



## Interrogating the Representation of ‘Transculturality’ in Gurinder Chadha’s *It’s a Wonderful Afterlife*

**Jayati Ganguly**

Guest Lecturer in English, BC College, Asansol

The author has done her Post-Graduation in English from The University of Burdwan. She has completed her M.Phil from The University of Burdwan and is working as a Guest Lecturer for both UG & PG Departments of English at Bidhan Chandra College, Asansol. Her research interests are Film and Culture Studies.

### **Abstract**

In view of increasing Globalization, Transnationalization and the growth of Transcultural spaces, it is important and interesting to study literature that encapsulates all the complexities of these phenomena. Issues like obliteration of cultural ‘Border’, analysing cultural complexities and the reshaping of hybrid realities of diaspora and globalization are becoming pertinent. This paper aims to study and interrogate such aspects in Gurinder Chadha’s film *It’s a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010). Chadha may be seen as a very relevant subject of study in the proposed context because of her own identity, especially as a diasporic filmmaker, and for the kind of movies she has made. Though aware of the nuanced concepts and theories of such contemporary fields of study, this paper draws mainly on the idea of ‘Transculturality’ as expounded by Wolfgang Welsch in his essay “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today.” It can be noted that the cultural intertwinement portrayed in the movie amounts to a representation of ‘hybridity’, a near obliteration of cultural borders and that of the conflicts arising from such borders. The paper asserts this to be quite a representation of transculturality. But through a deeper analysis of various representations in the film, it has been argued that despite the obliteration of stringent traditional cultural borders and an increasing globalized/transcultural existence, there emerges a latent ‘Orientalism’. This is a ‘Re-Orientalist’ attitude that betrays the latest efforts of restructuring the postcolonial discourse in the era of modern diaspora, hybridity, global citizenship, and transnationality/transculturality etc. This also questions the ideological perspectives of the filmmaker who makes efforts to transcend borders but, in a way (even if unconsciously), circulates re-orientalist discourses/prejudices and reinstates postcolonial binaries which emerge as dangerous gaps in the progressive processes of transculturality and globalization.

### **Keywords**

Re-Orientalism, diaspora space, hybridity, transculturality

Cultural media, especially cinema, has recently proved a major wing of Diaspora studies for it is a primary site of representing the diasporic experience. With rapid changes in the experience of the Diasporas, their cinematic representation has also undergone transformation. The phenomenon called ‘Globalisation’ has taken the globe by storm and disrupted strict boundaries. In many ways rapid globalisation has proven to be a boon and this has paved the way for massive transnational exchanges. With diasporic movements, initially changes and gradually exchanges were already taking place in economic, political, cultural and psychological arena. In view of the porosity/intersectionality and in fact, that of a near obliteration of borders in the era of globalisation, concepts like that of ‘Diaspora space’, Hybridity, Transnationality and Transculturality have taken currency. These contemporary concepts are highly nuanced as well as debates surround them. To make the study in this paper more precise, the concept of ‘Transculturality’ as expatiated by Wolfgang Welsch in “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today” may be majorly considered and adapted from. This paper proposes to interrogate the representation of ‘Transculturality’ in Gurinder Chadha’s movie *It’s a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010). It shall probe how far the representation of the confluence of cultures in a globalised/transcultural world has been able to escape of the haunts of the former crises of ‘boundary’ and ‘otherness’.

Chadha, born in Kenya, brought up in Southall (England) is of Kenyan Asian origin and is married to American director Paul Mayeda Berges. Chadha, thus, herself is a site of cultural confluence. She has the identity of a moviemaker representing diasporic experiences with movies like *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). In this light it is important and interesting to analyse her representation of the ‘diaspora space’ and the intermingling of cultures in a society. The basic storyline of the film goes that an ageing widowed British-Asian (as Chadha tags her in most interviews) mother Mrs. Sethi worries about her daughter Roopi’s marriage but can’t find a suitable match. Roopi is mostly rejected for being overweight and this intensifies the mother’s concern as to what shall happen to her daughter when she dies. She kills those who call Roopi fat or are unsympathetic towards her on her match-breaking. These murdered characters turn into ghosts who are only visible to Mrs. Sethi. They believe they can attain complete salvation when their murderer dies which finally happens while Roopi finds a match in Raj Murthy.

