

'TAKES' ON NATIONALISM

FILM

Procreating the Nation in Film: Joel Zwick's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

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Marriage and wedding rituals have long been popular and profitable subjects for the film industry. Usually treated as material for either social critique or outright comedy, wedding-themed films underscore, in one way or another, our society's hetero-patriarchal conditioning. In *Father of the Bride*, for example, Steve Martin plays the soft, enlightened patriarch, struggling to keep up suburban appearances while planning the perfect wedding for the daughter. In contrast, the creators of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* use wedding rituals to take potshots at the British caste system. In Australian-made *Muriel's Wedding*, the focus is on the agonies of a romantic young woman and her considerably less-than-perfect working-class family, while in *Wedding Banquet* the Taiwanese parents of the Americanized groom eventually discover that partners may be of either gender. Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, a critically acclaimed work awarded this year's Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and a Academy Awards nomination for Best Foreign Film, explores the cultural tensions among members of an extended Punjabi family — the indigenous branch situated in New Delhi, and the diasporic relatives from Dallas, London, and Sydney, visiting India on the occasion of the family wedding. "Indianess," mediated by both indigeneity and various diasporic identities, becomes the matrix through which kin relations are played out.

The latest celebrated addition to this film sub-genre is Joel Zwick's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. The magnitude of the film's U.S. box office success is remarkable. Now in its 24th week, the 5-million-dollar film is approaching the 200-million-dollar mark in profits. Although the film is lauded as a successful small-budget independent film, writer Nia Vardalos and director Zwick are well connected to the Hollywood establishment and used these ties to help produce their film. Vardalos is a recognized stand-up comedian with a professional pedigree that includes Chicago's famous "Second City" comedy review, and

television's "Saturday Night Live." Zwick has directed big-budget films like *All About Last Night*, *Glory*, *Legends of the Fall*, and *The Siege*. Influential actor Tom Hanks was one of the film's producers and played an active role in its creation. This corporate mainstream film treats ethnic marriage in a generic and modular manner. One could change the flags and the names and retitle it "My Big Fat _____ Wedding" (insert "Armenian," "Italian," "Lebanese," "Jewish," or "Turkish"...).

The film is noteworthy for its broad appeal and the frenzy it has created among the "family values" establishment as "good entertainment"—and not on account of its cinematographic qualities or script writing. We could look at this film sub-genre for the messages it transmits (or fails to transmit) about kin and ethnic identities, the role of hetero-patriarchy in underwriting the construction of the nation, and the manner in which global links expressed by ethnic diasporas modify the family as the nation's building block. My objectives here, however, are limited. I would like to look at Zwick's film as attempted cultural geography and ethnography, which may help us understand popular depictions of kin and ethnic relations in the era of American neo-conservative rule.

Greek-American stand-up comedian Nia Vardalos, the writer of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, constructed a romantic "ethno-matrimonial" fantasy based on her experiences growing up as a "hyphenated American" in a large extended family. The film's central character, Toula Portokalos, undergoes a Cinderella-like transformation from spinster and catatonic coffee maid in her father's Greek diner in Chicago, to a college-going, contact lens-sporting beauty who falls for upper-middle class, bohemian high school teacher and beau, Ian Miller, played by John Corbett. The ensuing clash of civilizations becomes Vardalos' main vehicle for poking fun at, and caricaturing, diasporic Greeks and American WASPs.

In her very gentle treatment of both groups, she makes allusions to, on the one hand, Greek ethnocentrism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and the Greeks' selective reading of world history. On the other hand, she comments on the social distance that separates upper-middle class "Anglos" (Miller and his parents) from the world of working-class immigrants. The Portokalos residence, adorned with plaster casts of Greek gods, a Parthenonian-style pediment, and Greek flags, is a stand-in for the imagined Greece that the immigrant family is trying to recapture. For Vardalos, these hyper-nationalist displays of cultural orthodoxy and pride signal the ambivalence that ethnic groups may experience about assimilating fully into American society. She makes the point that diasporic ethnics – as members of a minority – may have a greater stake in, and need for, asserting their cultural superiority. She overplays secondary cultural characteristics of Greekness – like the Greeks' taste for lamb, ouzo, and line dancing – as the salient elements of "otherness," when, in fact, discrimination

against Greek immigrants in both Western Europe and North America has historically had much darker roots in racism, classism, and ethnic exclusion. Vardalos' sanitized ethnography works because Greek-Americans (like Irish- and Italian-Americans—other historically “non-white” Europeans) are now securely members of the charter group. The “Anglo” Millers are depicted as quiet, slim, and ethereal in their *J. Crew* clothing; they are materially affluent, but culturally impoverished when compared with the mob of loud, virile, fast-reproducing, and hard-working Portokaloses. The bottom line is that the “Anglo” son-in-law is embraced by his new ethnic family and accepted as an honorary Greek. Although not Greek by birth, Ian Miller “evolves” by learning the ways of his new family. For Vardalos, America is a better society because of the vibrancy of its ethnic diasporic communities.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding does not take any risks by questioning the family-values culture propagated by American neo-conservatives. Blind to the fact that about fifty percent of marriages in the United States end in divorce, that gender equality is spoken about rather than practiced, and that Americans increasingly live in non-traditional (non-nuclear) families, this film depicts idealized family life that does not stray much from the vision of the Christian right. Although Toula went to bed with Ian before marriage, perhaps the big question is whether they used contraception. In Vardalos and Zwick's ethno-matrimonial fantasy, good Greek-American women can develop socially but choose to marry, have children, reproduce the value system, and set up their household next door to their parents. Patriarchy is benign and ineffective in both domestic and public domains because real control is in the hands of smart women who work behind the scenes. Everybody is, of course, straight.

The film's disconnection from the ethnic diasporic experience becomes all the more apparent by its failure to realistically depict how matrimony is an integral part of national identity formation. The grandmother's suburban antics and her lingering obsession with the Turks paint her as a ridiculous personage, yet in reality she is the keeper of ethno-matrimonial traditions. Greek-American ethnics reproduce Periclean Athens in their front yards and practice linguistic imperialism upon unsuspecting non-Greeks. The Greek homeland is remote and truly imagined since there is no real connection to it. The Greek Orthodox Church – the institution that supposedly defines the matrimonial ritual – is also absent or merely imagined. It is perhaps best for the box office to keep religion out of it.