VICEROY'S HOUSE: DISCERNING WHO THE VICTORS ARE

VICEROY'S HOUSE: QUIÉN ESCRIBE LA HISTORIA

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Abstract

Gurinder Chadha's 2017 film *Viceroy's House* opens with the quote attributed to Winston Churchill, "History is written by the victors". With this provocative beginning, Chadha seems to aim for a strong reaction and, indeed, a review of the critical response to the film suggests that Chadha garnered attention from voices on all sides of the historic events depicted in the film. The film was received with bitter criticism, especially from Muslim and Hindu critics, who considered it an attempt to whitewash Mountbatten's actions in the Partition of India and the terrible consequences of that decision. However, I contend that the victors in the film are Gurinder Chadha's family and the survivors of Partition, and that she uses *herstory* to pay homage to those who suffered the consequences of the decision. Furthermore, Chadha includes narrative and formal devices to underscore that her narration and knowledge are situated, rather than claiming to provide a transparent and objective account of the events that took place in the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The focus of my critical approach, then, will be the analysis of these devices and how the filmmaker ultimately challenges 'historical facts' or any attempt at offering the definitive version of history in order to problematise Churchill's statement and the official British account of Partition.

Keywords: diaspora, hybridity, *herstory*, situated knowledge, self-conscious film narrative.

Resumen

Sobre una pantalla en negro, antes de que aparezca ninguna imagen y con apenas un leve murmullo de fondo, la película *Viceroy's House* (2017) de Gurinder Chadha comienza con la afirmación atribuida a Churchill: "La historia la escriben los

vencedores". Con este comienzo, Chadha parece querer provocar la reacción del público y si atendemos a las críticas que recibió el film, podemos afirmar que todas las partes involucradas en los hechos históricos relatados se vieron interpeladas, y no siempre de manera positiva: la película recibió duras reseñas, especialmente por parte de las comunidades musulmanas e hindúes que consideraron que la única intención de la directora era la de blanquear la responsabilidad de Mountbatten en la Partición de India y las terribles consecuencias de esa decisión. Sin embargo, a lo largo de las siguientes páginas intentaré demostrar que, realmente, quien vence en la película es la familia de Gurinder Chadha y, por extensión, quienes sobrevivieron a la Partición y que la cineasta utiliza su relato como forma de homenajear a las víctimas de aquella nefasta decisión política. De hecho, Chadha incluye a lo largo del film recursos formales y narrativos que nos recuerdan que su narración y su conocimiento se encuentran 'situados' y que para nada pretende ofrecer una versión 'objetiva' de los hechos acaecidos en el subcontinente asiático en 1947. El objetivo de mi propuesta, así pues, es el análisis de esos recursos y de cómo la directora intenta en última instancia cuestionar la 'historia fáctica' o cualquier intento de ofrecer la versión definitiva de la Historia.

Palabras clave: diáspora, hibridismo, *herstoria*, conocimiento situado, narración cinematográfica auto-consciente.

1. Introduction: Diaspora on the Move

In 2017, coinciding with the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of India's independence, British South Asian filmmaker Gurinder Chadha released her only explicitly political work to date dealing with the home country of her ancestors. The only other film of Chadha's set in India, her romantic comedy *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), is very different in tone and subject matter. The more recent film places at the centre of the narrative one of the most painful events in the history of the South Asian subcontinent, the Partition of the territory into two nation-states, India and Pakistan, right at the moment its people were freed from British colonial rule. Taking into account its subject matter, the title of the film is somewhat provocative: *Viceroy's House* makes reference to the location —actual and symbolic— of imperial power. The Viceroy's residence in New Delhi was a locus for the reinforcement of colonial rule and, at the same time, with its imposing architecture, it stood as a spatial expression of imperial dominance. Considering that the film focuses on India's independence and the aftermath of Partition, Chadha's choice of title might seem an odd one. However, this decision seems deliberately provocative. Indeed, she succeeds in doing so —not only through the title itself, but also through the intertitle that precedes the film, featuring the

dictum (wrongly) attributed to Churchill: "History is written by the victors". One of the first cultural critics to react to Chadha's provocation was Fatima Bhutto (2017), who, in an article published in *The Guardian* on the day of the film's release, described it as one "of a deeply colonized imagination" and "a servile pantomime", and accused Chadha of placing the blame for Partition exclusively on the Muslim community and its leader at the time, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This article will assess the extent to which these criticisms are justified by focusing on two aspects: Gurinder Chadha's role as a diasporic filmmaker on the one hand and, on the other, discerning who the victors really are in this version of *herstory*. In the course of my analysis, I will aim to show how, because *Viceroy's House* is Chadha's *herstory*, she, her family and, by extension, those who suffered the terrible consequences of Partition become the true victors in the film.

