

CONTESTING IDENTITIES: REPRESENTING BRITISH SOUTH ASIANS IN DAMIEN O'DONNELL'S *EAST IS EAST*

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ABSTRACT. *The presence of Asian in Great Britain has added a new perspective to debates about notions such as 'identity', 'multiculturalism' and 'Englishness'. East is East (Damien O'Donnell, 1999) explores the culture clash that occurs in the context of a half Pakistani and half British family living in early 1970's Salford. Through its representation of an atypical family the film's emphasis lies most conspicuously on its portrayal of the beginnings of contemporary multi-ethnic and multicultural British society. This way, the film highlights issues of cultural diversity, difference and hybridity while also raising questions about identity, belonging and the concept of Englishness. The aim of this essay will therefore be to examine how Daniel O'Donnell's film East is East explores the paradoxical nature of "identities" inevitably swaying in between two cultures by looking at the diverse discourses on identity and how they have been constructed.*

Keywords: identity, multiculturalism, hybridity, questioning of stereotypes, representation, Englishness.

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**IDENTIDADES ENFRENTADAS: REPRESENTANDO
SUDASIÁTICOS BRITÁNICOS EN *EAST IS EAST* DE DAMIEN
O'DONNELL**

RESUMEN. *La presencia de asiáticos en Gran Bretaña ha añadido una nueva perspectiva a los debates sobre nociones como 'identidad', 'multiculturalismo' e identidad inglesa. East is East (Damien O'Donnell, 1999) explora el conflicto existente en el contexto de una familia mitad Paquistaní y mitad Británica a principios de 1970 en Salford. A través de la representación de una familia atípica el énfasis de la película recae en el retrato de los orígenes de la actual multiétnica y multicultural sociedad británica. El propósito del ensayo es cómo la película explora la naturaleza paradójica de las identidades atrapadas entre dos culturas investigando los diversos discursos sobre identidad y como han sido construidos.*

Palabras clave: identidad, multiculturalismo, hibrididad, cuestionamiento de estereotipos, representación, identidad inglesa.

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East is East (Damien O'Donnell, 1999) explores the culture clash that occurs in the context of a half Pakistani and half British family living in early 1970's Salford. Hence, through its representation of an atypical family it can be said that the film's emphasis lies most conspicuously on its portrayal of the beginnings of contemporary multi-ethnic and multicultural British society. This way, the film highlights issues of cultural diversity, difference and hybridity while also raising questions about identity, belonging and the concept of Englishness.

Given this preamble, the aim of this essay is, broadly speaking, to interpret Daniel O'Donnell's *East is East* as a film that explores the paradoxical nature of "identities" inevitably swaying in between two cultures. For that purpose, I shall first look at the diverse discourses on identity and how they have been constructed. In the same way, my aim is to highlight to what extent characters' language is used as a powerful weapon in the construction and assertion of identity. From there, I shall then proceed with the idea of how culture, tradition and history are key concepts in the analysis of identity. In the same way, I shall propose to analyse whether it is possible to negotiate identity and difference in multicultural societies. No less important is how comedy serves to heighten tensions and prejudices. I shall, therefore, examine to what extent much of the humour in the film reinforces typical stereotypes and assumptions about South-Asians.

Identity is a key concept in the contemporary world. Since the Second World War, the legacies of colonialism, migration and the rise of new social movements have put into question taken for granted ideas of identity and belonging. In order to understand the power of identity, and particularly the role it plays in the construction of both the individual and society, we need to theorise about it in relation to different discourses of race, gender or sexuality. A brief look at different approaches on identity almost immediately leads one to two contradictory perspectives: an essentialist outlook and a non-essentialist one. The essentialist view sees identity as something fixed, unchanging and related to a biological source (Woodward 1997: 12). In contrast, the non-essentialist perspective regards identity as fluid, constantly changing, contingent and, in the words of Jeffrey Weeks emanating from “different elements which can be reconstructed in new cultural conditions” (Woodward 1997: 26).

In his article “Cultural identity and diaspora” (1990), Stuart Hall also distinguishes two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. In his view, essentialism defines cultural identity as one community’s shared knowledge or truth about its own history and culture. This “truth” is conceived by the people pertaining to this community as their point of reference and meaning. As Hall states “this ‘oneness’ underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence” (1990: 222).