Noted theorist Avtar Brah in her celebrated book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* defines ‘Diaspora Space’ as “the intersectionality of diaspora,

border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes” (205). It dismantles the strict binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ and thereby mellows the sharp constructs of ‘difference’. Brah succinctly states:

The concept of diaspora space . . . seriously problematizes the subject position of the ‘native’ . . . includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’. The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.* (205)

Naturally, with long stay and with the necessity to communicate or exchange, a dynamics builds up. If there is a problem of acculturation, it lies not only with the diaspora community that has migrated but also with those who have their ‘roots’ there, which makes them a diaspora as well in the ‘trans/nation’ or trans/culture’ space which now becomes a potential ‘neutral space’. This emphasizes a sense of porous boundaries or even the obliteration of rigid and rigorous cultural boundaries that previously were thought to maintain ‘cultural purity’. A mutual acceptance and mutual acculturation--whether of individuals or of a collective existence -- is consolidated by factors like laws and policies of that nation, the kind of community life each community builds up with regard to the other, fluidity of discourses and mindset etc. It must be argued that the dynamics that builds up is complex and not unproblematic. Welsch cites ‘Hybridization’ as one of the major features of Transculturality, especially in the context of Globalization and the tremendously increased rate of diasporic existence.

Arianna Dagnino in “Global Mobility, Transcultural Literature, and Multiple Modes of Modernity” states:

. . . transcultural sensibility records and expresses the confluent nature of cultures, where the traditional dichotomies—North and South, the West and the Rest, coloniser and colonised, dominator and dominated, native and immigrant, national and ethnic—that have thus far characterized multicultural and postcolonial discourses are superseded. (133-134)

In view of this disruption of boundaries and binaries, the concept of ‘Transculture’ as explained by Dagnino resembles closely to Brah’s theorization of ‘Diaspora Space’ as mentioned above. It may also be argued that the concept of ‘Diaspora Space’ gradually leads to the concept of ‘Hybridization’ and therefore to that of ‘Transculturality’. Dagnino certainly clarifies that acquiring transcultural orientation does not mean

disowning the culture one is born into; rather, as Epstein mentions, it is about transcending it and not rigidly insisting on the affirmation of one's cultural origin (134). This is pertinent in case of analysing Chadha's movie as the characters do hold prominent traits of their cultures of origin but do not remain within the strict boundaries of those.

At the outset, it is an imperative to understand Welsch's conceptualization of 'Transculturality'. Welsch differentiates between the ideas of 'Interculturality', 'Multiculturalism' and 'Transculturality' whereby the first two terms are considered by him to be conceptually very similar. Welsch explains the classical concept of 'Cultures' as separate spheres (or islands) and that the concept of 'Interculturality' reacts to the fact that the idea of cultures as spheres "necessarily leads to intercultural conflicts". In fact, Welsch explains, the concept of 'Multiculturalism' fails equally to achieve "a transgression of separating barriers"; it rather "accepts and even furthers such barriers" among cultures ("Transculturality"). Thus this concept also tends towards that of 'Interculturality' and cites 'Transculturality' as a progressive solution to these. Welsch sums up the concept of 'Transculturality' as:

The concept of transculturality sketches a different picture of the relation between cultures. Not one of isolation and of conflict, but one of entanglement, intermixing and commonness. It promotes not separation, but exchange and interaction. ("Transculturality")

The issue of Transculturality in Chadha's movie must be analysed in the context of mass migration in the last couple of decades and the latest efforts to restructure diasporic and postcolonial discourses.

Gurinder Chadha in an interview to Matthew Stadlen on BBC News comments on *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* and says, ". . . it's hard to see where it stops being Indian and starts being English or starts being English and stops being Indian; it's such a, kind of, marriage of the two and it probably . . . reflects of who I am today" ("Five Minutes With: Gurinder Chadha"). Such conviction of the filmmaker ascertains an 'intermingled' and 'entangled' diaspora space being represented in her movie and the blend of cultures that she herself is. To talk about the cartographical or spatial aspect of the film, it is based in England, precisely Ealing in West London. This is the diaspora space where all communities co-exist, specifically the 'Native English' and the 'Indian migrants'/people of South-Asian origin. In fact, apart from those of British origin or South Asian diaspora, there are people of other origins as well. These people are members of the Murder Investigation Authority (which is a mixed group of people from various cultures and

