

# REBORN FROM ONE'S OWN HYBRID ASHES. TROUBLED IDENTITIES AND NOSTALGIC VIEWS IN *THE FAR PAVILIONS*\*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** During the 1980s, Thatcher's economic revolution brought about important ideological and cultural implications closely related to the issue of identity construction. The Raj Revival cinematic productions apparently reflected the Conservative government's return to the values of the past. Nonetheless, a deeper analysis of these productions also points to their ambiguous nature in their portrayal of gender, race and class tensions. My aim in this essay is to demonstrate how the 1984 TV series *The Far Pavilions* reflects this conflict of identities, especially through the analysis of the main character, a British subject raised by an Indian family who falls in love with a half-cast Indian princess.

**Key words:** cinema, identity, race, gender, Thatcher.

**Resumen:** Durante los años 80, la revolución económica thatcheriana llevó implícitos cambios ideológicos y culturales estrechamente relacionados con el tema de la construcción de la identidad. Las producciones denominadas "Raj Revival" reflejaban aparentemente el retorno a los valores del pasado defendido por el gobierno conservador. Sin embargo, un análisis más detallado de estas producciones también indica una gran ambigüedad en el retrato de las tensiones existentes entre género, raza y clase. En este ensayo intentaré demostrar cómo la serie británica *The Far Pavilions* refleja este conflicto de identidades a través del personaje principal, un británico criado por una familia india que se enamora de una princesa india mestiza.

**Key words:** cine, identidad, raza, género, Thatcher.

During the 1980s, Thatcher's economic revolution brought about important ideological and cultural implications closely related to the issue of identity construction. Several factors, like the Conservative party's defence of a free market in the context of globalization, the hegemonic influence of the economic and cultural imperialism of the United States,

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the attempted cohesion of the E.E.C., together with the increasing presence of several generations of immigrants from Britain's former colonies, contributed to increase the continuous contact with foreign cultures and countries. This contact threatened the traditional concept of British national identity defended by the government<sup>2</sup>.

Thatcherism's sense of Britishness was rooted in a nostalgic view of the past, reflected in the successful cycle of heritage films of that time —what Tana Wollen has labelled as “nostalgic screen fictions” (Wollen 1991: 179)— which held a revival and great success precisely in this context of the 1980s<sup>3</sup>. These cinematic productions that delved mostly into Britain's glorious past were viewed by some critics (Tana Wollen, Salman Rushdie and Claire Monk among others) as a branch of the heritage industry, closely related to the Thatcherite ideals. In their opinion, heritage films gave a Conservative vision of the past, reducing the British heritage to the aristocratic life and properties of the South of England (Monk 2002: 179).

This nostalgic vision of the British imperial past is even more present in the branch of the heritage films labelled “Raj Revival” productions: the films *Gandhi* (Attenborough, 1982), *Heat and Dust* (Ivory, 1982), *A Passage to India* (Lean, 1984) and the TV series *Kim* (1984), *The Far Pavilions* (1984) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984). Nonetheless, a deeper analysis of these cinematic productions could point to their ambiguous nature as they often portray gender, race and class tensions in relationship with the past and the present behind their apparent Conservative propaganda, as “they very often seem to move marginalized social groups from the footnotes to the centre” (Higson 1996: 244).

In this sense, I would argue that the Raj Revival productions in particular provide a problematic view of the fluidity of identity construction in individuals caught between different cultures. Basing my analysis on a cultural studies approach, my aim is to use the theories of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Lola Young, among others, in order to demonstrate how the 1984 TV series *The Far Pavilions* reflects this conflict of identities, especially through the analysis of the main character, Ash (Ben Cross). Ash is a British subject raised by an Indian family who grows up fascinated by this culture and who ends up living in the Indian mountains —the Far Pavilions— with his beloved, Anjuli (Amy Irving), a half-cast Indian princess<sup>4</sup>.