On the other hand, the second, non-essentialist view of cultural identity takes into consideration the never-ending similarities and differences which make up the historically contingent meaning of the sense of “being”. In this respect, Hall argues that we cannot simply talk about “one experience, one identity”. On the contrary, people need instead to reflect on all the changes, adjustments and adaptations embedded in the sense of “being”. In this way, cultural identity is a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 1990: 225). In this way, Hall claims that although identity is related to the past, people keep reconstructing their cultural identities because, as he states, identities “are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (1990: 225).

After this brief exposition what stands out is that the concept of identity is problematic and complex. What I propose to do is to examine how the characters in the film represent or embody the opposite approaches of fixity and fluidity.

*East is East*¹ is set in Salford in 1971. The crowded back-to-back terraced house with an outside toilet, where the Khan family lives, portrays the poverty of a

1. It has to be noted that the film, with the funding of Channel Four, became a huge commercial success and won several awards such as the audience award at Cannes and also the support of big US investors (Miramax) for US distribution (Black Film Bulletin Winter 2000 vol. 7. 4, p.20).

working-class neighbourhood in that period. The film, adapted from a Royal Court production also written by Ayub Khan-Din, follows the story of the Khan family. George Khan, is a strict Muslim from Pakistan who settled in Manchester and eventually married Ella, a white, English, working-class Catholic, despite the fact his first wife still lives in Pakistan. George and Ella have seven children and run a fish and chip shop. He attends the mosque regularly and wants to raise his mixed-race children within the tradition of Muslim faith. The film is based on an auto-biographical play by Ayub Khan-Din that he began in drama school and performed fifteen years later. In his introduction to the screenplay, Khan-Din writes:

It was important to me from the early stages that this shouldn't be just one son's story but the story of a whole family, and not just an excuse for Paki-bashing my father (although this would have been easy to do as he behaved monstrously at times). But the more I looked at my parents and their relationship, especially considering the times they lived in, the more admiration I felt for their bravery. This was not a time of mixed-race marriages, which were barely acceptable in the middle-class salons of London. Anywhere else in Britain a white woman with a black man would be considered a prostitute. It must have been very hard for them, the hatred and the bigotry that they would have faced. (1999: viii)

The basic themes of the film therefore are the culture and identity conflicts suffered by these second generation children as a result of the clash between their own aspirations and their father's expectations. As Sarita Malik argues in her review: "Locked somewhere between the style of a northern "kitchen sink" drama and a modern interrogation into identity, belonging and Britishness, *East is East* tells an intensely moral tale—about freedom over oppression" (2000: 20).

The opening scene patently sets out the family's main problem. It shows a Catholic procession in which the six sons and only daughter of the Khan family actively take part. Maneer (Emil Marwa), Khan's most devoted son, is carrying the Virgin effigy together with several of his brothers; before them in the procession, Meenah (Archie Panjabi) is the bearer of a crucifix, while the youngest of all, Sajid (Jordan Routledge), is strewing rose petals in the street. They are all smiling and happy. Although their physique clearly denotes their non-British roots, they are portrayed as wholly integrated in the religious celebration. While portrayed as fully involved in the ritual, it is clear before long that their participation in the procession is being kept secret from their father. The next scene shows them running across the narrow streets in order to hide from George who has returned earlier than expected from the mosque.

This early scene thus already underscores that the real problem for the children is not how to fit in with their English neighbours, but how to accommodate their identities within their own family. From there, the film's focus on the children's

rebellion against their father's attempts to raise them as traditional Muslims. In the process, the offspring of this mixed-marriage come to build their own identities both as individuals and as part of a family and community.

Thus, the construction of identity is shown to take place both personally and in the social spheres. In his essay, *On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (1971) argues that identity is shaped and located in and by different social and cultural situations of daily life. In other words, we represent ourselves to others differently in each context (work, home, school).

