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# Queering the family of nation: Reassessing fantasies of purity, celebrating hybridity in diasporic cinema

## ABSTRACT

*This article seeks to explore how the disclosure of queer desire is negotiated in the diasporic family. Focusing on Lola and Bilidikid (Kutlug Ataman, 1998), My Beautiful Laundrette (Stephen Frears, 1985) and Nina's Heavenly Delights (Pratibha Parmar, 2006), it examines the intersectionalities of 'queerness' and 'diaspora' and suggests that queer diasporic identities function as a master trope of hybridity. 'Coming out' in the diasporic family articulates a critique of fantasies of purity, which simultaneously underpin certain traditional models of the family (based on bloodline, gender hierarchies and heteronormativity) and nationalist ideologies (based on ethnic absolutism and other essentializing concepts). The family emerges as a privileged site where the contested belonging of the over-determined Other is negotiated. Are the queer sons and daughters expelled? Can their Otherness be absorbed into a homogenizing family of nation? Or are they able to introduce new structures of family and kinship and thereby queer the family of nation?*

## KEYWORDS

diasporic cinema  
family in cinema  
queer cinema  
Asian British film  
Turkish German  
cinema  
identity and European  
cinema

1. Further examples of queer inter-racial/ethnic desire in contemporary diasporic cinema include *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1993), *Hamam* (Ferzan Özpetek, 1997), *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (Olivier Ducastel and Jaques Martineau, 2000), *Chouchou* (Merzak Allouache, 2002), *Touch of Pink* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 2004), *Fremde Haut/Unveiled* (Angelina Maccarone, 2005) and *Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven* (Fatih Akin, 2007). For extensive discussions see Williams (2010) and Provencher (2007).

'Queers and families are two concepts often diametrically opposed in our popular imagination', Harry Benshoff (2008: 223) boldly asserts in relation to mainstream Hollywood cinema, while Stella Bruzzi observes that 'mainstream culture in general has not been historically hospitable to homosexuality, lesbianism or bisexuality' (2009: 133). Yet the opposite appears to hold true for diasporic families in diasporic cinema, be it art cinema or productions bidding for the mainstream. Focusing on three recent diasporic films, the Turkish German *Lola und Bilidikid/Lola and Bilidikid* (Kutlug Ataman, 1999), the British Asian *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) and *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (Pratibha Parmar, 2006), this article seeks to explore how the disclosure of same sex desire is negotiated in the diasporic family. It examines the intersectionalities of queerness and diaspora and proposes that the theme of 'coming out' in the diasporic family articulates a critique of fantasies of purity, which simultaneously underpin certain traditional models of the family (based on bloodline and descent, gender hierarchies and heteronormativity) and nationalist ideologies (based on ethnic absolutism and other essentializing concepts). Both the family and the nation state mobilize discourses of inclusion and exclusion for their legitimation. In diasporic cinema, the family emerges as a privileged site where the contested belonging of the over-determined Other, whose queer desire typically transcends ethnic and racial divides and whose gender identity is fluid, is determined. This article, then, examines how the revelation of gay and lesbian desire affects the diasporic family: are the queer diasporic sons and daughters expelled from the family? Can their Otherness be absorbed into a homogenizing family of nation? Or are they able to build alternative structures of family and kinship and, in doing so, queer the family of nation?

Thus, while endeavouring to advance scholarly discourse on diasporic cinema, this article does not set out to demarcate the boundaries between diasporic cinema and cognate concepts such as transnational (Bergfelder 2005; Ezra and Rowden 2006; Higbee and Lim 2010; Berry 2010; Durovicova and Newman 2010), cosmopolitan transnational (Hjort 2010: 20), accented (Naficy 2001), intercultural (Marks 2000), postcolonial hybrid (Shohat and Stam 1994: 42), cinema of displacement (Ghosh and Sarkar 1995–1996), cinema of double occupancy (Elsaesser 2005), nor the differences between migrant and diasporic cinema (Berghahn and Sternberg 2010). Instead, it explores a theme conspicuously prominent in contemporary European (and in other) diasporic cinemas.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, before considering the reasons behind the proliferation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) identities in diasporic cinema, it is necessary to briefly define diasporic cinema and the diasporic family, given the centrality of these concepts, for this article. Diasporic cinema is generally conceived of as a particular type of transnational cinema that transcends the boundaries of the national in specific ways. Its recent emergence as a much-debated and contested critical concept is inextricably linked to the postcolonial and labour migrations of the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries that have 'dramatically changed the social and cultural composition of European [and other western] societies' (Robins 2007: 152) and have led to the increased visibility of film-makers with a migratory background and a growing interest in the representation of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism on screen. Inscribed in diasporic cinema is the experience or memory of migration as well as the consciousness of belonging to a diasporic collectivity that is trying to assert its place

in the social fabric of the hegemonic host society. As such, it is a cinema of identity politics, probing 'difference along the multiple coordinates of race, colour, ethnicity, nationality, regionality, language, religion, generation, class, gender and sexuality' (Berghahn and Sternberg 2010: 41). Its mission is the relocation of the margins to the centre and the valorization and, ultimately, 'the redemption of the marginal' (Stam 2003: 35). Whereas most scholars link diasporic cinema to authorship, I regard this categorization as problematic since it is based on an essentialist understanding of diasporic cinema.<sup>2</sup> It does not take into account Avtar Brah's concept of the 'diaspora space', which constitutes an important critical intervention in diaspora scholarship.

