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Film Review: *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006) Nina's Fairy Tale

David Thom

NB: This review gives away the film's storyline.

Every fairy tale has its moral. In *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, written by Andrea Gibb after a story by director Pratibha Parmar, the moral is: 'No matter what the recipe says, always follow your heart.' The film's moral is based on Western liberal secular ideals and refuses to follow the recipe of "ethnic" cinema. The movie's romantic comedy plot becomes a vehicle to avoid the usual narrative developments of successful British Asian films such as *East is East* and their concerns over family and cultural traditions colliding with secular British life. The world of the title character Nina, a young Scottish Asian woman, is a world not only devoid of homophobia, racism and discrimination, but also any of the becoming stereotypes of recent British Asian films of arranged marriages and the stern patriarch. The film knowingly points towards these but then unashamedly floats down the mainstream.

The movie opens with an idyllic and intimate view of a father-daughter relationship, Nina as a young girl being taught by her father how to make a curry. Nina as a grown woman returns home to Glasgow after the sudden death of her father. In the three years of her absence her father was made to sell half of the family business, a curry restaurant called the New Taj, to pay off a gambling debt. Lisa, the daughter of the man he signed the business over to, now runs the business with Nina's family. But the family is in financial dire straits and is planning to sell the remaining half of the business. Nina is upset at this prospect, especially when she discovers that her father has made it to the live televised finals of the "Best of the West" curry competition. This sale is made all the more difficult because the proposed purchaser is a family who runs a rival curry restaurant. Their son Sanjay was supposed to wed Nina in an arranged marriage – the reason why Nina fled her family and broke her father's heart. Nina enlists the help of Lisa to save the restaurant and live out her father's dream of winning an unprecedented third title of the "Best of the West" cooking competition. While cooking up a storm in practise for the competition the two women begin to fall in love. Their love is publicly expressed when Lisa forces Nina to come out during the live television broadcast of the competition. The movie ends with Nina and Lisa hand in hand in a busy and vibrant New Taj and then cutting to a grand finale Bollywood routine with all the cast from the movie singing and dancing in front of picturesque scenes of the Scottish countryside.

The film is overdetermined in its use of contemporary mainstream narrative techniques. It plays on a multitude of familiar plot devices not only from film, but also from television and music video. It places the viewer in a comfortable position of replaying references to popular entertainment while at the same time steering clear of presenting an Asian family divided over Western culture and lifestyles. The movie includes a cooking competition based on a popular television format, the rocky path of true love, a liberal dosage of family secrets, and MTV-style emotional character development montages. Set in Glasgow and its surrounding countryside, it is a film

that constantly calls attention to its own construction in both location and narrative tension through numerous interruptions from a radio DJ's off-screen voice of "Good morning Glasgow!" and reminders of the excitement over the looming curry competition.

It would be very easy to criticise *Nina's Heavenly Delights* for its glib superficial nature, laziness and predictable plot, but this film quite purposely plays on the viewer's knowledge of well known formulas. It sits knowingly between Hollywood's romantic comedy and recent successful British Asian films; it exploits one genre, the romantic comedy, to hold up to examination the limitations of another genre, the British Asian film, where tensions are fore-grounded in a family-centred tragicomedy through issues of race and religion. Almost every cliché from feel-good romantic comedies is in this film: the flamboyant gay best-friend to confide in, a Romeo and Juliet balcony scene (also a bit of the *Taming of the Shrew* in Nina's relationship with Sanjay), the moment when someone has something in their eye and the misidentification of the love interest. Here Nina thinks that Lisa is the love interest of her brother, Kary. It turns out, however, that Lisa is helping Kary to cover up his recent elopement to Gretna Green with a white British girl who he 'pure loves.' This highlights both the assimilation of Scottishness within the family's younger generation, using Gretna Green's history as a place for socially unacceptable marriages, and the appropriation of that site for a hybrid union between Scottish and Asian cultures.

Of course no one expects the path of true love to run smooth, but in Nina's world it is just that little bit smoother by the near absence of racial and cultural considerations. At every point the film resists the path of its expected destination – overcoming the challenges of being gay and belonging to an ethnic minority. Whenever cultural confrontation should take place, it doesn't. All the family's secrets – from Nina's younger sister's pursuit of Scottish dancing against her father's wishes and her brother's dropping out of medical school and concealed marriage to Nina's love of Lisa – are greeted with tolerance by the mother and the statement 'Follow your heart.' *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is almost devoid of cultural, ethnic, religious or even generational difference. Tropes of struggle are replaced by the ideology of romantic love and the pursuit of personal happiness. It just so happens that in this conventional storyline most of the characters are not white.