Gurinder Chadha may be considered a true daughter of the diaspora: she was born in Nairobi, Kenya, although she defines herself as "a self-identified Punjabi [who] migrated to England at an early age and settled in Southhall in the sixties" (Desai 2004: 130). While it is beyond the scope of this article to survey the expansive body of diasporic literature, it is nonetheless necessary to reflect on the significance of the concept and its implications in light of recent political and social developments, including the following: the resurgence of the worst version of English nationalism, leading to Brexit; Trumpism and its anti-Muslim and anti-migratory politics; the rise of ultraconservative parties in Europe and beyond; and what euphemistically is referred to in the wealthy Northern and Western countries as the 'migrant crisis'. All these should be reason enough to, paraphrasing Donna Haraway (2016), 'stay with the trouble', particularly at a time when academia urges scholars to adopt the latest, most in vogue theoretical frameworks.

Before the release of *Viceroy's House* in 2017, Chadha had burst onto the British film scene with productions in which she grappled with the difficulties of growing up in a gendered and racialised body in the UK (or, as was the case in her 1993 film *What's Cooking*, in the US). Since the release of her 1986 short film, *I'm British But…*, films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *What's Cooking* (2000), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2004) and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010) have relocated diasporic female characters and their everyday lives out of the margins they usually inhabit, both in the real and cinematic worlds. As many other diasporic filmmakers, her 'accented films' have since then taken on "subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location[s]" (Naficy 2001: 4). Her success both inside and outside the UK turned Chadha into the British diasporic filmmaker *par excellence*, together with

(script)writer Hanif Kureishi, who had started his career in the previous decade. In this sense, Chadha's films offer "a unique overview of the debate on (post-)national British cinema, as a cultural practice that challenges monolithic understandings of nationhood, and instead gestures to a transnational ethos" (Mendes 2007: 98).

However, as is the case with other diasporic women directors who have challenged 'monolithic understandings', such as Mira Nair or Deepa Mehta, Chadha was soon the object of harsh criticism, accused of oversimplifying complex issues related to individual and collective identities and of using stereotyped characters in her works. But being celebratory or entertaining does not have to be necessarily coterminous with superficial or simplistic, as Naficy has stated:

> displacement creates its own peculiar spectatorial environment that produces different demands and expectations, which are torqued not only by market forces but also by nationalist politics and by politics of ethnic representation. While the general public may prefer accented films that are entertaining and enlightening, […] displaced communities often demand "authentic" and corrective representations. Such conflicting demands may "distort" the accented films, exposing them to criticism from all sides. (2001: 6)

Bidisha Banerjee, in her analysis of diasporic women's autobiographies, asserts that "the diasporic woman's identity is always already fractured and for her […] the process of subject formation lies in celebrating the fracture rather than attempting to cure it" (2022: 1212). Following Banerjee's ideas, Chadha is the paradigmatic example of a diasporic woman celebrating that fracture: ever since she entered the film industry, her narratives have challenged, as many other diasporic artists do, "any notion of a unified, central subject who has complete autonomy and authority in presenting the self" (Banerjee 2022: 1212), with stories brimming with affection, good humour and irony.

Ann Kaplan points out that there are two main strategies in/for 'diasporan' filmmaking: "Some undertake an ideological project of reversing the oppressive gaze (and as such remain to a certain extent within the parameters of western structures)", while some other films, which she labels the 'healing' ones, "seek to see from the perspective of the oppressed, the diasporan, without specifically confronting the oppressor's strategies" (1997: 221). I argue that Chadha's narratives fit into the category of 'healing films', with *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) as a paradigmatic example —considered as a way of embracing "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life" (Gilroy 2004: xi). Gilroy defends "the radical openness that brings conviviality alive" in order to make "a nonsense of closed, fixed and reified identity" (Gilroy 2004: xi). Chadha's films support Gilroy's belief in the 'radical openness' of conviviality, which is closely related to the radical use of the term

'hybrid' that Jigna Desai proposes in her often-quoted work on South Asian diasporic filmmakers entitled *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (2004). Desai understands this term not as a simplistic "apolitical mixing" or some mediated kind of assimilation to "dominant forms" (2004: 219), taking Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1984) as an example of a film that "seeks to work against the binary of Indian/Western in framing itself in terms of multiple and fragmented British Asian hybridity. Hence, it constitutes itself more through an understanding of racial politics of Britain than it does with the deterritorialized national politics" (2004: 128). Hardt and Negri seem to agree with Desai on the political strength of the hybrid when they state that hierarchical order is founded on binary classifications and that

> the mere fact of hybridity has the power to destroy hierarchy *tout court*. Hybridity itself is a realized politics of difference, setting differences to play across boundaries. This is where the postcolonial and the postmodern most powerfully meet: in the united attack on the dialectics of modern sovereignty and the proposition of liberation as a politics of difference. (2000: 145)

According to Desai, since the 1980s diaspora has been variously defined in discourse as a "response to exclusionary and racist national narratives" and as the "'third space' of postcolonial migration" (2004: vi). Later, in the 1990s, diasporic communities were "hailed as a deterritorialized geopolitical community succeeding the nation in an age of increasing globalization" (vi). This way, the diaspora was to be understood "in postcolonial and feminist discourse as antinational and postnational" (vi), as the very existence of the diasporic and the hybrid questions traditional understandings of the nation.