[D]iaspora space as a conceptual category is 'inhabited', not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement, the intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'.

(Brah 1996: 209, emphasis in the original)

As the concept of diaspora space disavows essentialist notions of origin or of the history of displacement as prerequisites for partaking in the diasporic experience it allows us to include films authored by non-diasporic film-makers who centrally engage with diasporic identities and privilege the perspective of diasporic subjects. Consequently, films centrally concerned with the representation of the diasporic family would qualify as diasporic cinema regardless of whether they are written and directed by a diasporic or by a majority culture film-maker.

The study of the diasporic family is primarily the domain of sociologists and anthropologists. In scholarly debates within these fields there is a tendency to subsume the 'diasporic family' under the more general term 'transnational family', defined by Bryceson and Vuorela as a family living 'some or most of the time separated from each other' yet that is held together by 'a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely, "familyhood", even across national borders' (2002: 3). While multilocality, transnational mobility and the extensive use of modern communication technologies to maintain social and kinship networks are common to the 'transnational' and the 'diasporic family', the two terms are not entirely synonymous. The designation 'transnational family', tends to be used with reference to 'transnational elites [who] are perceived as "mobile" rather than "migrant"' (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 7–8); they move by choice rather than being forced to leave their country of origin because of economic or political necessity. 'Transnational' connotes hyper-mobile cosmopolitan elites who are at home nowhere, whereas 'diasporic' refers to settler communities that have evolved out of mass migration movements, such as postcolonial and labour migrations of the post-war period and that were, at least initially, more likely to belong to the working class than to the social elite. The adjective 'diasporic' inevitably implies sharing in the collective identity that is characterized by 'a strong retention of group ties sustained over an extended period (with respect to language, religion, endogamy and cultural norms)' (Cohen 2008: 61), and a diasporic consciousness that finds its expression in an idealized myth of the homeland and a strong emotional connection with it. It also implies that, in relation to the majority culture of the host society – which

2. Benshoff and Griffin raise the same issue in relation to 'queer cinema', asking whether the label only refers 'to films made by gay and lesbian people' or whether it includes 'films that depict gay and lesbian characters, even when they are made by avowed heterosexuals?' (2004: 1–2).

3. Pratibha Parmar also conceives of the two identity categories as intertwined, stating that her aesthetic 'sensibility comes as much from my culture and race as from my queerness' (cited in MacKinnon 2006: 121).

in the context of the old Europe is white and Christian – the diasporic family is part of an ethnic minority.

How, then, do the marginality and putative difference of the diasporic family in relation to the normative model of the heterosexual, white, nuclear family relate to the proliferation of LGBT identities in diasporic family films? First, queer diasporic subjects are doubly different or doubly marginalized and therefore lend themselves particularly well to the identity discourses of diasporic cinema with its emphasis on marginality. Second, the conjoining of these particular identity categories is not coincidental: queerness and diaspora are both defined by a minority status and awareness. One of the shared concerns of queer and ethnic minorities is the extent to which they enjoy full and equal citizenship (see Sinfield 2000; Fortier 2002; Williams 2010). Furthermore, the (often traumatic) experience of separation and loss of home and homeland, by many scholars regarded as constitutive of the diaspora experience, is shared by gays and lesbians who, when they 'come out', risk being 'cut off from the heterosexual culture of their childhood, which becomes the site of impossible return, the site of impossible memories' (Fortier 2002: 189). As David L. Eng (1997), Alan Sinfield (2000) and other scholars who examine the intersectionalities of diaspora, ethnicity, sexuality and gender suggest, queer and diasporic subjects share a sense of loss and separation from an original place of belonging and the impetus to build a new home. Meanwhile, Avtar Brah identifies a 'homing desire ... which is not the same thing as a desire for a "homeland"' (1996: 180) as a quintessential element of the diaspora experience.<sup>3</sup> Third, the 'diaspora space' potentially functions as a site of liberation. Avtar Brah conceives of it as a conceptual space 'where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate [each other]; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while [...] being] disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition' (1996: 208).

In the context of diasporic family narratives, the diaspora space empowers the queer sons and daughters of migrants-turned-settlers to live or even openly declare a 'love that dare not speak its name', to use Oscar Wilde's euphemism for homosexual desire. What Omar and Johnny in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Nazir and his white British hat designer boyfriend in *East Is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999), Lola, Murat and Bili in *Lola and Bilidikid*, Alim and Giles in *Touch of Pink* (Iqbal Rashid, 2004), Nina and Lisa in *Nina's Heavenly Delights* and Emrah and Tim in *Evet, ich will!!/Evet, I Do!* (Sinan Akkus, 2008) have in common is that they are involved in a homosexual or lesbian relationship, in most cases with a partner who belongs to the majority culture, and that their families do not know anything about it until their secret is revealed.

