

Arab al-Nai'm



A Scene from *East is East*



REVIEWS

East is East

Feature film (1999); directed by Damien O'Donnell. Screenplay by Ayub Khan-Din, based on his play. Produced by Leslee Udwin, London: Miramax.

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East is East is a comedy portraying a working-class family in 1970's Britain, with a Pakistani father (George Khan, played by Om Puri) a British mother (Ella Khan, played by Linda Bassett), and seven children, among whom the youngest, Sajid (Jordan Routledge), represents the screenwriter as a child¹. The father is intent on raising traditional Pakistani children. As long as that means religious school and abstention from pork, the highly Anglicized children resist minimally and primarily in secret. But the father's determination to marry his older sons off without their consent causes increasing tension and eventually outright rebellion, with the mother, in particular, withdrawing her critical support.

East is East is a film of liberation. Children are liberated from a restrictive culture, a father is liberated from the need to reproduce that culture blindly, and even the child who will grow up to author the film is liberated from his ever-present fur-rimmed jacket. But the most important liberation of all is the one that leads to the others, as a mother frees herself from the demand to put her husband's culture above her children's welfare. It is a story of "tough love" that is also a fascinating window into how culture, orientalism, colonialism, and gender can interact to shape dynamics in a multicultural family.

It is by now a truism that in heterosexual families, interaction is conditioned by the power attached to gender in the outside world. Similarly, I argue, cultural hierarchies in the world at large, shaped in this case by orientalism and a prior history of colonialism, affect the behaviors of various family members. When gender and cultural advantage are differently distributed – that is, when the woman is from the dominant, legitimized culture and the man from the non-dominant, delegitimized culture, these dynamics can be particularly complex. It is its portrayal of this complexity, intentional or unintentional, that

¹ Miramax press releases term the movie "semi-biographical". But, "the parents in *East is East* are drawn directly from my parents and what you see in the film is more or less my family," admits Khan-Din who created the Khans as a way of coming to terms with his own past." My recollection is that a BBC broadcast about the film reported that Khan-Din created the character of Sajid to represent himself, and the Miramax press release is consistent with this notion. However, I was unable to verify that Sajid is in fact supposed to be Khan-Din

makes this film interesting. Three inter-related issues are central: the role of the orientalist discourse in shaping Khan-Din's portrayal of his family, the disembodied nature of the culture George, the father, tries to transmit to his family, and the role of culture and gender in simultaneously empowering and disempowering the mother, Ella, in her gender-determined role as cultural and family mediator.

The impact of cultural hierarchy in the world outside is nowhere more evident than in the writer's uncritical reproduction of Pakistani culture through the lens of the orientalist discourse (Said, 1978). For Khan-Din and the characters he reproduces, British culture is about freedom and Pakistani culture about despotism. Pakistani culture, according to the movie, is composed of two primary features: the marriage of children to partners they do not know, and a series of restrictions on food and behavior. The restrictions cause Sajid, in particular, great humiliation, as his incomplete circumcision, once unearthed, becomes public knowledge, and he is jerked and pulled about, his penis examined by any number of adults, bribed, misled, and cajoled into a painful operation. The culture loses any sense of warmth it initially had as the movie progresses. Our perception of the intimate moment in which the father prepares his son for his wedding is informed by the knowledge that not only do the children have no say in who they marry, but that watches, hats, and clothes are bought by the dozens and handed out as meaningless salves for all family rifts. Pakistani culture is in fact so unappetizing that it is unclear to us why anyone would bother to preserve it.

Not that British culture is a paragon of virtue – this is, after all a satire. Most English seem to be racist, the girls are silly and oversexed, and English marriage rituals seem to involve drinking beer, hanging grooms in tires, and tarring and feathering them. Still, we can understand why someone would prefer English culture, with its freedom of choice, sexual openness, and deference to individual rights. And it is clear, in the film, that those freedoms are English. "They have a right to know", says Ella about the soon-to-be-married children. "What right", responds George, "Pakistanis believe the father decides". "You should agree with me", he yells at another point, "That's a proper Moslem wife". Later, Tariq tries to explain that he is fed up with being told what to do. "Pakistani son always show respect", responds George. "I'm not Pakistani", says the son, "I speak English". But perhaps most disturbingly, George's honor in his Pakistani community appears to be dependent on his ability to control his family; even worse, he is far more concerned about his reputation than his sons' welfare, as both children and wife tell us.

