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Title: Dark Humour and the Female Performance of Subversion in South-Asian Diasporic Cinema: Chadha's *Rich Deceiver*, *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*, and *What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?*

Acknowledgments: I would like to acknowledge the support of the British Film Institute (London) for providing me viewing access to their copy of Gurinder Chadha's *Rich Deceiver*, which was unavailable at all other archives across the globe, as well as her rare documentary, *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*.

Dark Humour and the Female Performance of Subversion in South-Asian Diasporic Cinema:

Chadha's *Rich Deceiver*, *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*, and *What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?*

Abstract: This essay focuses on three films from Gurinder Chadha's South-Asian diasporic oeuvre, *Rich Deceiver* (1995), *It's A Wonderful Afterlife* (2010), and the documentary titled *What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?* (1994), in order to understand the brand of humour that is theorized and staged from the filmmaker's diasporic context of hybridity and liminality. I will argue that the female characters in the first two films produce dark humour from a position of marginality---gendered and class-based in the case of Ellie Freeman (*Rich Deceiver*), gendered and racialized (diasporic) in the case of Mrs. Sethi (*It's A Wonderful Afterlife*)---which in turn allows these characters agency and control in a public space where humour is generally assumed to be the exclusive preserve of masculine authority. I will argue that the very figure of a woman performing/producing dark humour---especially in a racially-inflected diasporic context such as Chadha's own---functions as a vehicle for the critique of normative social oppression, whether gender-, class-, or race-based, and therefore becomes an inherently empowering template and expository medium both for the female characters and for the genre of South Asian diasporic cinema.

Keywords: Gurinder Chadha, South Asian diasporic cinema, dark humour, humour from below, gendered performance, postcolonial cultural critique

‘[W]omen’s comedy has become a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested . . .’

(Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, 6)¹

‘Seeing four Asian women talk, you know, and do things and be sexual and be funny . . . women really enjoy [it], it’s so rare . . .’

(Chadha, *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*)

I examine in this essay the woman-centric dark humour that characterizes Gurinder Chadha's South-Asian diasporic oeuvre, in particular films like *Rich Deceiver* (1995) and *It's A Wonderful Afterlife* (2010), noting alongside the manner in which this brand of diasporic humour is discussed theoretically in Chadha's brief documentary called *What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?* that predates both these films (1994).² The female characters in the first two films produce and stage their humour working from a position of marginality, gendered and class-based in the case of Ellie Freeman (*Rich Deceiver*), gendered and racialized³ (diasporic) in the case of Mrs. Sethi (*It's A Wonderful Afterlife*). I examine how,

1 Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin, Texas: Univ of Texas Press, 2015), p. 6.

2 I would like to acknowledge the wonderful support of the British Film Institute (London) for providing me viewing access to their copy of Gurinder Chadha's *Rich Deceiver*, which was unavailable at all other archives across the globe, as well as her rare documentary, *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*.

3 I find it important to detach the concept of ‘race’ from any associations of biological or geographical facticity, while fully recognizing its historical centrality as a socio-political category that determined the course and quality of lives, and believe that it should therefore be enclosed within single quotes throughout—a practice that

in this cinema born of the hybrid and marginalized subjectivity of a South-Asian diasporic filmmaker, the template of humour—and in particular dark or black humour—is powerfully staged by the female protagonists who operate from marginalized subject-positions and then emerge agentive through this very process of producing/performing humour. I will argue that in Chadha's cinema, these central female characters appropriate humour, a domain often set aside for the exclusive exercise of masculine authority and creativity, and invert it to derive a stinging and bitter black humour—the most biting kind of humour that it would seem could ever arise from the marginalized subject-positions occupied by these women and the kind that could most powerfully offer a trenchant critique of the systemic (gender-, race-, and class-based) injustices suffered by them.⁴ I will show that it is through this process that the female characters in *Rich Deceiver* and *It's A Wonderful Afterlife* emerge as incisive commentators on social injustices and speak to the rebellious definitions of humour that Chadha foregrounds in her documentary, *What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?* By examining these three films that have received practically no critical attention so far, I will argue that the very figure of a woman performing/producing humour—especially in a racially-inflected diasporic context such as Chadha's own—functions as a vehicle for the critique of normative social oppression, whether gender-, class-, or race-based, and therefore becomes an inherently empowering template and expository medium both for the female characters and for the genre of South Asian diasporic cinema.

Plotlines of Comedy: Dark Beginnings and Happy Endings

The first thing that strikes the viewer in *Rich Deceiver* and *It's A Wonderful Afterlife* is the inversion of humour into dark/black humour, and this becomes all the more evident when we compare the two films to their cultural antecedents on which they draw and which they critically alter. *Rich Deceiver* distorts the light comedy and ignorant misogyny of Ovid's classical Pygmalion ('living doll') story perpetuated through several cinematic works down the ages. But it most directly builds on and destabilizes Pygmalion's greatly popular variant, Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990). *It's A Wonderful Afterlife* draws on the early nineteenth-century literary classic, *Pride and Prejudice* (a work Chadha had also adapted earlier in a light humorous vein as *Bride and Prejudice*, 2004), and morphs it into a tale of horrors, grim and hilarious at the same time.

Rich Deceiver (1995), a TV drama that Chadha directed in two parts for the BBC, is based on Gillian White's novel and tells the story of Ellie and Malcolm Freeman. The film begins against the backdrop of St. Paul's Cathedral with Ellie getting pregnant and marrying Malc. They settle into a poor district of Liverpool where they set up a family of two kids and struggle financially as a lower middle-class couple. Ellie has a part-time job as a shop assistant and Malc is a warehouseman battling the prospect of retrenchment at his company.

is not often followed in scholarship. Following the direction of John McLeod (*Beginning Postcolonialism*), I would like to point out that it is only for practical reasons that I am omitting to do this throughout the essay.

⁴ While the films draw on the radical and transformative potential of humour in general as a cultural expression and rhetorical tool, especially when installed in the hands of the marginalized, they also underscore the significance of black/dark humour as a particularly biting socio-political template that is able to force contemplation, shatter complacency, and trigger change. As I will suggest later in the essay while focusing on the significance of this trope in the films and its older cultural bearings as a subversive tool, black/dark humour is able to channelize the *anger* at social injustice without which the constituency of like-minded audience (or the 'apna' people whom Chadha addresses, as I will later explain) fails to relate to the marginalized protagonist. Furthermore, this kind of humour questions the systemic injustices more fundamentally, expresses the full bleakness of the situation through its implicit pessimism, indicates the audience's complacency and complicity surrounding socio-political inequalities, and offsets the sunnier yet meaningless consolations of happy change and regeneration.

Struggling to save their floundering marriage, Ellie wishes for him to get his professional confidence and dignity back, which she believes would infuse love into their life once again. She gets the opportunity of a lifetime when she wins one million five hundred and twenty five thousand pounds on the football pools. Despite this huge win, she does not spend any of it but invests it in a local security firm (Mercy Secure Systems) as a silent partner under the condition that they hire Malc as a salesman. Malc prospers at this job and begins to change his priorities, increasingly tiring of his wife, feeling embarrassed of her company over business meals and trips, and finally straying into infidelity. After visiting him in the household that he now shares with his new girlfriend, and after pointlessly begging him to let her back into his life, Ellie decides to teach him a lesson. She drives people from his old impoverished neighbourhood to the location around his new opulent home to embarrass him in front of his new girlfriend—a plan that succeeds hilariously. She takes possession of a swanky house nearby and gets it renovated and ready to further disrupt Malc's life. The girlfriend, however, discovers the fact of the lottery-win that had enabled Ellie's rise to riches and blackmails her for a lot of money as the price for not telling Malc and for exiting his life—a deal to which Ellie agrees. The film ends when the husband returns to the wife and learns about the lottery win, and happy conjugality is restored.

