

Representing Partition: a British Asian Perspective

Clelia Clini

My paper focuses on Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017). Described by the filmmaker as her own "upstairs and downstairs film in the tradition of *Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park*"¹, the film follows the last months of colonial rule: from the arrival of Lord Mountbatten and his family to Delhi, to the weeks that followed Indian independence and the birth of Pakistan – and the violence that marked this historical shift.

With an estimate of nearly 2 million people killed during the riots that accompanied independence and some 15 million people uprooted (Darlymple 2015, Mishra 2002: 211), Partition remains, in the words of Bhaskar Sarkar "a festering wound in the collective psyche of South Asia" (2009:1). It is not surprising then that *Viceroy's House*, released in the year in which India celebrates 70 years of independence, has triggered a heated debate over its representation of Partition. One of the harshest reviews of the film has been written by Fatima Bhutto (on the very day of its release, 3rd of March), who, through the pages of *The Guardian*, accused *Viceroy's House* to be a "film of a deeply colonised imagination" and called it a "servile pantomime", also accusing the film of blaming Partition entirely on Muslims and Jinnah². In response to Bhutto's allegations Sufiya Ahmed, in the *Huffington Post*, suggested that Bhutto's accusations are due to the fact that she "doesn't get" the British Asian experience and that the attack on Chadha was an attack on all "Brit Asians"³. Indeed, Chadha herself had described the film as "a British Asian perspective on Partition". In an interview published upon the release of the film, Chadha, whose family had been personally affected by Partition, explained that:

By using the upstairs, downstairs formula I was able to access both sides of me as a British Asian - that's an important point of view that we don't often see on the screen. I was able to look at it from

¹<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/16/gurinder-chadha-on-viceroys-house-why-i-had-to-make-a-film-about-partition>

²<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/03/fatima-bhutto-viceroys-house-watched-servile-pantomime-and-wept>

³http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sufiya-ahmed/the-attack-on-gurinder-ch_b_15166450.html

*different points of view and for me the challenge was to humanise all the characters rather than villainise say, the British*⁴.

This is quite an important remark because it also emphasises Chadha's resolution to tell the story of Partition from the people's perspective –which is to say Lord Mountbatten and his staff.

So how are the British and Asian sides of Chadha reflected in the film? In her notable work on cinema and Partition, Ira Bhaskar observed how “*Cinema* not only refracts history through the prism of representation, it also forms a collective *memory* of momentous events and mobilizes *memory* for an *imagining* of the *community*--both national and local” (2005: viii). In this paper, I will seek to investigate the British Indian character of the film by looking at the way in which the Indian community is imagined *vis à vis* the British one.

In terms of style and concept, the film is undoubtedly indebted to period dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park*, as mentioned by Chadha. Just like *Downton Abbey*, *Viceroy's House* is a lavish drama which intertwines the stories of those upstairs – the Mountbattens, the Viceroy's cabinet and the Indian political leaders – with the stories of the servants downstairs, in particular of the two star-crossed lovers Aalia and Jeet. Moreover, just like in the ITV series, the film's style strongly recalls that of 1980s English heritage films, with the camera indulging on the sumptuous palace and the careful recreation of costumes and locations (Byrne, 2014: 312), which point to the splendour of the lifestyle of the upper classes but also to the greatness of the lost Empire (Higson 2006). The opening scene of the film offers an overview of the magnificent house of the Viceroy, where an impressive number of Indian servants (800, we are told) are fretting about to get the house ready for the arrival of the Mountbattens. The majesty of the house is such that Jeet Kumar, the newly-appointed valet of the Viceroy, watches in awe and comments that this was exactly what he imagined England to look like.