Following this line of thought, it appears that the children's identities in the film are shaped and located in and by different places and situations such as the mosque, the chippy shop, the street where they play, night-clubs or even visits to Bradford. For instance, the children hide when the van comes to take them to the mosque where they have to attend religious and Urdu lessons. Several scenes show them sitting bored and unengaged during their lessons. Apparently for them, the mosque is anyone else's sacred space but nothing to do with them. Likewise, although once a month the Khan family visit their Pakistani relatives in Bradford ("Bradistan" in the film), where they eat curry food and go to the cinema to watch a Bollywood film, the mixed-race children feel as outsiders among the large Pakistani community. Tariq's passion for night-clubs is also highlighted in the film. Several scenes show him going out with Stella, an English neighbour, and drinking alcohol which is not allowed for Muslims. Another scene pictures the children eating bacon and sausages at home when their father is out. In this way, the film underlines the children's constant rebellion against the Pakistani education imposed on them. In other words, these scenes illustrate the young generation's daily struggle to strike a balance between opposing expectations and activities: taking religious lessons and spending nights out at clubs. Hence, the film focuses on the children's main problem, their "in-betweenness" or identity sliding between two cultures.

Let us now, look at the "survival" tactics used by each individual child. Nazir, the eldest, escapes from George Khan's oppressive treatment and rejects the Pakistani tradition of an arranged marriage by refusing to marry the girl his father had chosen for him and walking out on the guests during the wedding ceremony. Instead of returning home he starts a new life in Eccles with, as it turns out, a gay partner. Maneer keeps Muslim traditional customs such as praying five times daily and reading the Koran. By highlighting in this way his religious convictions, the film presents him as the only child who respects his father's authority. At the opposite end, Tariq is the most extreme and rebellious of all. He asserts his Englishness by changing his name for "Tony" to get into a disco that exclude Pakistanis. Nor does Saleem want to obey his father's demands, but he acts in a subtler way, not confronting him directly. Although supposedly to be studying

engineering, he is attending an art school. In the same manner, Adbul goes along with his father's wishes just to keep peace and avoid George's violent outbursts. For her part, Meenah is characterised as a tomboy who prefers playing football to behaving like a proper traditional Pakistani woman. Finally, Sajid keeps his parka hood constantly over his head, as a way of protecting himself from the episodes of domestic violence. By means of the characterisation of the children (second generation immigrants) the film thus underlines the children's constant rejection of Pakistani culture and any form of Pakistani identity.

Evidently, these second generation, mixed-race children are not willing to settle for traditions, and their challenges to their father's oppressive patriarchal practices produce family tensions and even domestic violence. Although the film deals with serious issues (Islam values and practices, gender and racial difference and domestic violence), these are smoothed over by the use of comedy. In other words, it is precisely the family's infighting and Pakistani culture that provide all the laughs in *East is East*.

East is East has strong comic elements but these do not detract from the seriousness of the issues dealt with. In examining the issue of comedy in the film, various factors need to be taken into account. An important issue at stake here is humour and laughter. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud analyses the purposes of jokes and the nature of the pleasure derived from them. Although he initially differentiated between tendentious and non-tendentious jokes, he later acknowledged that all joke-making was "tendentious". In other words, jokes are *hostile* because they "serve the purpose of aggressiveness, satire or defense" (Freud 1959: 97). In this way, Freud argues that a person telling a joke which has as its butt another person or member or a certain social group is expressing a kind of aggression towards them, one of verbal kind. In *East is East* George and his Pakistani ways are the butt of the joke and the source of laughter most of the times. According to Freud's argument the film is expressing to some extent an aggression towards that social group. Moreover, Freud argues that the narrator of the joke invites the listener/spectator to take pleasure in the act of aggression. Hence, the joke allows the narrator to express aggression in a form that "will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (Freud 1959: 102-103). Therefore, a function for comedy and other means of arousing laughter (such as jokes) is "[to] gratify impulses which we normally have to repress" (Nelson 1990: 4).