However there is a religious element hinted at in an earlier hybrid relationship between Nina's mother as a Hindu and her father as a Muslim. This is expanded upon by the inter-textual use of the Bollywood film *Mughal-e-Azam* where the Emperor, and grandfather of the builder of the Taj Mahal, "unites" Hindustan through his marriage to a Hindu woman. Here in *Nina's Heavenly Delights* the Taj Mahal tries to operate solely as the Indian link to a Western and Hollywood idea of romantic love and exclude its connections to Islam and the Mogul Empire. Through the use of the Western romantic appropriation of the Taj Mahal all reference to the site's Islamic motifs are effaced and its myth is that of eternal true love. This continues through *Nina's Heavenly Delights* where religious difference in the family is tangential. In the film the symbol where East meets West is the Taj Mahal, and where Nina meets Lisa is at the restaurant the New Taj. At the end of the film, the father's small tourist ornament of the Taj Mahal with its broken internal light shines again when Nina and Lisa confirm their love publically with a kiss on live television. The family restaurant The New Taj is saved. All the expected British Asian family "problems" are sidelined through the operation of the Taj Mahal's myth of eternal love; the son who has given up medical school against family expectations and married a white woman in secret

(for love), Nina refusing an arranged marriage, Nina's cross-dressing best friend's Bollywood dreams achieved in the film's final scene and finally Nina coming out of the closet for true love, everywhere everyone is pursuing their dream and falling in love. The only problems left are predominately Western problems of "living the dream" and "finding one's self." When it all becomes too much Nina slugs back a shot of straight whiskey better than any character from a British soap opera. There is no real exposition of cultural difference, and the most telling example of the lack of engagement with cultural issues is in the portrayal of Nina's father. The patriarch in many British Asian films is seen as the stern enforcer of tradition who is concerned with family honour and male pride. In Nina's world the patriarch's cultural position has been made ambiguous and replaced by a father more worried about his daughter's personal happiness. He is literally a kindly ghost who follows Nina and the family, guiding them on the path to true love. The narrative presents nothing further about a father who was so insistent on his culture that one daughter had to run away to avoid an arranged marriage and another that was not allowed to take Scottish dance lessons.

Nina's Heavenly Delights hints at disapproving older relatives, arranged marriages, family honour and the importance of tradition, but it refuses to develop any of them beyond a nod and a wink. The film ends with Nina's ghostly father giving the audience a nod and a wink; it seems to be saying because I am self-aware as a film, social reality does not matter. In Nina's world the British National Party wouldn't be invited to a political debate because they don't exist, and neither do religious extremism nor people who oppose same-sex relationships. But in a similar way the film's collusion with dominant Western discourse causes the film to deny its status as queer cinema in its promotional material. (*Nina* was nominated for a GLAAD Award.) The American voice-over on the film's DVD trailer does everything except mention that this is a film about a same-sex relationship. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is an interracial lesbian love story made acceptable as a Hollywood fairy tale. In fact, the narrative refers to itself a fairy tale during the climax of the cooking competition. On the one hand, this fairy tale is used to subvert social problem expectations and to indicate that this is truly 'make believe', but on the other hand it is also the very thing that undermines its authority.

The movie ends in the modern fairy tale hybrid fashion of Disney and Pixar where all the characters come on for a final song and dance routine. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* not only stages such a big finale in the Scottish countryside, but the camera eventually pulls back and we see the sound stage and the characters dancing in front of a giant green screen, reinforcing and making explicit that this is all make believe. In exchange for the realism of ethnic "social problem" films, we get a fairy tale where romantic love is conflated with the Hollywood tale of the pursuit of happiness – the American dream –, and the movie ends with a successful restaurant being equated with true love. And if this film had been given a general release with some Hollywood stars in it, it would have been billed as the "feel good romantic-comedy blockbuster of the summer." After all, the prize that is in question and Nina is after is 'The Best of the West.'

This film review was created as part of a [module on migrant and diasporic cinema](#) in Europe in the [MA Cultural Studies](#) at the University of Leeds (2009/10).