⁴ http://www.hawesandcurtis.co.uk/blog/features/interview_gurinder_chadha

The characterisation of the Mountbattens bears important similarities with the Crawley family of *Downton*, which in turn, Katherine Byrne observed, is fashioned in the tradition of the 1980s heritage film (2014: 325). It is certainly no coincidence that the Viceroy is played by the same actor who plays the Earl of Grantham in the ITV series, Hugh Bonneville. This is a common device of heritage cinema, where, Higson explains, “same actors play similar roles and class-types in several different films, bringing a powerful sense of all the other heritage films, costume dramas, and literary adaptations to each new film” (2006: 96)⁵. Just like the Earl of Grantham, the Viceroy is a liberal, just figure, who is very conscious of his class and status but at the same time displays a paternalist benevolence towards his servants (Byrne 2014: 319) and Indians more generally (political leaders included). His whole family is portrayed in this fashion, and they all seem to have only the best interests of India at heart. In their first scene, Mountbatten’s daughter Pamela stresses the great task ahead of her father: he is “giving a country back to its people”. The fact that that very freedom was taken away by the country he represents does not seem of concern. The film shows Mountbatten fighting hard to find an alternative solution to Partition, for, he says, “to divide India would be a tragedy”, and after he fails to do so he refuses to leave India, and instead we see him in the closing scenes helping out at a refugee camp in Delhi. Analogously, Lady Mountbatten is against the idea of “tearing the country apart” and, just like her husband, she demonstrates her benevolence to the servants when, for example, she insists on being personally introduced to the kitchen staff, as she “wants them to know who they are”. To emphasise her goodwill, Lady Mountbatten exhorts the cook to prepare more Indian dishes for, she announces to his surprise, they will entertain more and more Indian guests and wants to meet their tastes. Moreover, she does not hesitate to fire a Mrs Hudson (one of the British employees) when she registers her uneasiness, and annoyance, at being surrounded by the other Indian employees.

⁵ To strengthen this link, it might be worth noting that the film also stars Michael Gambon as General Hastings Ismay and also Simon Callow as Cyril Radcliffe, both actors having starred in several heritage films such as, respectively *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman, 2001) *Maurice* (James Ivory 1985), not to mention Simon Williams, who played James Bellamy in the period drama *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-1975).

The benevolence of the Mountbattens is emphasised throughout the film, so much so that, despite his role as the Viceroy, and despite the fact that, as Aalia's father points out, he has "Empire in his blood" (being the cousin of the king), Mountbatten seems not to be acquainted with the policies, and politics, of the empire. The sense of betrayal at the acknowledgement that the partition between India and Pakistan had all been settled by Churchill – Chadha used Narendra Singh Sarila's book, *The Shadow of the Great Game* (2006) as a reference – two years prior to his appointment, shows his naivety regarding the empire he represents. When he, in shock, asks Ismay "You divided India for oil?!" one cannot but wonder whether Mountbatten ever knew what colonialism was all about. Perhaps Chadha suggests that he bought into the idea of colonialism as a civilising mission, as his wife did, when she tells him that they should do all that they could to improve the situation of India before leaving, starting with a literacy programme. The characterisation of the Mountbattens then, just like that of the Crawleys in *Downton Abbey*, suggests that they might belong to the highest ranks of society, but they are well-meaning people who use their power wisely for the common good. This perception is reinforced by Nehru when he tells his friend "Dickie" that, despite the nine years he has spent in a jail, he has always believed in his sincerity and in the fact that "he [Mountbatten] loves India". Why should he love India is not explained, but this is a point that is reiterated later in the film (next time by Radcliffe). In representing Mountbatten as such a loveable master, the film once again complies with the style of heritage films, which, Higson observes, "seemed to articulate a nostalgic and conservative celebration of the values and lifestyle of the privileged classes [and] in doing so an England that no longer existed seemed to have been reinvented as something fondly remembered and desirable" (2003: 12).

But if the film is so much indebted to heritage cinema, it is crucial to remember that, despite its association with "a nostalgic modern English upper-class" (Desai, 2004: 59) heritage films can also be highly ambivalent and subversive, potentially challenging the very system that they seem to uphold (Dave 2006; Monk, 2002). Despite the characterisations of the Mountbattens as the well-

meaning colonisers, *Viceroy's House* also shows the more brutal aspect of the Empire. As a counterpart to the Viceroy we find General Hastings Ismay, *he* a true villain, who, in stark contrast with the Mountbattens, is interested only in leaving the country as soon as possible, and to make it look like a grand gesture, rather than a defeat. He is portrayed as a manipulative character who uses Mountbatten to promote the Partition plan designed by Churchill and is determined to manipulate the nationalist leaders as well: “the Indians have to believe that whatever the future of India is, it is their idea”, he says. So, there *is* an English villain in the picture, but he is basically the only one: even Cyril Radcliffe is reluctant at the idea of dividing the country, at least in the short period of time he has been given to complete the task, and suggests that they should enlist the support of the United Nations. Other references to the violence of the British Empire are made throughout the film: Jeet’s father was killed by the British, while Aalia’s father (the late Om Puri), who is a supporter of the Congress, had been imprisoned for some time a few years before because he marched in support of Gandhi. And yet these references, which have the potential to subvert the characterisation of the colonisers, are somehow ineffective because they are placed in the past and are not connected with the present days of Mountbatten as the Viceroy: even Aalia tells his father that maybe the Mountbattens will be “different”, while Nehru comments on the new sensation of “trusting the viceroy”.