origins) or doctors in hospitals and they make the cultural space ‘transcultural’. Notably, the South Asian migrants, who seem to be living in England for quite long now, do not live in any community ghetto. It is an Ealing neighbourhood where the Sethis (Punjabi-Indian diaspora) and Mrs. Goldman (Jewish-English origin) live in almost adjacent houses, with frequent visits to each other and sharing each other’s food and evidently dependent on one another. Mrs. Goldman makes eggless cake for Mrs. Sethi which she loves and is herself very fond of the Indian *laddoos* (sweets) or Indian cuisine that Mrs. Sethi cooks. Firstly, the intermingling of all the cultures in the same living space causing the complexity of identities, and secondly, there being no ghettoization based on cultural differences, brings out the idea of ‘Transculturality’ in the movie quite well.

Mrs. Sethi (played by Shabana Azmi) appears to be the first generation migrant for she has not that British accent which the second generation diaspora like her daughter Roopi (Goldy Notay), Roopi’s brother Jazz or the officer (of Indian origin) Raj Murthy (Sendhil Ramamurthy) have. Yet Mrs. Sethi is not a conventional first generation diasporian who constantly narrates to her children their history of migration to sustain myths of homeland and return nor is she desperately obsessed about maintaining any form of ‘cultural purity’ regarding Indian culture (a tendency so often found in major Bollywood movies representing Indian diaspora) in her children. Mrs. Sethi’s character is, in fact, a good blend of the cultures that are her own and those she has adapted and may be seen as the filmmaker’s progressive step towards moving ahead of the age-old conflicts regarding the co-existence and adaptation of multiple cultures. Neither Mrs. Sethi nor her children face any kind of ‘otherization’ by people any other community, specifically the English, neither despised nor unwanted for being ‘migrants’. Rather there is love and care, exchange of food and emotions. There is no centre-periphery relationship. Thus this representation qualifies as one of a transcultural attitude for the intercultural or multicultural conflicts (that Welsch thinks can be solved by a transcultural approach) seem to be almost absent from the scene.

Apart from not living in a community ghetto, the transcultural young characters are represented to frequent restaurants and clubs which are again more ‘Global’ in terms of culture and are apparently open for people of all cultures and nationalities. Even in terms of attire there seems a transcultural exchange throughout the movie. More specifically, Roopi is seen to wear mostly Western dresses, prepares Western salad while her friend Linda, originally British but now more Indianized, wears Indian dresses, puts *bindi* and wears Indian style jewellery; in one of the scenes she even wears a traditional

Indian *saree*. On the other hand, the people of non-Indian origin are portrayed to enjoy *Bhangra* (typical Punjabi dance form) and themselves dance to the beats of the *dhol* (Indian drums), enjoy Indian food (almost as if it is not foreign to their taste, rather, they seem to have been happily used to having such food) like *chutneys*, *pakoras* (fries) and *naans* (Indian bread type). Especially in the scene of engagement between Dev and Gitali, the happy confluence of cultures, the prospects of inter-ethnic marriage find way. This is another major instance of complete obliteration of cultural borders and sowing the seeds of what Welsch calls “transcultural permeations” (“Transculturality”). There seems hardly any desperation to sustain the ‘myth’ of ‘cultural purity’ on any community’s part, rather, the once ‘foreign’ cultures becoming an inalienable part of one another (both at the macro/social and micro/individual levels) seems a natural phenomenon. Of course it is no way an alternative move towards homogenization of culture but a move towards a happy and a new type of diversity as Welsch considers the concept of Transculturality to be. The diaspora space Chadha represents emerges as “a point of confluence and intersectionality” (Brah 207) and thus may well be considered Transcultural in nature with, apparently, a near obliteration of cultural or hegemonic borders.

Yet looking deep into matters, a different aspect may emerge which questions the position of the filmmaker and also, whether the obliteration of ‘Borders’ has taken place in the true sense under the veil of Transcultural existence. The film begins with the comedy or ridiculous murders by using Indian cuisine as a murder tool. Chadha in the Al Jazeera interview says that the people whom Mrs. Sethi knocks off are all mean and horrible people who’ve been unfair to her daughter calling her weighty and unmarriageable, so Mrs. Sethi is quite right in killing them and adds, “. . .she kills them using Indian food methods . . . so it’s comedy killing” (“Frost over the World”). Anita Mannur in her book *Culinary Fictions* refers to a phenomenon called “culinary orientalism” (Mannur 114). Despite the film representing some hybridization or a sort of transcultural exchange in terms of food /culinary tastes, there emerge some serious questions about Chadha’s use of the culinary tropes. Why does she use this trope at all for the intentional murders committed in the film? Is it simple fun or caricature? One of the victims is killed due to the chilli content being way beyond the human tolerance level, the other by a rolling pin, another by piercing the *seekh* (skewers) of chicken tikka kebab and another suffocated by *Naan*. Does not Chadha reinforce the culinary orientalism where such use of Indian cuisine highlights its ‘otherness’, its exotic quality of being harmful or unsuitable to Westerners’ health/taste; therefore ascribed negativity by the Westerners’