It is not that I doubt the experience of restriction, violence and despotism in this family, nor do I doubt the father's use of Pakistani culture to defend it. But where Khan-Din's adherence to the orientalist or modernization discourses make such restrictiveness an expected outcome, other approaches (from a social constructionist to a post-colonial) ask how a culture, which is assumed capable of nurturing, came to be reduced to a disembodied set of restrictions. The

question is how family, gender, and cultural hierarchies in Britain may have contributed to a desperation so extreme that the father was willing to wed his sons to brides he himself deemed undesirable.

Two related dynamics, I would argue, can lead to this outcome, irrespective of gender. First, immigration itself contributes to ossification and distortion of cultures. George's sense of what it means to be Pakistani froze at the time he left Pakistan, and although he is aware that "these days, even the girls in Pakistan are becoming too modern", he is not close enough to the changes to change with them. Isolated even from the immigrant community of Bradford, Pakistani culture is distilled into what he is capable of reproducing on his own: Arabic watches, religious school, and a system of arranged marriages. He becomes dependent on a set of values that, divorced from their context, are restrictive and give no joy.

Second, dynamics associated with orientalism as a widely disseminated system of thought can also cause ossification of orientalized cultures. When "eastern" is defined as the antithesis of "western", when east and west are seen as radically different, non-overlapping worlds (east is, as the title tells us, east), "authenticity" can become confused with the past, and any kind of change can be seen as cultural dilution. Such a process, I have argued elsewhere (Khazzoom, 1999), accounts for key features of post-Enlightenment Jewish history. For George, operation in such a framework meant that he could not simultaneously modernize and remain Pakistani – by definition, recognition of children's rights to choose their own marriage partners would be de-Pakistanization. This is true even in South Asia itself, where, it has been argued, the labeling of certain changes as "westernization", can fuel resistance to them (Jaywardena, 1995). This would leave George with a very painful choice between two things that might be good for his sons – knowledge of a culture that will not discriminate against them, and the freedoms George encountered in the west. The sons cannot, in this conception, have both at once.

It is within this context that the mother Ella, as female and as British, becomes a key powerbroker within the family. Her sources of empowerment are complex, and often related to her disempowerment. As representative of the local, and seemingly more enlightened culture, as well as in her role as primary caretaker and socializer, she has the power to make or break George's cultural-preservation project. And for the most part, she supports him. Sometimes this support is active, as when she "gives" George seven children, wears traditional earrings with her British dress, allows for a second wife in Pakistan, or speaks the appropriate introductory words in Arabic when guests arrive. Her children's surprise at her use of the language ("what's she talking like that for?"), in contrast to their non-reflexive ridicule of their Moslem brother, demonstrates how much membership in the dominant culture can lend authority to cultural choice within the home. At other times Ella's support is passive, as she lets him re-circumcise their son, send the children to Islamic school, and marry them off without their knowledge.

But it's unclear how much Ella's support of her husband's project is voluntary, particularly when she senses that it hurts her children. "Am I a good mother?" she asks her friend Annie, stroking the twice-circumcised Sajid's hair. "You didn't have a choice" responds Annie. "Yes I did", she says. "It's their religion", answers Annie. Later, having been threatened by George with abandonment, she decides against telling her boys that George has made new matches for them. The toll that cultural preservation is taking on British women becomes apparent when the family visits Bradford, the location of many Pakistani immigrants. The men sit in the living room together, while the women chat at the dining room table. The hostess shows Ella a picture of her own daughter, who has apparently gone to Pakistan to get married. "When will she come back?" Asks Ella's daughter. "I don't know", is the answer. At that moment, the host bangs on the wall and shouts for tea, hard enough that a picture becomes askew. The hostess fixes the picture and then, apparently overwhelmed by life under this patriarchal domination, begins to cry.