The credit sequence situates the action in 1865 in Mardan (Punjab), when the British army was at war with the “rebel” independent tribes in the North West frontier. An Indian-looking teenager enters the headquarters of the army asking for protection. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that he is Ash, an English boy whose parents died during the

<sup>2</sup> In her attempt to make Britain “Great” again, Thatcher focused her efforts in reaching the unity of the country through the defence of the traditional values of the past associated with the sense of Britishness, mostly based on the Victorian ideals of the British imperial past (Hall 1990: 29-30).

<sup>3</sup> Some examples of heritage films are *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson 1981), *Another Country* (Kaniewska 1984), *A Room with a View* (Ivory 1985), *Maurice* (Ivory 1987), and the TV series *Brideshead Revisited* (1982).

<sup>4</sup> The problems of identity construction of individuals caught between two clashing cultures together with troubled interracial sexual relationships are recurrent topics in the Raj Revival productions: an anglicized Indian who falls in love with a British woman in *The Jewel in the Crown*, Gandhi's identity construction first in Britain, then in Africa and finally in India in *Gandhi* and the conflicting relationships between British women and Indian men in *Heat and Dust* and *A Passage to India*.

Indian mutiny and who was adopted, first by his Indian maid and, after her death, by the Muslim servant of a Royal Hindu family. Ash becomes a servant but has to run away due to the tyranny of Biju Ram (Saeed Jaffrey), the prince's counsellor, leaving behind his friend Anjuli, the prince's mix-breed half-sister, with whom Ash feels identified. Thus, from the very beginning of the series, the spectators become aware of the multiplicity of identities that have forged this hybrid main character. This mixture of identities is even present in his name, since he is called Ash by the British and Ashock by the Indians.

In the credit sequence at the beginning of every chapter India is presented first with a map in order to locate the concrete place of the action within the Indian subcontinent, and then with spectacular images of the natural landscape, ending with a view of two big mountains: the Far Pavilions. The first chapter starts with Ash, now a young Englishman, travelling by train to Mardan in his return to India from Britain. As occurred in *A Passage to India*, *Gandhi* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, the appearance of a train allows not only the main British characters but also the spectator to travel back into the imperial past through a nostalgic portrayal of the British precious lost possession, the so-called "jewel in the crown". Ellen Strain analyses the importance of tourism in the nostalgic screen fictions: "Essentially, the use of film as an analytical lens creates a double layer of touristic practice to be examined: the travel experience of the fictional character at the center of the novel or film in question and the "virtual tourism" of the reader or spectator as armchair traveler" (1998: 148).

Strain explains that the viewing strategies of the Western tourist are equated to the "distanced, framed vision of cinema and television": "The space on the other side of the [train] window becomes less real and less enterable, like a painted canvas, a televisual depiction, or a movie screen" (1998: 151). She argues that although the tourist embarks on a journey trying to find some truth that lacks in his/her daily life through the contact of other cultures, that aim is hardly ever fulfilled because as soon as the indigenous culture is commodified by the tourist industry, it loses any authentic meaning (1998: 151). In *The Far Pavilions* this tension is present as the character's will to find his true identity through his journey back to India clashes with the appropriation and commodification of the Indian landscape transformed into images recalling the *National Geographic* style for the visual pleasure of a distanced spectator (Padgaonkar 1992-93: 26).

Throughout the series, but especially in the first chapters, where Ash socialises mainly with the British community, the spectator is allowed to enjoy the splendour of the British upper-classes in India, the wealth of their clubs, balls and the exotic pic-nics which are just an excuse to present the wonderful natural Indian landscapes. The scenes devoted to the time Ash spends in the army portray male bonding in the adventures the men have to face and the patriotic defence of the British interests. Reaching the ending of the series, Wally (Benedict Taylor) —Ash's mate— dies in the hands of the rebel tribes in Afghanistan, when he was defending the British fort. Before leaving the place, Ash puts the corpse on a cannon and covers it with the Union Jack.