Owing to this, it has to be considered that much of the humour of the film is at George's expense due to his oppressive patriarchal characterization. As Ali Nobil argues: "It seems that the archetypal image of the eastern male, brutish and oppressive, retains a powerful hold over the English imagination" (1999/2000: 105). Most of the comic scenes can be read as excessive and stylised caricatures of racial stereotypes. For instance, the scene before Sajid is taken to hospital for a

circumcision operation shows an enraged greatly offended George at the thought that Sajid has not been circumcised yet. In contrast, the audience enjoys seeing how the child hides from his father while Annie, Ella's friend, checks that this is true. In the same way, the comically ugly physical appearance of the Pakistani brides George has sought for Tariq and Abdul, invites laughter on the part of the audience. Much of the humour in the film can be read as, on the one hand, foregrounding negative stereotypes about Pakistanis, while suggesting that identity is a question of culture and background rather than one's physical appearance or who one's parents are.

Thus it can be said that the narrative reproduces "negative images" of South-Asian community and culture, and in so doing much of the humour reinforces stereotypes about Pakistanis in Britain. Moreover the film operates within a body of fixed assumptions and stereotypes about Muslim religious values and Eastern cultures.

From there, the audience is another aspect that needs some consideration. As Marcel Pagnol (quoted in Corrigan 1981: 75) suggested in *Notes sur le rire*, the source of laughter lies in the subject who laughs. In many theories of laughter and humour (Bergson 1900; Freud 1905), it has been argued that comedy is a means through which membership of a particular group identity can be reinforced. In other words, a whole identified group laughs at something or someone which seems to be different from them. Regarding this, Henri Bergson states "However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary" (in Corrigan 1981: 329-330). Weedon in *Identity and Culture* (2004: 126) puts forward the same argument: "Comedy works as a double-edged sword, that may both deconstruct and reinforce stereotypes depending on the viewing subject and position from which it is viewed". The problematic revolves around the issue of representation and whether texts should only portray positive images or deal with the race relations discourse and the complexity of South Asian communities at stake. Like filmmakers of African descent, British South Asian film directors are constantly faced with tensions and dilemmas over representation. As black filmmaker Isaac Julien and critic Kobena Mercer have argued: "If only one voice is given the "right to speak", that voice will be heard, by the major culture as "speaking for" the many who are excluded or marginalised from access to the means of representation" (1988: 4). Therefore, one of the main issues faced by Black and South Asian film directors is the problem of being expected to represent an entire ethnic minority community. This issue is intimately linked to the potential danger of showing negative images that might reinforce racist views in white British audiences.

So far I have considered certain aspects concerning the concept of identity and how comedy can serve to bring to the fore tensions and prejudices. At this point,

I wish to examine other ways in which the film highlights the generational conflict within the family.

The younger generation's revolt against imposed identity is subtly brought to light through the film's emphasis on language. In *Identity and Culture* Weedon states: "language constitutes rather than reflects or expresses the meaning of experience and identity[...] it is in the process of using language[...] that we take up positions as speaking and thinking subjects and the identities that go with them" (2004: 18). In the film we have evidence of this through the language the children (except Maneer) use to refer to Pakistani people. Despite being called "Pakis" by their neighbours, they do not identify themselves as Pakistani. On the contrary, they themselves talk scornfully about others being "Pakis". For example, when Meenah, Tariq and Saleem discover in their father's trunk the clothes and presents for Abdul and Tariq's arranged weddings, Tariq exclaims: "I'm not going to marry a fucking Paki". Likewise, Sajid cries out "The Pakis are here" when the visitors from Bradford come to their house. Each and everyone of these scenes stresses how powerful language is in the construction of identity. Evidently, George's children are using language to defy the identity imposed on them by their father and community. Thus, language in the film is shown to be a powerful weapon in the assertion of one's own identity. Although the children are mixed-race, they see themselves as English not Pakistani. Their English identity is what leads them to reject any aspect of Pakistani culture.

The children's reassertion of their English identity against George's traditional Pakistani one therefore brings up the concept of Englishness in the film. After the Second World War, migrations from the ex-colonies were significantly large. The influx of immigrants increased the diversity of Britain. In the film, Salford and Bradford offer an example of multicultural cities that resulted from migration during the 60's. Consequently, migration plays a key role in reshaping societies and politics (Woodward 1997: 16). During the 60's and 70's "exclusively white norms of Britishness were hegemonic and assimilation dominated thinking about migrants to Britain" (Weedon 2004: 23). In this way migrants had to adapt to the British culture and be "like" the British.