It's A Wonderful Afterlife (2010) is the London-based story of Mrs. Sethi, the widowed Indian mother of Roopi Sethi, who desperately keeps trying to get her daughter married despite the multiple rejections by prospective grooms or their families. The film opens with the sensational news splash about the 'Curry Killer,' a murderer on the loose who is killing people in Southall, London's 'Little India.' As the film proceeds, we realize that the murders have been committed by Mrs. Sethi who, unable to get her daughter married, and furious at those who insult and dismiss Roopi, kills them using her culinary equipments and food in the most hilarious way. Meanwhile, Captain Murphy, a police officer also of Indian origin, and Roopi's childhood friend from long ago, is tasked with investigating the case closely. The main plot of the film revolves around the ghosts (or 'spirits' as they are called in the film) of the five people murdered by Mrs. Sethi (four intentionally and one mistakenly) hovering around her, accusing her angrily, and later cooperating with her to try and get Roopi united with Murphy with whom Roopi falls in love. Murphy, forced to investigate Roopi in the 'Curry Killer' case, also falls in love with her, and later returns to apologise and to propose to her. Roopi's psychic friend, Linda, adds to the drama, often sensing the cavalcade of ghosts, celebrating her own engagement with Dev, and ultimately exploding at the discovery of his infidelity on the day of their engagement. Towards the end of the film, we learn that Mrs. Sethi's frantic hurry to see Roopi happily settled into matrimony was because she herself had been diagnosed with cancer. Ultimately, she dies a happy woman, freeing all six ghosts (the sixth being Murphy's boss who had been killed accidentally in his scuffle with Mrs. Sethi) for reincarnation.

Creative Identity and Filmmaking

Several of Chadha's films are seen to portray a kind of fun-filled feminism in the South-Asian diasporic context with some deep and empowering friendships among women that last a lifetime making adversities bearable. Studying the 'feminist possibilities and limitations' of *Bend It Like Beckham*, Mridula Nath Chakraborty traces three genealogies that according to her account for Chadha's feminist, racialized, and diasporic positionality—firstly, 'the black British film tradition' (to which I will allude in detail later), secondly, 'black British feminism' that Chadha would have known well from growing up in Southall and that differentiated itself 'from the kind of unified blackness [that] influential male theorists were advocating as a political contingency,' and thirdly, the cult built by 'feminist filmmakers of diasporic origin from the Indian subcontinent' (such as Mira Nair, Gurinder

Chadha, Deepa Mehta).⁵ Tracing the ‘feminist filmmaking’ of the South Asian diasporic filmmakers, and in particular the filmmaking of ‘women directors from the Indian diaspora’—which ‘occupies a dominant hegemonic speaking position within South Asian diasporic studies’—Chakraborty notes that these directors depart from and have no interest in the avant-garde ‘experimental filmmaking of 1970s feminists in both the United Kingdom and North America’ and that they therefore ‘very much do the linear, content-based film,’ drawing on their own ‘filmic antecedents, namely . . . the Bollywood melodrama.’⁶ Chakraborty remarks that while the 1970s experimental feminist filmmakers ‘rendered a non-inclusive feminist language unavailable to the very constituency it was intended for, namely women,’ these South Asian diasporic women filmmakers intentionally ‘go for conventional and accepted modes of storytelling that make it possible for their productions to enter the mainstream’ in ways that experimental feminist films and their idiom could not.⁷ Chadha herself testifies to this in her interview with Lawrence Chua. When asked why, when compared to ‘the evolution of black filmmakers in Britain,’ she has taken a ‘more populist road’ than her contemporaries, Chadha explains: ‘It’s important that the people who are in the films can see themselves. That’s always been very critical for me.’ She goes on to explain that when she makes a film ‘about black people’ and about ‘ordinary Asian women’ then it becomes important for her that these people themselves ‘be able to see and enjoy’ the film. She concludes, therefore, that she has never made a film that she ‘would call avant-garde’ or ‘particularly experimental.’⁸ This ensures the accessibility and ‘feel-good’ factor of the films made by these South Asian diasporic ‘feminist filmmakers,’ that cements their appeal to a large demographic of women and particularly to sections of the audience that identify with feminist perspectives.

However, Alison Donnell studies the feminism represented in two films, Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham*, noting that there are limits to the liberatory potential suggested by the ‘feel-good’ element of this kind of feminism. She notes how the ‘politics of liberation’ endorsed by these films is problematic because of the ‘points of continued silence and struggle (specifically [that of] queer diasporic subjects and sex workers)’ that remain unaddressed—points of struggle and silence that are ‘not foregrounded by the visual or narrative persuasions of the films themselves’ and that ‘the films fail to bring into their emancipatory politics.’⁹ In the films by Chadha that I examine in this essay, I show how the dark humour of the female characters underscores precisely these ‘vanishing points of liberation’ (43). These films, I argue, indicate the very real limits to the liberatory potential that is promised by the patriarchal market economy—an economy that is represented by the urban lottery in *Rich Deceiver* and by the glamorous marriage market in *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife*. However, despite having won the lottery and despite this market promise of infinite freedom, Ellie Freeman is able to demonstrate through her futile attempts

5 Mridula Nath Chakraborty, “Crossing Race, Crossing Sex in Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002): Managing Anxiety in Multicultural Britain,” in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (Abingdon Oxon UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 125.

6 Ibid., p.126.

7 Ibid., p.126.

Chakraborty remarks that these Indian diasporic female directors belong to the post-1960s diasporic populations and that their group is ‘characterized by its access to high culture and a thorough theoretical understanding of colonial discourse and postcolonial theory.’ This suggests that their choice of conventional modes of storytelling is a conscious and informed one.

(Mridula Nath Chakraborty, p.126.)

8 Lawrence Chua, “Hanif Kureishi & Gurinder Chadha,” *BOMB* 48 (1994): p. 54.

9 Alison Donnell, “Feeling Good? Look Again! Feel Good Movies and the Vanishing Points of Liberation in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham*,” *Journal of Creative Communications* 2, no.1,2 (2007): p. 44.

at humour—her hesitant mirth and cautious smiles—that the stores full of pretty things and the fancy restaurants stocked with unfamiliar food are not for her. She is separated from them and from any claim to authoritative social positions not only by virtue of her gender that roots her in a systemic disability for life but also by her class that renders these economic and cultural privileges inaccessible forever. Similarly, despite the dreams of ‘true love’ and ‘happy matrimony’ culled and sold by the prevailing marriage markets—markets that make a ‘good match’ seem theoretically accessible and desirable for an educated, well-employed, and good-hearted woman like Roopi—the reality is a distant cry from this. She is doomed to a constant humiliating objectification for her body shape at the hands of a sexist society. Besides this gendered discrimination, she is further delimited because of her race—a parameter which invisibly defines the yardstick for beauty in a way that excludes Roopi from any claim to beauty or to marketable femininity. In contrast to this, as I will show, is the voluble praise that the male ghosts, after having rejected Roopi, shower upon her friend Linda, a white British woman, who they suggest is ideal for the marriage market. Thus, despite the commercial promise of equal purchasing power offered by the contemporary market economy, the global white patriarchy with its inherent systemic inequality undercuts this possibility—a reality to which we are alerted by the dark and constantly hesitant half-humour of the female characters in Chadha’s films.