It is probably for this reason that, even nowadays, hybridity is still thought of as synonym of "the impure mixings propagated by the dissolution of political, geographic, ethnic, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries" (Kapchan and Strong 1999: 239). The term hybrid, when applied to humans, is defined as "a person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) but, as is usually the case with dictionaries, the definition is simplistic and reductionist. If one refers to "a blend of two", it may lead us to think of those "two" as perfectly homogeneous, differentiated units. However, as numerous scholars have agreed (Kureishi 1990; Said 1993; Bhabha 1994; Maalouf 1999; Brah and Coombes 2000), when talking of hybrid individuals, their identities are imbricated and intertwined in such a way that dividing the 'entity' in two (or three, or any given number according to their cultural background) would entail the end of the individual, as there would be no 'id-entity' left. Accordingly, my analysis draws on the concept of intersectionality, emerging from the foundational statement on interlocking oppressions proposed by the Combahee River Collective

in 1977 and developed by Black and Chicana feminist thinkers like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), Angela Davis (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Barbara Smith (1998) and bell hooks (2014), among others.

Despite the persistence of groups resisting our quintessentially hybrid nature, culture and even existence, the future will be hybrid or, simply, it will not be: the most resistant animals or plants are hybrid (Brauer et al. 2023: 284) and, as Donna Haraway stated in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, "we are all chimeras, fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (1991: 150). It is my contention that, in the same way, the most successful communities are and will be the ones who embrace Gilroy's notion of 'conviviality'. Conviviality, according to Gilroy,

> introduces a measure of distance from the pivotal term "identity", which has proved to be such an ambiguous resource in the analysis of race, ethnicity, and politics [and, I would add, gender too]. The radical openness [of] conviviality turns attention toward the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification. (2004: xi)

Chadha is perfectly aware of how her own persona, her racialised and gendered body, along with the focus on diversity she offers in her films, disturb unified, homogenising definitions of individual and collective identities. In fact, she seems to have vindicated what Gilroy defines as "the always-unpredictable mechanisms of identification". Consequently, her work can be inscribed among those "cultural, political, and theoretical 'cartographies' of South Asian diasporas, transnationalities that are disjointed, heterogeneous, and hybrid rather than stable, unified, or coherent" (Desai 2004: 4). Continuing with Gilroy's notion of conviviality, this concept resonates with that of Roberto Esposito's *communitas* and his approach to community. This concept does not follow traditional ideas about 'belonging' (i.e. the individual belongs to the nation and the nation belongs to the individuals), but, instead, Esposito goes deeper into the etymology of the *cum-munus*, understanding the concept 'munus' as both a gift and a duty, an obligation (Esposito 2009: 4-5) towards the other. In dialogue with Esposito, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests (2010: 104-105) that we should understand the condition of 'being-togetherness' not as something that originates from a subject, whether individual or collective. In other words, being-togetherness is not a collective made up of 'being-subjects', because there is no individual subject beyond the *communitas*: if there is an 'I' it is because there is a 'we' and, actually, if there is a 'we' it is because there are other 'we'(s) that must be acknowledged. As Gilroy insists,

> Recalibrating approaches to culture and identity so that they are less easily reified […] seems a worthwhile short-term ambition that is compatible with the long-term aims of a reworked and politicized multiculturalism. Indeed, it is doubly welcome because it requires the renunciation of the cheap appeals to absolute national and ethnic difference that are currently fashionable. (2004: 6)

In the context of political polarisation that took hold in the beginning of the twenty-first century and continues today, it is hardly surprising that Chadha's *Viceroy's House* became, soon after its release, the target of fierce criticism, dealing as it does with one of the most traumatic events in the recent history of the South Asian subcontinent.

2. Heritage, Industry and Reception

Chadha has always claimed both her Punjabi family roots and her Britishness (despite its racist, colonial history). The filmmaker has never been shy in expressing her love for the British audio-visual tradition, be it "those epic films" such as *Gosford Park* (2001) or TV series like *Downton Abbey* or *Upstairs/Downstairs*, and she talks in the first person when she says in the production notes for *Viceroy's House* that these films and TV series "tell us who we are by going back, looking at our history to understand our present. That is exactly what I wanted to achieve here, to reach out to the broadest audience possible and remind them of this hugely important event that has been largely forgotten" (2017a: 6).