Although the 'queer diaspora', understood as a minoritarian community of queers, and the 'queer spaces within ethnically defined diasporas' (Fortier 2002: 183) are not identical (despite overlapping partially), both constitute a challenge to essentialist notions of the nation and nationalist ideologies. Given that 'the heterosexual family is the essential building-block in the construction and elevation of the nation' and given that 'queer diasporas [...] decidedly "propagate" outside of the nation-building narrative' (Fortier 2002: 189), the queer diaspora as well as queer enclaves within ethnically defined diasporas challenge nationalist ideologies based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity that have traditionally underpinned the idea of the nation state. Diasporic citizenship transcends the borders of the nation state

and is characterized by multiple belongings and ambivalent attachments. In *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath proposes an interesting equation, namely, that:

queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation. If within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation.

(2005: 11)<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on Gopinath's observations, I propose that the preponderance of queer subjects in diasporic cinema and, in particular, in diasporic family films, is due to the fact that queer diasporic identity functions as a master trope of hybridity. The word 'queer' means 'across' and is etymologically linked to the German *quer*/transverse and the English 'athwart' (Eve Sedgwick cited in Clark 2006: 557). Being queer is essentially about resisting containment within clearly demarcated borders and categories. Queer defines itself against the normal and the normative, of which the heterosexual is but one particular normative category (Eng 1997: 50). Queerness therefore implies transgression, subversion and dissent, and is often conceived of as a state of 'in-betweenness'. In discussing the cultural representation of gays, Richard Dyer notes that both the queen and the dyke 'are represented as if their sexuality means that they are in between the two genders of female and male. Thus dykes are mannish, queens effeminate' (1993: 30). Similarly, conceptualizations of diasporic identity revolve around the space of the 'in-between' that positions diasporic subjects at the interstice between the home and the host country, the culture of origin and the destination culture, national rootedness and transnational routes. The space of the in-between – if understood in negative terms as 'falling between two stools' – is imagined as a space of irreconcilable conflict between cultural and generational value systems where the diasporic subject is caught in the middle unable to choose between either. Yet, in-betweenness can also be understood in positive terms as 'having the best of both worlds'. This revalorization is expressed in spatial metaphors of border crossing, third space (which resonates with Magnus Hirschfeld's designation of homosexuals as 'the third sex') and in the concept of hybridity that has replaced previous dichotomous conceptualizations of diasporic subjectivity.

The widely used term 'hybridity' is generally understood to refer to a range of cultural phenomena that involve mixing. In this broad and fairly imprecise sense, hybridity represents the antithesis to purity. Discourses on nationalism, post-nationalism and diaspora deploy hybridity as a 'a critique of the "Purities" around which minoritarian cultural nationalism mobilizes as much as those of the dominant "host" society' as both discourses stigmatize 'mergings between different cultures as undesirable, divisive and socially degenerative in tendency' (Moore-Gilbert 2001: 195). With regard to diasporic identities (which are inevitably hybrid), Stuart Hall notes that they are never fixed and stable but, instead, poised in transition and fluid. Hybrid identities are complex and heterogeneous, characterized by crossovers and mixes between different cultural traditions that are invoked and drawn upon simultaneously. Consequently, hybridity negates essentialist notions of ethnic absolutism, purity and the nostalgic fantasy of 'a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return' (Hall 2003: 237). Queerness constitutes

4. While European nation states such as Germany, Britain and France with sizeable diasporas are effectively hybridized nations, there is still a widespread reluctance to accept 'the Other' as 'one of us'. 'There ain't no black in the Union Jack', Paul Gilroy asserted in his seminal book of 1987 and, despite continuing to promote a post-racial and post-national ecology of belonging in his more recent writings on diaspora and the nation, he remains sceptical about a widespread acceptance of alternative hetero-cultural and cosmopolitan conceptions of the nation state. As heated public debates in France and the Netherlands around the headscarf and the burka ban indicate, such visible signifiers of difference are perceived as a threat to European nation states, intent on preserving fictions of cultural, ethnic and religious homogeneity. But even a postcolonial nation state like India, with diverse religions and languages, is not immune to such homogenizing discourses, as the recent 'rise of a religious nationalism identified as Hindutva' (Moorti 2003: 356) suggests.

a further dimension of fluidity, gender ambivalence and boundary crossing, representing a vector of alterity that challenges dominant expectations of heteronormativity.

This article, then, is based on the dual premise that 'coming out' in the diasporic family articulates a critique of fantasies of purity, which underpin nationalist and other essentializing ideologies. The family as the most important unit of social and cultural reproduction functions as a trope of belonging, in particular belonging to a nation state, traditionally imagined as a unified, homogeneous and paternalistic family-like structure. The family is therefore a privileged site where the contested belonging of the over-determined Other (simultaneously queer and diasporic) is negotiated. What marks the queer sons and daughters as Other in the context of the diasporic family, which is Other itself in relation to the majority culture of the host society, is not their ethnicity but their queerness.