However, since then there have been social, cultural, economic and political changes which made necessary a redefinition of the hegemonic discourses of nation, culture and identity. As the Parekh Report (2000) states: "given the changes to Britain that had occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, there is a pressing need to redefine current norms of Britishness" (in Weedon 2004: 55). This need for redefinition was also provoked by the emergence of new identities as the ones we find in the film: the children's hybrid identities. The idea of what it is to be English is constantly brought to the fore both by George and the children. George defines Englishness against his own nationality: he and his family are Pakistanis not English. George tries to reinforce this difference throughout the

narrative, stressing the importance of Pakistani cultural and religious practices and authoritatively imposing his own identity upon his children. George is unable to recognize that his children are mixed-race and fails to listen to and understand their aspirations. This is made patent in a scene where Tariq tells his father he doesn't want an arranged marriage and that all the family is fed up with his oppressive patriarchal ways. George replies in his broken English: "I not bring you up to give me no respect. Pakistanis always show respect". Then Tariq insists: "I don't know Pakistani, I was born here, I speak English not Urdu". These words show him reasserting his personal identity. George finally says: "You are not English! English people are never accepting you! In Islam everyone is equal, or black man or white man or Muslim, special community".

On the one hand, Tariq's argument highlights the idea that identity comes from one's immediate background, friends, school. In this sense identity is seen as always in movement and as a matter of constant "becoming" (Hall 1990). He and his brothers and sister were also born in England, which gives them their sense of belonging to English society. "Identity, then", as Autar Brah argues, "is simultaneously subjective and social, and is constituted in and through culture. Indeed, culture and identity are inextricably linked concepts" (1996: 21). They want to be included and accepted.

On the other hand, George learnt that Pakistanis were not considered English due to their race. Therefore he wants to bring up his children within the Pakistani tradition and the Muslim community, vigorously reinforcing his own identity of origin as something fixed, unchanging and as a matter of "being".

Although he is married to an English woman, he prevents his sons from marrying English women because "they are no good, drink alcohol, go with men and don't look after". However there is a contradiction between George's wishes for his children and the choices he himself has made. After all, his opting to marry a British woman, who does not share his faith, obviously went beyond the bounds of the traditions he is now fiercely imposing on his children. For this reason George is perhaps the most problematic character of all. He is shown to be anchored in tradition to the point of having lost touch with his own Pakistani culture. For instance when he criticizes the Pakistani clothes his daughter is wearing, which are more trendy leaving some parts of the body uncovered, he does not realise that his own culture has also evolved. Instead, he reacts furiously at his daughter's indecency. Nevertheless, other scenes make patent George's ambivalence towards the English culture. For instance, he is very proud of his fish and chip shop which Ella runs and he accepts half a cup of tea after arguments or joyful moments with Ella, which means he accepts English culture partially.

Having dealt with individual and national identities, I shall consider now how concepts of community and collective identity work in *East is East*. In the film

George's clinging to traditional Pakistani values and Muslim religion underscores the importance of tradition and community in the construction of identity. He wants to be part of the local Muslim community by raising his children as good Muslims, but he is set apart from his own community both by his marriage to an English Catholic and by the fact that his children are no longer willing to conform to his expectations. For instance, when his oldest son, Nazir, is getting ready for his wedding his brothers laugh at the traditional Pakistani clothes he is made to wear. George tells them: "it is tradition son, all our people wear this". Second, both in this scene and in the one after Sajid's circumcision, George gives his "about-to-be-wedded" sons two watches with their names in Arabic, the language of the Koran. In this way, we see how George holds strong values regarding religion and culture and wants to transmit them to the children. Community is essential at this point.

In his book *Social Identity* Richard Jenkins examines Anthony Cohen's concept of community and collective identity as "symbolic constructions". First, Cohen argues that symbols produce a sense of shared belonging, considering religious and cultural shared rituals as symbols of the community too. If, as Jenkins argues, community is "a powerful notion in terms of which people organise their lives and understand the settlements and localities in which they live" (1996: 105), then it can be argued that the film shows the arranged weddings and circumcision operations as quintessential rituals of the Muslim community.