Occupied by the Mountbattens, the viceroy’s residence is a safe haven amidst the chaos that is descending on the rest of the country, which, Mountbatten keeps saying, depends solely on the Indian leaders’ inability to reach an agreement over the future of India. It is uncertainty, Mountbatten maintains, that leads to violence. Apart from a few skirmishes between servants, communal violence firmly remains outside of the Viceroy’s house. Moreover, as a reinforcement of the goodwill of the Mountbattens, they offer their staff the opportunity to bring their relatives at the residence, so to save them from the atrocities which are taking place in the rest of the country. Such a division of space, the threatening outside world inhabited by Indians, juxtaposed to the safety of the house magnanimously opened to the servants’ families by the Viceroy, resonates uncannily with

colonial narratives which, as Pramod Nayar noted, drew a “clear binary” between “the innocent, heroic, and stoic Englishman versus the barbarous and unfair Indian” (2012: 77). Even if the film eventually puts the blames of Partition on the British government, it still seems to reproduce the colonial discourse of difference according to which, as Nayar again observed: “the English man or woman, no matter what the provocation, retains his or her civil behaviour” and keeps stressing “the benevolence of the English ‘conqueror’” (2012: 28).

If the British side of the film is imagined mostly in benevolent terms, what about the Indians? On this side, we see on the one hand the nationalist leaders, Nehru, Jinnah and Gandhi, and, on the other hand, the staff of the viceroy’s house. Their representation is interesting in terms of their relationship with the colonisers and with one another. When it comes to political leaders, they are mostly seen through the eyes of Mountbatten, who summons them to discuss the transfer of power. The viceroy behaves with them with the same benevolent patronising attitude with which he deals with his staff, scolding them like children who are misbehaving – “how can we leave – he tells Nehru – when you can’t agree on what your future should be?” The film makes it quite clear that Mountbatten has a stark preference for Nehru, his college friend, and Gandhi. It is interesting also to note that while Nehru is treated like a skilful politician and orator (thanks to Cambridge, Mountbatten reminds us) Gandhi is treated more like a spiritual guide than a politician, and he is also the only one whom the servants gather around when he reaches the viceroy’s house. The one leader that Mountbatten clearly does not like is Jinnah, a feeling that is reinforced after he finds out that he had been promised Pakistan well before his appointment as the new Viceroy, but he failed to inform him. Despite Chadha’s intention to eschew the common characterisation of Jinnah as the villain⁶, he is blamed by everyone else for Partition. Even Aalia’s father, a Muslim, calls him a “troublemaker”. Moreover, his reasons for supporting the “two nation theory”, the fear that in independent India Muslims would end up being treated “like negroes in the United States”, are not

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/16/viceroy-house-tells-bloody-truth-of-partition>

given much thought and are overshadowed by Nehru's plea to Mountbatten not to "be persuaded by Jinnah to tear India in two".

Nehru is also the one character who, along with Ismay (who had previously reminded the Viceroy that he was there to follow the orders of the King and Queen), provides Mountbatten with some home truths regarding British imperialist politics: as a response to the Viceroy's reprimands for their inability to reach an agreement, Nehru reminds him that they "have done everything to foster hatred between their different communities: separate schools, elections, that was always your policy: divide and rule" he says. He then adds: "now you have divided us, you ask *me* for a solution?" His observation is an important reminder of the devastating effect of colonial rule on the social texture of India, where the imported politics of group representation had in fact the effect of creating a majority-minority dialectic which turned "indigenous ideas of difference [...] into a deadly politics of community" (Appadurai, 1996: 135). As Appadurai observed:

The process by which separate Hindu and Muslim identities were constructed at a macro level and transformed not just into imagined communities but also into enumerated communities is only the most visible pathology of the transfer of the politics of numerical representation to a society in which representation and group identity had no special numerical relationship to the polity (1996: 132).

And yet, this point is not explored further in the film. In a previous meeting with the cabinet, we heard that "this hatred between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims" was "poisoning everything the British had built", rather than being the product of their very politics. When the prospect of Partition begins to acquire substance and the echo of disorders reaches the viceroy's residence, no reference to British politics is made. Instead, we see the first skirmishes between members of staff, with Muslims characters immediately supporting the idea of Pakistan and the rest of the staff opposing it, and later on we see Aalia's compound being set on fire by some Hindus. No explanation is offered as to why people are fighting: it all seems to explode out of the blue, if we take Jeet's words that

Hindus and Muslims have lived together like brothers for centuries. What is problematic about the representation of communal violence is that it is treated matter-of-factly and is not historicised, as Nehru's comment would have wanted.