Chadha’s South Asian diasporic oeuvre is often seen as one that deals with issues of race and ethnicity albeit in a playful mainstream format. She is frequently cited as a cultural commentator on issues of race and is known to have emerged as a filmmaker from the radical British black cinema of the sixties and seventies. And yet, *Rich Deceiver* is one of her very few films that does not portray people from diverse ethnicities or races and is entirely focused on a white community. To understand the creative currents that might direct such choices, one can turn to Susan Koshy’s interview of Chadha. Koshy prefaces Chadha’s interview with a brief recapitulation of Chadha’s professional trajectory. We learn that Chadha began with radio journalism followed by work in the BBC in the 1980s ‘in the midst of a very dynamic period in black British cultural and intellectual life,’ and very quickly became a part of the black British radical cinema which had taken off in the ‘late sixties and early seventies’ when ‘Afro-Caribbean and South Asian organizations and activists had borrowed the term “black” from the Black Power movement in the United States.’¹⁰ Anne Ciecko writes, borrowing from Sallie Westwood’s analysis, that ““black” was appropriated from revolutionary movements in the United States . . . for diasporic South Asian and African Caribbean populations in Britain and came to represent, in the 1980s, a hegemonic and unified (though not uncontested) oppositional political identity in the struggles against racism.’¹¹ Chadha, therefore, was a product of these times, and subsequently underwent a shift in her self-identification ‘from black to British Asian’¹²—from taking pride and finding value in identifying as ‘black’ to considering this label too limiting and wanting to establish (like many others in her time) the specificity of the ‘Asian’ identity. Anne Ciecko, in fact, says of Chadha’s film, *Bhaji on the Beach*, something that can perhaps be applied to Chadha’s cinema in general—that it ‘challenge[s] conceptions of “black” British filmmaking, cultural identities, and racial politics.’¹³ In response to Koshy’s questions, Chadha explains that she ‘find[s] labels very problematic’ and ‘flourish[es] [in] . . . margins that can’t be categorized, that can’t be read easily.’¹⁴ She clarifies that the fact that she has ‘gone through three labels

10 Susan Koshy, “Turning Color: A Conversation with Gurinder Chadha,” *Transition* 72 (1996): p.150.

11 Ciecko, 67.

12 Susan Koshy, “Turning Color: A Conversation with Gurinder Chadha,” p. 150.

13 Ciecko, 67.

14 Susan Koshy, “Turning Color: A Conversation with Gurinder Chadha,” p. 150.

in as many years is indicative of how provisional they are' for her.¹⁵ Chadha speaks of the current label that she works with and finds empowering, the *apna* identity ('us' or 'ours')—an identity that is explored at length by Gargi Bhattacharyya and John Gabriel¹⁶ as one that represents the spirit of a generation of filmmakers. Chadha says in her interview with Koshy that she adopted the 'apna' identity when she realized that different kinds of audience across the globe, including those who hailed from very different backgrounds, were responding to her cinema by saying that it represented *their* story. As Chadha explains to Koshy: 'My experiences were being claimed by other people, different facets of my identity were being claimed by others, and in that sense, I learned and started talking about "us," or *apna*.' She explains her current cinematic ethic thus:

So when I talk about the work now, I say I wanted to make films that reflected us as opposed to Asians or blacks. 'Us' or 'ours' in Punjabi is *apna*. Originally that meant my mum, my dad, my sister, the Asian community in Britain—but that *apna* and that 'us' for me has now come to mean audiences globally who have shared the same kind of experiences as me and who have a similar take on the world.¹⁷

This may explain how, as a South Asian diasporic filmmaker, Chadha identifies less ethnically and more creatively, not just in terms of what she considers to be her parent community and her audience, but also in terms of the marginalized demographic—whether marginalized by gender, class, or race—that she represents on screen. What follows from this is her choice of characters, not necessarily people of colour (or 'black' in British parlance of the eighties), but others such as Ellie Freeman who also occupy a position of marginality and who are subjected to systemic oppression—in her case because of a combination of gender and class positionality. What brings the two films of my essay together is the situation of female marginality that is shared by Ellie Freeman and Mrs Sethi. Amplifying this is the class inequality that Ellie confronts and the racial humiliation that Mrs. Sethi battles, all of which understandably finds its most evocative expression in the work of a female South Asian filmmaker—severed geographically and culturally from the Indian 'homeland' and working from the female margins of creative cinema despite being financially privileged and professionally mainstream. Ellie Freeman and Mrs. Sethi both ultimately adopt dark humour as a narrative template to comically communicate the tragic, and likely irrevocable, systemic injustices of various kinds imposed on them—a move that reflects Chadha's alignment of personal and narrative loyalties with the marginalized which in turn stems from her background in British radical black cinema that was ideologically committed to portraying and protesting the societal imposition of inequality and indignity.

What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?: Power and Possibilities of Female Humour

The figure of the woman as an agent of humour is in itself a complex and productive one, as discussed by the four Asian women comics in *What Do You Call An Indian Woman Who's Funny?* (1994). This documentary interestingly preceded and perhaps even anticipated the two other films under discussion, elaborating theoretically on the interface of women and humour. It is a mix of segments from the live taping of a stand-up comedy show in Britain with four Asian female comics. The film stitches together excerpts from their individual onstage monologues and their greenroom group conversations. The first shot is of a signboard outside the venue that advertises the evening's event: 'Asian Women Performers—Parminder Chadha, Shobna Gulati, Nina Wadia, Syreeta Kumar; Door open 7 pm.' The work discusses the possibilities that surround, and challenges that lie in the way of, an Asian woman comic

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 150-1.

¹⁶ Gargi Bhattacharyya and John Gabriel, "Gurinder Chadha and the Apna Generation: Black British Film in the 1990s," *Third Text* 8, no. 27 (1994): p. 58.

¹⁷ Susan Koshy, "Turning Color: A Conversation with Gurinder Chadha," p. 151.

as she performs her humour. There is no direct correlation between the situation of stand-up comedy that the documentary stages/discusses and the way humour is screened in the two movies. However, some of the intriguing greenroom exchanges between these four performers touch on crucial theoretical issues that have to do with humour, its limitations, its performative mediums, and its social rewards.¹⁸ In particular, the documentary engages with the issue of the limits placed on women's humour. Thus, Nina Wadia (who plays the character of Geeta onstage) says in her greenroom exchange with her fellow performers that she was told when she auditioned: 'Look, your material's great, [but it] doesn't suit your face.' In a similar vein she remarks that the word 'fuck' when uttered by her—'a young Asian woman'—seemed to shock her audience. Wadia's reception seems to result from the racialized and gendered position that she occupies, but her experience resonates with the way we approach and react to women's humour in general. While the larger social view of humour is that it is naturally offensive and irreverent, and while society grants to it a certain license to insult, this domain is assumed to exclude the feminine which is conventionally constructed as docile and subservient. Linda Mizejewski studies these issues insightfully in her book, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, and remarks:

[I]n the historic binary of "pretty" versus "funny," women comics, no matter what they look like, have been located in opposition to "pretty," enabling them to engage in a transgressive comedy grounded in the female body—its looks, its race and sexuality, and its relationships to ideal versions of femininity.¹⁹

This reading indicates how the very format of a woman channelling/performing/producing humour seems to be an implicit and conducive vehicle for the questioning of normative social oppression, whether gender-, class-, or race-based. This helps us understand the fundamental challenge extended by Mrs. Sethi and Ellie, or even by Linda, when they step into this template perceived and designed to be inherently radical and subversive. As Mizejewski claims, in the genre of female stand-up comedy, "'pretty" is the topic and target, the ideal that is exposed as funny.' Interestingly, both Mrs. Sethi and Ellie Freeman, as I will go on to show, dismantle and deconstruct the premium laid on being 'pretty'—this 'ideal of femininity' in itself being a class-based and race-based construct, which is therefore fundamentally inaccessible to Ellie and Roopi (excluded from class and race privilege, respectively), and as they defiantly claim, also *undesirable to them*. Hence, as I will proceed to show, both challenge the 'living doll' prototype—Ellie decidedly setting aside conventional feminine embellishments (jewellery) and Roopi the very prospect of romantic courtship.

As a brief sidenote, it is important to begin by recognizing that the field of comedy, in some of its most celebrated, contemporary, and cutting-edge templates is also ridden with inequalities. In *The Comedy Studies Reader*, editors Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz examine the comedic media in its various forms in modern-day USA and observe that

¹⁸ One must begin by conceding that a stand-up comic delivering a personally scripted humorous piece is substantively different from a female character in a film that channels humour. The case of the latter is markedly different because of the significant additional filter of the cinematic medium and the concerted intervention of a film crew that this implies. Even when a scriptwriter fashions a stand-up comic's gig and the situations described in the monologue are fictional, there is still the sense of subjective experience, personal enunciation, and private rage. As opposed to this, the female character on the movie screen is fictional and distant. Despite these fundamental differences, I open my discussion of the two films with this documentary in order to focus attention on the figure of the female agent who channels/produces comedy, accepting the premise that in creating a comic female character, a filmmaker would have to deal with some of the same issues surrounding the interface of women and humour that a female stand-up comic has to negotiate and that the four comics in the documentary discuss at some length.