### **FANTASIES OF PURITY AND QUEER DESIRE IN *LOLA AND BILIDIKID***

Set in Berlin's Turkish gay and transvestite subculture, Kutlug Ataman's *Lola and Bilidikid* illustrates how queer desire is employed as a critique of homogenizing fantasies of purity and unity that lie at the heart of both minoritarian as well as hegemonic cultural nationalisms. The film shows how in three very different cultural contexts (Turkish patriarchy, National Socialism and its neo-fascist legacy in contemporary Germany), queer identities have evoked extreme and violent homophobic responses, thereby drawing attention to the correspondences between belief systems that centre on fictions of purity, regardless of what their ideological underpinning is.

Homosexuals were one of the groups persecuted under National Socialism. Regarded as socially and morally aberrant, 'defilers of German blood', homosexual men challenged the ideal of the German heterosexual family, whose chief function it was to contribute to the creation of the Master Race. The National Socialists' idea of the Master Race, a race of Nordic, tall, blond and blue-eyed Aryans, deemed superior to all other races, encapsulates the obsessive pursuit of racial purity and a racially homogenous nation state like no other ideology. *Lola and Bilidikid* establishes continuities between the homophobic and racist ideology of German National Socialism and contemporary multicultural Berlin by situating scenes of xeno/homophobic violence in locations such as the Olympic Stadium, 'a deserted master site of memory' (Webber 2008: 278), inextricably linked to Germany's legacy of the Nazi past. The Berlin Olympic Stadium was commissioned by Adolf Hitler for the Summer Olympic Games of 1936 and has assumed a prominent place in cultural memory through Leni Riefenstahl's two-part documentary *Olympia: Festival of the Nations* and *Festival of Beauty* (1938). *Olympia* was not just a sports documentary but also a propagandist celebration of the beauty and perfection of the Aryan race. At the same time, the numerous scenes showing naked male athletes in the sauna or under the shower, massaging each other's perfect bodies in sporting camaraderie, oscillate between the homosocial and the homoerotic, therefore conflicting with the Nazi's persecution of homosexuals. It is, not coincidentally, in the underground public toilets of the Olympic Stadium, where Murat, one of the Turkish German characters, has a sexual encounter with his classmate Walter, a German neo-Nazi, before being violently assaulted by Walter's neo-Nazi homophobic friends. Their provocative remark, 'The Turks are the Jews of today', establishes further historical

continuities between Nazism and the queer-bashers' acts of violence. Yet the film's narrative development reveals that a no less violent homophobia runs right through the Turkish German family whose dark secret propels the narrative forward.

The film's title hero/heroine Lola is a Turkish German gay man, who performs as a drag queen in the cabaret show *Die Gastarbeiterinnen/The Women Guest Workers*. The other Turkish German drag performers, Calypso and Shehrazade, and her macho boyfriend Bilidikid, have become Lola's surrogate family after the disclosure of her sexual identity resulted in her being evicted from her Turkish birth family, also living in Berlin. Yet this is not the only family secret that comes to light and gradually tears the diasporic Turkish family apart. It transpires that the family's eldest son Osman is himself a closet queer, who raped Lola and whose 'repressed same-sex desire returns in his homophobic violence' (Mennel 2004: 303) directed at his brother Lola. A similar ambivalence is evident in Lola's hyper-masculine boyfriend Bili, who tries to talk Lola into having a sex change so that they can get married and lead a 'normal' life as husband and wife in Turkey. Bilidikid's attempt to convert his queer desire into a socially respectable straight relationship reflects the denial of his own sexual identity.

Despite working as a hustler and despite being in a same-sex relationship with Lola, Bili does not consider himself homosexual. In accordance with the Turkish conception of homosexuality, 'the label of *the homosexual* is attributed to any individual who is being penetrated or thought to be penetrated, whereas the other one remains free of this label regardless of the fact that he is engaged in homosexual sex as well' (Tapinc 1992: 42, emphasis in the original). The homosexual is regarded as a disgrace of manhood and exiled from the public sphere of Turkish men, which, according to Tapinc (1992: 45), explains why many homosexuals (in the Turkish sense of the term) identify themselves completely with women and often opt for a sex change. In line with this gender-stratified model of homosexuality, Bili tries to impose the same uneven power relationship that governs male and female gender roles in the patriarchal family upon Turkish German gay subculture. Bili's fear of gender ambivalence – another variant of both Osman's and the neo-Nazi closet queers' homophobia – is reflected first in his plan to turn his drag queen lover into a 'proper' woman and second, in his violent revenge of Lola's murder. Presuming (wrongly as it turns out), the neo-Nazi thugs have killed Lola before dumping her body in the River Spree, he castrates one of them and kills another, before being shot dead by his opponents in a harrowing blood bath. In the violent act of castration Bili carries out on another man's body what he threatened to do to Lola, should she resist the sex change.