In answer to the criticisms over her use of the conventions of the heritage film in *Viceroy's House*, she conceded in an interview that she very much enjoyed "the mischievousness of taking one of Britain's great traditions and Indianising it" (in Mendes 2007: 101). Chadha seems to ignore not only those British purists who did not accept her approach to the British film tradition due to her diasporic origin, but also those others who accuse her of betraying her roots for being too close to white Britishness. However, as Kaplan pointed out, when dealing with filmic traditions, "representational systems are not so easily undone. It takes work from within such systems to begin to change them" (1997: 19). While not focusing on the hybridity of the film in formal terms, it is relevant for my argument to point out that its narrative style results "from intertwining different genres and cinematographic traditions. Such hybridity […] questions other hegemonic global accounts of past and present history and memory" (Oliete-Aldea 2021: 177). In my opinion, it is this interweaving of genres and her self-conscious look that will give us the key to understand Chadha's approach to narrative as *herstory*. It is precisely because of the trauma still haunting the (national) communities involved in Partition that these events resist narrativisation. In Judith Butler's words, "enormous trauma […] undermines narrative capacity" (2004: 7). Moreover, in relation to the difficulty of narrativising trauma, Slavoj Žižek argues that any given "symbolic field is always by definition […] structured around a central void/impossibility" and adds that even a "personal life-narrative" is nothing but a "*bricolage* of ultimately failed attempts to come to terms with some trauma" (in Laclau and Mouffe 2000: 125).

Paraphrasing Radhika Mohanram, no museum or monument in India honours the millions of victims caused by the conflict (2011: 918-921). Mohanram describes the horrors endured by the population at length, including the loss of two million lives. Moreover, she offers a special remembrance to the devastating number of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women (around one hundred thousand) "from both sides of the border [who] were abducted, mutilated, raped and impregnated" (Mohanram 2011: 921). In the same way, John Hutnyk points out that it was not until 2017 that the "Museum of Partition" was launched in Amritsar by the Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust of India as "a permanent tribute to victims in Pakistan, India or Bangladesh". Its inauguration prompts "questions as to why Partition had not hitherto excited the same official remembrance as the Jewish holocaust" (Hutnyk 2018: 611-612). This likely speaks to the level of shame that still haunts the communities involved in the events, and the reason why "this other history of trauma, grief, loss, diaspora and separation […] is not articulated in the narrative of Indian nationalism and Independence, for doing so would completely undercut the more acceptable and triumphant event of Independence" (Mohanram 2011: 921).

Given that history is a contested terrain —and in the case of Partition, a deeply painful one— it is hardly surprising that Chadha was accused of distorting the past. Critics claimed she was biased against the Muslim community and, perhaps most controversially, sympathetic to British colonialists. As a consequence, the film has been at the heart of the controversy and the filmmaker has been accused of manipulating history and, as noted above, of being particularly harsh in her criticism of the leader of the Muslim League and the community he represented. As shown in the film, Muhammad Ali Jinnah's unswerving attitude and his demand for an independent state for the Muslims was a must in the negotiations to put an end to colonial rule. In addition, there was criticism about the benevolent portrayal of the last Viceroy of India and all the members of the Mountbatten family. Thus, in this sense, Chadha could be considered a 'shifter':

> In linguistics, shifters are words, such as "I" and "you", whose reference can be understood only in the context of the utterance. More generally, a shifter is an "operator" in the sense of being dishonest, evasive, and expedient, or even being a "mimic", in the sense that Homi Bhabha formulated, as a producer of critical excess, irony, and sly civility (1994). (Naficy 2001: 32)

However, beyond her alleged 'dishonesty' or 'mimicry', I do believe Chadha is a producer of "critical excess, irony and sly civility" and I agree with Hutnyk when he describes the film's portrayal of all the participants in the negotiations as "unsympathetic" (2018: 617). Contrary to the accusation that Chadha is biased against the Muslim community, it is particularly telling that the only leader

receiving a slap in the face for the catastrophic consequences of Partition is Nehru and "his upper Hindu elite 'Cambridge debating skills'" (Hutnyk 2018: 617). By the end of the film (Chadha 2017b: min. 94), the audience is shown how the recently-proclaimed first Prime Minister of independent India arrives to the refugee camp where thousands of people gather looking for shelter due to the forced displacement of Hindus from Muslim areas. As soon as he gets out of the vehicle, somebody approaches him and without a word strikes him in the face. No words are needed to understand that Nehru is blamed, too, for the humanitarian calamity.

