



RETHINKING THE JANE AUSTEN CONTINUUM : CROSS-CULTURAL AFTERLIVES AND DROP CULTURE IN BRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novels are pivotal in the canon of English literature. This article attempts to make a foray into the ever-continuing presence of Austen in the global literary scenario, which gets boosted through the cross-cultural adaptations of the novels. Her novels have been a site of retellings over generations. The present article focuses on *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), a Bollywood cinematic adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* directed by Gurinder Chadha, which is a cross-cultural and transnational translation. The arguments are based on adaptation studies, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies. The film reinvents the portrayal of class, marriage, and female agency through culturally specific film aesthetics, paying attention to postcolonial diasporic cultures and altered notions of romance and marriage. The film is multilingual, located in multiple spaces, and is highly musical, making it an apt demonstration of the circulating and evolving potential of the Austen canon in the global popular culture scenario. The thesis of the article is that Austen's relevance endures not just through her novels alone, but more powerfully through cultural reinventions.

1. Introduction

More than two centuries have passed after the publication of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The novel has been celebrated for its nuanced social commentary, the ironic nature of its narrative voice, and the incisive portrayal of class, marriage, and female autonomy. The novel has a vibrant afterlife across various cultures and contexts in a variety of media. The rich adaptability of the novel has resulted in a plethora of cinematic reinterpretations to most modern global reworkings. Austen is not a mere canonical English novelist but a transnational cultural presence who has transcended the original English milieu.

This article tries to analyse Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) as a site which exemplifies the concept of Global Austen. Austen is no longer a concrete literary artefact but an ever-evolving cultural resource. The focus is not on fidelity to the source text. *Bride and Prejudice* will be situated within the framework of adaptation studies, diasporic identities, and cross-cultural translation. The basic premise is that the film produces a fresh take on Austen's themes through the aesthetics of Bollywood cinema from the perspective of postcolonial cultural representations and diasporic cultural dimensions.

Bride and Prejudice is a portrayal of a globalised cultural scene set in varied locations from India to Britain and the United States, and the presentation mixes the conventions of Hindi cinema with those of Hollywood romantic comedy. The confluence of local traditions and global approaches generate a vibrant hybridity which enhances the reception of Austen in a renewed fashion enabling the emergence of new meanings. *Bride and Prejudice* as a cultural translation reinstates Austen's status as a classic.

According to Frank Kermode, a classic is not a fixed canon but a work that continues to generate new meanings in varied contexts. Its timelessness rests on its capacity to endure, be remade in the transaction between the text and the historical moment. The adaptation of canonical literature to new forms of media has been a serious concern for adaptation studies for a long time. Questions of fidelity to the literary source dominated at the initial stages. Faithfulness was considered superior to deviation. This hierarchy was challenged by critics like Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon. Their contention is that they attribute an autonomous entity to adaptations as they are shaped by unique historical, cultural and ideological situations. In the viewpoint of Hutcheon, adaptation is considered not only as a product but as a process as well, a process of relocation and re-creation of culture across time.

Austen's works have yielded tremendously to rewriting endeavours as the narrative structures are suitable for recreations. The concept of marriage as a social institution yields to communicate to successive generations highlighting concerns of family, class, social hierarchy, cultural gaps etc. The narratives become sites to negotiate gender politics, globalisation and so on. *Bride and Prejudice* focalises cultural difference situating Austen within global popular culture. The film employs dialogues in multiple languages, popular musical sequences and locations across continents, thus shifting the narrative from the English society to a global scenario where migration, tourism and cultural collage decide the order of the day.