In *Lola and Bilidikid*, the disclosure of homosexual desire is rendered as a narrative about the transgenerational transmission of shameful and traumatic family secrets. In their study *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), the psychoanalyst couple Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok suggest that family secrets such as incest, child abuse, illegitimacy, suicide and other perceived social stigmas, if undisclosed, become 'phantoms' that haunt subsequent generations: 'In folklore and literature (*Hamlet* functions as the paradigmatic text here), this phenomenon is usually explained as the haunting of the dead who took unspeakable secrets to the grave' (1994: 171) and return to haunt the living. But, 'what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others' (Abraham and Torok 1994: 171). Transgenerational phantoms do not only haunt individual and familial memory but also the collective

5. A memorial commemorating homosexual victims of the NS regime was erected as late as 2008 in Berlin.



Figure 1: Lola (Gani Mukli) wearing the red wig.

memory of nations: ‘a phantom can help account for the periodic return of political ideologies rendered shameful’ (Abraham and Torok 1994: 169), such as the return of Nazism in the shape of neo-Nazi movements in Germany and elsewhere.

Considering that the persecution of homosexuals under National Socialism was largely excluded from public remembrance until 1985 and that Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code, which outlawed homosexual acts under Nazi rule, remained in effect in West Germany until 1969, one could argue that the suffering of this particular group of victims of the Nazi regime has for a long time been collectively ‘forgotten’.<sup>5</sup> The periodic return of the Nazis’ ideology of the Master Race with its concomitant homophobia manifests itself in the violent homophobia of the neo-fascist closet queers in *Lola and Bilidikid*. The phantom that haunts Murat and Lola’s family and which Murat, the guardian of the phantom, dutifully re-enacts relates to a deep-rooted homophobia that is simultaneously personal and collective, national and transnational.

Still wearing Lola’s red wig and women’s clothes, which he donned in order to lure Lola’s presumed killers to the dilapidated warehouse where he discovers that the neo-Nazis are innocent of Lola’s murder, he runs home. His coming out in front of his mother and brother Osman in the kitchen requires few words of explanation, since his resemblance with Lola in drag alone results in a *déjà vu*. The red wig serves as a startling reminder of Lola, who wore it in order to make her queerness visible and thereby deter Osman from further acts of incestuous rape. The unexpected apparition of what looks like Lola’s ghost catches Osman off guard and, bewildered, he shouts: ‘They should have buried [the red wig] with him’, thereby disclosing that he knows of Lola’s death and is, in fact, guilty of murdering her. Murat breaks the vicious circle of silence and repetition by revealing what has been phantomized – his brother’s violent homophobia and the heinous crime of fratricide.

By establishing analogies between the fictions of purity that govern fascist and patriarchal ideologies, *Lola and Bilidikid* condemns both, advocating instead fluidity and cross-over, not only in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of transcultural encounters. Lola’s performance of gender and ethnicity on stage as well as in her personal life, in which she chooses the fluid identity



of a gay transvestite over that of a male-to-female transsexual, embodies this notion of fluidity. She disproves Bili's dogmatic statement that 'a man is a man' by switching between being a man and being a woman, and she wants to keep it that way. It is therefore not coincidental that her death is associated with water: her red-bewigged body floats on the River Spree, where it is discovered by children who think it is a mermaid, a hybrid creature, half woman and half fish.<sup>6</sup> Lola's symbolically charged death validates the ideal of cross-over and hybridity along the multiple axes of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. It destabilizes ontological conceptions of gender and sexuality and, by palimpsestically mapping them onto ethnicity, the film foregrounds the constructedness of all of these categories. In this sense, Lola represents the antipode of a unified, stable identity and purist fantasies of cultural and ethnic homogeneity that underpin nationalist ideologies, which is why she must be destroyed by its proponents.

### COMING OUT IN THATCHER'S FAMILY OF NATION: *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*

*My Beautiful Laundrette*, based on a screenplay by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Stephen Frears, makes queerness and hybridity its main concern. The film's fragmented narrative centres on Omar, the son of a Pakistani father and British mother, who becomes an aspiring young entrepreneur when his wealthy Uncle Nasser asks him to manage one of his small businesses, a run-down laundry in South London. Omar employs his one-time schoolmate Johnny, who is white, British, unemployed and hangs out with a group of xenophobic skinheads, to help him refurbish the laundrette. They become lovers, yet they never 'come out'. In contrast to the other films considered in this article, in which the revelation of queer desire determines whether the transgressive couple will be included or expelled from the family circle, *My Beautiful Laundrette* remains equivocal as to which members of Omar's extended family actually grasp the true nature of their relationship.

Christine Geraghty describes *My Beautiful Laundrette* as a 'cross-over film' (2005: 5) with respect to its production, reception, aesthetics and themes, while film-maker Julian Henriques notes that it is about 'a love affair between two men, two races and two politics' (cited in Geraghty 2005: 22).<sup>7</sup> I would posit that *My Beautiful Laundrette* takes the idea of cross-over one step further by not just crossing over but by *inverting* prevalent social class and power structures which testify to uncomfortable continuities of colonialism in Britain under Margaret Thatcher's rule and beyond.

According to Bart Moore-Gilbert, Kureishi and Frears's film interrogates racially determined power relationships familiar from colonial discourse in as much as:

Johnny's dependence on Omar plays off the colonialist trope of 'the faithful servant'; and in providing Johnny with work, Omar contributes to his friend's moral regeneration in a way that parodically recalls the colonialist project of 'civilising' the brutal natives. Instead of the white colonial male enjoying the native female [...] the non-white Omar enjoys the native British man.