The film narrates the arrival of the last Viceroy of India, who is charged with overseeing the process of India's independence. As a result of the hasty and irresponsible actions of those in power at the time, violent conflicts erupt across the country between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. The focalisers of the narration are Jeet and Aalia (played respectively by Manish Dayal and Huma Qureshi), a young couple who work at the Viceroy's House —the very location that gives the movie its title and where most of the action unfolds. As Chadha has declared in several interviews, the "legacy of Partition" continues to have enormous relevance in Britain nowadays and, even though "the events of 1947 are largely forgotten in the UK" (in Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 25-26), she considers her film a way "to bring attention to such a pivotal moment in South Asian (and British) history and to address all the parties involved in Partition with the stated aim of offering 'a message of reconciliation' that would speak to Indians, Pakistanis and British people alike" (25-26).

I find it pertinent to recall the words of Esposito here, when he states that "yesterday as well as today (indeed more so today than yesterday), community appears to be marked, indeed saturated with communitarianism, patriotism, and local and factional interest" (Esposito 2009: 16). However, when he speaks of the *communitas*, he refers to "not only something different" from the community, but also of the vindication of the "'impropriety' of the common, when the reference to the 'proper', or the voice of the 'authentic', or the assumption of being pure, reappears" (16). Esposito reminds us that "*communis* (always referring to its earliest meaning) meant in addition to 'vulgar' and 'of the people', also 'impure'" (16). It is my conviction that Chadha is closer to Esposito's understanding of the *communitas* than to accepted formulations of the national community and, consequently, her film was received with fierce criticism at a time when Brexit-related sentiments were front and centre.

In this way, at least since the latest so-called 'financial crisis' in 2008, hegemonic nationalist discourse has gained force —from Trump's "make America great again", to Brexit, Putin's authoritarian rule in Russia or the rise of far-right political parties

all over Europe and beyond— and, for this reason, recuperating the relevance of the hybrid and the diasporic may seem as revolutionary as ever. Chadha translates her condition as a hybrid individual to *Viceroy's House* and has referred to it as "her own 'upstairs and downstairs' film in the tradition of *Downton Abbey* and *Gosford Park*" (in Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 23). She has described herself as a fan of the heritage film genre, and declared in an interview that she wanted "her films to be representative of the 'new' national cinema", rejecting the idea of defining British film industry in dualities of the kind seen in "*Howard's End*" vs. "*My Beautiful Launderette*" (in Mendes 2007: 99). As Hamid Naficy points out when analysing "Chadha's hybridized and exuberant *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993)", she celebrates the "pleasure and playfulness in hybridization. [The film] is fundamentally about being British but also about being dual, even multiple", focusing as it does "on the heterogeneous lives of a group of Asian women" (Naficy 2001: 93). After her adaptation of Jane Austen in *Bride and Prejudice* (Chadha 2004), I consider Chadha's *Viceroy's House* another pivotal step in claiming her right to inscribe her name in the British film tradition (see Oliete-Aldea 2012, 2021).

3. Gurinder's *Herstory* of Partition

As mentioned above, in the film Chadha deals with one of the most traumatic events in the history of the South Asian subcontinent, whose scars remain more than visible nowadays, with feelings of shame and remorse still lingering among the national communities involved in the infamous events around the time of Partition. For this reason, Chadha seems to embrace Haraway's understanding of the notion of 'staying with the trouble': "*Trouble* is an interesting word. It derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning 'to stir up', 'to make cloudy', 'to disturb'. We —all of us on Terra— live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response" (2016: 1).

Haraway adds that these "mixed-up times are overflowing with both pain and joy —with vastly unjust patterns of pain and joy"— and that it is our response-ability "to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present. Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (2016: 1). And this seems, from my point of view, precisely what Chadha intended with *Viceroy's House*: on the one hand, 'staying with the trouble', 'making trouble' and 'disturbing' many of the assumptions and shared fictions taken for granted surrounding Partition. On the other hand, she assumes the task of 'making kin' as 'to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places'.

Having said this, among all the actors involved in the negotiations portrayed in the film, it is my contention that the British receive the most negative representation. We are witness to their racism, as when Mountbatten contemptuously quotes Churchill describing Ghandi as a "half-naked fakir" (Chadha 2017b: min. 7), to which Mrs. Mountbatten replies, affirming ironically that the "British Empire [was] brought to its knees by a man in a loincloth". Later (Chadha 2017b: min. 20), while waiting for the recently arrived Viceroy, a group of officials and governors discusses how "this hatred between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims is poisoning everything we've built", adding that "these ragged Indians won't agree" to form a government. In that same dialogue, in "line with the culture of the empire, […] zoological tropes" are employed (Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 28), describing Indians "as slippery as eels" (Chadha 2017b: min. 20), which Clini and Valančiūnas consider "a discursive device to strip colonised subjects of their humanity so to justify colonialism" (2021: 28). British arrogance and their contempt for the Indian people are also on display, as when a British official doubts 'Indian people' will be able to run the country's administration, legal system or its army (Chadha 2017b: min. 42). However, the most controversial sequence in terms of 'historical accuracy' regarding the role of the British in the negotiations takes place near the end of the film. At this point, it is revealed that the plan to divide the subcontinent into two religiously defined nations was not imposed on the British by the leaders of those (allegedly irreconcilable) communities, but was actually a strategy devised by Churchill's administration to maintain control over strategic colonial interests in the area. According to Clini and Valančiūnas, "Chadha follows the events as narrated in Narendra Singh Sarila's book, *The Shadow of the Great Game* (2006)" (2021: 28) and in the episode as presented in the film (Chadha 2017b: min. 84), "General Ismay in particular is portrayed as the brutal face of the Empire: he is not concerned about the human cost of Partition, but rather wants to leave the country as soon as possible and make the most of it by dividing the country in two and securing British access to the Arab Sea via Pakistan" (Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 28).