The staff of the Viceroy's house, which represents a microcosm of Indian population, after the announcement of Partition begins to divide along religious lines, with Sikhs siding with Hindus and only Jeet and Aalia's relationship crossing the divide between Hindus and Muslims. Aalia's father is also a strong advocate of brotherhood and peace, although he agrees to leave to Pakistan when the situation becomes too dangerous for Muslims in Delhi – tragically meeting his death on the train to Lahore. It is interesting to note that, despite their own personal experience with the brutality of the colonial regime, both Aalia and Jeet, especially him, trust the viceroy. Jeet's admiration for Mountbatten is declared as soon as he is employed, when he says that Mountbatten is a hero for having freed Burma and that "he will now free India". Just like Mountbatten's daughter Pamela, even Jeet does not see the anomaly of "liberating" a country that you had conquered in the first place.

Incidentally, it is worth noticing that throughout the film Indian independence is described as a something granted by the British, not obtained by the Indians after decades of struggle: despite the references to political marches and to independence supporters being jailed, independence is still discussed mainly in terms of the British leaving, except for lady Mountbatten's comment that Gandhi "had brought the British Empire to his knees". Even Jeet's friend Duleep explains the British decision to leave India as a consequence of the war in Europe, which has "exhausted" them, otherwise, it seemed implied, they would not be leaving. Describing independence as something that is given rather than taken is an interesting choice because it resonates with the cultural strategy of colonialism which, as Fanon noted, "wants everything to come from it" (1965: 63), meaning, in this case, that even independence is a gift offered by the magnanimous coloniser as part of his civilizing mission. This is not to say that Chadha endorses this perspective: it is of course absolutely plausible that the colonisers described independence in such terms, for they certainly would have

not liked to admit defeat, as Ismay made clear earlier in the film. It would also be plausible that Indian civil servants would have adopted this perspective and bought into the myth of England just as colonial culture would have wanted, as Macaulay (1835) eloquently explained (see also Lammings, 1960).

Jeet's relationship with the Viceroy, however, is more problematic: his father had been killed by the British, and he himself admitted that he could not carry on his work as a police officer in Punjab because he couldn't take it anymore (seeing nationalist leaders being jailed) and yet he still seems not to hold a grudge against the British. On the contrary, he nurtures a deep admiration for the Viceroy. His fellow employees at the viceroy's house, clearly much savvier than him in colonial politics, warn him that he should not believe Mountbatten, but he does not listen to them, and when another servant observes how the British are leaving earlier because "they don't want to be accountable for the carnage", Jeet still defends Mountbatten explaining that he was trying to prevent it. Even Jinnah, who wanted Pakistan, was puzzled by the rush and objected to it, but Jeet doesn't question the Viceroy's word and he does not give up his trust even when he finds out that his family is missing. Jeet's feelings towards Mountbatten turn to hate only after Partition kills his romantic dream of marrying Aalia. His characterisation is peculiar not because as a colonised subject he must resent the viceroy, but because his faith in him goes against all odds. Compared with Aafrin, the civil servant-turned-independence fighter in *Indian Summers* (ITV 2015-2016) he is definitely much more naïve, and his naivety matches that of his master.

The portrayal of the Indian side of the *Viceroy's House*, of the Indian political leaders as well as of the house's servants and employees, offers the opportunity to question, and to challenge, the narrative of events offered upstairs. Unfortunately, however, the main perspective presented in the film is that of Mountbatten, and his dominant point of view makes alternative voices marginal.

Conclusions

I started my paper with the intention of exploring Gurinder Chadha's statement that *Viceroy's House* provides a British Asian perspective on the event of Partition. From the point of

view of style and concept, the film, being fashioned on the model of British heritage costume dramas, undoubtedly provides a British flavour to the narrative. The narration of the events through a personalised love story also resonates with many Indian and Pakistani films on Partition, which for years have focused on the impact of Partition on ordinary people rather than engaging with its violence head on (Viswanath and Malik, 2009: 65). Moreover, Viswanath and Malik noted that “the recurrent themes in most post-Partition cinema in both India and Pakistan of films made after 1947 are separation within a single family, or between lovers” (64), just like Jeet and Aalia. Looking at the film in this perspective, one can see why Chadha calls it “British Asian”.

