



“My Son Won’t Play Cricket for England”: Cricket, Patriarchy, and Diasporic Subjectivity in *Patiala House*

Rakesh Ramamoorthy

Abstract

The Hindi movie *Patiala House* (2011) deals with the question of the (sporting) allegiance of diasporic subjects. In the movie, a prodigiously talented British Asian cricketer’s sporting career is curtailed by his father’s unwillingness to let his son play for England. This paper examines the ways in which the text negotiates the ‘homeland vs adopted land’ dichotomy, a cliched binary that continues to be pervasive in discourses on the allegiance of diasporic subjects. Informed by the assumption that neither of these positions are empowering or regressive in themselves and that there is a need to explore the contingent cultural politics of particular diasporic subjectivities, this paper argues that the narrative of *Patiala House* undercuts the (contingent) progressive potential of both poles of this dichotomy. The movie’s suggestion that England has entered a post-racial era makes it complicit with what Bonilla-Silva terms “color-blind racism”. Such a negation of racism undercuts the critical potential of the South Asian immigrants’ identification with their country of origin as a means of combatting the exclusionary overtones of the mainstream British culture. Furthermore, the movie’s eventual portrayal of a seemingly acceptable means of assimilation into the adopted land — a British Asian cricketer’s playing for the England team while adhering to certain Indian cultural norms — is regressive on account of its endorsement of patriarchal hierarchies.

Keywords: Cricket, *Patiala House*, Color-Blind Racism, Diaspora

The sport of cricket has been a key site of the negotiations of British Asian subjectivities. The scholarship on the subject attests to the heterogeneous nature of South Asian diaspora’s engagements with British cricketing cultures. The immigrants have been cast as racial and cultural Others in these (sporting) cultures, and often critiqued for refusing to assimilate into the mainstream English culture (Burdsey “If I Ever Play Football” 17, Fletcher 613-6, 620-21). This has resulted in many immigrants identifying themselves with ‘home’

teams as a means of battling such every day racisms. In many cases, this identification is cultural, and does not amount to a rejection of English national identity in favour of their country of origin (Burdsey “If I Ever Play Football” 17,21; Raman 222, 225; Fletcher 621-4). There have also been instances of (tenuous) inclusion into purportedly multicultural mainstream cricketing cultures, as evidenced by the stardom of English cricketer Monty Panesar (Burdsey “Monty Panesar” 553-5). This paper explores the ways in which *Patiala House* — a movie whose plot revolves around the unwillingness of an aged first-generation Sikh immigrant to allow his son to play cricket for England — negotiates the pervasive, albeit cliched, ‘homeland vs adopted land’ dichotomy.

This study is informed by Elizabeth Mavroudi’s (2007) call for dynamic and contingent conceptualizations of diaspora. She argues that it is problematic to adhere to binaristic notions of diasporas wherein they are seen as either bounded (which involves an affiliation with an allegedly static homeland) or unbounded (wherein diasporic identities are seen as nomadic and fluid). While bounded conceptions, with the idealised notion of a cultural unity that transcends national boundaries, can reinforce progressive political projects, they can be exclusionary for those subjects who do not adhere to the said cultural norms (470-1). Unbounded conceptions, with their notions of ever-changing postmodern subjects, not only capture the ambivalence that diasporic subjects often feel towards the notion of a stable identity, but also questions the power relations inherent in the policing of cultural and political boundaries (472-3). Mavroudi maintains that these two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive and argues that the negotiations of diasporic identities as a process, wherein

. . . those in diaspora may be seen as dynamic, ‘on the move’ and multiple but also subject to power relations, tensions, disconnections and the specific, situated processes that enable (or force) the constructions of shared (and often politicised) notions of belonging, identity and community”(476).