Despite the criticisms, this contested revelation offered Chadha a pathway into *herstory* —a means of challenging official history and the version she had been taught at school in London, namely that Partition had been "the fault of the warring Indians" as well as the view held by many of her relatives that it had been "principally the fault of Mountbatten" (Chadha 2016).

In this sense, the filmmaker makes clear from the start where her allegiances lie: the film opens and finishes with the protagonists of the love story, Jeet and Aalia (he is Hindu and she, Muslim), a young couple who, against all odds, breaks the barriers imposed on them by religion, family and history, and end up together.

However, rather than merely fulfilling the expectation of a mandatory 'happy ending' in commercial film narratives, the final scene can be interpreted as part of Chadha's self-reflexive narrative strategy. This ending resonates with Ernst Bloch's *principle of hope*, as it underscores how "the apparent darkness surrounding us is a necessary precondition for the sparks of hope and the preilluminations of utopia to glow more brightly in the future" (Thompson 2013a: 11). Thus, Chadha's *herstory* is marked by an affective turn that, as Michael Hardt points out, "does draw attention to the body and emotions" and involves "both reason and the passions" (in Clough 2007: ix). The connections between the principle of hope and the affective turn become more apparent when Patricia Clough points out that the latter brings "forth ghosted bodies and the traumatized remains of erased histories. It also sends thought to the future" (Clough 2007: 3). Thus, since the early moments in the film, we witness an ecology of affects traversing the narrative, a net of sentimental relations that go well beyond the love story between Aalia and Jeet: the first scenes of the film focus on the friendship between Jeet and Duleep, a relationship that will be interrupted only by the Partition. The Mountbattens, as a family, are also portrayed as one full of affection and complicity between all its members. In addition to this, Jeet shows Aalia's father love and respect, feelings that are mutual since the moment Jeet takes care of the old man while he is imprisoned by the British.

It is my conviction that this affective approach in the film partially provoked the criticism explained throughout this article, especially by mainstream reviewers who insisted on the lack of factual accuracy as one of the film's most egregious flaws. These critics seem to ignore what postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon convincingly suggested some decades ago, namely that, in contrast to a traditional understanding of history as the objective recollection of past events, we should approach history as a textual construction, as the only way we can access it is through texts. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon problematised the textual nature of history (1989: 87-101): history is not there waiting for the expert to grasp it, put it into words and offer it to the world as unmediated and transparent truth. In any given text, the narrative strategies are always present, with some 'characters' and 'actors' occupying central positions, while others will inevitably inhabit the margins, in the same way that some facts and figures will be included while others will be left out. Both history and fiction writing share a "common use of conventions of narrative, […] of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology […]. In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken" (Hutcheon 1989: 106). If history is to be defined, we could say it is first and foremost a situated discourse and, as such, a construction. Paraphrasing Hutcheon, this does not imply a desire to dismiss history as a whole or to deny

the existence of the past: simply, a distinction should be made between events and facts (16). While the former refer to actual situations, they are turned into facts by corseting them into narrativisation processes. Taken to the extreme, even eyewitnesses are texts, inasmuch as everybody, as individuals, is crisscrossed by our historical (socioeconomic, gendered and cultural) context (16). This is, of course, connected to Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledges' and 'feminist objectivity'. According to Haraway, "we seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism […] and disembodied vision"; instead, our "nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word" should be discarded to embrace knowledges "ruled by partial sight and limited voice. We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular" (1991: 196).

In line with Hutcheon's and Haraway's theories, Chadha has insisted on several occasions that her film does not pretend to be "the one true Word" about the events that took place at the time of Partition: "everyone sees history through their own lens […]. My film is my vision of the events leading up to India's Partition" (2017c). This is Chadha's *herstory* and, as Patricia Waugh stated some decades ago, "the important thing is to *admit* one's authorship, *admit* the provisionality of one's constructions" (1993: 125, emphasis in original). Chadha's fragmented and self-reflexive strategies subvert, as is characteristic of accented cinema, "the master codes of realist aesthetics and race relation narratives, which had traditionally posited blacks and minorities as invisible problem figures or victims" (Naficy 2001: 88-89).