Furthermore, Jenkins (1996: 107) quotes Cohen's definition of community as "essentially enshrined in the concept of boundary" in order to emphasize its power of exclusion and inclusion. Together with the concept of difference this factor plays a key role in the film. The exclusion from the Muslim community is first suffered by George when he married Ella and then when Nazir runs away from his wedding ceremony. After the failed attempt to marry Nazir, George tells the Mullah he doesn't understand his son's behaviour and the Mullah says: "It will always be difficult for you, they are different". The children are marked as different by the community because they are mixed-race. Despite all the efforts made by George to integrate the children into the Muslim community, they are not seen as proper Pakistanis but as aliens to the community. Hence, what the film enhances through George's failed efforts to integrate his children in "the community" is the problematic nature of group identity: tensions evidently exist within the community itself—between members and between generations.

Another important issue in the film is the way people do or do not negotiate difference and identity. On the one hand, only one of the white neighbours, Mr Moorhouse, bears any visible ill will against the Khan family, sticking on his window a poster of Enoch Powell.² Despite this, his daughter Stella and his grandson

2. Enoch Powell, Conservative MP during the 1960's, was famous for his extremely racist speeches.

Earnest are good examples of how difference can be negotiated. Stella is going out with Tariq. For his part, Earnest is Sajid's best friend. They play football together. He speaks Urdu with the Khan family and has a crush on Sajid's sister Meenah. Neither Stella nor Earnest have prejudices against their Pakistani neighbours. On the other hand, the Muslim community struggles to negotiate the difference of being mixed-race and bi-cultural, as they have some prejudices against George and the children. On the whole, because the children suffer the imposition of their father's culture and beliefs, they try to negotiate a bi-cultural existence. Negotiation will lead to a redefinition of boundaries.

If we analyse the final scene, we see how after an episode of domestic violence Ella goes to the chippy shop and offers George some tea. Her support for him is unwavering, but perhaps after this big argument George is able to realise that his children are mixed-race and are no longer willing to accept such oppressive parental authority and control. It is also very relevant that at the end Abdul accidentally rips Sajid's hood, exposing him to the outside world he associated with his father's patriarchal treatment. This is why he constantly had his parka hood on, to avoid the hostile domestic setting. This event may mean that there exists a possibility for these mixed-race children to go on and live their hybrid identities.

To sum up, through the representation of this British-Asian family as site of conflict between Pakistani traditional values and new mixed-race hybrid identities *East is East* subverts the taken-for-granted notion of the Asian community in Great Britain as the homogeneous entity which earlier British-Asian films and directors portrayed in order to fight the negative representations that white audiences have made of them. Likewise, the paradoxical nature of both the adaptation and integration of the Pakistani community in England and of inter-generational conflict within Pakistani families are reasserted throughout the film. According to this, identity should be thought of as something in process, changing and complex. In *East is East* identities are portrayed both as fluid and changing in the case of the children and to some extent stable and fixed in the case of George. In a sense, it could be said that the film comically focuses on how both stances fare when shown between two cultures. Through its contrast between comic and dramatic scenes the film highlights the paradoxical nature of identity inevitably slipping away between two worlds.

By taking up Freud's view of jokes as always somehow hostile, it appears that the film indirectly criticises George Khan's concept of identity as something immune and unchanging. In this respect the dramatisation of his exaggerated authority within his own family is an underlying comic theme that sparks off different subsistence reactions on the part of his British born children. Thus, the young British-Asian protagonists of the film are represented in their individualistic

struggle as trying to construct their sense of identity and belonging within the context of the two different cultures that inform their ethnic hybridity. In the same manner, the portrayal of George as “different” and hence an outsider to the Muslim community also serves to highlight how mistaken the notion of rigid, pre-set identities can be.

Finally, it is therefore through the characters of Maneer, Meenah, Sajid ... that *East is East* calls attention to the only viable way forward: new hybrid identities, which try to negotiate mainstream and fixed forms of identity. Hence, it can be said that the film’s emphasis lies most conspicuously on its portrayal of hybrid identity as a site of negotiation between different individual, communal and national identifications.

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