

**Film Review*****Yasmin: Hybrid Cinema from the maker of *The Full Monty******E. Anna Claydon***Department of English, University College of Education, Edge Hill, Lancashire<sup>1</sup>**Yasmin*. Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> January, Channel Four

When I first read about Peter Cattaneo's film for Channel Four, *Yasmin*, the natural assumption was that this was to be another *East is East* (1999), a British-South Asian comedy directed by a white director from another of Britain's immigrant communities (Damien O'Donnell was from an Irish background, Cattaneo is British-Italian). A shared positioning as the Other would contribute to a sympathetic reading of the disenfranchised community in the film. The fact that Peter Cattaneo is the director of one of British cinema's finest social realist-comedies, *The Full Monty* (1997) furthered the presumption that *Yasmin* was to be another comedy set in the 'grim' North: but *Yasmin* is no comedy. It may use comic devices in places (the heroine's husband brings home a goat at one point) but this is only to heighten the dramatic power and great pathos of the scenes which are played out. Indeed the initial humour of the goat, brought back to Yasmin's house by her drunken husband only in name, is a counterpoint to the confused sadness Fesal feels on his end of an arranged marriage: "It's my wife. You're not my wife. It my wife, my friend".

*Yasmin* is not a stunning film. It is not, like *Anita and Me* (2002), a film which finds beauty and significance through style, lighting and colour: but it does evoke a chillingly realistic vision of a small Northern town set in the frost covered hills and strewn with the debris of life. As in *The Full Monty*, Cattaneo finds his spectacle in everyday events and their contrasts. Whereas in his 1997 film, costuming and the changes in and out of it provided much for the spectator to reflect upon, here the same function is performed by Yasmin's own dressing, undressing and redressing as she struggles to express her identity(ies). Costume is politicised and filled with meaning which any audience can comprehend. At one moment dressed traditionally in a sari and headdress with 'sensible' glasses poised on her face, Yasmin drives into the hills and changes, wriggling into jeans, putting in contact lenses and divesting herself of the signs of South-Asianess as she continues on her way to work in an H-reg Golf GTI ("sex on wheels", she describes it as to her friend and colleague, John).

The plot is stunningly simple but it is the complex characterisations which create an impressive dynamic of social, political, sexual and racial confusions. The story begins with the small Moslem community going through their daily lives comparatively uninterrupted and Yasmin's secret, westernised, life is unrealised by her religious father. Every evening she takes over her father's and brother's dinner to their house

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and deals with the difficulties posed by her “banana boat” husband who knows not how to use an electric stove and sleeps on a mattress in her front room. She is unhappy and confused but finds a certain kind of freedom in her escape into her job as a care worker and the hip hop dance music the radio blares out in her red convertible car. Then September 11<sup>th</sup> happens: and as we all experienced it in Britain so does the film – it becomes a televisual event. Screens take captive their viewers and so the tone of the film shifts to one of paranoia and thinly veiled prejudice on all sides. Thus, Yasmin’s secret identity is blown into freefall and, drunk on vodka, aggravated by John and the other white work colleagues, she angrily shouts her apologies on the behalf of all Moslems to the bar, full of white faces suspiciously gazing in her direction. Without giving too much away, because I am sure *Yasmin* will find itself released on DVD before long, what follows next is a depressing indictment of British institutional racism finding an outlet in the wake of the destruction of the Twin Towers, especially the police.

The focus upon the police racism, paranoia and violence is fascinating. Not only because of the events which saw a number of the Greater Manchester police fired or suspended for issues of racism, exposed in the BBC documentary but because of the echoes, as a text, which the spectator can recognise from colonial literature, especially *The Jewel in the Crown* and *A Passage to India*, both filmed during the 1980s. It may seem tenuous to link these costume dramas to a film such as *Yasmin* but we read all films as intertexts, recognising and comprehending through similarities to other films, TV series and books. This intertextuality is part of what has shaped the post-national, post-modernist hybrid cinema of British film since the late 1980s and it is crucial to the presentation of subjectivity in *Yasmin*. Put baldly, Yasmin herself is a liar and has so little respect for her family that she resents everything of which she is asked, whilst her brother is a foul-mouthed drug dealer who thinks nothing of sharing his sister’s use of racist language towards people in their own community. Of course, it is much more complex than this; indeed all of these features point to the confused identities of Yasmin and her brother, Nasir. As such, the spectator reads these characters as akin to the Khan siblings of *East is East*: they are victims at the intersection of incompatible societies (at least when represented as ciphers of Islamic and British secular cultures). Thus, the spectator identifies with Yasmin (and to a certain extent her brother, who is persuaded to fight in Palestine amidst the tensions of the post-9/11 environment) because of the way in which she is pushed and pulled one way then the other. In short, because she is victimised by the obsessed and apparently racist police.

*Yasmin* is one of the best British-South Asian films to emerge since the wave began in 1999; especially because, unlike the comedies or highly comic films we have seen of recent years, this film does not fear to be dramatic or challenging in addressing the impact of 9/11 on the South Asian diasporic community. *Yasmin* also stands out as a truly hybrid text, not simply in the union of the explicit creative team (director, writer, actors, producers) but because it was written entirely in consultation with the South Asian communities of the North of England. It has an elegance and truth of representation that neither *East is East* or *Bend it Like Beckham* could achieve in their artifice which is epitomized for me by the moment when Yasmin defends a fellow Pakistani woman against the racist attack of a group of teenagers. As Archie Panjabi and the other actress walk off and the boys cycle away, an elderly white woman comes into the frame from the left, apologizing profusely for the behaviour of the louts. This, according to Cattaneo, interviewed for the *Radio Times* of the week, was

unscripted. The woman did not realise a scene was being filmed or recognised that the women in traditional dress were actresses. When put against the characterisations of the racist police and the ridicule imposed upon Yasmin by her work colleagues, this genuine, caring behaviour makes me hope that Cattaneo's film will make more spectators think before they act in response to the terrible propaganda effused by the likes of the BNP in towns throughout the North.

If you haven't seen this film yet, you should.