4. Cinematic Construction of Chadha's *Herstory*: Some Examples

This subversive approach is evident from the very beginning of the film. One of the clearest examples of how Chadha engages with history with a "critical gaze" (Halasz 2011: 30) is her portrayal of the Mountbatten family and the transfer of power ceremony.

The first time we see them is on a plane flying in to India (Chadha 2017b: min. 6), with Lord Mountbatten looking at himself in the mirror full of vanity, as his daughter points out when she tells him to stop "hogging the mirror". Of course, this is not to suggest that the Mountbattens are portrayed unsympathetically, but one might reasonably argue that there is no better way to describe what has been defined as "vertical empathy" (Martín-Lucas 2024: 85), understood as a kind of empathy that "can operate as a technique of white privilege and power" (Lobb

2022: 87). By introducing Lord Mountbatten and his family on a plane flying over the subcontinent, the filmmaker is subtly putting forward the distance between Mountbatten and the Indian people, coming, quite literally, 'out of the blue' with his family to 'bring freedom to India'. The images of the family as they survey the country through the aeroplane window underline with sharp precision the idea, problematising "the role of liberal white vertical empathy in the process of (de) colonisation" (Martín-Lucas 2024: 85).

Similarly, the staging of the sequence depicting the transfer of power ceremony clearly indicates Chadha's conscious decision to leave the imprint of her "look" (Kaplan 1997: 219) in the film through a series of "unreal objective shots" (Casetti and di Chio 1998: 247-248), starting with the arrival of Lord and Lady Mountbatten and their reception by Scottish bagpipers and a perfectly arranged crowd (Chadha 2017b: min. 7). The subject of the enunciation (Bettetini 1996: 30) enters the frame through an overhead shot, in a god-like style, with the red carpet unfolding, and the ritual of the Mountbattens descending from the carriage. There is nothing misleading in this sequence, as it deliberately presents imperial power in its full splendour, visually condensing a faithful and pompous representation of its defining characteristics into a single, concentrated instant. To draw our attention and foreground the moment —just before meeting the salient Viceroy and his wife— Lord and Lady Mountbatten are framed from below, in a low angle shot, rendering them larger than life. These are just some examples of the aesthetics Chadha introduces in her film, highlighting the narrative process involved. The approach reveals a playful combination of her critical gaze together with formal and narrative strategies drawn from Hollywood, British heritage cinema and Bollywood, all of which constitute her distinctive personal signature.

Chadha includes herself explicitly as a subject of enunciation, not seeking partiality "for its own sake" (Haraway 1991: 196), but precisely to situate her knowledge in a dialectical strategy and even at the risk of exposing herself to criticism, as was indeed the case. This can be perceived, for instance, in the scene where we watch Jeet and Aalia peeping through a keyhole into the room where Mountbatten is talking to Nehru (Chadha 2017b: min. 34), as if the two main characters were an extension of Chadha's gaze in the act of watching through the camera lens. There is no more effective or compelling way to illustrate the mediation between the production of images and their consumption: the filmmaker is stating that *herstory* is far removed from the well-trodden realist discourse and from the pervasive strategy of filmic transparency. Rather, she is asserting this is *her* reality, as *she* chooses to narrate it. In doing so, and in line with Haraway, Chadha appears to challenge one of the grand narratives of modernity (Lyotard 1979: 37-41), denouncing the assumption that, as is the case with the writing of history, "there has been no clear distinction

between objective science and abusive ideology because the relations of knowledge and historical determinants require more complex concepts" (Haraway 1991: 67-68). Only by situating one's knowledge, Haraway argues, can a "larger vision" be achieved (Haraway 1991: 196).

On top of the formal and narrative devices analysed so far, Chadha's most interesting and explicit intervention in the film narrative is her use of documentary images: contrary to the widely held opinion that Chadha employs the Movietone newsreels to enhance the realism of her film or to underline that it is based on true events (see, for example, Clini and Valančiūnas 2021: 23-24; Oliete-Aldea 2021: 181-182), I suggest these extracts are a formal strategy to precisely question how victors (in the case of these newsreels, the British) have traditionally written history. The documentary, as a genre, is the opposite of Haraway's situated knowledge: the male voiceover in classic documentaries is considered "almost an institution" (Silverman 1988: 163), "a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge" (Silverman 1988: 48). As decolonial, transmodern thinkers remind us, the "disembodied and unlocated neutrality and objectivity of the ego-politics of knowledge is a Western myth" (Grosfoguel 2011). Chadha openly challenges this official history written by the victors of coloniality and their ego-politics.