This paper argues that the movie *Patiala House* detracts from the progressive potential of both the bounded and the unbounded

perspectives of diasporic subjects. It makes a twofold argument: The movie's contention that contemporary England has become a post-racial society — which undercuts the counterhegemonic potential of a bounded diasporic subject who identifies with the country of origin — makes it complicit with the discourses of “color-blind racism” (Bonnilla-Silva's term, cited in Burdsey “Monty Panesar” 552-3). Furthermore, though the movie seemingly endorses the notion of an unbounded diasporic subject — a British Asian cricketer who chooses to play for the English cricket team —, that subjectivity's implicit critique of bounded subjectivities is diluted by the movie's endorsement of the stereotypical notion of a patriarchal extended South Asian family.

England, a Post-Racial Utopia?

Gurtej Singh Kahlon, addressed as “Bauji” by his family, is the patriarch of a large Sikh family domiciled in Southall, London. He has fought against racial discrimination as a first-generation immigrant in the 1970s, and is a leader of the local Sikh community. Smarting from bitter memories of racist abuse and violence, he is unwavering in his dislike of the mainstream White British population, and perceives them as the Other. He curtails his family members' freedom in negotiating their subjectivities as second-generation immigrants, and insists that they conform to stereotypical life choices that are in line with regressive conceptualizations of Indian culture. For instance, a nephew who wants to be a chef specializing in western cuisine is forced to fry jalebis, and a niece who wants to be a rapper has to restrict herself to singing bhajans. Bauji's eldest son Parghat Singh Kahlon (known as “Gattu”) is a prodigiously gifted fast bowler who was called up to the England national cricket team at the age of seventeen. However, Bauji could not accept the notion of his son playing for England and prevents him from accepting the offer. The movie presents Gattu as a thirty-four-year-old man leading a listless existence managing a convenience store and venting his frustration by furtively bowling in the nets in the middle of the night. The members of the family do acknowledge the hegemonic nature of Bauji's patriarchal authority, and Gattu's voice over at the opening of the movie states, “My name is Parghat Singh Kahlon. . . And I am living the life my father chose for me” (00:10:47-00:10:58; *my trans.*)

The central conflict played out in the movie, stemming from the younger generation's rebellion to Bauji's authority, is premised upon a problematic misrecognition: rather than critiquing the feudal patriarchy that Bauji embodies, the movie attributes his sins to his failure to recognize the allegedly post-racial nature of the present-day England. When Gattu receives an improbable second chance to play for England (a selector of Indian origin convinces the committee that the talented Gattu can turn around the national team's fortunes), he refuses to pursue the opportunity. The younger members of the family — Gattu's cousins, brother, and sister-in-law — convince him that he can play without Bauji's knowledge. They beg him to fulfil his dreams just once so that they can convince Bauji that racist discrimination against British Asians are a thing of the past. Her sister-in-law says,

Achieve your dreams just once...prove that you are a winner...then Bauji will realize that he has achieved the rights that he fought for...the Whites consider us as equal and you are proof of this...everything has changed...now all that remains is for him to change...only then will Patiala House be able to face Bauji with heads held high and reclaim their lives. (00:58:07-00:58:3; *my trans.*)

As Aparajita De points out in her reading of the movie, Bauji's world view is binaristic (289). One can go a step further and say that it is blatantly Occidental, marked by the Orientalist subject's hate for everything Western. The scene discussed above, a crucial scene on which the rest of the plot hinges, reveals that rather than critiquing Bauji's essentialist thinking via an unbounded perspective of the diaspora (wherein identities are seen as fluid and always-already hybrid), the movie alleges that England has become a post-racial society. This glib claim is as politically regressive as it is ahistorical, as evidenced by the work of numerous scholars working on British Asian societies, often through the prism of sporting cultures.

The diasporic subjectivity that the movie attributes to Bauji — and one which it denigrates — is one which has considerable critical potential in the everyday cultures of British Asians. Soumya Bhattacharya's cricket fan memoir, *You Must Like Cricket? Memoirs of an Indian Cricket Fan* (2006) recounts how, while his parents were

working in England in 1974, they had hoped in vain that the visiting Indian cricket team would triumph on the field and thus redeem their pride. Bhattacharya notes that their smug self-confidence was shattered by the team's abysmal performance. He writes,