The portrayal of India is devoted to the upper-classes, too. Almost two chapters are dedicated to the journey of the two Indian princesses, Anjuli and Shushila (Sneh Gupta), to their future husband's palace. The narrative action alternates with long shots of the never

ending parade with decorated chariots, tents, elephants, horses and servants singing and dancing, together with a detailed recreation of the ceremonies of the princesses' wedding, the Rana of Bithar's (Rossano Brazzi) burial and Shushila's (Sneh Gupta) suttee.

Heritage films are praised for their faithful approach to their sources in the portrayal of the past, exemplifying the quality cinema that has characterised the British film industry since its very beginnings in contrast to Hollywood excesses (Caughie & Rockett 1996: 3). Nevertheless, despite the realistic depiction of the *mise-en-scène*, the portrayal of the past in *The Far Pavilions* seems to be closer to an imperialist nostalgic fantasy of the ex-coloniser than to a realist account of the how life was in British India in the nineteenth century.

This presentation of India as an attractive, exotic and dangerous subcontinent where the British could escape the dull and monotonous life of grey Britain and live exciting adventures and romance recalls Said's notion of "Orientalism"<sup>5</sup>. The main character's return to the place where he grew up and feels emotionally attached to becomes a metaphor of the British "imperialist nostalgia" of the 1980s. bell hooks<sup>6</sup> explains that behind the contemporary will to contact the Other —embodied by Ash— lies a hidden form of orientalist approach to foreign cultures: "In mass culture, imperialist nostalgia takes the form of reenacting and reritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other" (1992: 25).

Thus, the hero's attraction towards the Indian culture, his marriage to an Indian princess, and his final settlement in the Indian mountains could be understood as the desire of appropriation of the Other on the part of the white Western culture for its own benefit. In bell hooks's words: "The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992: 21).

This commodification is present in the way the TV series is sold to audiences other than the British one, especially to the U.S. market. As Hipsky notices, the heritage productions were an "affordable luxury" that allowed the American spectator to spend his/her leisure time in a "quality" manner, travelling to a distant past and exotic places (1994: 102-104). *The Far Pavilions* adds to the heritage character of the series ingredients of Hollywood adventure films, romance and even comedy, mainly in the portrayal of characters who embody stereotypical traits, not only of the Indians, but also of the British. The Indians are generally presented in disordered crowds in the streets, at war or fanatically witnessing the barbaric suttee. The Indian princes are despotic and whimsical, the servants are either faithful or treacherous. The British are characterised by their order in their parties as well as in the army. Most of them despise the colonised culture with racist attitudes and defend the Empire patriotically.

<sup>5</sup> Said's Orientalism refers to the discourses through which the West has constructed the East in order to control its Otherness. It is: "a set of terms, ideas and ways of constructing and thinking about the subject. Orientalism may be seen as preparing the way for colonialism discursively, ideologically and rhetorically" (Young 1996: 57).

<sup>6</sup> As is widely known, bell hooks prefers her name to be written in lower case.

According to this nostalgic orientalist presentation of the British past in India, *The Far Pavilions* fits Salman Rushdie's critical definition of the Raj Revival productions which contributed to the "refurbishment of the empire's tarnished image" and "recrudescence of imperialist ideology", therefore, this rise of Raj revisionism represented "the artistic counterpart to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain" (Hill, 1999: 99). Even so, it seems that the series uses its nostalgic tinge in a deliberately ambivalent way—for as John Hill remarks, the plots of the Raj Revival productions show up the Empire's "idiocies, injustices, and, to a limited extent, even its brutalities" (Hill, 1999: 99). Thus, *The Far Pavilions* shows what Fred Davies labels as "reflexive nostalgia", which "acknowledges that the past was not perfect and that, despite its many attractions, it also contained its faults" (Hill, 1999: 84). Therefore, however visually attractive, the past appears as ironic and critical, revealing both historic flaws and their echoes in the present.