¹⁹ Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin, Texas: Univ of Texas Press, 2015), p. 5.

American humour is often staged through actors/agents who are white and male because it is assumed that such characters are able to ‘create humor that translates more broadly than that of non-white, non-male, non-Americans’²⁰ (13). Not only this, such hegemonic mainstreaming is also intricately linked to the logic of profitability because the authoring and producing of comedic media takes place within industrial networks of commerce. Attentive to this driving force behind all comedic television, films, or internet content, the editors remark that the ‘world of commercial comedy always has embedded within it a set of assumptions that amplify some voices while silencing others’²¹ (13). That said, it is crucial to review recent scholarship that foregrounds the socio-political implications of contemporary subversive humour and the defiant fashioning of it in the hands of marginalized constituencies. According to Cynthia Willett and Julie Willet, unlike traditional humour that makes fun at the expense of the marginalized demographic segments, ‘humour from below’ can function as a ‘source of empowerment, a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear, a source of joy and friendship, a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance.’²² Conventionally, humour is ‘valued as a cerebral game and an elevated skill of true wit that rational minds play’ and ‘women and others who are socially disempowered’ are considered ‘less capable of true humor and relegated to mockery’s natural targets.’²³ Debunking this view, revamping the major traditional theories of humour associated with such approaches,²⁴ and disproving the ‘persistent suspicion that comic laughter is politically irrelevant or ineffective,’ the authors study how in ‘humor from below’ the ‘women, animals, and other subversive creatures’ become ‘comedy’s central agents rather than its targets’ and proceed to dismantle ‘entrenched hierarchies and biases.’²⁵ In *Hysterical!*, Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant also emphasize the way humour functions as ‘a key political weapon’ and highlight how patriarchal assumptions undergirding the field of comedy often systemically exclude female comics from agency. The editors attempt to recuperate women’s comedy from the long history of ‘pathologi[zing] . . . female bodily and emotional excess’ and ‘female unruliness,’²⁶ hoping to reposition female comics in a realm free of gendered associations and delimitations.²⁷ In her chapter titled “The Unruly Woman” in *The Comedy Studies*

20 Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (eds.), “Comedy as Theory, Industry, and Academic Discipline,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), p.13.

21 Ibid., p.13.

22 Cynthia Willett and Julie Willet, *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 1-2.

23 Ibid., 1-2.

24 The four main theories, as Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett explain, are “superiority theory, relief, incongruity, and play.” The first is one where “pleasure arises as a reinforcement of the other’s inferior social status,” the second declares that “comic venting of emotions . . . offers a physical release of tensions,” the third sees laughter as arising from a “perception of incongruities— . . . violation of mental patterns or anything that offers surprise,” and the final one assumes that laughter originates in a situation of playfulness that ignores rank. Cynthia Willett and Julie Willet, *Uproarious*, p. 5.

25 Ibid., pp. 11, 2, 10.

26 Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), p. 2.

Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant observe the dual suggestiveness of the clinical notion of the ‘hysterical,’ summarizing that on the one hand it began as a misogynist category of “medical diagnosis used to control women” in the nineteenth century and on the other hand its very medical connotations imply female “performance and . . . spectacle.” That is, this clinical category implies medical sanction for or diagnosis of “unruly” women capable of “acting out and acting up” and engaging “wilfully [in] outrageous performance.” [Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, pp. 1-2.]

27 Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant note how existing social stereotypes posit a ‘natural’ relationship between humour and masculinity and imply that women’s proper role is only to “appreciate male humor rather than speak her own truth through comedy.” In response to this, the authors emphasize the significance of

Reader, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn notes that in comedy the figure of the ‘unruly woman contains much potential for feminist reappropriation,’ especially by reclaiming the possibility of visibility as power—staging the ‘woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle.’²⁸

Striving to triumph over such internal inequalities, the field of comedy ultimately aspires to rise to the level of mordant socio-political critique, barraging existing hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change*, notes that humour ‘serves as the advance guard of social change, mocking values in flux’ and that within the ‘humor zone’ the ‘humorist invokes social rules in order to transgress them, if only symbolically through language, visual art, or other mode.’²⁹ In *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*, Rebecca Krefting notes that humour ‘has always taken aim at its surrounding culture, exposing societal discontent’ as well as the ‘social, economic, and political forces [that] collude to maintain inequality,’ challenging our cherished myths about the democratic egalitarianism of our society, often with an aim to ‘promote unity and equality or to create a safe and accepting space for people from all walks of life.’³⁰ According to Krefting, while legal citizenship excludes several constituencies when it apportions rights and respect, humour acts as an adjudicator and leveller by ‘mitigating experiences of social and political exclusion’ and by creating a reassuring sense of cultural citizenship for various marginalized communities based on ‘shared ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation.’³¹ Thus, performances of humour (such as stand-up comedies) ‘tak[e] control of a public image created by others to maintain hierarchies’ and take it down in order to ‘counteract inequitable treatment’—ultimately empowering ‘otherwise marginalized social identities,’ ‘enacting cultural citizenship,’ and ‘asserting . . . [their] rights.’³² Krefting links this affirmative, agentive and empowering setting up of cultural citizenship to a particular kind of humour called ‘charged humor’ which is distinctive from other kinds of humor because of its characteristics—most significantly its ‘subversive content’ and its ‘comic intentionality’ wherein its marked subversiveness has ‘designs on an *outcome*, . . . a *change* in attitudes or beliefs or action.’³³ Also crucially, according to Krefting, charged humour comes only from marginalized positionalities, because ‘[i]deal citizens—able-bodied, heterosexual men of some means’—are ‘afforded privileged experiences and worldviews’ and do not have reason to be ‘critical of a system from which . . . [they] benefit,’ and would thus not be ‘prompt[ed] . . . to write charged humor.’³⁴ Drawing on Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz’s introduction to

challenging these assumptions, noting that humour is “a key political weapon” and that therefore there are “political implications to the myth that women are less funny.” [Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*, p. 4.]

²⁸ Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe, “The Unruly Woman,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), pp. 210, 211.

²⁹ Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), p.xv.

While traditionally social change in its rhetorical aspects is seen as resulting from “serious discourse” (“protest movements or political rhetoric”) which are seen to carry “an assumed legitimacy not granted to other modes of discourse,” Meier and Schmitt argue that the comedic mode (and in particular stand-up comedy) which is a “decidedly non-serious form of rhetoric” participates significantly in the “discourse of social change” even while operating outside of the template of ‘serious discourse.’ [Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, *Standing Up, Speaking Out*, p.xxii.]

³⁰ Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

³² *Ibid.*, p.18-19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18, 25, emphasis added.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

The Comedy Studies Reader, my writing must acknowledge alongside that this self-reflexive ‘interrogating [of] political power’ is true not just of the comedic content, but also of its scholarly analysis—the genre within which this essay is located.³⁵

Following in this critical trajectory, I will go on to show that in *Rich Deceiver* and *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife*, Chadha stages this problematic surrounding female humour and the female protagonists fracture the curbs placed on agentive female humour as part of the process of dismantling power hierarchies. A characteristic of this comic template, especially in the case of *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife*, is the pervasiveness of bodily humour that manifests in the gut-splashing and gore-gouging murders Mrs. Sethi commits. Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett examine contemporary subversive humour, noting that it debunks the conventional understanding of humour as ‘a refined mental act, an existential detachment from life or a dry intellectual enjoyment,’ and that it draws on ‘two decades of groundbreaking work from feminists, philosophers, and historians as well as social and natural scientists’ which associates humour with the bodily elements.³⁶ This re-envisioned philosophical underpinning of humour insists that humans like other animals are ‘emotionally driven, social, and embodied creatures’—an approach that therefore dethrones the socially valorized ‘figure of the rational man’ from centrality in theories of comedy and ‘elevates the belly laugh,’ foregrounding the ‘gut-level affective register of humor’s impact on social positions.’³⁷ Manifesting in the form of stabbed gurgling bodies and punctured gastrointestinal systems, female humour operates literally at this corporeal level in *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife*.