The canonical Austen survives as a niche culture through the formation of sub - communities of specific novels, adaptation loyalty circles, online spaces like fan fiction platforms, BookTok micro audiences, academic blogs etc. which create cultural communities with highly engaged Austen fandom. The focus is more on belonging and distinction than on popularity. Pierre Bourdieu has elaborated on how taste categories are formulated. Henry Jenkins has theorised participatory culture and fandom. The film *Bride and Prejudice* functions as a perfect example for the evolution of a canonical text to the position of a global cultural text. It is an example of drop culture where culture is turned into an event more than a sustained practice. Culture gets manifested through releasing "drops" which are time - bound and limited and which produce urgency and exclusivity. The film positions Austen in the global drop culture through its adoption of the Bollywood - style and the release of festival premieres. It markets hybridity as novelty, a consumable sign of cultural fusion. In the digital age Austen's afterlives sustains at the intersection of niche culture and drop culture. It is aesthetic commodification and algorithmic visibility that cherishes the canonical author rather than continuous literary engagement. The film acts as an episodic cultural event which shifts Austen from canon to drop which enables it to enter into the world of global niche culture through the creation of a strategically timed and hybridised spectacle. It is not a heritage adaptation but is framed as a global release event which is premiered at international festivals and is marketed as a Bollywood - Hollywood crossover. The film's consumers are the diasporic and cosmopolitan niche audiences, not the mass literary public. It addresses the English educated diasporic South Asian communities who move globally and are fluent in both Bollywood conventions and the grammar of Western rom-coms. The film assumes the viewers to have at least a partial literacy of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* which will

enable them to find and recognise the parallel between the marriage plots in the novel and the film.

The visual and musical excess in the film functions as a drop aesthetic. The song and dance sequences in the film perform the function of interior narration. India gets curated as a vibrant and consumable modernity through the compression of cultural difference into spectacle. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity can be used productively as a framework for scrutinising *Bride and Prejudice*. In his view, cultural meanings are negotiated in the "third space" through hybridity. It is not just transmitted. The concept of cultural purity is destabilised and identity is considered as relational and performative. The film occupies a hybrid space which operates by a harmonious blending of Austen's world, the conventions of Bollywood, Hollywood romantic comedy and the experience of diasporic existence. Lalita Bakshi, the counterpart of Elizabeth Bennet in the film, performs this hybridity. She is an Indian woman with autonomy, very articulate, an ardent follower of local traditions yet in touch with global culture. Lalita does not accept the simplistic, conventional impressions of tradition and modernity. Darcy in the film has prejudiced cultural assumptions which are looked at by Lalita with skepticism, very similar to Elizabeth Bennet's criticism of class prejudice. Lalita expresses the postcolonial critique of the Western rationality about India.

In the novel, Darcy is an English gentleman land owner representing hereditary privilege. The film's Darcy is an American hotel magnate representative of global capitalism. The socio-economic context of Austen's world shifts to contemporary forms of power which bring about inequality. The narrative trajectory of moral judgement and moral growth is retained in the film too. Instead of accepting Darcy's economic and cultural assumptions, Lalitha openly challenges them thereby questioning the Western modernity rather than idealising it. It does not portray marriage as an aspiration but as a negotiation. It is not a reproduction of the Austen canon but a selective drop which is appropriated, reshaped and released in a fresh manner for a global niche audience.

The form of the film too celebrates hybridity. The too many song and dance sequences typical of Bollywood cinema mark its unique difference from Western realist conventions. The sequences serve the purpose of communal celebrations which act as cultural signifiers. The film legitimises the role of non-Western aesthetic forms while adapting a Western classic. Austen's cultural context is translated into an Indian one where marriage as an institution occupies a central

controlling power which is negotiated through familial and economic considerations. Contrary to the prejudiced assumption of arranged marriage as a forceful and coercive tradition, the film portrays it as a cultural framework where the choice of individuals and the obligation to the family function simultaneously, though not without tension. It is more of a complex social practice than an innately oppressive institution.

The film uses English, Hindi and Punjabi reflecting the postcolonial linguistic hybridity. Austen's text is one which highlights the superior status of English. The use of English along with vernacular languages in the film destabilises this linguistic hierarchy and places it only as just another linguistic resource. Lalitha and family use English for everyday conversation. This signals their education, cosmopolitan competence and transnational legitimacy which enable them to engage in a global conversation space, thus positioning them as equals to Western characters. In the post colonial scenario of the film, the use of English is a strategic one which is a mark of global mobility and elite access, not an aspiration as it was in the colonial times. English became the language of eventisation which enabled easy circulation in film festivals without the need of subtitles. English is used as a tool of post colonial resistance. Following Homi K. Bhabha, one can argue that English in the film is deterritorialised by speaking with an Indian accent and inflecting with local idioms. Lalitha debates in English with Darcy on global inequality and economic arrogance. The worldview of the coloniser is challenged by appropriating his own language. The use of English and Hindi on different occasions acts as a marker of class and space. The selective code switching highlights the contrast between urban and rural spaces, global and local contexts and public and intimate moments. English is predominantly used in public debate, transnational encounters and ideological confrontation whereas Hindi is used in musical numbers, occasions of family intimacy and cultural rituals. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia may be applied here when multiple voices coexist without hierarchy. Thus, the use of English in *Bride and Prejudice* is not a linguistic mimicry but a strategic cultural capital which facilitates the film's circulation as a global niche product and a cinematic "drop". It also provides a space for the postcolonial subjects to contest and rework Western dominance.