Caught between two cultures, Ash's search for his true identity throughout the series echoes the anxieties of identity construction in Britain during the 1980s due to the continuous contact with "foreigners". As explained before, Thatcherism tried to foreground the feeling of national unity of the country through the "British race" that managed to create a vast Empire. Thatcher's notion of "Britishness" excluded the non-white of the British nation—who mainly immigrated after the Second World War. This identity exclusion, known as "new racism", is concerned with "the 'threats' which black communities are seen to represent to the cultural, political and religious homogeneity of white British society" (Solomos, 1993: 185). Lola Young comments that in the 1980s, the Argentinians were considered to be Britain's external enemies due to the Falklands war. However, Thatcher identified the "enemies within"—miners, trades unions and anti-racist among others:

Anti-racist and black activist were characterized as the problem, and it was they who were 'totalitarian' and 'racist', not the 'victimized' 'native' white population. It was held that British culture was being denigrated, its imperial achievements belittled and cultural values undermined by the continuing presence of 'alien' cultures and their supporters. These cultures were not explicitly labelled 'inferior' but it was held that separate development was desirable due to natural and inherent incompatibility (1996: 154).

In *The Far Pavilions*, parochial and racist British characters, whose attitudes are closer to Thatcher's defence of the preservation of white British identity, are ridiculed and presented in a wholly negative light. This is the case of Mrs. Harlowe (Mary Peach) in her disdainful comments against Ash's Indian friends. In the first chapters Ash falls in love with Belinda Harlowe (Felicity Dean), a young English lady he met in the train to Mardan. She first appears as a nice woman who becomes interested in Ash's childhood in India. She seems to lack the prejudices of Mrs. Harlowe, who is concerned in the young couple's relationship due to precisely Ash's sympathies with the Indian community. However, Belinda's excitement in acquiring knowledge of the Other is based on Orientalist assumptions. Just like the aversive racists, she ends up avoiding contact with the Other: she rejects Ash and chooses to marry a rich old Englishman instead. This election, based on economic reasons,

also has racist implications, since she had previously rejected George Garforth (Rupert Everett) upon learning of his mix-breed condition<sup>7</sup>.

On several occasions Ash denounces the British racist behaviour towards the Indians and the half-casts and he even questions the British dominance on India. In one scene at the club he advises the Englishmen to imagine themselves in the place of the Indians to understand the natives rebellious behaviour against their colonisers. As a consequence he makes a lot of enemies within the British community and is attacked one night by several men. However he manages to defeat them all. In presenting Ash as a hero, the series seems to portray the character's open-mindedness towards the Indians as the model of behaviour the audience should identify with, while the parochial English characters, whose attitude is closer to Thatcher's defence of the preservation of white British identity, are ridiculed and presented as antagonist and obstacles to the hero's happiness.

Ash's hybrid identity transcends all cultural manifestations creating a new "Third Space" where the dichotomies of inferiority and superiority are no longer at work:

The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom [...]. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (Bhabha in Rutherford 1990: 211).

This "Third Space" is made present at the end of the first chapter when Ash is shown alone in front of a spectacular sunset in the mountains. This image recalls the scene when Ash is asked by the British community how he managed to cope with not only two but three cultures—or religions—during his childhood, as he was born as a Christian, then raised by a Hindu woman and later by a Muslim foster father, to finally come back to England. His answer to them is that he prayed to the mountains.

Ash tries to find his identity throughout the series. From the very beginning he is portrayed as an outcast in both the British and the Indian communities. There are several conversations Ash has with different characters that show up his concern in his hybrid condition. For example, when he befriends Wally, he tells him that he feels as "a citizen of no man's land", to what Wally answers that it is as if Ash inhabited in the "limbo". However, it is with the Muslim Koda (Omar Shariff), to whom Ash calls "dad", that the issue of the troubled identity is mostly discussed. Ash tells him how uncomfortable it is to be "two people in one skin", to what his foster-father answers: "With time you will find a third person within you who is not Ashock, not Sahib but yourself".