Furthermore, in these two films the female characters launch their assault on systemic marginalization by resorting to the template of what I have called dark or black humour. We see Mrs. Sethi killing rampantly, Linda destroying unthinkingly, and Ellie acting unforgivably cruel—engaging frequently in violent acts, typically unsuited to comedy and to conventional ‘femininity,’ but channelled through black humour to fracture the limits placed both on ‘humour,’ defined as masculine, and on ‘femininity,’ defined as docile. Instead, by allowing female agents to produce/perform humour, albeit black humour, these films legitimize the female subject-position of the comic and thus make possible, through this female humour, specific forms of protest against injustices of gender, class, and race— injustices that most impact the vulnerable constituency of women, and that are also most powerfully articulated when depicted by a female filmmaker located in a brown diasporic context.

Black Humour in *Rich Deceiver*: Breaking the ‘Living Doll’

It is useful to begin by looking closely at the template of dark or black humour that characterizes the two films I explore in this essay. Patrick O’Neill, in “The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour,” explains that black humour is different from the other kinds of humour, both ‘benign and derisive,’ not just ‘in terms of its subject matter alone’ but most importantly ‘in terms of its mode of being’ (154). O’Neill explains that entirely distinct from black humour, these other kinds of humour in both benign and derisive

35 Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (eds.), “Comedy as Theory, Industry, and Academic Discipline,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, p.13.

It is important to note that the meanings one assigns to humour while unpacking its multilayered format, as its consumer or critic, is defined in very real ways by one’s own subject position and therefore one’s need and willingness to identify critique in, and cull subversion from, the humorous piece. For instance, the scholarly investment that leads me to identify gender-, class-, and race-based critique in these films is undeniably also informed by my personal grounding and experiences as a South Asian woman located in the global South.

36 Cynthia Willett and Julie Willet, *Uproarious*, pp. 4, 5.

37 Ibid., pp. 5,6, 11.

forms, are ‘self-congratulatory, self-assuring, and spring from an ordered world of unimperilled values—the humour of those inside and safe rather than outside and lost’ (154). These modes of humour ‘essentially see the self optimistically as a controlling agent in an orderly world.’ In this kind of comedy, the ‘world may indeed be threatening, but once the threat has been passed through the protective filter of humour we feel capable once again—even if only momentarily—of handling it and soldiering on.’ Whether benign or derisive, this is ‘the humour of certainty, the humour of cosmos’ (154). Black humour, on the other hand, ‘is the humour of lost norms, lost confidence, the humour of disorientation’—it is ‘the comedy of entropy’ (154).³⁸ In *Dark Humour and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*, Colletta studies the comedic works of British novelists between the wars, explaining how their dark humour is an essential part of their modernist ethic. Drawing on Freud and Bergson’s theories of humour to understand dark humour, Colletta explains that it ‘presents violent or traumatic events and *questions the values and perceptions of its readers* as it represents, simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous’ (emphasis added).³⁹ This is the mode in which the disturbingly cruel and the repulsively violent is portrayed in Chadha’s films, evoking grim humour and upsetting the status quo while at the same time using this violent disruption to question the viewers’ complacency at the inherent social injustice of the status quo. Crucially, reviewing Colletta’s book, Alistair M. Duckworth notes that ‘[d]ark humor, . . . though politically ineffective, provides a means of coping, *not least for women and minorities*.’⁴⁰ Thus, as a significant rhetorical tool, Chadha’s South Asian diasporic format equips the female characters, marginalized in several ways, with this subversive narrative format to allow them to both rebel against and cope with their unmitigated suffering and insult.

This is the kind of entropic humour we encounter in *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife*, and in a manner even more strained in *Rich Deceiver*. What one sees in *Rich Deceiver* is a realization about the impossibility of ‘soldiering on,’ and a ‘disorientation’ and despair surrounding the existing tragic state of affairs, that can only be expressed through chinks of hesitant comedy.⁴¹ A plot rife with ‘rags-to-riches’ reversals, secret conspiracies, unfaithful love, and the promise of love-won-back—it is manifestly full of comic potential. And yet, the tone of the film is largely despondent and the humour that surfaces is distinctly black—rooted in a sense of futility and irreparable disorder. In the three episodes that most clearly foreground dark humour, Ellie Freeman inscribes the reality of social class and the limitations it imprints on people’s lives—this being the dark reality that the filmmaker intends to communicate and that underlies the apparently unlimited light comic potential represented by the lottery-win in the film.

The first of these episodes is to be found when, after learning of her lottery-win, Ellie visits a fancy restaurant of the kind that she had not frequented earlier, in a hopeful and upbeat mood. Clearly eager to partake of upper-class luxuries that had so far been inaccessible to her, she begins by saying to the waiter ‘I mean I didn’t just want to go anywhere, this is much nicer.’ It quickly becomes evident to the viewer, as also to the waiter, that Ellie is unfamiliar with restaurant etiquette and is unaccustomed at maintaining social composure. When she appears confused, he cues her in by asking her to hand him her coat.

38 Patrick O’Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 10, no.2 (1983): p. 154.

39 Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humour and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel: Triumph of Narcissism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan; Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2004), p.2.

40 Alistair M. Duckworth, “Dark Humor & Satire,” review of *Dark Humour and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel: Triumph of Narcissism, English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 49, no. 2 (2006): p. 235, emphasis added.

41 Patrick O’Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour,” p. 154.

He promptly steps up to assist the gushing and excited Ellie as she places her order, easing her struggle with unfamiliar names on the menu, breaking it down to basics ('meat or fish?'), and then pronouncing the French items on the menu almost as if to politely shame her before patronisingly translating it for her. Most interestingly, this episode is infused with intertextual references to *Pretty Woman*, an overlap which offers an implicit and scathing narrative commentary on social hierarchies through the distorted evocation of plot similarities. Released five years before Chadha's *Rich Deceiver*, Marshall's *Pretty Woman* celebrates the romance between a sex worker, Vivian, and a billionaire, Edward. Their romantic union in the fairytale end of this story is preceded by several socially awkward situations that result from the huge social chasm that separates the two. Very similar to the restaurant scene described above is the iconic scene from *Pretty Woman*, engraved in popular cinematic memory, where Vivian (Julia Roberts) accompanies Edward (Richard Gere) to a meeting with his business colleagues at a fine dining restaurant with the ways of which she has little or no familiarity. During this light-hearted scene with a hilarious send-up, Vivian is offered a delicacy of snails with which she fumbles till one piece inelegantly flies out of her clumsy fingers and into the air, only to be intercepted in its trajectory by a benign waiter who grabs it and then pretends as if this is a regular occurrence in order to keep up the pretence of (class) sophistication. Chadha plucks this scene out of the genre of romantic comedy and transplants it into her much darker film, infusing the light humour of *Pretty Woman* with a disturbing steeliness. In the parallel restaurant scene in *Rich Deceiver*, after having been nudged into elitist patterns of conduct by waiters, Ellie gushes right before ordering her meal, 'It's just like *Pretty Woman*, you know' and then follows it up with the humorous twang: 'but I'm not into snails!' The self-conscious and somewhat unnerved invocation of *Pretty Woman*, where the woman is so manifestly a purchasable commodity and her class affiliation a matter of such outright shame, serves as a reminder of the way all women including Ellie are commodified and how all underprivileged (or 'working') classes are shamed for their unaffordability of and unfamiliarity with the appurtenances of the rich. This intertextuality endows Ellie's passing discomfort and seemingly light humour with the dark undertone of trenchant critique.