(Moore-Gilbert 2001: 73–74)

At the same time, Omar and Johnny's relationship inverts the widespread image of elite, white men 'pursuing working-class and/or Latin, Arab, Indian

6. Menell (2004) and Clark (2006) explore the reference to Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
7. *My Beautiful Laundrette* has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention. For diasporic subjectivities see Desai (2004), Korte and Sternberg (2004); for production history and institutional context, see Hill (1999) and Geraghty (2005). Geraghty (2005: 81–89) also explains why the film had little impact on gay film-making and queer theory.

and Africano men', in which the 'the former [...] tend to be thought of as the queers, not the latter' (Dyer 2002: 6). In this sense, the character constellation 'queers' prevalent racial and class stereotypes and challenges binary oppositions that customarily serve 'as the basis of political cleavage and social division' (Brah 1996: 184), thereby encapsulating Kureishi's utopian vision of a 'fluid, non-hierarchical society with free movement across classes' (Kureishi cited in Korte and Sternberg 2004: 85). Imbued with a certain 'degree of old-fashioned sexual utopianism' (Hill 1999: 214), the film identifies sexual desire as the means through which barriers of race and class can be overcome: 'Much good can come from fucking', Omar remarks at a family get-together at Uncle Nasser's home, where he introduces Johnny as his business partner (though not as his lover), and where the socially disenfranchised Johnny is included in the circle of the prosperous Asian British family.

The pivotal scene capturing the utopian potential of queer desire is the gay couple's lovemaking at the back of the launderette. As Johnny caresses Omar, Omar disentangles himself from Johnny's embrace and recalls how, several years ago, Johnny betrayed their friendship and that of Papa by joining the National Front on their notorious anti-immigration marches through Lewisham. The moment of seduction crystallizes into a moment during which Omar reassesses his ethnic and familial loyalties. The chiaroscuro lighting, casting patches of light and shadow across his face, makes his inner conflict visible, as he remembers what he and his father witnessed: 'It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People *we* knew. And it was you! He [Papa] saw you marching and you saw his face, watching you'. The fear of racial hatred and violence took its toll on Omar's family. Yet, despite implicating Johnny in his mother's tragic suicide and his father's steady decline since then, Omar succumbs to Johnny's tender caress and the two make love, allowing their desire – at least momentarily – to overcome the shadows of the past and whatever else may stand in their way.

Shortly after this symbolic 'act of racial reconciliation' (Bruzzi 2009: 139), they face one another on opposite sides of a one-way mirror, which separates the brightly lit public space of the launderette at the front from the dark back room. Looking into each other's eyes, their faces are momentarily superimposed, blended into one unifying oval shape. Eva Rueschmann regards this superimposition as 'the most striking visual image of Kureishi's [and Frears's] filmic construction of a new British identity, one neither traditionally Pakistani nor exclusively white British but both, altered and transformed by the changes each character has wrought in each other' (2003: xix).

The film's persistent preoccupation with social divisions and barriers is reflected in the *mise-en-scène* with its conspicuously many windows, mirrors and screens that 'both allow us to see the action and slightly obscure it' (Geraghty 2005: 57). In contrast to Omar and Johnny, who are frequently shot through windows and semi-transparent screens, the other transgressive couple, Uncle Nasser and his white mistress Rachel, whose exuberant waltz and kiss in the laundrette's public space is synchronized with the gay couple's lovemaking and kissing in the office at the back, are on most other occasions shot through grids (cf. Geraghty 2005: 56). Both the scene in which Rachel and Nasser make love and the one in which they break up are shot through a grille of black square bars that simultaneously imprisons and visually fragments the couple. These rigid rectangular bars stand in stark contrast to the permeable mirror, or 'liquid window' (Kaleta cited in Rueschmann 2003: xix), in which Omar and Johnny's reflections merge.



Figure 2: Omar (Gordon Warnecke), Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis) and the utopian potential of queer desire.

Omar and the laundrette are persistently linked to fluidity and water. The sound of bubbling and gurgling water accompanies the title sequence and several subsequent scenes, especially those set at the Powders laundrette. Omar is introduced by a shot of his hands washing and wringing his father's clothes in a bathroom sink. Later the camera penetrates a windscreen covered in soapsuds to reveal Omar's hands and face, as he is washing a car at Nasser's garage. The film's final scene shows Omar, who has been tending the wounds Johnny incurred in a violent fight between 'his own people', the white supremacist gang, and Omar's cousin Salim, laughing and splashing each other with water in the laundrette's back room. The laundrette, decorated in pastel shades with stylized images of giant blue waves on the walls, reverberating with the sound of Strauss's Blue Danube waltz on its grand opening day, and compared by Rachel to 'a wonderful ship', functions as a utopian space in which antagonisms of race and class dissolve. But, as Stella Bruzzi reminds us with reference to Omar and Johnny's playful water games, the laundrette 'is only the film's microcosm, the film's larger social concerns remain [...] unresolved' (Bruzzi 2009: 140).