In this conversation Koda makes reference to Bhabha's Third Space of hybridity which is the place Ash needs to find in order to accept his condition. It is interesting to notice that Ash's answer to Koda's comment is "I love her [Anjuli]" because from this very

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<sup>7</sup> George is presented as a stiff-upper-lip Englishman who warned Ash not to mix with the Indians. Yet after his secret origins as a half-cast are discovered, he is expelled from the British community. Not being part of the Indian culture either, he finally commits suicide.

moment, a clear connection is established between Ash's identity and his love relationship with Anjuli. The Indian princess's half-cast condition is also a source of trouble to her. From her early childhood she is marginalised and even the servants treat her differently. "I had no one else to love", she confesses Ash when she tells him how alone she was after his departure. In both the British and the Indian communities, then, mix-breeds seem to be marginalised and even despised.

After many troubles and adventures, love triumphs and the couple manages to end up together. Just before their reunion, Koda, who had been deadly injured, tells Ash: "She is not of your race but I think that she is a good woman. In you, Ash, sahib, may she have beautified that third person, your true self". Therefore, it is through Anjuli, half Indian and half Russian, that Ash constructs and finally accepts his new "third identity". The last scene of the series is that of Anjuli and Ash, riding a white and black horse respectively heading for the Indian mountains, the Far Pavilions. This image of the main characters ending up in the natural landscape of the mountains is a recurrent one in the Raj Revival productions. In these films, the mountains seem to be the suitable place for those who dare to trespass the rigid boundaries of segregated identity construction. On the one hand, these high-lands can be perceived as symbolising the still unknown "third space", the origins of a new tolerant multicultural society. On the other hand, the mountains seem to be a refuge for those who dare to destabilise social hierarchies. In this view, this apparent "happy ending" could also be the beginning of a troubled life for the couple, who also gets relegated to the margins of society.

Even though this ending is similar to those of other Raj Revival films with the appearance of the Indian mountains, it nevertheless differs in a significant aspect. In *A Passage to India*, *Heat and Dust* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, all the attempts to establish an interracial love relationship end up in tragedy or frustration. In contrast, in *The Far Pavilions*, the final couple remains together. According to Lola Young:

Avoiding issues raised by interracial sexual relationships and maintaining a distance from any activity which may be interpreted as interracial intimacy is one of the manifestations of a strategy of aversion. This can be identified as a consistent feature of films made by white people: there is a constant refusal to relate intimately to black's people's knowledge and experiences, despite protestations of the contrary [...]. The practice of aversive racism may be seen as a significant feature of white British mainstream, independent and 'art' cinema (1996: 26).

Lola Young argues that from the very beginnings of British cinema, "interracial sexual activity constituted a significant taboo area" (1996: 44) due to the traces of the pseudoscientific racist discourse in colonial times. According to Robert Young, interracial heterosexual relations and hybridization are not welcomed in a racist society because this means lowering the standards of the white "pure" and "civilizing" race (1996: 24-5).

In the light of these assertions, *The Far Pavilions'* positive representation of an interracial heterosexual relationship is an exception to the rule of cinema's usual avoidance of emotional interracial sexuality (Young 1996: 168). Not only does the couple end up together, but the series also devotes minute-long scenes to depicting the two characters'

brief romantic elopement and love making, thus defying the conservative preservation of the white national identity boundaries of the 1980s and ensuing cinematic and social taboos.

Nonetheless, there are several aspects that problematise this apparent rebellious and critical aspect of the series, most of which are related to the representation of the main female character. In a white patriarchal society, black women are deprived of any kind power, however they are the source of white men's anxieties:

Within a supremacist white representational schema, black women are marginal. Unlike black men, black women represent no *present* threat to established hierarchies of privilege, since black women have so little political and social power, however black women represent a *potential* threat, a danger yet to come since they—because of their responsibility in continuing the black 'race'—carry the future dissidents against subordinate status (1996: 179-80; italics in original).