The second episode of black humour is from the latter half of the film where Malcolm, who has by this point abandoned his wife, works to impress his new girlfriend and tries to essentially leapfrog into a higher social class by moving into a lavish property in an upmarket location. To disrupt this social aspiration and expose its impossibility as well as its unethicity, Chadha stages the rage of the underprivileged in the form of their disturbing yet apparently comic counter-attack, planned and facilitated by Ellie. In this scene, Ellie brings over to Malcolm's new house people from his old neighbourhood—clearly social misfits in this ambience—and the girlfriend realizes to her shock that they are Malcolm's acquaintances when she hears one of them address him by name. Ellie, seated in her car, erupts with laughter and enjoys this commotion thoroughly. This ironic attempt at humour highlights the tragic class disparity in our society that discriminates against those at the lower end of the scale by stamping them with indelible class identities for a lifetime and temporarily glosses over simmering discontent underneath only to trigger occasional violent regurgitations. This episode of dark humour indirectly portrays working-class anger at the institutionalized injustice directed towards the indigent. In this climactic moment, the constituency disregards social hierarchies and strikes back, indifferently yet effectively, rupturing the reassured peace of the rich. Furthermore, Ellie's ruthless laugh as she watches Malcolm's discomfiture from inside her car also represents dark and ironic mirth at the reversal of *gender* hierarchies

where the scorned and seemingly dependent wife retaliates to her husband's patriarchal cruelty⁴² of abandoning her by mortifying him in front of his new object of desire.

In the third episode of dark humour that occurs earlier in the film, immediately after learning of her lottery-win, Ellie walks around the shops, admiring all that is on sale—clothing, lingerie, jewellery, cars, upcoming cruises. The inherent mirth of this plot-situation suggests the possibility of comic relief when Ellie, who had been ridiculed by Malcolm for trusting the lottery, is able to splurge excessively and expose her husband's foolishness. However, this light humour—Ellie's giddy relish of this situation and her intermittent silly giggles as she enjoys the thought of her unbridled purchasing power—soon morphs into dark humour when she enters a jewellery store and experiences what Vivian does at a clothing store in *Pretty Woman*. The women in both films are subjected to the condescending eye of the store assistants against which they brace themselves, struggling to assert their financial claim to the commercial space. But while Vivian nervously withdraws, knowing that the source of her money is an endowment from a rich man, Ellie is much more confident and assertive, knowing that the money is hers. Despite this crucial difference, Ellie's character ultimately emphasizes the intractability of class barriers in a world ridden with systemic social inequalities. This episode in *Rich Deceiver* begins with Ellie peremptorily declaring to the store assistant about the jewellery she was inspecting that she 'could buy that' if she wanted. She even threatens to report the assistant to the supervisor after the assistant tries to imply that a certain necklace priced at 'thirty thousand pounds' was beyond Ellie's reach. But the frothy humour of this situation, the glee enveloping this happy rags-to-riches transformation, and the oddly funny moments arising from it quickly dissipate into dark humour when she finally tries on this expensive necklace. Ellie's reaction is very different from that of Vivian in *Pretty Woman* who feels euphoric and validated when she finally gets to try on the new clothes in the store, accompanied by her male protector-financier, Edward. In *Rich Deceiver*, having placed it round her neck, Ellie at first admires the way she looks in it in typical comic mode—a reaction that promises light humour at her unexpected reversal of circumstance. However, immediately afterwards, she puts it away quietly and gravely despite having a fortune at her disposal, communicating indirectly to the audience her newfound realization that her class and gender is irrevocably excluded from certain experiences and opportunities—despite having the immediate monetary capacity to indulge in them—because society systemically delimits and even nullifies certain possibilities for the marginalized (such as the women and the poor). Stripping herself physically of the necklace and symbolically of access, she says to the salesperson at the counter, 'I could buy this you know, I could buy anything here'—a statement that appears to be spoken more to reassure herself of the veracity of this claim than to testify to an outsider. This introspection that brings Ellie face-to-face with the reality of her structural exclusion from privilege and her permanent banishment from equality, also condenses the film's (and Ellie's) critique of our systemic social inequalities, i.e. the kind of inbuilt and unjust hierarchies that makes the most visibly accessible opportunities/things realistically unavailable and practically unaffordable for certain groups. Light humour turns even darker as Ellie's realization of her gender-subordinate and class-outsider status is further reinforced by the salesperson's implicitly sarcastic response when Ellie declares her substantial purchasing power to him—'Of course, madam.' Ellie's subversive commentary becomes even clearer in the way she rudely deflates the usually light comic paradigm of the 'living doll' that, according to Jane O'Sullivan, has its origins in Ovid's Pygmalion tale, and that has been revived in key cinematic

⁴²Ellie's gendered sacrifices are evident throughout the film—in the way she has to choose marriage, child-rearing, and domesticity after pregnancy while Malcolm continues his education and career. His demeaning treatment of her, such as when he calls her a "bloody fool" for "wast[ing] [money] on the pools," or later when he arrogantly casts her aside for his promotion, is a recurrent trope in the film.

productions like *Vertigo* or *Pretty Woman*, or even in science fiction films such as *Metropolis*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, *the Stepford Wives*, and *Blade Runner*.⁴³ By rejecting the purchase of the necklace at the jewellery store, Ellie refuses to get ‘dolled up’ in jewellery and disables what O’Sullivan calls a ‘very negative aspect of heterosexual power relations: fetishism’—‘a process by which a concurrently feared and desired object—in this case, a woman—is refashioned to conform to idealised notions of femininity in a bid to render her a compliant and familiar substitute for that unruly object and, in so doing, to tame her.’⁴⁴ Chadha’s *Rich Deceiver* refers self-reflexively to *Pretty Woman*, making significant departures from this prototype. While Vivian undergoes a comic ‘Pygmalion-like transformation,’ ‘Edward demands and oversees the makeover of Vivian’s etiquette, demeanour, and mode of dress’ (a makeover ‘clearly reminiscent of the metamorphoses in such films as *My Fair Lady* and *Vertigo*’)—ensuring ‘the refashioning of Vivian into a fully fetishized version of femininity.’⁴⁵ Ellie contorts this sunny comic format, adding a complex dark humorous undertone by dismissing both the marionette-like cosmetic embellishments and patriarchal authority, and by choosing to jokingly control her husband instead—at first benignly and quietly to secure him a job, and later fiercely after he scorns her to get him to return to her. Unlike her husband, Ellie models herself into an entrepreneur, negotiating expertly with a bank, and investing in business in return for the promotion of her husband—something that reduces *him* to a doll that she puppeteers. And while the husband continues to presume that he is in the deciding role—for instance by introducing her to the workings of the bank, to his colleagues at the company, to the bank manager, or to the staff of Mercy Secure Systems—the audience remains in the know about Ellie’s superior financial viability and entrepreneurial knowledge because they have seen her transacting with the bank and the company long before her husband could even qualify to get in. Building on the potential offered by black humour, and accompanied by resolute, dark, and ironic mirth, Ellie defies her shackles as a class- and gender-outsider, and emerges as the entrepreneur-puppeteer offering a critical commentary not only on society but also on her cinematic predecessor encased ‘pretty’ in the ‘living doll’ mould.

Black Humour in *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife*: Reinventing Mrs. Bennet

Chadha’s *It’s A Wonderful Afterlife* refers back to the cultural monument that Jane Austen created with her *Pride and Prejudice*, a work that has outlived its topicality with its continued global relevance, and a work that Chadha herself had adapted in her earlier film *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). In this film, the character of Mrs. Sethi who is apparently befuddled, clueless, and inanely comic, actually echoes the subversive challenge Estella Tincknell associates with the figure of the aging older woman (or ‘Aunty’) of South Asian origin in British/British-Asian diasporic cinema and television, and takes it further by channeling the dark humour of the filmmaker through the acerbic commentary she offers on the marriage market.⁴⁶ Mrs. Sethi frankly admits to the murders she commits, explaining in well-modulated indignant tones the reason behind the executions, and displaying to the

43 Jane O’Sullivan, “Virtual Metamorphoses: Cosmetic and Cybernetic Revisions of Pygmalion’s ‘Living Doll,’” *Arethusa* 41, no. 1 (2008): p. 136.