They came from a country which had none of Britain's creature comforts and affluence. Here, they were as poor relations in every sense. And they were often faced — despite the best and kindly efforts of many of the English friends they had made — with contempt and condescension. Cricket would help them to get level. (47)

In an article that is evocatively titled, “‘If I Ever Play Football, Dad, Can I Play for England or India?’ British Asians, Sport and Diasporic National Identities”, Daniel Burdsey has argued that while young British Asians often support international cricket teams hailing from their ‘home land’, in the case of football their allegiance tends to be with the English team. He argues that the difference in the attitudes towards these two sports can be understood in terms of cricket's potential to empower the immigrants. Unlike in the case of football, subcontinental teams have had superlative success in the cricket field and celebrating the success of ‘home’ team against England has functioned as a form of postcolonial resistance for the immigrants. Moreover, British Asian fans' performance of South Asian modes of cricket fandom at international cricket matches can be seen as an implicit critique of the exclusion of such codes of behaviour in the cultures of domestic cricket in England (20-1). In her study of immigrants from India and Pakistan, Parvati Raman has noted that, “[f]or many South Asians, cricket has become a repository for emotional attachments to ‘home’, through migrant narratives of vindication and empowerment, which are simultaneously a critique of a British polity, which, they feel, continues to racialise and exclude its migrant ‘others’” (217). She cites the responses of second-generation British Asians who attest to being subject to overt racism as well as subtle exclusionary attitudes, and some of them assert that refusing to support the English cricket team is a conscious act of resistance (225-6).

Patiala House attributes Bauji's attitudes towards the British to the racist violence inflicted upon the Sikh community of Southhall in

the 1970s. The flashback sequences at the beginning of the movie reveal that his political awakening was triggered by a traumatic incident wherein a beloved leader of the Sikh community was murdered by skinheads and justice was denied as the police were in cohorts with the perpetrators. He subsequently took the lead in transforming Southall into a “mini-Punjab”, a self-contained safe haven for the Sikhs in London. As the anecdotal and scholarly writings discussed above indicate, a bounded subjectivity such as that of Bauji has considerable counterhegemonic potential. In *Patiala House*, however, this subjectivity is delegitimized by the assertion that Bauji’s anti-racist stance is no longer necessary in a purportedly post-racial England. This problematic perspective is presented at another instance in the movie when a routine altercation breaks out between Bauji and the local authorities, and Gurdial Sira, the Member of Parliament for Southall is forced to intervene on behalf of Bauji. Afterwards, the MP tells Bebe (Bauji’s wife), “Please speak to Gurtej. What is the need of all this in the present scenario? The same drama everyday! Everything has changed now” (00:20:51-00:20:58). Bebe responds sharply that things did not change by themselves and that Bauji brought about all the change. She reminds him that there was a time when their children couldn’t go to school and that now a Sikh man has become the MP for Southall, all due to her husband’s efforts (00:20:59-00:21:13). This whole conversation reiterates the problematic idea that racial parity has been achieved and thus delegitimizes the struggle for equality that continues to be a part of the everyday life of many non-White immigrants in England.

The implicit contention of the movie, voiced through the family members’ criticism of Bauji’s refusal to allow Gattu to play for England, is that a British Asian cricketer’s playing for the English national team is acceptable because such citizens have been accepted as a part of the mainstream British society. This perspective should be read in conjunction with Daniel Burdsey’s reading of the celebrity image of Monty Panesar, the British Asian cricketer whose career as an England spinner is believed to have inspired the character of Gattu in *Patiala House* (“Monty Panesar ‘inspires’ Akshay’s Character”). While Burdsey acknowledges the significance of Panesar’s celebrity status, he argues that the cultural politics of his fame is ambivalent and that it cannot be simplistically read as an instance of progressive

