

Fixity and Fluidity: Embodiment of Multicultural Ethos in Damien O'Donnell's Movie *East is East* (1999)

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Abstract

This article is an examination of multicultural ethos in the movie *East is East*. Multiculturalism, in this, article stands for the policy of embracing of differing viewpoints and perspectives when two or more cultures come into contact. Through qualitative methodological mode and multiculturalism as a theoretical framework, this study utilizes the research methods such as within case analysis, comparative analysis and archival studies. Within case analysis lends the ground for the intense consideration of the instances selected; comparative analysis is a mode of reasoning to segregate the attributes; archival studies offer a situation in which earlier critiques and judgments are considered for an intended conclusion. The analytical framework constitutes twofold conceptual strings: familial lynchpin's fluidity and against bigotry. These two strings yield the analytical advancement as they contain the dialogues of the characters. Such advancement substantiates the usefulness of the multicultural attitude: the respect for all cultures, if not in the absolute sense. The implications and significance of this study can be summed up as the addition of a perspective, through the artistic means such as cinematographic representation. The added perspective in the domain of cultural studies is that multiculturalism can neither be taken to its celebratory mode nor the denigrating mode. Striking the middle math, multiculturalism is a useful notion that can help embrace the panoply of customs, values and norms. *East is East*, the movie as the corpus of the study renders the evidences to prove that fluidity, not fixity, in the border situations is a better option.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, bigotry, fixity, fluidity, lynchpin, panoply

Introduction

Given the debate around the conclusive perspectives on the movie *East is East*, the aim of this research article is, broadly speaking, to interpret the nature of existence that sways between two cultures- Pakistani and British. To that end, the researchers examine the existing perspectives in the form of archival study along with the analysis of the dialogues in the movie. This way, this article explores the psyche of characters such as George and Ella to come to a conclusion that multiculturalism, if not in the truest sense, has turned out to be a useful policy.

The movie *East is East* contains the cultural differences and contains a character named Ella, an English lady and the wife of George, an immigrant Muslim from Pakistan. Sazaad, R. (2024) observes the role of Ella and concludes that Ella “provides the direction by being emblematic of a fluidity that not only appropriates the previously colonized culture but also ensures that her children are free to negotiate their binaries” (p.133). Dini D, Alfian & Amin AI argue that the audience can enhance their understanding of dealing with differences after they watch the movie *East is East* (2023, p. 75). It “ponders a lot of questions” and “does not offer simple cut-and dried answers” (Berardinelli, J. 2003, p.211). However, the conclusion is offered that displays the need to coexist in the foreign land. Ella, the wife of George and mother of eight children is more open to the culture of George. She is considered to be the woman of compromise. She facilitates her children to be multicultural. She takes the children to the Muslim celebration as well as the Christian traditions. In a way, she is the fulcrum to bring balance between the children and her husband; she also worked hard to send money to George Khan’s first wife in Pakistan. Although it had been difficult to adjust in the family where the dominance of Pakistan existed, she was open-hearted to do so. Ebert R. maintains, “perhaps the real love story in the movie is the one we overlook, between George and his wife, Ella, who has stood by him through good times and bad, running the fish shop and putting up with his nonsense” (2003, p.181). This study has been guided by a research question: How do the central characters in the movie *East is East* navigate the cultural diversity?

Methodology

This study has employed qualitative design with its focus on within case analysis, archival study and comparative analysis. Informed by these three methodological modes of cases, archives and comparison, the study has developed an analytical framework of fluidity and bigotry. Whilst George is the embodiment of bigotry, Ella is the instance of fluidity.

“Within case analysis typically involves detailed case study” and the cases are analyzed without the attempt to see the patterns (Huberman & Miles,2012. p. 17). This method of data collection and analysis lays emphasis on the intense study of the expressions of the characters. This way, the dialogues of two major characters George, the cases of fixity and Ella, the cases of fluidity are duly discussed and employed for coming to a claim of multicultural ethos.