After their love-making scene, Ash implores Anjuli to elope with him, however she insists in remaining next to her half-sister in the wedding, even if she gets pregnant after their sexual encounter. It turns out that she does not bear a child. She may or may not be infertile, but the fact is that she does not represent the black woman stereotype of excessive fertility that so many anxieties poses to white supremacists. The interracial couple, then, ends up together, however their future pro-creation of hybrid beings is not assured.

Moreover, Anjuli is not completely black, she has white blood in her veins. This "white streak" in her could be inferred as the reason of her "noble" behaviour in comparison with the cruel and egotistic drives of her pure Indian half-sister and half-brothers. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that under the black wig and the dark make-up, there is a white American actress. The use of white actors and actresses to play non-white roles was a common trait in the 1950s and 1960s in both American and British movies which involved an interracial relationship in their plot or else a plot of a half-cast "passing" from white (Young 1996: 95; Wiegman 1998: 163). The fact that a white actress plays a non-white character in the 1980s may be a hint of the prejudices that were still alive in terms of cinematic representation.

Anjuli, then, does not represent the stereotype of the sexually threatening dark woman, nor is her role that of the tragic mulatta who needs to sacrifice her love and her life for the welfare of the hero or the social structures (Wiegman, 1998: 164). She is an outcast in the Indian community but is nevertheless submitted to its social norms. She offers herself as a part of an arranged marriage in order to comfort her half-sister's despair. She accepts her suttee without questioning the barbarism of that tradition and, despite Shushila's cruel actions against her, she asks Ash to shoot her in the suttee to save her the pain of being burnt. She patiently waits to be rescued by Ash, whom she refers in several occasions as "my love and my life" and "the husband of my heart". Anjuli is a totally resigned woman, a "Cinderella" who is finally rewarded for her submission and sacrifice.

Thus, the characterisation of Anjuli as the suitable partner for the male hero clearly diminishes the critical tone of this cinematic production. In this respect, Anjuli, in her



exotic Otherness, represents the white male's nostalgic desire for the traditional submissive femininity that was disappearing in Western societies after the rise of feminism<sup>8</sup>.

Hence, the main couple's interracial relationship is not based on equal terms. In spite of his integration into the Indian world, Ash remains the superior coloniser who uses Anjuli, his Other, as the means to construct his troubled identity. On this point, an interesting connection can be made between Ash's and Anjuli's romance as pictured in the series and bell hook's claim that nowadays imperialist attitudes are echoed even in some apparently non-racist situations, such as young white men's desire to have sex with non-white girls: "The direct objective was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter. "Naturally", the presence of the Other, the body of the Other, was seen as existing to serve the ends of white male desires" (hooks 1992: 24). Taking hook's words into account, Anjuli's role in the series is simply to serve the male hero's needs to construct his own identity. Although one learns that her half-cast condition has always caused her trouble, her own subjectivity and feelings are never granted throughout the series. Her only will is to sacrifice her life for the sake of others'. Her sacrifice is ultimately rewarded, but her subjectivity is clearly submitted to that of "her love and her life".

Despite its apparently conservative nostalgic portrayal of the past, *The Far Pavilions* critically reflects the troubled identity of multicultural Britain during the 1980s through an interracial love story in which the main characters involved find their identity in the Third Space of hybridity. Issues of gender and race intermingle and give way to ambivalent meanings in the series, proving that the concept of hybridity is not an easy one, and that the burden of a patriarchal and racist past makes it difficult to construct a Third Space where new relations can be set on equal terms.

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<sup>8</sup> The nostalgic return of the traditional values of the past claimed by the British conservative government during the 1980s included the defence of the traditional role of wife and mother for women. Despite being the first woman who became Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher believed that feminism was out of date: "The battle for women's rights has already been won [...]. The days when they were demanded and discussed in strident tones should be gone forever. I hate those strident tones we hear from some Women's Libbers" (Young, 1989: 306).

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