

The Feminist and Orientalist Perspectives in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a movie by Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* which is an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The movie, despite being a mainstream one, contains critiques about patriarchy in Indian society and is against Western's orientalist notion about India. For these reasons, this article is trying to unfold how feminism and orientalism are presented in the movie.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, India, orientalism

A. Feminism

Feminism has come to be commonly known or referred to as a movement and/or a political outlook which challenges women discrimination in society which they endure due to their biological sex differences (from that of men). As Humm puts it, feminism is in general, the ideology of women's liberation due to the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex (1995: 94). This injustice has implicated to a condition where women do not deserve formal equality in the eyes of the law. (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004: 48)

In addition, feminists deem that this so-called gender discrimination has long been suffered by women around the world regardless their age, race, and social status. In many places in the world and throughout history, women are considered sub-ordinate to men, and thus, received unequal treatments. In this regard, feminists are determine to confront the injustice and advocate for equal opportunities for women in being able to realize their potential as individual in many areas of life. Humm noted that gender discrimination has indeed prevented women from earning equal rights from men in economy, politic, education, and

social life (1995:94). In the same manner, Walby argues, as cited in Pilcher and Whelehan, that the inequalities have confined women both in private and public sphere (2004: 95).

Feminists approve that practices of gender discrimination was and is still evident. According to Pilcher and Whelehan, it is particularly true in a unit or a society that maintain a patriarchal system of power (2004: 56) where the masculine principle is always the favored 'norm' and the feminine ones becomes positioned as 'Other' (de Beauvoir, 1972:295). In other words, men are the privileged sex in the system enjoying a higher social status than women. This privilege has earned men more dominant roles and positions in the society which make their judgments concerning with the man-woman relationship becomes justifiable.

B. Patriarchy in Indian society

India is one of the world most-populated and culturally rich countries. It is also one of the countries in the world considerably associated with patriarchal values and practices. Male culture and dominance has been part of Indians' lives and it was during the ancient times that it got probably the worst. As Mandakranta states it in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*,

... the lives of women of ancient times, their roles in society, their access to education, and their power and control over their own life was the period when the society gradually established itself as patriarchal, controlling every aspect of women's existence. As society became stratified, women's roles were defined as subservient to men in the name of social, legal, and moral stability (2000:viii).

Meanwhile, although the present day India is seemingly a better time for Indian women, as the country develops and thus, giving more opportunity for its people (including the women) to enjoy equality in more aspects of life, patriarchy still operates either subtly or apparently in many aspects of Indian lives. This was as reported by *Times of India* in 2004.

Gender bias continues to exist in India at several levels in access to healthcare, education and livelihood security and in other social and economic...services

.... The inequalities exist within the household in food allocation and in spending on healthcare and education,... Girls are also less likely to be enrolled in schools or will

drop out soon after initial enrolment due to their "usefulness at home". When schooling beyond primary level is available at some distance away from home, girls are much less likely to be sent for further education (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/853318.cms>).

C. Orientalism

Orientalism is an influential study made popular by Edward Said. Said's *Orientalism* is a critique of the academic field of Oriental Studies which is, according to him, packed with subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against, particularly Middle-East people. This was what Edward Said believed to be true as he assessed the implication of the Western construction of the Orient/ the East as an object of knowledge during the period of colonial expansion (Lewis, 1996:16)

According to Lewis (1996), through *Orientalism*, Said intended to offer a new way to conceptualize the history of relations between what people might commonsensically refer to as the West and the East or the Occident and the Orient (p. 15-16). Said argued that the West, whose influence is prominent in both the scholarly and popular thinking, has misinterpreted and given an appropriate representation of the East which they (the West) did in order to show their being 'better' and more 'superior'.

Orientalism, thus, documents the ways in which the West governs and dominates the East through its whole fictioning of the East's culture (Easthope and McGowan, 1998 : 243). This therefore tells that for Said, the formation of the Western images and identity is in fact in its dialectical relationship to the East. In other words, it is by its whole representation of the East, that the West acquires its strong sense of identity in perceiving itself as distinct from that of the Orient. As stated by Lewis (1996), *Orientalism* manages to establish a set of polarities in which the Orient is characterized as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic and heathen, thereby securing the West in contrast as rational, familiar, moral, just and Christian (p.16)

Here is Said's own summary of his work showing his whole discourse on Orientalism:

My contention is that, without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which

European culture was able to manage-even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism, the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought and action. This is not to say the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity 'the Orient' is in question. ...This book also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate (Said, 1985, p.3)

Additionally, according to Hall and Gieben (1992), although in his critiques toward the representation of the Orient, Said particularly refers to the Middle East, "It is never far from the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans (p. 328). Eventually through *Orientalism*, Said wanted to draw our attention to what he believed as a power assertion produced by the West and for the West by faultily representing the East (Lewis, 1996: 16) which resonated his proposition that one should not only see and understand the Orient or the East from the perspective of the West, but also seize upon the East's viewpoints and their actual reality.