The film addresses issues of gender, class and postcolonial identity. Though limited in agency by the patriarchal constraints of the society, Lalitha manages to challenge them subtly. She is able to challenge the cultural superiority of the West as well. She establishes her autonomy by locating

tradition in a global frame, not by rejecting it outright. The song “No Life Without Wife” is a reasoned critique on how marriage gets commodified. The film employs a large number of song and dance sequences and visual excess. The psychological depth and narrative subtlety of Jane Austen are replaced by the excessive spectacle. According to Debord, social relations are mediated through images, and meaning is condensed into consumable forms (Debord 7). Lalita mirrors Elizabeth when she resists the concept of a marriage solely based on wealth or status. Mrs. Bakshi is similar to Mrs. Bennet in her obsession with daughters’ marriage.

Bride and Prejudice is an apt illustration of how the canon gets reinvigorated through repositioning in time, space and culture. The fluid nature of contemporary identities is figured through the transnational setting of the film. The plot evolves shifting from Amritsar to London to Los Angeles. The figure of Darcy is an American hotel entrepreneur who is presented as the embodiment of Western economic and racial privilege. Initially, his impressions about India are similar to what Edward Said calls as the Orientalist discourse which eyes the non-Western world as the other, i.e., barbaric, exotic and backward, waiting to be civilised (Said 3). When Darcy expresses his opinions about the need of modernising India and its infrastructure, it is an echo of colonial narratives of modernity. The moral superiority claims of Western capitalism is exposed through the sharp repartees raised by Lalita.

The theme of class prejudice highlighted by Austen is reconfigured in the film as a scathing attack on racial and cultural hierarchy. The settings serve to highlight this. They are not mere backdrops, but carefully chosen cultural spaces where the world of Austen gets translated into a global, postcolonial and eventised framework. Amritsar, Goa and London are symbolic spaces which shape the class dynamics, the behaviour of characters and their relationships. Amritsar stands for tradition, London for cosmopolitan modernity and Goa represents a transitional, liminal space. The primary domestic space of Amritsar is analogous to Austen’s rural English setting. It portrays cultural rootedness, middle-class dignity, vibrant kinship ties and community surveillance. It is recognisable as a “home” space for the diasporic community. Cosmopolitan London is employed to focus on the power asymmetry functioning in the post colonial world. It is the financial and cultural capital with economic privilege and political dominance. Lalitha mingles with the Western people with confidence and it functions to challenge the Western assumptions by reversing the gaze. With its beaches, resorts and leisure culture, Goa acts as a space which is not fully traditional or entirely western. Indian and western characters mingle and coexist in the same space. There is emphasis on colour movement and music which makes Goa

a space of visible globalisation where tourism and cultural exchange take place. Thus Goa functions as a spectacular drop space for visual pleasure and global appeal. The scenes in the film which are set in Goa address the gaze of the Western tourists which turns Indian culture to a mere spectacle. Stuart Hall argues that power is decisive in every representation (Hall 225). This argument is suitable in analysing how the global entertainment industry consumes and reduces postcolonial cultures. The large numbers of song sequences are employed self-consciously by Chadha to expose the Western expectations of exoticism.

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the film *Bride and Prejudice* demonstrates how the canon of Jane Austen survives not through linear continuity but through dynamic reimagining across culture and time. Through its transnational framework the film strategically reactivates the canon instead of merely preserving it. The logic of drop culture is demonstrated through this cross - cultural adaptation where Austen comes to life as a time bound, eventised phenomenon shaped by spectacle, hybridity and niche address. However, the film is not intended for passive consumption. Characters like Lalitha negotiate and challenge the Western notions of superiority by asserting linguistic and cultural agency thereby embedding the postcolonial critique within the film's narrative. *Bride and Prejudice* is neither static nor derivative; it is part of a fluid process in which the Austen canon gets repeatedly reimagined across cross cultural spaces.

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