Kureishi and Frears do not naively propose that queer desire instantaneously creates social equality and harmony. The racial and ideological tensions that jeopardize Omar and Johnny's relationship resurface again and again. Yet, although *My Beautiful Laundrette* hardly disavows the social realities that put Omar and Johnny in the line of fire between warring sections of society, it nevertheless heralds the utopian vision 'that contemporary Britain has within its grasp the possibility of expanding traditional conceptions of national identity to create for the first time a genuine and revolutionary, though always *contradictory* rather than blandly harmonious, unity-in-diversity' (Moore-Gilbert 2001: 92).

8. Some voices from within the British Asian community criticized the film for its overly positive portrayal of Asians, especially that 'there were no poor Asians in the film, Asians living on the margins and in poverty' (cited in Malik 1996: 209). Others objected to the negative stereotyping of the British Asian community: 'all the prejudices that this society has felt about Asians and Jews – that they are money grabbing, scheming, sex-crazed people' (cited in Geraghty 2005: 20).

What makes *My Beautiful Laundrette* central to the concern of this article is that Omar and Johnny's queer desire is deployed as a powerful critique of Thatcher's Britain, with its emphasis on ethnic absolutism and family values. As Paul Gilroy argues in his aptly titled book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), Thatcher's populist nationalism ultimately conceived of the British nation as white. Her vision of a regenerated British nation emphatically disavowed difference and extolled 'a political culture dominated by the notion that the family was the only social unit, as reflected in Thatcher's now-famous statement, "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families"' (Tudor 2008: 145). Yet not any type of family would qualify. The Tory government discriminated as much against family diversity (in the shape of single mothers, and other non-traditional family types) as it did against ethnic and sexual diversity. Sexual minorities were positioned alongside other 'enemies within' in Thatcherism's 'constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation' (Stuart Hall cited in Waites 2000). Thatcher regarded immigrants from Britain's former colonies (also called the 'Commonwealth family' or 'family of nations') as a threat to the British nation and the values it stood for. *My Beautiful Laundrette* challenges this homogenizing fantasy by making the point that there are no families that come even close to this ideal. Johnny has severed all bonds with his family; Omar's father Papa has never recovered from his wife's suicide and is a bed-ridden alcoholic; and Uncle Nasser's 'traditional' Asian family with a white mistress on the side is barely holding up. If, as Margaret Thatcher pronounced, the moral integrity and stability of the traditional nuclear family was to be the chief guarantor of Britain's social stability and prosperity then, according to Kureishi and Frears's ironic assessment, there was not much hope for Britain under Tory rule. Or, conversely, Thatcher's Britain had to open up to the reality of family diversity – and by implication – an ethnically diverse Britain.

### CELEBRATING HYBRIDITY IN *NINA'S HEAVENLY DELIGHTS*

Twenty-one years after the remarkable success and heated controversy (in the Asian community) sparked by *My Beautiful Laundrette*,<sup>8</sup> the Asian British filmmaker Pratibha Parmar has revisited the theme of queer inter-racial love in the Asian diasporic family in *Nina's Heavenly Delights*. Dubbed 'My Beautiful Restaurant' (Wajid 2006), Parmar's and Frears's films evince a number of conspicuous similarities. Like Omar and Johnny, Nina and Lisa are lovers as well as business partners, their first erotic encounter also occurs in their working environment, and both films end with the dual promise of a lasting relationship and business success.

Described by Parmar as a film about the family, food and love (Parmar n.d.), this romantic comedy centres on the young Scottish Indian Nina, who falls in love with the white Scottish Lisa, while preparing for a cooking contest. Nina, who ran away from home after breaking off an engagement, returns to Glasgow to attend her father's funeral. Upon taking over her father's restaurant, The New Taj, she finds out that he has gambled half of it away and that the restaurant is co-owned by Lisa. She also learns that The New Taj has been shortlisted for The Best of the West curry competition, alongside The Jewel of the Crown with her ex-fiance Sanjay as its master chef. Nina, who was initiated into the art of cooking by her father as a little girl, is confident she will win simply by following her father's advice: 'Taste

it. Taste it in your heart, [...] no matter what the recipe says, always follow your heart. Best chicken chakuti this side of Maryhill!'. As David Martin-Jones observes, cooking 'is a way for Nina to recreate her father's presence from her childhood' (2009: 84) and to keep, via the family, the cultural memory alive. Though significantly, this is not the memory of 'a homeland like India, but of a diasporic NRI childhood in Maryhill, Glasgow' (Martin-Jones 2009: 84). Exploring the sensuous delights of exotic food, Nina and Lisa grow ever more attracted to each other until, one day, they fall into each other's arms and passionately kiss – first amongst the sizzling pots and pans of the restaurant kitchen and then on national Korma TV, after winning The Best of the West curry competition.