gaze? Does it not seem to validate notions and stereotypes about Indian food which Mannur identifies as—Indian food is too oily, too hot, full of mushy mysterious ingredients or Indian food is defined by its excess like it is too spicy or smells too much of ‘curry’ (Mannur 185). The film almost opens with the white Police investigators laughing and making fun of such bizarre murder incidents and thereby making fun of the community as a whole. Sandip Roy’s observation finds relevance here. He says that the ‘chutney’, ‘chai’, ‘masala’, ‘bhaji’ in the names of South-Asian diasporic films are gratuitous and meaningless as all they do is mark the film as ‘exotic other’ and their continued presence as signifiers of “South-Asianness” speaks symptomatically to a larger tendency to use food to signify ethnic otherness (120). Chaddha says the murders are justified. So should one see the ‘chilli paste’ and rolling pin as symbols of resistance against a wrong as it was for women in many cases according to Mannur? The answer may be in the negative. Even if one justifies the murders, I argue that the treatment of the culinary aspect, which may have been used for pure fun, turns it into caricature and sometimes extremely macabre. It is not only the chilli or the pin that kill but also a frail *Naan* bread that suffocates a well-built man. When the curry-man’s stomach explodes in the hospital, all doctors and nurses are washed off by the slime which leaves them with a dumbfounded gaze. This may be seen as a nuisance caused to the whites by the exotic, bizarre Indian phenomenon and therefore another occasion for disparaging Indian culture. Chadha in an interview to Rob Carnevale admits that the scene was originally much longer but she felt “it was too gross out and not comedic enough. So, it was re-cut” (“It’s A Wonderful Afterlife”) and the reception of this scene was not very hearty too.

One may argue that Indian food is well accepted in the diaspora/transcultural space of the movie, the orientalist perspective is countered within the narrative when the British enjoy them in Gitaali’s engagement ceremony. Even the white Policemen accept Raj’s argument that everyone eats curry now; Chicken Tikka Masala is the number one national dish in Britain so anybody could be a murderer, not necessarily a South Asian. Yet I argue that the pervasive presence of the traces of the Indian culinary murders and their caricatured strangeness throughout the movie doesn’t allow the orientalist gaze to die out. Throughout the film, the spirits of the murdered roam about with either the rolling pin stuck to the head or the *Naan* on the mouth, the entrails of one bursting out and another carrying the *Seekh Kebabs* pierced through her neck. It is no romanticised representation of Indian or South Asian cuisine, rather a depiction of its horrible quality and a depiction which generates an aversion rather than love for it. Even if these

murdered characters are portrayed as quite transcultural people (as humans and as ghosts), they gradually turn out to be epitomes of the latent 'Orientalist' prejudice.

The interactive, porous and apparently smooth transcultural space sometimes looks questionable due to the underlying tensions of race and ethnicity. Murthy (another transcultural entity in whom the cultural ingredients have mixed inseparably thus making him a hybrid) is put undercover by the British officer to investigate the members of the South-Asian community because they think that he is an 'insider' to the community, so people will expectedly talk to him. Thus Avtar Brah's proposition that the concept of diaspora space decentres the subject position of the in/outsider (Brah 238) proves unfitting in this case. Even when Murthy asserts the contemporary hybrid culture by stating CTM as the national dish, he is teased indirectly and oblique racist jokes are cracked by the White members while a couple of members of other origin seem offended as well as bored for this typical behaviour of the officers. Raj is not made aware of all the information regarding the investigation which shows that racist suspicions still persist in an undercurrent. These can certainly be taken as instances that reveal the gaps in the process of a true and progressive transcultural existence.