From the point of view of the narrative, however, I find it more difficult to identify the British Asian character of the film. The film is dominated by the Mountbattens and their compassion for India, so that it ends up, even if unwillingly, replicating the same sort of fantasy of the empire that, according to Higson, permeates certain heritage dramas such as *A Passage to India*, or *Jewel in the Crown* (2006: 104). Just like them, *Viceroy’s House* suggests a nostalgia for the past that is “both a narrative of loss, charting an imaginary historical trajectory from stability to instability – in this case Partition – and at the same time a narrative of recovery, projecting the subject back into a comfortably closed past” (Higson 2006: 104). Even with the several remarks that criticise the colonial version of the events, especially in the “downstairs” area of the house, the film is too apologetic towards Mountbatten and does not follow up on any of the cracks and fissures that emerge, and which have the potential to subvert the colonial discourse. In an article written in March 2017, Shashi Tharoor described British colonialism in India in terms of “practices of loot, expropriation, and outright theft, enforced by the ruthless wielding of brute power, conducted in a spirit of deep racism and amoral cynicism, and justified by a staggering level of hypocrisy and cant”⁷. A description that is very far from the portrayal of the Viceroy. The characterisation of Mountbatten is problematic not because he is too good, but because he is portrayed as completely foreign to the ways of colonialism, as to suggest that there was a “good colonialism”, the one

⁷ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/india-has-forgiven-britain-200-years-imperial-enslavement-we-wont-forget-1610656>

Mountbatten stands for. This is the same assumption made by Jeet, and despite the fact that it will ruin his life, it seems to be reinforced by the last images of the Mountbattens tirelessly helping out at the refugee camps, in the attempt to make up for a tragedy that, as Lady Mountbatten's says to her husband "was not of his making".

Writing on diaspora, cinema and cultural identity, Stuart Hall, in the essay "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation", wrote that "the practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write - the positions of enunciation", but, at the same time, he warned that "though we speak, so to say, 'in our name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never exactly in the same place" (1996: 211). I believe this reflection could be useful when approaching *Viceroy's House*.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, S. (2017, March). “The Attack on Chadha Was an Attack on All Us Brit Asians”. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sufiya-ahmed/the-attack-on-gurinder-ch_b_15166450.html
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: The Cultural Dimension of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bhaskar, I. (2005). *Persistence of Memory: Historical trauma and Imagining the Community in Indian Cinema*. (Doctoral dissertation). Accessed through Proquest Doc ID [913512341](#)
- Bhutto, F. (2017, March 3). “Fatima Bhutto on Indian partition film Viceroy’s House: ‘I watched this servile pantomime and wept’”. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/03/fatima-bhutto-viceroys-house-watched-servile-pantomime-and-wept>
- Byrne, K. (2014). “Adapting heritage: Class and conservatism in Downton Abbey”. *Rethinking History*, 18(3), 311-327.
- Chadha, G. (2016, April 16). “Gurinder Chadha on Viceroy’s House: Why I had to make a film about Partition”. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/16/gurinder-chadha-on-viceroys-house-why-i-had-to-make-a-film-about-partition>
- Darlymple, W. (2015, June29). “The Great Divide, The violent legacy of Indian Partition”. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>
- Dave, P. (2006). *Visions of England*. Oxford: Berg.
- Desai, J. (2004). *Beyond Bollywood: The cultural politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. London: Routledge.
- Fanon, F. (1965). *A Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove Press.

- Hall, S. (1996). "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation". In *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 210–22.
- Hawes & Curtis. (2017, March 8). "Exclusive Interviews with Gurinder Chadha". Retrieved from: http://www.hawesandcurtis.co.uk/blog/features/interview_gurinder_chadha
- Higson, A. (2003). *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Higson, A. (2006). "Re Presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film". In Friedman, L. (ed.) *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*. Second Edition. University of Minnesota Press.
- Lamming, G. (1960: 1995). "The Occasion for Speaking". In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*
- Macaulay, T. (1835: 1995). "Minute on Indian Education". In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, pp. 428-30
- Mishra, V. (2002). *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Monk, C. (2002) The British heritage-film debate revisited. In: *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, edited by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant, London and New York: Routledge, pp.176-198
- Nayar, Pramod K. (2012). *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- Sarkar, B. (2009). *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Singh, S. N. (2006). *The Shadow of the Great Game. Carrol & Graf*.

- Tharoor, Shashi (2017, March 10). "India has forgiven Britain for 200 years of imperial enslavement – but we won't forget". International Business Times. Retrieved from: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/india-has-forgiven-britain-200-years-imperial-enslavement-we-wont-forget-1610656>
- Thorpe, Vanessa (2017, January 2017). "A British film with a Punjabi heart: director's personal take on partition". *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/16/viceroy-house-tells-bloody-truth-of-partition>
- Viswanath, Gita and Malik, Salma (2009). "Revisiting 1947 through Popular Cinema: A Comparative Study of India and Pakistan". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(36), 61-69.