For this reason, my analysis on Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* will also employ Orientalism in order to show the presumably orientalist notions and perceptions shown by the American and British characters toward the Indian characters and their culture in the movie. In addition, I also hypothesize that the movie also contains an indictment against patriarchy especially in India.

D. About *Bride and Prejudice*

Bride and prejudice is Indian reworking of Jane Austen's classic novel, *Pride and Prejudice* into modern day India setting adapted and directed by Gurinder Chadha, a female English director of Indian descent. The movie, despite being made for international mainstream audiences, follows many conventions of Bollywood's formula; featuring songs, dance and considerably huge casts. *Bride and Prejudice* is a movie about present day India, its culture, families, women and their encounter with westerners. *Bride and Prejudice* was filmed at the end of 2004

and released under Miramax Film Company in 2005. The movie stars Bollywood and Hollywood actors and actresses and uses English dialogue. The movie is set in India, London and ends up in Beverly Hills.

Gurinder Chanda, began her career as a news reporter at BBC, and went on to direct several award-winning documentaries. She began working on the big screen in the early '90s. Her first directorial debut was *I'm British But....* Most of Chadha's films stress diversity over difference through an increasingly adept mix of drama and comedy which also characterizes her most accomplished and commercially successful film, *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). As Chadha once said, in one of her films "You have tradition on the one side and modernity on the other, Indianess on the one side, Englishness on the other, cultural specificity and universality." (www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/502103)

E. Feminism in *Bride and Prejudice*

Here, I argue that the movie, *Bride and Prejudice* contains critiques against patriarchy in India particularly concerning with arranged marriage which puts Indian women in subordinate position in deciding a life partner. In an arranged marriage, Indian woman nearly has no liberty to make her own choice; she doesn't choose but is chosen by the men. That is the rule, the tradition has long positioned the man as subject and woman as simply object or property.

In an article entitled *First Comes Marriage, Then Comes Love*, Ira Mathur reported, "The custom of arranged marriages in India has survived and remaining central to the fabric of society. Although no exact figures are available, some 95 percent of all marriages in India are arranged, even among those in the educated middle class." (2000:3). She further implies that, in matched marriage, Indian women are seemingly put in more non-negotiable position in certain cases,

A girl is marriageable from age 18, and parents get worried if she remains unmarried past 24 or 25. It is acceptable for a boy to remain unmarried until his late 20s.... An unmarried daughter - pronounced a spinster even in her late twenties - brings shame upon her parents, and is a burden. But once married, she is considered the property of her in-laws. In this context, unwed mothers, separated, single or unfaithful women are considered outcasts. (2000: 3-4).

In *Bride and Prejudice*, we can see how Mrs. Bakshi is eager to get her two oldest daughters marry rich Indian men. There is a scene where Mr. Kholi, Bakshi's rich Indian relative comes to their house to look for a wife. Kholi is introduced to Bakshi's girls, who are standing in line waiting to be gazed and then, chosen. In this scene too, Mrs. Bakshi reminds her daughters and especially Lalita, the most sensible and practical of all the girls, to make good first womanly impression.

Lalita : *Who?*

Mrs Bakshi :- *Kholi.*

He's your father's sister's husband's sister's son.

And he's a top accountant in California.

Lalita : *But why is he coming here?*

Mrs. Bakshi : *To look at me for his bride. What do you think?*

Mrs Bakshi : *Hurry up, girls, come on here.*

I want to look at you.

Hurry up, hurry up. Come on, fast.

Now, listen to me carefully, girls, huh.

It's very important to make a good first impression on Kholi

Stand straight... smile..... don't talk unnecessarily,

and don't say anything too intelligent. You! (to Lalita)

(Chadha retrieved from rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)

In that particular scene, the girls are expected to be passive, yet acting as sweet as possibly to win the heart of the bachelor.

Lalita, the leading woman character in this movie, is seen as the one with the feminist perspectives. She is against the idea of matched marriage and maintains that she will marry a man of her choice - a sensible, loving and un-sexist man. The lyric of one of the songs sung in the movie, *No Life Without Wife*, clearly shows Lalita's feminist notion.