*Nina's Heavenly Delights* takes the sexual utopianism of *My Beautiful Laundry* significantly further by resolving the narrative conflict between traditional Indian family values and queer inter-racial desire in a happy end that affirms the lesbian couple's integration into the family circle and into the Scottish nation. The telling name of the curry competition and the victory of the lesbian racially mixed couple over what would have been a traditional heterosexual couple (if Nina had not broken off her engagement to Sanjay, the competing master chef), celebrates the transgressive and hybrid union as superior – simply The Best of the West.

*Nina's Heavenly Delights* normalizes queerness by suggesting that Nina's secret is on par with those harboured – and eventually revealed – by other family members: her little sister's innocent indulgence of traditional Scottish dancing, her brother's 'pure love' (an expression used several times) and clandestine marriage to a white Scottish woman and her mother's secret love with the owner of The Jewel in the Crown. In a bid for mainstream audiences, Parmar's comedy remains coy about the depiction of same-sex desire, translating erotic into culinary delights, and foregrounding romantic love over lesbian desire. Whereas Omar and Johnny's lovemaking in the launderette is charged with erotic frisson and sensuous physicality, the corresponding scene



Figure 3: Nina (Shelly Conn) and Lisa's (Laura Fraser) kiss is televised on national Korma TV.

in *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is conventionally romantic. As Lisa enters Nina's bedroom, steeped in deep red light, Nina offers her an Indian-style dress similar to the purple one she is wearing, and holds it up against her body. Lesbian desire is imagined as dressing up rather than undressing each other. The women's almost identical hairstyles in this scene, their similar height and body shapes, foreground similarity rather than difference and, thereby, tone down the transgressiveness of what was once tabooed as 'miscegenation'. The touching of white and brown skin is muted by the red lighting and limited to a close-up of intertwined arms. As soon as Lisa unzips her lover's dress, the screen fades to black.

The grand finale is a tongue-in-cheek endorsement of fluid identities, be they queer, diasporic, or both. In this hybrid Bollywood-style song and dance number, the entire cast joins Nina's friend Bobbi, an out gay drag queen, and the Chutney Queens in their celebratory performance of 'Love in a Wet Climate'. Not just the Chutney Queens are cross-dressing everybody is wearing 'ethnic drag' (Sieg 2002): some Scots are dressed in Indian saris while some diasporic Indians wear tartanry. Parmar's romantic comedy presents the queer diasporic subject as fully integrated into the Scottish nation, represented through the same kind of clichéd nature imagery as used in the Scottish Tourist Board's advertising campaign 'VisitScotland'. Expansive, empty landscapes with high mountains and crystal-clear lakes conjure up visions of a pure Scotland and, by extension, pure Scottishness. In the film's final sequence, in which the performance of 'Love in a Wet Climate' gives way to the filming of the performance in the studio, this vision of 'pure Scotland' is revealed to be fake: it is a landscape that has been projected onto a green screen. This self-referential conceit underscores that the ideal of purity – be it pure (i.e. heterosexual) love or a pure (i.e. racially homogeneous) Scotland – are nothing but pure fantasy.

## CONCLUSION

The disclosure of queer desire (especially when inter-racial) in the diasporic family challenges fantasies of racial and cultural homogeneity, ethnic absolutism and heteronormativity. These fantasies of purity underpin and legitimize dominant social formations that rely on discourses of inclusion and exclusion. They determine who's in and who's out, who belongs to or is expelled from the nation state, traditionally imagined as a family. However, the diasporic family, hybrid itself, problematizes the fixity of the nation state and functions as a site where the contested belonging of the Other is renegotiated. The representation of queer diasporic identities in diasporic European cinema challenges the hegemony of white heteronormativity and, thereby, the foundations of the family and the nation.

As Partibha Parmar wrote in *Queer Looks* in 1993, i.e. at a time when she made aesthetically less mainstream films than *Nina's Heavenly Delights*:

as lesbians or gays of color, we have had to constantly negotiate and challenge the racism of the white gay community, and at the same time confront the homophobia of communities of color [...]. Precisely because of our lived experiences of racism and homophobia, we locate ourselves not within any one community but in the spaces between these different communities.

(1993: 5)

The three films analyzed in this article speak from precisely this position of the interstice. Their strategic agenda is the de-marginalization and, ultimately, the integration of the over-determined Other into the social fabric of the host nation – albeit not necessarily the host nation as it is but as it should be. They identify queer desire as the means to attain this social utopia. Whereas *Lola and Bilidikid* focuses on the dystopia of homogenizing fantasies of purity and their destructiveness,<sup>9</sup> *My Beautiful Laundrette* envisages the queering of the family of nation as an ongoing process in which new, fluid forms of kinship are established only to disintegrate and be reconfigured again. The generic framework of the romantic comedy in *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, however, provides the utopian space in which queer inter-racial desire can be fully accommodated in the diasporic family and in a culturally hybridized host nation. Just as Indian curries and Bollywood rhythms make the Scottish nation richer and more vibrant, Parmar's feel-good movie seems to be saying, so does diversity in love.

9. Lola's family of choice, the drag performers *Die Gastarbeiterinnen*, and the relationship between the aristocratic Friedrich and his Turkish hustler boyfriend Iskender do, however, offer glimpses of more utopian socialities.

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