multiculturalism. He has been subject to patronizing representations, with his relative ineptness at fielding and his cohabitation with his parents — typical in South Asian cultures — being mocked at. Panesar himself has noted that he often feels that the fans are waiting for opportunities to mock his fielding errors rather than supporting him. Moreover, the Barmy Army's (the collective of English cricket fans noted for their boisterous presence in the stands) wearing of clip-on beards as a sign of being Panesar fans is deeply problematic: The beard, which is a significant element of the Sikh religious practice is being treated with a problematic irreverence ("Monty Panesar" 553-6). Burdsey further speculates, "Is Monty's beard perceived as an acceptable and available form of cultural appropriation because it is clearly — if not visually, then certainly symbolically — not Islamic?" ("Monty Panesar" 556). This reading of Panesar forms a crucial frame of reference for the cricketing discourse in *Patiala House*, for it challenges the simplistic notion that the English cricket fan's acceptance of a British Asian cricketer can be seen as evidence of England having become a post-racial utopia.

Burdsey goes on to argue that English cricketing cultures are shaped by a hegemonic discourse of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "color-blind racism". Bonilla-Silva's formulation, developed with reference to contemporary America, refers to the "the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in "raceless" explanations for all sort of race-related affairs" and identifies "minimization of racism" as one of the key themes of such discourses (7). Burdsey argues that color-blind racism is pervasive in British sport and explains the minimization of racism as follows:

This frame posits that prejudicial views and behavior are no longer a major factor affecting the life chances of minorities, it also views discrimination as synonymous with blatant, full-on racist instances, and by doing so "eliminates the bulk of racially motivated actions by individual whites and institutions by fiat" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006: 30). This perception serves to obscure the existence and extent of prejudice and discrimination, and the fact that minority ethnic groups' inclusion in English cricket remains partial and contingent. More specifically, it allows the numerical representation of British Asian players to be often correlated

mistakenly with a belief that they are unequivocally included and accepted within the structures and cultures of the game. (552-3)

Through its portrayal of Bauji as an obstinate old man who fails to realize the putatively post-racial character of contemporary Britain, *Patiala House* is complicit in sustaining the discourse of color-blind racism, thereby denying the continued prevalence of racist othering of British Asians. Such discourses of color-blind racism serve to devalue Bauji's principled struggle against the everyday racisms experienced by British Asians.

Bowling for England and Batting for India

The movie offers a happy ending that is typical of family dramas in Indian popular cinema and in the process, reaffirms both the discourses of color-blind racism and that of hegemonic patriarchy. Aparajita De's reading of the discourses of gender in the text has focused on the domestication, so to speak, of Gattu's girlfriend Simran. Gattu's girlfriend Simran, borne of an English mother and Sikh father, plays an instrumental role in encouraging him to take up the opportunity to make a belated debut for England. De points out that while she is initially cast as a "nonconforming, resistant subject" the movie ends with a dance number in which Simran is dressed in traditional garb, indicating her conforming to the traditional Indian culture that Bauji seeks to replicate in his family structures (292). De presumably has this transformation of Simran in mind when she writes, "Although the film celebrates cricket as a site which helps identify, coalesce, and claim a coherent hybrid cultural identity for the members of the young British Asian diaspora, it ultimately affirms a patriarchal nationalistic model of identity"(293). However, there is another significant way in which the movie endorses a patriarchal notion of Indian identity: through Gattu's discursive and performative linking of his cricketing triumph, and the alleged mainstreaming of British Asians, to Bauji's defiant anti-racist perspective.

For the bulk of the movie, Gattu embodies a subservient masculinity wherein he subjugates himself to the authority of his father. The family members' conspiracy to enable Gattu to play for

England is rather tame. In a plot element that challenges credulity, they conspire to cut off the cable connection in the whole of Southhall so that the cricket mad Bauji has to resort to follow the game through radio commentary. Furthermore, Gattu adopts the rather insensitive pseudonym of “Kaali” so as to prevent his father from learning the secret. When Bauji eventually finds out that Gattu had been playing for England without his knowledge, he is enraged and is hospitalized due to a cardiac incident brought on by the shock. He severs all ties with Gattu, and a heartbroken Gattu decides to quite cricket. This news makes newspaper headlines and the English cricket fans are dismayed by the loss of their new cricketing hero on the eve of the upcoming final match. Bauji remains steadfast in his denunciation of Gattu and denies him his position of the eldest son, a privileged position within a conservative patriarchal family. He prevents him from performing a ritual customarily performed by the eldest son at his sister’s wedding. This provokes Gattu to explicitly question his father’s hegemonic patriarchy, “Bauji, I had forgotten that only you have the right to live. The rest of us only have the permission to breath. Nobody here has the courage to live their lives the way they want to” (01:52:50-01:53:07). When a furious Bauji demands of the rest of the family whether they feel that he has ruined their lives, the very people who had instigated Gattu to take the lead in challenging Bauji’s dominance do not have the courage to speak up. Gattu further says,