It is in the character of Linda, Roopi's best mate and an English girl that the representation of transculturality takes a more complex turn. Linda/Gitaali represents an acculturation of some aspects of 'Indian culture'. She returns from India with a changed identity. She has lived in India for the six months and has metamorphosed herself by strongly infusing some aspects of Indian culture into her personality and thought process. She changes her name from Linda to Gitaali (an Indian name) for the numerologist she met in India has told her this will change her luck. She is so convinced that she insists on calling her Gitaali and gets angry if anyone calls her Linda and prefers an Indian attire though this is not enough to make her look Indian. She looks quite non-Indian with her blonde hair and her accent. She says she went to an *ashrama* (a spiritual residence in India) and has taken lessons from an Indian *Guru* (master) by which she can feel the presence of spirits or ghosts. In fact, she repeatedly behaves in such an exaggerated and caricatured way while trying to remove the spirits around that she becomes a symbol of a psychotic superstitious Indian sensibility (which perhaps doesn't exist at all) regarding ghosts, spirits or rebirth. This may be called an instance of 'reverse colonisation' where her mind is colonised by a certain notion/aspect of Indianness or Indian spirituality. But the way she is represented again raises serious questions on the filmmaker's idea of India and her representation of it in case she acts as a 'native informant'. What kind of an India



does she represent? The character of Linda or Gitaali could have been a great attempt to portray cultural hybridity or transculturality, the impact of Indian culture as a major cultural influence in the age of globalisation or at least it could've been a resistance to any oriental stereotyping. But I argue that through a caricatured representation of slices of Indian ideologies and the treatment of the reactions of the British South-Asian hybrids to them is what constructs a re-orientalist attitude. This questions the 'structures of attitude or reference' on the part of the filmmaker. When Linda comes back from India and senses that Mrs Sethi's house is haunted she tries to feel the spirits but Roopi immediately comments sarcastically and jokingly, "This is England!" This reaction evidently suggests that such strange beliefs are not characteristic to the 'Enlightened West'; ghosts are Indian constructions so they cannot inhabit England. This at once reinforces the long suppressed binaries of Orient and Occident but this time it is not any European imperialist constructing orientalist knowledge to create discursive hegemony and power to rule. The film shows how narrow discursive pictures of the land of origin remain embedded in the minds of second generation diasporas (like the filmmaker and her characters). Raj and Roopi find it strange that an Indian *mantra* is set as Linda's call ringtone. When Roopi ascribes it to the effect of Linda's stay in India, immediately Raj mocks saying, "That explains it all." This attitude raises questions at the perceptions and ideas of the second generation South-Asians regarding their land of origin. They live in a transcultural world where boundaries have obliterated enough but perhaps fail to take India into account as a major participant at the global forum. Their ideas seem to remain trapped in the orientalist ideas of the past where India was conceived through stereotypes of 'timelessness' / 'primitivity' or 'peculiarity' / 'strangeness' (McLeod 44). These stereotypical ideas still loom so large in the psyche of some that India's potential as a progressive cultural ambassador is often neglected.

What may seem more dangerous in the film is that the cultural representatives of India (even if they are hybridised now) have such re-orientalist approach towards the culture of their land of origin. This can have serious consequences as this perception is prone to set out all the partial, wrong or prejudiced and regressive images of the country to the world. Does Chadha critique such perceptions by representing them? May be not. Gitaali finally insists that she be called Linda again. This shows a privileging of the English self over the Indian, thereby reinforcing a binary. Unintentional stereotypes emerge perhaps due to the ideological gaps that occur because of the distance (neither born nor brought up in India) from which such diasporic filmmakers view and represent

their land of origin. This can make the world view India's role in constructing global ideologies as problematic and regressive. Critics like Welsch have tried to offer the concept of transculturality as a solution to eradicate cultural conflicts and ensure that borders and binaries of superior and inferior (which never allow a satisfactory intermingling of cultures on equal terms) are obliterated. But this process of obliteration of borders remains incomplete in the film. Chadha's movie may be taken as an instance where there emerges a bright transcultural side of social existence on one hand but on the other, reveals the dangerous gaps that remain in the process of transculturalization in the form of such binaries. There is latent reassertion of the binaries that Dagnino (mentioned early in this paper) excludes from the concept of transculturalism. This re-orientalist attitude that remains in the unconscious of the transcultural psyche shatters all efforts of restructuring the postcolonial discourse and cultural progress even in this era of globalization and demand serious inquiry.

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