Apart from the within case analysis, the study, by and large, has employed the archival method of study. The critics' views are collected for the substantiation of the claim. The critics from the time of the movie production to the recent time have been consulted and cited for the qualification of the multicultural ethos, but not in the sense that archive is everything as "tragedy of believing that an archive everything there is to know or that might be knowable" (Steedman, C.,2005, p.19).

Benoit Rihoux and Charles C. Ragin (2009) claim that comparison is "a basic, and powerful mental operation" that can be developed into "comparative methods or techniques" (p. xvii). In this light, the comparison between two characters George and Ella has been made for establishing a claim that it is Ella who has been the lynchpin for the family to maintain the multicultural ethos. As comparison is one of the basic reasoning domain of human beings for reaching a conclusion, this method has been deployed.

Literature Review

This section brings forth the cursory review of literature surrounding the primary text: East is East and the theoretical strand- multiculturalism.

Sarah Zapata's conclusion about *East is East* also depicts the picture of contesting identities which she has clarified in the following lines: "*East is East* explores the paradoxical nature of "identities" inevitably swaying in between two cultures by looking at the diverse discourses on identity and how they have been constructed" (2010, p.175).

Synthia Weber (2010) presents the role played by Ella. Ella does not impose her religious values upon George and her children:

George and Ella never compete over the civilization identities of their children. Ella respects George's wishes when it comes to religious matters, and so do the children, (although, like children, they don't necessarily enjoy themselves in the process or take either their father's or their mother's religion seriously). And while Ella certainly exposes the children to Western Christianity, she does not, cannot, and (we are led to believe) would not insist that the children define themselves through her "civilizational identity". For Ella recognizes that her children embody new distinct identities. They are the full cups of tea that George only ever takes as halves (p.169).

Weber's affirmation of Ella's efforts confirms that Ella strikes the middle path in the act of navigating the cultures. Sazzad R. (2024) takes the movie as black comedy that contains the confrontations of cultures between the Pakistani ideologies and the English values (P.133) Dini D, Alfian & Amin AI (2023) find in their studies that the movie intends to establish two kinds of conflicts as primary conflict and secondary conflict in terms of culture (p.73).

Robe Pope in *English Studies Book Book* defines multiculturalism as “distinctly plural...nature of all cultures” and those who wish to maintain purity of culture “have been rabble-rousing ideologies” (1998, p.145).

Concerning the views on multiculturalism, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology* highlights that “multiculturalism celebrates and seeks to protect cultural variety” (Wievorka, 1998, p. 1), Wievorka here presents a clear of unequal relationship in culturally pluralistic environment. Will Kymlica (2012) maintains that multiculturalism as theory supports “citizens to acknowledge and embrace the panoply of customs, traditions, music and cuisine that exist in a multiethnic society (p.1).”

With this literature as hindsight, a gap is explored, not all the characters are able to embrace the diversity, and thus, this study paves its way to the exploration of the panoply of the customs in the border studies.

Results and Discussion

This section brings in the consideration of the debate between bigotry and fluidity. In doing so, it aims at reaching the claim that it is the fluidity that looks better in terms of familial needs.

Cultural Fluidity: Familial Lynchpin’s Need

The mother figure Ella in the movie *East is East* is visualized as a multicultural woman embedded with an art of compromise, tolerance and patience at the racial setting. She has been able to continue familial bond amidst the members with different schools of thought. It is visible that the large family is restricted in a small house in a working class neighborhood and manages decent existence on their limited income. Their cramped quarters is often a source of conflict, but the main source of tension is the clash between George’s desire for the children to strictly observe Islamic and Pakistani customs and their desire not to.

Abdul: Looks great, Dad.

George: Tradition, see, son? All our people wearing this. The watch here. Says your name in Arabic. See? Nazir, son. Today you make me feel proud. (*East is East*, 1999,00:06:16)

When George sees his son wearing the dresses of his culture, he feels happy. The opposite is equally true. He sounds rigid in terms of traditions. Nevertheless, Ella’s endeavors to settle this tension always renders a glimpse of organized multicultural family in Britain.