Lalita's sisters sing: Lonely Mr Kholi from Los Angeles

Came to Punjab on one bent knee

He had a Green Card, new house, big cash

Still made a wish with every fallen lash

For you to do the journey with him

To smile when he got home,

- ask how his day had been
He wants you by his side, in joy and strife
Poor Mr Kholi
He has no life without wife
No life Without wife
Oh, yeah-yeah yeah yeah yeah*
- Lalita sings : I don't want a man who ties me down
Does what he wants while I hang around
I don't want a man who's crude and loud
Who wants a pretty wife to make him proud
I don't want a man who can't be funny
Tells tall tales about making money
Oh, yeah
I don't want a man who'll grab the best seat
Can't close his mouth when he starts to eat
I don't want a man who likes to drink
Or leaves his dirty dishes in the sink
I don't want a man who wants his mummy
A balding pest with too much tummy
I don't want a man who's dead in the head*
- Lalita's sisters : Poor Mr Kholi Hai, Mr Kholi
Maybe he's good in bed
Euurghh!
What you don't want don't matter no more
Soon you'll be married and ready to go
A match made in heaven just like milk and honey
You make aloo gobi, he'll make the money
Every day will be the same, according to his plan
Forget what you want, Mr Kholi's now your man*
- Lalita : I just want a man with real soul
Who wants equality and not control
I just want a man good and smart
A really sharp mind and a very big heart
I just want a man not scared to weep
To hold me close when we're asleep
Oh, yeah I just want a man who loves romance*

*Will clear the floor and ask me to dance
I just want a man who gives some back
Who talks to me and not my rack
I just want a man whose spirit is free
Will hold my hand, walk the world with me
Sorry, Mr Kholi, it is not to be
My heart is set on another, you see
The wandering soul I was meant to meet
Has finally come and swept me off my feet
Now I dream of what it would be like
To be an overseas bride dressed in white
To have a little home in the country
And live in the land of Her Majesty
(Chadha retrieved from http://www.script.-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)*

Lalita is quick to reject Kholi's proposal as she finds him shallow and sexist. Lalita's refusal to Kholi's proposal is a daring decision against her tradition which her mother found it hard to deal with. This can be seen in her following lines:

*Mrs Bakshi : It's too, too much tension for me now.
She is happy to let us all be ruined.
You must speak to her, old man.
She wants love to be there from the beginning.
Where was the love-when we first got married, huh?
Tell her. Tell her that you marry first, then love grows.
I'll never speak to her again if she refuses him.
(Chadha Retrieved from http://www.script.-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)*

In another scene, Mrs. Bakshi easily argues that her daughters are considered as valuable marriageable assets for any eligible bachelors:

*Mrs. Bakshi : Well, you can see for yourself, Mr Darcy,
they are all exceptional marriageable prospects
for any single young man...
Balraj, you are a very lucky man.*

*Jaya's had many suitors before,
with her great beauty and fine figure,
... You two will make a fine couple
and you will have no regrets
on your wedding night.*

(Chadha retrieved from http://www.script.-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)

In those scenes and in many others throughout the movie, Mrs. Bakshi, despite her being a woman, has overlooked Lalita's view and stance against arranged marriage. Such attitude explains and confirms the fact that many Indian women today, including Mrs. Bakshi character, have become the victims of patriarchy. This is generally recognized from those women submission to the patriarchal values which govern the society norms that in some way have held them hostage in believing that such practice as, arranged marriage and viewing Indian girls as simply tribute for Indian men, are indeed justifiable.

F. Orientalism in *Bride and Prejudice*

As much as feminist notion appears in the movie, so is in my operating assumption, orientalist perspective as the movie depicts the East (Indians) being in contact with the West (Americans and British) which later involves them in some cultural conflicts.

The fact that the movie is re-written and directed by Indian British director may bring about an assumption that *Bride and Prejudice* is pretty much a representation of Chandha's awareness of Western's orientalist notion toward non-Westerners from which her characters in the movie receive their Eurocentric prejudice.

It is through characters like William Darcy, Balraj, Kiran and Kholi that Chadha brings about the discourse of orientalism within the movie which is later countered by the characters like Lalita and Mr. Bakshi, Lalita's father.

Said says that 'the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (Said, 1985, p.42). One can see such attitude very clearly in William Darcy when he first sets his foot in India.