The mistake is mine, Bauji. You are right. But this time round, my mistake is not that I played cricket, but that I was about to quit it. Bauji, if I don’t go to the stadium tomorrow, twenty more Gattus will be born in this house, who have dreams in their hearts but lack the courage to express them. Bauji, I will play cricket. I will play for myself and for my dreams. I will play for all their dreams. I will play for Patiala House. But Bauji, I will definitely play. (01:53:59-01:54:50, *my trans.*)

With these words, Gattu walks out of the house. While preparing to play in the match, Gattu’s thoughts, conveyed through voice over, declares that he has come out of his father’s shadow for the first time in his life and has decided to take decisions for himself. These words and actions constitute an individualistic counter discourse to a

hegemonic patriarchy. It can be seen as an instance of a second-generation diasporic subject assuming agency upon himself and choosing to identify himself with the adopted homeland, thereby challenging the traditional authority wielded by the patriarch of a South Asian (Sikh) family.

However, this challenging of patriarchy from an individualist perspective and the agential adoption of a fluid conception of identity is undercut by the resolution of the familial dispute, which is achieved through Gattu's reaffirmation of both his father's patriarchal authority and the problematic discourse of color-blind racism. Bebe forces Bauji to watch the match on the television and he sees Gattu say at a pre-match interview that his success is an outcome of his father's quest for acceptance and respect,

He had heard all this noise [the applause and cheers of the crowd] before I did. Frankly, whenever I play cricket, I don't see the stadium or the pitch or batsman or the wicket. I only see my Bauji's dream, which I have now fulfilled. He would always say, "Son, one day the abuses will be drowned out by the noise of the applause." (02:01:24-02:01:50; *my trans.*)

This refiguring of Gattu's success as the realization of his father's dreams undercuts Gattu's challenge of his patriarchal authority. It dilutes his agency in affiliating himself with England and suggests that his cricket is merely the outcome of the patriarch's fight against racism. It is not just through words that Gattu remakes his subjectivity and his cricketing performance in his father's image. In the crunch situation in the climactic match, Gattu bowls the last delivery with a different run-up. He mimics the fabled action of Lala Amarnath in which he uses a shortened run up. Lala is not only a legendary Punjabi cricketer of the pre-Independence era; he is also Bauji's hero. The bowling action Gattu uses is one that Bauji often waxes eloquent about. While such an embodied cricketing practice in itself can be read as a positive sign of Indian cricketing styles infiltrating English cricket and as a marker of hybridity, in the context of the movie, it works as a reaffirmation of Bauji's patriarchal dominance as well as of the prescriptive adherence to 'home' culture. Furthermore, Gattu's assertion that his cricketing success is a result of his father's quest for respect also works within the symbolic

economy of color-blind racism. For Gattu's comments at the pre-match interview suggest that Bauji's dream of racial equality has already been realized. The sequences featuring White English fans cheering for Kaali — the unsubtle racial overtones of the pseudonym is significant here — serve to suggest that the English have accepted non-White immigrants as being part of the Self. Such a depiction does not factor in any of the ambivalences identified by Burdsey in his discussion of Monty Panesar's stardom. The climactic sequences show the rest of the family members obtaining Bauji's 'permission' to pursue 'Western' careers and in one case of one daughter, to marry her White boyfriend. The symbolic tenor of the resolution of the familial conflict is complex and deeply problematic: On the one hand, Bauji has forsaken his agential, if binaristic, view of the racial issue in multicultural Britain in favor of a disempowering discourse of a color-blind society. On the other hand, he still retains his patriarchal authority over the family: though he *permits* his daughter to marry a White man, as Aparijita De has pointed out, his soon-to-be daughter-in-law, the biracial Simran is indigenized through a typical song and sequence in which she wears ethnic costumes (292).