Being a representative of dominant religion and culture, Ella has positioned herself at the state of compromise, an icon of South Asian culture. Her contribution in bringing the adjustment between two different cultures within a family has given rise to “feel-good celebration of ethno-cultural diversity” though not so well applicable in the case of George (Kymlica, 2012, p. 4). Regarding Ella and her seven children, it seems that they, though undesirably, look loyal towards

Muslim whereas feel comfortable towards dominant religion of the time. This is what delineates the image of true multicultural family. Tactful amalgamation of two cultures and religions-tolerant towards both the religions-favoring the husband's cultural rituals and traditions-bringing adjustment between husband's dogmatism and children's desire for freedom- 'This feel good' is justified by the acts of Ella in *East is East*.

East is East though presents identity conflict within the family, also demonstrates the way towards realization of identity realities (multiple identities). The main identity problem in this concern is whether George, Ella or the Children are British or Pakistani. George has presented himself as strong and strict Pakistani despite the contradictory fact that he favored to put English name for himself. The real identity crisis has been created by George himself because he seems to be a dogmatic Muslim. Ella sounds pragmatic, she allows children to wear what they want, but George does not allow it:

George: Why you wear bloody shirt skirt, Meenah?

Ella: It's her school uniform. She has to wear it. (*East is East*, 1999, 01:12:54)

But, on the other hand, in-betweenness of Ella and her children has helped them to have mixed identities. The identity is at the verge of crisis due to the clash between their own aspirations and their father's expectations. Ella has played a constructive role in determining the identities for her family members as being compromising, tolerant, patient and balanced figure ready to be adapted in any kind of circumstances she be in. In fact, the struggle of Ella is to bring harmony in the exploration of identity in cross-cultural realities which is one of the features of people of multicultural environment.

Ella has realized that, along with her, all the family members have mixed identities, which is the result of their family situations. Similarly, though George is also aware of this fact, does not like to realize this and always heads for constructing uniform identities by making his wife tolerant to and attempting to adjust all his sons to Muslim cultures. Yet, both of them never seem to vie over the identity issues of their children which is maintained well by the tactful acts of Ella in the movie.

It shows that the relationship between George and Ella is also seemingly rich. Ella is convincing as a woman who yields to her husband's demands not through fear or weakness but through empathy and love. It is because of this fact that the family seems to be unified though the differences exist in the family.

It is seen that the clash of the mindsets of all family members is partially settled by Ella in the movie by maintaining the balance between orthodox behavior of George and the children's desire to follow their Englishness. Even though George imposes his authoritativeness over Ella and his children, Ella never reduces her love to George in the scenario of reality that they are from two different cultural and racial worlds and the uniformity in their ways of thinking is seemingly impossible. This bond of Ella with her husband brings success in making their

livelihood in their twenty-five years of conjugal life. Despite numerous impositions by George, Ella is caring:

Ella: Want a cup of tea?

George: I'll have half a cup. (*East is East*, 1999,00: 49:31)

The movie shows that the type of patriarchal domination does not work in swinging

England and his children continually rebel as their lifestyle of discos and bellbottoms clash with their father's idea of studying the Koran and wearing traditional Pakistani garb. This is the real reflection of multicultural family. But George Khan believes that even though his children are of mixed Pakistani and English descent, they should follow every rule and traditional custom as if they were living in Pakistan. As such, he intends to marry his sons Abdul and Tariq to the daughters of a Bradford Pakistani, Mr. Shah. In this concern, Ella tries to convince George that he has to inform his sons about it giving the reference of Nazir's marriage. This demonstrates the fact that Ella is absolutely multicultural on the ground that she has acknowledged the differences of interest and taste of her children.

