her children and explains that the city has become her home.

Nazneen matures into an independent woman. London is no longer a hindrance to her freedom, but the land of opportunities which makes her be glad to be allowed to work and support herself and her two daughters. By working from home, she is not subordinated to anyone and does not experience the racism endured by her husband. Moreover, she is proud of her skills and values the money she makes so much that she successfully confronts her money-lender who keeps increasing the rent. She symbolically takes the role of the head of the family and thus prepares herself for a new life in London. After the departure of her husband, the heroine ponders on the different kinds of love. She realizes that she has come to know "the kind that you do not notice at first, but which adds a little bit to itself every day, like an oyster makes a pearl, grain by grain, a jewel from the sand" (1:29:04). She may be talking about her love for her husband but perhaps she is also referring to her increased affection for the city itself. London may not be the green paradise she was accustomed to, but the final scene of her playing in the snow with her daughters (1:32:35) mirrors the first scene of the film where she is playing with her sister (0:01:09). Nazneen transforms from a "girl from the village" to a woman from the global city of London.

The cinematic London promoted and financed by the Labour government under the motto 'Cool Britannia' aimed to reinvigorate the economy and reinvent the image of the city while preserving Britain's values, heritage and tradition. After the end of the Blair administration, the New Labour continued the trend of chiselling the image of cinematic London and transforming the city into a fashionable location for visitors around the world. British-Asian cinema was particularly energized by the success of Academy



Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), which made the new prime minister Gordon Brown exalt the British film industry, stating that it was “leading the world” through its release of “outstanding, surprising and culturally enriching films” (Press Association 2009). The four British-Asian films examined also go beyond the glossy, white, middle-class, business and tourism-oriented depictions of London that box-office successes purposefully encouraged during the Blair administration and focus instead mostly on the complexity of the global, multicultural capital. London is portrayed as a transnational metropolis characterized by cultural hybridity which exceeds any established traditions. It is a borderless creative nation which offers its inhabitants the possibility of expressing themselves and pursuing their dreams. It is equally an important knot in the web of transoceanic economic and cultural connections. Despite the quiescent racial tensions, all films deconstruct the binaries East/West and tradition/modernity. Jess’s achievement of practicing an iconic British sport and honouring her family by securing a scholarship in America, the weddings of western men to eastern women, the potential rise to fame of British Pakistani cowboys and the rise to independence of a British Bangladeshi wife advocate for personal responsibility in initiating social changes. The branded city succeeds in reinforcing the synergy of its cinematic representations and consumer products, casting a sentimental image of its past and making a confident leap into the future.

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