Several possibilities are raised by these interactions. First, women in the 1950's, even enlightened British women, felt themselves obliged to produce the home their husband's wanted. This, then, would be Ella's gender-based disempowerment. Her culture's more powerful position outside may in this case have disempowered her even further. The requirement to support her husband may have extended to managing or assuaging his cultural loss by supporting his bid to control her and force her children to live Moslem lives. But most interesting is the possibility that George himself manipulated her empathy and her awareness of cultural imbalance, as well as Pakistani culture's reputation as sexist, to force her into a role she might otherwise have protested. This is suggested most strongly by her own accusation of hypocrisy: "Ya, I'm a proper Moslem wife when it suits you, but not when it comes to the store (presumably, she is talking about waiting on men), or when one of your relatives needs something". Even after she has been beaten, and when it has long been clear that she is horrified by the forced marriages, Ella continues to defend her husband to her children. Many abused wives defend their abusers, often because they empathize with men who simultaneously dominate and present themselves as victims. Did cultural hierarchies in the outside world help George, for whom even Pakistan was becoming too modern, preserve sexism in his family just a little longer than other men could?

Still, Ella does set limits to the cultural preservation, so we know she is not entirely powerless. More importantly, she may be helped in her limit-setting by her culture's dominance in the outside world. She refuses to move to Bradford, "with the immigrants", and one wonders if there have been earlier conversations, in which she pointed out to him that the children's chances for advancement would be lower in areas of high immigrant concentration. She tells George (not for the first time, it appears) that his Pakistani wife cannot come to England to live with them, and threatens to leave with the children if she does. Their residence in England lends weight to her threat, as they are probably both

aware that she would have an advantage in the courts. The priest's greeting, "how are you getting along with that Islam?", may also support the notion that if Ella chooses to go against George, she will find support on the outside. (It may also, of course, add to her sense that her husband and his religion are under siege, and increase her protective impulse). Similarly, it is interesting to speculate the underlying messages when she suggests that the second wife would find it hard to serve fish and chips in her veil.

In the end, Ella is unable to stomach the destruction cultural preservation is wreaking on her family, and she takes control. The righteousness of motherhood suddenly combines with the righteousness of western culture, as she rises up and tells off Pakistani men, women, and culture in one fell swoop. She endures a beating for her troubles, but finally is able to welcome a subdued patriarch back into a family that has shaken the worst of patriarchy. The question is this: without cultural legitimacy and her husband's ethnically-based disempowerment, would she have rebelled, and could she have been as effective?

Multiculturalism, suggests Susan Moller Okin (1999), is essentially the importation of family values, and more often than not, it is the importation of sexist family values that "we" (that is westerners) have already transcended (at least legally). It is not clear if Khan-Din has ever read Okin's work, but his understanding of the incorporation of eastern culture into British society is startlingly similar. East is east, he tells us, it will never change, and what east is is horrifying. East involves wives (usually more than one to a given husband), and children who listen passively, and it involves the inability to drink, dance, have sex, or determine for oneself whom to marry. It's a life that no one would want to lead. The story Khan-Din tells is of the painful but necessary march forward into modern life, in which patriarchal power is scaled back, and individuals have the right to the pursuit of happiness.

I have argued however, that a much more complex story underlies the events in this movie. Gender, culture, and a history of colonialism, I argued, are operating on several levels at once. In a sexist world, a man has the ability to impose his culture on his family. This is his source of influence. But in a colonial context, his culture has been constructed (rightly or wrongly) as a radically different and less-valuable one. This puts pressure on him to both ossify and abandon it, and causes him pain. It may then be his wife's empathic reaction to that pain, in interaction with the *western* (remember, it's the 1950s) demand that she put her husband's happiness above all, that explains her voluntary support of a cultural retention project that often tugs at her conscience. Yet in the end, she emerges as powerbroker; it is the generally accepted rightness of her cultural perspective that gives her both the inner strength and audience support for her stand against him. In the end, the mother does, in fact, liberate the whole family, and I have no doubt that even the father felt much better once he gave up what really was a hopeless project.

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