44 *Ibid.*, pp.133-4.

45 *Ibid.*, p.144.

46 Estella Tincknell, “Monstrous Aunties: the Rabelaisian older Asian woman in British cinema and television comedy,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no.1 (2020): pp.135-150.

Tincknell’s analysis connects the figure of the older woman of South Asian origin in British/British-Asian diasporic cinema and television with uncontainable and transgressive humour and its resulting societal subversion. According to Tincknell, this figure combines the tropes of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, and emerges as a Rabelaisian figure of excess, overturning the conventional discourses around race, gender, and age by functioning as a ‘jester’—violating established societal norms through ‘clownishness’ and forcing subversive laughter.

audience the clear logic behind her decision to eliminate those who reject and humiliate her daughter as a prospective bride. What she says is seemingly light and funny, an impression mainly produced and sustained by the film's template of farce and fantasy that constantly reverts to a slapstick gallery of odd-looking, ridiculous, and unthreatening ghosts lining the backdrop. The ghosts are frequently hilarious, such as when Manjit Kaur's ghost complains to Mrs. Sethi asking her why, despite knowing that Manjir was vegetarian, she killed her by drilling her neck with 'chicken tikka kabab—why not paneer.' Despite this veneer, the film's black humour is discernible in the murderous actions to which Mrs. Sethi is driven, filled with despair at the traditionally sanctioned social violence directed at women in the marriage market. When this aging and tormented mother—almost Mrs. Bennet-like in her chatty eagerness, open indignance, and her simple desire to settle her daughter into happy matrimony—is reduced to commonsensical and jaunty conversations with a panel of loquacious, disabled, white-coloured ghosts, the dark humour underlying the plot becomes evident. On closer inspection, the mother's suffering seems undeserved and her rage legitimate when set against the humiliation that her daughter suffers in her constant rejections by parents and sons alike. Much like *Rich Deceiver*, this film strongly rejects the 'living doll' prototype that is imposed upon women—a rejection dramatized with great urgency by both Roopi and Mrs. Sethi through their outraged dismissal of social opinion.

The tableau of ghosts that adorn the backdrop of each scene after a point in the film are a literalization of the 'ghosts from the past'—in this case, the troubling past of society that has witnessed endless racial and gender injustices enacted upon bodies of gender-subordinate and coloured communities. When they first appear, the ghosts are lined up in Mrs. Sethi's kitchen, pointing accusingly and menacingly at her without speaking. The four ghosts include the first two victims, Mr. and Mrs. Chopra, who had called off Roopi's engagement with their nephew, Tej (Mr. Chopra's sister's son). The third victim is a young man who was murdered because he had turned Roopi down, and the fourth victim is Manjit Kaur who had tried to set Roopi up with her cousin's sister's son at the gurudwara and had demeaned Roopi for her looks (her body shape, her 'moustache,' her unthreaded eyebrows) after this boy rejected her. These ghosts again appear by Mrs. Sethi's bedside as she wakes up the next morning. It is part of the farcical format of the film and its atmosphere of grim humour that makes this interface with the supernatural seem like an everyday affair. As she sits up startled at their reappearance, the ghosts say to her one after the other, reproving her for murdering them, and insulting Roopi by body-shaming her: 'Why did you do it?', 'Girl works too hard. That's why she has let her body go—Fat mother fat daughter,' and 'She already has a bottom like a buffalo!' The most sexist member of the retinue is the young man with the spilling guts, who keeps calling Roopi 'motu' ('fat'), and who laments his predicament of having to depend on Roopi's marriage for his release from this spirit-state saying that this was exceptionally burdensome because no one was likely to want to marry Mrs. Sethi's 'jumbo daughter.'

Not only does the film protest the gender hierarchy underlying matrimony—a structure that is, by the implicit logic of the film, a socially institutionalized, religiously consecrated, romantically constructed, and commercially marketed pageantry of patriarchal imposition over women—it also systematically relates this to racial discrimination that intersects with the former to collapse Roopi's socio-economic worth. The young man among the ghosts derogatorily compares Roopi's body—implicitly both in its shape and in its complexion—to that of her White friend, Linda. Talking about how this group of ghosts was frustratingly stuck in the spirit world because of Mrs. Sethi, he says while staring lecherously at Linda: 'If her [Mrs. Sethi's] daughter had a body like that we wouldn't be in this problem.' Mr. Chopra's ghost assents quietly, both men participating unabashedly in a racist condemnation of the brown body. This implicit racialized commodification of women is contained within an

atmosphere of general racial injustice and insult that is seen for instance when Captain Murphy is inducted into the police team investigating the ‘Curry Killer Case’ because he is an ‘insider,’ i.e. brown and of Indian origin, and when his fellow White officers scan him with some obvious distaste written across their faces. More specifically, when Captain Murphy protests the racist stereotyping that is at play in the assumption that the ‘curry killer’ must be of Indian origin by saying that Indian cuisine is ubiquitous in current-day Britain (‘chicken tikka masala’s the number one national dish,’ he says), they joke about how Captain Murphy is ‘currying favour’ with the Boss. Confirming the racial hatred that lies at the heart of such remarks, we are shown the offended and disgruntled expressions not just of Murphy but of two other Black officers (suggestively, British-African). In this complex social and bureaucratic setting, Mrs. Sethi’s murderous actions, infused with black humour, acquire meaning also as a protest against racialized commodification of women of colour.

All of this systemic violence is seemingly in the light comic mode. Many of the scenes are framed by the four ghosts—all with white ashen faces that look zombie-like, crudely painted and papered with the layer peeling off in places, and glued to props that indicate the way they were killed by Mrs. Sethi. The young man has a food-filled gut that keeps pouring out and exploding, Mrs. Chopra has a rolling pin stuck to the head, Mr. Chopra has chapatti dough plastered over most of his face, and Manjit Kaur has her neck skewered with a kabab stick. The film very deftly negotiates the terrain between facile comedy and subterranean violence. Despite the light comic extravagance of the murders, the dark humour underneath unmistakably gestures towards the social violence to which Mrs. Sethi is responding with her homicidal actions—her bludgeoning rage serving as an indicator of the severity of the injustice suffered by marginalized communities, the gender- and racial-outsiders in a white society. The film begins with Mrs. Sethi (excluded from the frame at the beginning but obvious from what happens later) cruelly force-feeding a man for having rejected her daughter and pushing him towards a gruesome death, followed by the almost scatological gut explosion of his body in the hospital which splashes food repulsively all over the medical staff. This, along with the other murders which involve kabab skewers, chapatti doughs, and rolling pins as murder instruments, are complex in their suggestiveness. Though portrayed with an air of light frothy laughter, the modus operandi of these murders fit neatly into legally identified forms of violence/torture such as blunt-force trauma (dashing on the head with a rolling pin), suffocating (with chapatti dough), stabbing (skewering with a kabab grilling stick), and force-feeding (forcing into eating to death). The enormity of these criminal procedures along with the general grotesqueness of their representation highlights the extent of suffering and pent-up anger—both individual and societal—that manifests in the form of these homicidal outbursts. The dark humour of this cinematic universe is highlighted literally when Linda (or Geetali), who claims psychic powers, interrupts what appears to be a light and funny sequence where Mrs. Sethi and the five ghosts sit around the television enjoying a melodramatic Hindi soap opera. Linda exposes the ‘darkness’ their fatuous conversation actually signifies—the darkness that binds together the murderer and the murdered through a common realization of patriarchal violence— saying to Mrs. Sethi when she senses the ghosts in the room: ‘Aunty, your aura’s got so dark.’ Mrs. Sethi herself admits to the undergirding dark humour and its origin in grim despair when she responds from within the slapstick frame of buffoonish ghosts, saying to them in between the frivolous murders and waggish ‘curry killer’ investigations:

That’s why I did it. [Pointing towards the young man] You said my daughter is too fat for you, [Pointing towards Manjit Kaur] you said she is too ugly for your cousin’s sister’s son, [Pointing towards Mr. and Mrs. Chopra] and you—you said she is not good enough for your nephew, Tej . . . She is all I can ask for in a daughter. She is

loving, dutiful, considerate—yet no one will have her. She deserves to have a good husband and a good family.