Instead of having a thoughtful and fair observation, his first impression of India, particularly Amritsar, is a total mess. In a scene such as the following, Darcy is obviously comparing India along with its irregularity to his more advanced and well-established country, Britain.

Balraj : Good, isn't it?

Darcy : What do you mean it's a bit like New York ?

Kiran : Better get used to it, Darcy.

We're here for two weeks.

Darcy : Jesus, Balraj, where the hell have you brought me?

(Chadharetrievedfromhttp://www.scriptrama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)

In another scene which sees Darcy getting involved in a strong argument with Lalita, this British multi-millionaire seems content with his orientalist notion. His argument implies that the West with all of its superiority should come to rescue the East, (India) from its oriental backwardness. That is, of course, much to Lalita's disagreement. On the other hand, Lalita sees that all of the investments which Darcy has made in India is not actually meant to help or celebrate India. Lalita argues that Darcy and other western investors are only using India to expand their capitalist empire.

Lalita : I'm sure you think India's beneath you.

*Darcy : If I really thought that,
then why would I be thinking about
buying this place?*

Lalita : You think this is India?

*Darcy :- Well, don't you wanna see more investment,
more jobs?*

*Lalita : Yes, but who does it really benefit?
You want people to come to India
without having to deal with Indians.*

*Darcy : That's good. Remind me to add that
to the tourism brochure.*

*Lalita : Isn't that what all tourists want here?
star comfort with a bit of culture thrown in?
I don't want you turning India into a theme park.
I thought we got rid of imperialists like you.*

Darcy : *I'm not British. I'm American.*

Lalita : *Exactly.*

(Chadha retrieved from http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)

Through another scene involving Lalita and the Darcys, Chadha seemingly wants to address critique against many Westerners who fail to see or understand the real India.

Lalita : *Well, there's so much to see in India, Mrs. Darcy.
You must come some time.*

Mrs. Darcy : *Well, if I had a hotel, I might have.
But, well, with yoga, and spices, and Deepak Chopra, and
wonderful Eastern things here, there's no point in travelling there
any more.*

Lalita : *Well, I don't know about that.
People haven't stopped going to Italy because Pizza Hut's around
their corner.*

Mrs. Bakshi : *Yes, right.*

(Chadha retrieved from http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)

In another scene of the movie, Chadha appears to point out a reality that, in fact, orientalist notions are still as influential to her western characters as they are to her Indian characters. As Hall and Gieben quoted from Said, "Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental, European, or Western"(329). Such feature is evident in Kholi character, an Indian descent able of becoming successful in America, who turns on seeing India as a pitiful country in comparison to U.S. In turn, Lalita and Mr. Bakshi argue that it is not fair to compare a young country like India to a country like U.S.

Kholi : *You must join me in US.
You must, you must, you must. Eh?
I could help you start a business there.
That's where the money's to be made.
UK's finished, India's too corrupt.*

Mr. Bakshi: *Kholi saab, India is still a young country
since Independence.
I hardly think its potential is over.*

Lalita : *What do you think your US was like
after years of independence?
They were killing each other with slavery
and blindly searching for gold.* (Chadha retrieved

from http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/b/bride-and-prejudice-script-transcript.html)

G. Conclusion

This somewhat obvious that Lalita, the movie leading character, has been made a representation and/ or a voice of the writer and director (Gurinder Chadha) herself. This is due her attempt to put across and highlight the feminist and orientalist perspectives in the movie.

The way *Bride and Prejudice* carries and presents its critiques toward patriarchy in India is by presenting the reality of arranged marriage and women objectification which Chanda believes to be disadvantageous for Indian women.

At the same time, *Bride and Prejudice* also quite noticeably reveals the way in which orientalism has operated and shaped the way the Indians think of themselves and how the West think of the Indians. Through *Bride and Prejudice*, as if Chadha was saying that people of Indian must be proud of being Indians, proud of their country as well as their culture. It is since India, despite its many problems, is also superior in many ways. It thus tells how the movie also attempts to encourage the Indians to become more sensible and critical of their being within the discourse of the West and the Rest.

I finally argue that the feminist and orientalist perspectives which I assumed to be present in *Bride and Prejudice*, and by which I employ to analyze it, are notably portrayed in the movie. This is, first and foremost, seemingly endorsed by the movie title, *Bride and Prejudice*, as the word 'bride' may represent the movie underlying feminist perspective and the word 'prejudice' as a reference to the orientalist notions. These, I believe, are accordingly taken as the story's underlying plot, and construed through the characterization of the Western and Indian characters (in the movie) who operate within and carry with them the two views namely feminism and orientalism.

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