She does so by using two kinds of newsreel images for different but related purposes. On the one hand, there are those in which the manipulation of the images is evident, with the actors inserted in existing filmed records of the events depicted. This is the case, for example, of the meeting between the Mountbattens and Gandhi (Chadha 2017b: min. 43), and their visit to the Punjab. On the other hand, Chadha uses what seems to be actual footage from British newsreels to depict riots in the streets of what then was known as Bombay (Mumbai, since 1995) and Delhi (min. 66), masses of people moving painfully (min. 92), or children crying in despair (min. 93), all examples of the devastating consequences of Partition. I contend that Chadha includes the newsreels to denounce not only the cruelty and pain inflicted on the population, but also to highlight how easily, in both cases, images are manipulated to create a particular reality in the interest of those producing them. If the documentary images in the first instance —with the faces of the actors inserted in real footage— help to construct a cinematic reality according to the filmmaker's interests, in the second case, it is the British propaganda that accommodates reality to their colonial interests. Such discursive framework implies, for instance, that the uncivilised and violent people of India were unfit to govern themselves because, as Churchill infamously described them, they are "a beastly people with a beastly religion" (in Chadha 2016).

5. Conclusion

As "a British-Indian woman" Chadha has expressed distrust over Churchill's statement "History is written by the victors" and, to express it mildly, she doubted that the statesman had her "in mind when he said [it]" (Chadha 2016). The evidence examined in this article suggests that *Viceroy's House* is Chadha's *herstory*, in which the filmmaker foregrounds what has been without doubt one of the most grievous events in the recent history of India. Her intervention is centred from the outset by the provocative intertitle, "History is written by the victors", which frames the film as a conscious reworking of historical narrative and asserts the validity of her perspective. While the film received, as is usually the case with 'accented' filmmakers, harsh criticism from all sides involved, Chadha's intention to re-write the events and challenge the 'facts' of the official history should be clear by now. By deploying narrative and formal strategies —from the use of subaltern focalisers and mixing film genres, to self-conscious frames and the manipulation of images— the director invites us to reflect critically on those who have traditionally taken the blame for the Partition of India and its terrible consequences (the 'warring Indians' or Mountbatten's ineptitude). As discussed in my reading of the sequence in the film, Chadha has engaged with those voices who point their accusing finger at General Ismay's haste in leaving India and, following Churchill's orders to protect British commercial interests, promoted the Partition of India by marking random lines on a map and without taking into account any criteria beyond the Empire's interests.

In opposition to such meanness, the film's closing sequence, as has been already mentioned, resonates with Bloch's principle of hope: the German philosopher spoke of our need to be educated in hope and, according to Thompson, hope is "also the means by which we reach beyond pessimistic nihilism to give purpose to an existence which is objectively purposeless in any transcendental sense" (2013a: 7). Bloch "argued that a desire to move forward out of necessity and into freedom was an essential human characteristic, the 'invariant of direction', as he called it" (Thompson 2013b: 82). After an escalating melodramatic moment, Jeet and Aalia, the two lovers of irreconcilable religious faiths at that historical moment, finally get together after enduring endless misfortunes (Chadha 2017b: min. 97). With this sequence, Chadha seems to offer a light of hope and reconciliation for the different communities in both her home and host nation, contrasting with what Bloch terms the "darkness of the living moment" (Thompson 2013a: 11). By highlighting the "articulation of possibilities for change and self-fashioning and the rejection and refashioning of the 'badly existing'" (Ní Dhúill 2013: 154), the sequence exemplifies what Bloch considers one of the central aims of culture. The two lovers were set apart

because of Partition and, due to Aalia's unswerving loyalty to her father, she flees with him to what will become the new nation-state of Pakistan, leaving Jeet behind. However, a terrorist attack on the train in which they are travelling leaves Aalia badly injured, and she arrives at a Hindu refugee camp. She is about to be expelled from the camp, as she does not 'belong' there due to her religion, when, while lying on the floor, she sees Jeet, who is volunteering at the camp. After some painful and suspenseful moments, she takes a microphone and calls her lover's name through the PA, who runs towards her in despair until they come together in a long embrace.

I read this happy ending as a determined vindication of hope and utopia on the part of Chadha, whose use of the strategy of the *deus ex machina* provides an alternative to the dictum of irreconcilable differences between the citizens of the new nations. To reinforce this hopeful vision, Chadha includes a series of intertitles, dedicating the film (2017b: min. 99) not only to those who died during the Partition —"One million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs", as she specifies— but also to those who survived it. Besides, immediately before the final credits (Chadha 2017b: min. 100), she inserts a set of photographs from her own family album. These images relate, in some way, to Jeet and Aalia's story, summarising the hardships her ancestors and many other families like hers endured before she was born. By doing so, Chadha connects past, present and future generations beyond religious ascription. In her view, those who outlived the consequences of British imperialism are the true victors in her *herstory*.

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