Conclusion

In concluding this discussion, it would be useful to place *Patiala House* vis-à-vis two discursive trends in popular Hindi cinema: its engagement with popular cricketing nationalisms and with conservative patriarchal family values. *Patiala House* is an atypical Bollywood cricket movie, given the tendency of popular cinema to reiterate the notion that cricket is a 'natural' vehicle for Indian nationalism. Whereas a movie like *Lagaan* endorses a majoritarian, homogenous notion of Indian cricketing nationalism (Mannathukkaren), *Patiala House* advocates for a fluid, hybrid conception of diasporic subjectivity, implicitly challenging both the allegedly intrinsic link between cricket and Indian nationalism as well as the problematic notion that the Indian-origin subject has to affiliate oneself such a national(ist) imaginary. The counterhegemonic potential for such an unbounded subjectivity is, however, negated because rather than portraying British Asians as identifying with Britain despite the everyday racisms that they have to negotiate, it denies the very existence of racism in contemporary

England. Furthermore, the movie fails to endorse the dilution of feudal and/or patriarchal notions of authority that such an unbounded subjectivity affords, and as is typical of Bollywood NRI films, presents a regressive cultural nationalism that seeks to preserve the traditional power hierarchies. Whereas the movie initially presents Bauji as a repressive patriarch, it ultimately suggests that he embodies a figure that Malhotra and Alagh identify as being crucial to the gender politics of post-1990s Hindi cinema: a benevolent patriarch who acts out of a genuine, if misguided, love for the family (28-31). So the loosening of Bauji's grip over the extended family, enabling people to choose their careers and pursue interracial romantic relationships, also creates an acceptable form of patriarchy, leaving the fundamental gender hierarchies intact. In other words, *Patiala House* brings together the worst of the worlds that it engages with, merging contemporary West's "color-blind racism" with the patriarchal discourses that permeates both the technologized, globalized India and Bollywood, one of its key sites of popular culture.

Works Cited

- Burdsey, Daniel. "If I Ever Play Football, Dad, Can I Play for England or India?" *British Asians, Sport and Diasporic National Identities.* *Sociology*, vol. 40, no.1, 2006, pp.11-28.
- . "Monty Panesar and the New (Sporting) Asian Britishness." *A Companion to Sport*, edited by David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, Wiley, 2013, pp. 548-63.
- De, Aparajita. "Sporting with Gender: Examining Sport and Belonging at Home and in the Diaspora through Patiala House & Chak De! India." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 11, no.3, 2013, pp. 287-300.
- Fletcher, Thomas. "'Who Do 'They' Cheer For?' Cricket, Diaspora, Hybridity and Divided Loyalties Amongst British Asians." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2011, pp. 612-31.
- Malhotra, Sheena and Tavishi Alagh. "Dreaming the Nation: Domestic Dramas in Hindi Films post-1990." *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 2, no.1, 2004, pp.19-37.
- Mannathukkaren, Nissim. "Subalterns, Cricket and the 'Nation': The Silences of 'Lagaan.'" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, no. 49, 2001, pp. 4580-88.
- Mavroudi, Elizabeth. "Diaspora as Process: (De)Constructing Boundaries." *Geography Compass*, vol.1, no.3, 2007, pp. 467-79.

- “Monty Panesar ‘inspires’ Akshay’s Character in Patiala House.” *The Indian Express*, 27 Dec. 2010, www.indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/entertainment-others/monty-panesar-inspires-akshays-character-in-patiala-house/. Accessed 01 Dec 2022.
- Patiala House*. Directed by Nikhil Advani, Produced by Bhushan Kumar et al., 2011.
- Raman, Parvati. “It’s Because We’re Indian, Innit?” Cricket and the South Asian Diaspora in Post-war Britain.” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2015, pp. 215-29.