In one of the most starkly dark humorous episodes of *It's A Wonderful Afterlife*, food is weaponized to teach patriarchy a lesson. This possibility looms over the film as a whole in the way Mrs. Sethi kills her victims by literally overfeeding them or by bludgeoning them with cooking equipment—effectively overthrowing the associations of culinary dedication with female docility. This element is dramatized further in the episode where Linda explodes with rage after discovering her fiancé's [Dev's] infidelity during her engagement party, much like Ellie is outraged at a similar discovery in *Rich Deceiver*. Linda's response is decidedly fierce and spectacular. With her psychic abilities, she weaponizes all the food at the party, turning champagne bottles into missiles that spout fluid, causing food items to erupt or fly like projectiles, and finally bombarding Dev with these food-grenades. As the traumatized invitees scuttle for shelter, and Dev collapses as though pierced with bullets, food renounces its associations of female duty, domestic propriety, or male saturation, and morphs into a vessel of radical subversion that attacks matrimonial celebrations. Once again, this humorous weaponization of food is both gender-subversive and race-critical because of the way food metaphors are made the vessels of racialized condescension throughout the film. An example is the way the image of 'curry' is treated.⁴⁷ Drawing on the multifaceted cultural charge of the Indian 'curry,' the film starts with white police officers laughing at the 'curry killer' case, echoing the racist stereotyping of Indian cuisine, and emphasizing the seeming ridiculousness of crime that is founded on what they consider to be sub-standard and inelegant food from the (colonial) global margins.⁴⁸ Dark humour knits together these racialized tropes that run through the images of food in the film with the filmmaker's socio-political critique of exclusionary policies.

The reality and universality of the gender- and race-based marginalization that Mrs. Sethi experiences and the real darkness underlying the black humour of the film becomes clear when even the ghost-mothers whom Mrs. Sethi has murdered come together to support her. They recognize the social injustice of Mrs. Sethi's situation and relate instinctively to this misery of watching a daughter being humiliated and rejected, thus exonerating Mrs. Sethi from criminality and freeing the film from its appearance of humorous frivolity. Simultaneously, as I have been suggesting, this also imbues the farcical comedy performed by Mrs. Sethi's character, and embodied by the film as a whole, with a distinctly black hue. Mrs. Chopra's ghost, for example, says: 'Only a mother can know what another mother

47 The centrality of th/e food metaphor in Chadha's cinema has been explored well in scholarship. Debnita Chakravarti notes the significance of food as a trope in Chadha's films, in particular *What's Cooking?* (2002). Similarly, Winnie Chan proposes that the food images in Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* help us understand imperial and postcolonial identities by representing the consumption of the diaspora metaphorically.

48 The film draws on the multifaceted cultural charge of the Indian 'curry.' On the one hand, it builds on the tensions relating to the British colonial construction of the curry where the 'curry' was intended to function as an assimilative/consolidatory imperialist strategy. This is exemplified by Rohit Varman who studies the colonial appropriation of the Indian curry and Susan Zlotnick who explores the consolidation and domestication of imperialism through the curry cookbooks of the Victorian Age. On the other hand, the film also draws on the postcolonial transplantation of the 'curry' into the British metropolitan landscape through the Indian diaspora. Elizabeth Buettner and Uma Narayan study this terrain, analysing what is often referred to as 'food colonialism' or 'culinary imperialism,' and the problematic western 'multiculturalism' and diasporic rigidity associated with it. Despite the role that is conventionally prescribed to women in immigrant communities as the carriers and preservers of native culture and cuisine, it is significant that Mrs. Sethi dismantles these racial/ethnic expectations by skilfully perverting the use of this cuisine and rendering the 'curry' murderous. Other scholarly works that study the relationship of food to the colonial enterprise and to postcolonial reconstructions include those by Krishnendu Ray and Tulasi Srinivas, by Lizzie Collingham, James P. Johnston, Thomas Prasch, and Mary A. Procida.

feels.’ Manjit Kaur’s ghost says: ‘No mother wants to die before seeing her daughter married and settled.’ Mrs. Sethi’s Jewish neighbour, Mrs. Goldman, joins this chorus of assent soon after. She dies as it were by pure mischance, when she accidentally eats a poisoned sweet (*laddoo*) that Mrs. Sethi had prepared for herself with a mind to commit suicide before she decided otherwise. As Mrs. Goldman joins the entourage of ghosts, Mrs. Sethi laments to her: ‘Do you know how hard I’ve tried to find a suitable match for Roopi?’ Despite Mrs. Goldman’s wrongful death, her ghost is quick to agree and says reassuringly: ‘No mother could have done more than you.’ Furthermore, she sends out a rallying call to the fellow-ghosts and more specifically to fellow ghost-mothers, saying:

This is wonderful. This is our chance to do a good deed. Roopi’s a lovely girl. If we can help her, it’ll help us come back as something better in our next life, right? Sure we’ve all done things we are not proud of. She [Mrs. Sethi] has done us a favour. She has given us another chance.

To this, the other ghost-mothers respond with eager empathy. A little further on, Mrs. Goldman and Manjit Kaur’s ghosts cheer on and celebrate as Captain Murphy, or Googly as Roopi used to call him as a kid, comes back to propose to her. And finally, when Mrs. Sethi is on her deathbed, Mrs. Chopra says to her: ‘Roopi’s like our own daughter no, *behnji*.’ In a culminating moment infused with black humour, this gallery of Mrs. Bennets finally unite in their collective outrage towards violent patriarchy. When the police officer, now accidentally dead and part of the gallery of ghosts, still attempts to continue his investigation against Mrs. Sethi (and Roopi) by blaming her as the murderer, all the five other ghosts unite against him in an emotional rebuttal, saying that they are the ‘real victims’ but they do not mind and have no allegations against Mrs. Sethi. Surprisingly, even the most incorrigible of the five ghosts, the young man, confesses emotionally: ‘I’m sorry I called her *motu*. You [Mrs. Sethi] made me a much better person in death than I ever was in life.’

Black humour draws together the different characters in Chadha’s cinema as well as the different segments of her audience into an empathetic bond centred on a creative and collective critique of systemic social injustice. Chadha, in her interview with Lawrence Chua, explains how she attempts to transcend the specificity of her South-Asian diasporic topicality: ‘I strive to show the universality . . . of my diasporic existence.’⁴⁹ While Chadha emphasizes this broadening out of the referentiality and relevance of humour, Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz emphasize the relationship that exists between ‘comedy’s universal ambitions and its specific conditions of creation’—conditions like ‘race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and nationality’ that are instrumental in ‘construct[ing] and understand[ing] humor.’⁵⁰ Despite this locality of humour’s origin and the topicality of its meaning, subversive humour in Chadha’s films functions with a wider political effectiveness. Overcoming biographical and narrative boundaries, the dark humour of Chadha’s female characters stages a ‘transgressive comedy grounded in the female body’ that most effectively and appealingly shatters, through

49 Lawrence Chua, “Hanif Kureishi & Gurinder Chadha,” p.53.

50 Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (eds.), “Comedy as Theory, Industry, and Academic Discipline,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, p.14.

Felicia D. Henderson, a television comedy writer with many years of experience, studies the writers’ room of American comedic shows and sculpts the notion of “situational authorship” to indicate the “ritual of othering writers based on gender and race” that goes on in the writers’ rooms from where comedic shows are born (180). Summing up the politics of this space, she observes that in these cases humour is created “through a process of inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and othering,” derived from “social categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.”

Felicia D. Henderson, “The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers’ Room,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), pp. 181-2.

popular South-Asian diasporic cinema, the kind of socio-political marginalization that lies beyond the reach of legal redress.⁵¹

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⁵¹ Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, p. 5.

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