It is clearly visible from the movie that Ella has helped to make her family a true multicultural family. Even she has realized the truth that it is very hard to enforce the Pakistani customs as desired by George since it's early 1970's and her family lives in a Manchester suburb, and six of her seven children want little to do with him or Pakistan.

The movie also presents the conflicting character of Ella who, on the one hand, loves her husband without strongly rejecting his decisions, on the other hand, also wants the children to have the lives of their own. She seems to be quite conscious not to let the conflict affect the family. But George is so set in Pakistani ways that he frequently beats her and her children when they disobey him or Pakistan. He discharges insults calling them illegitimate children and female dogs etc. George's children refer to him as Ghengis and are intimidated into conforming to the expectations of Pakistani culture which they feel as foreign.

Against the Fixity: Dealing with Bigotry

Apart from one son who takes his Islamic instructions seriously, this next generation of Khans sees little value in dietary restrictions, circumcisions and arranged marriages but is instead attracted to bacon, visits the local disco in the back alleys. This conflicting scenario has been well settled by Ella though some extreme actions like eldest son's leaving the house, destroying the wedding watches by other sons take place in the movie. This visualization of differences leads to diversity which helps to form a distinct culture i.e. the blend of cultures. In this context, Olga Kuharets (2001) is not wrong as she claims that diversity allows people to embrace different views (p.7). A very good example in this regard is Ella and her family members where Ella realizes this fact and acts accordingly and as such has been able to bring a kind of harmony in the family. Otherwise, her family would have already been split off.

It's essentially a situation comedy dealing with the cultural 'no-man's land' in which the children of immigrants find themselves and the strains inside the family produced when the younger generation begins to feel the pull of the host culture. It portrays a Muslim father who is totally indifferent to the happiness and wellbeing of his children, fanatically devoted to the ritual and trivial aspects of his religion, spouting obscenities at all around him, taking out his frustration in violence on both of his wife and his children when he is unable to get his own way, physically ugly and unpleasant in his personal habits. Michael Keith (2005) has tried to justify this scenario with the saying that "the categories of intolerance and bigotry are also inverted and translated into forms of identification and solidarity" (p.8). This kind of intolerance and brutality of George, the central figure, brought about the identification of reality under multicultural situation and with the continuous endeavors of Ella created the situation of solidarity at the end of the movie as George feels that he is far from his expectations.

His family too seems like ciphers introduced to embody clichés of 'the younger generation' stuck between two cultures: there's the gay brother, the religious brother, the terrified younger brother (whom George has no hesitation in subjecting to a late circumcision in order to keep up appearances when he finds that it was overlooked at the correct time), the rebellious daughter. Only the white English second wife seems noble and long suffering and even capable of some degree of common affection which helps to bring conflicting solidarity in the family.

Ella, George's English wife for the past twenty-five years, is of two minds: she wants her children to go their way while determined to have them respect George properly despite their differences. The various small incidents involving the playing off of the father against each of his children and ultimately committing an act of violence against this wife is climaxed in a wonderful pay off scene involving a meeting between the Khans and the family with whom George has arranged a marriage for two of his children:

[*Saleem accidentally drops a fake vagina on Mrs. Shah's lap*]

Mrs. Shah: This is an insult to me and my family! I will never allow my daughters to marry into this jungle family of half-breeds!

Ella Khan: Well, they may be half-bred, but at least they're not friggin' inbred like them two monstrosities.

George Khan: Ella!

Ella Khan: Never mind "Ella". Who the frig do you think you are? You come in here, telling me that my house isn't good enough for your daughters? Well, your daughters aren't good enough for my sons, or my house, and if I hear another word against my family, I will stick that fanny over your bastard head! [*Mrs. Shah leaves without a word*]

Mr. Shah: [*to George*] Your wife's a disgrace.

Ella Khan: Oh, go on, piss off! Go on, sling your bleedin' hook! Go on, piss off! Piss off out of my house! And take Laurel and Hardy with ya!

[*a lecherous Dalmatian leaps onto Mrs. Shah*] (*East is East*, 1999, 01:27: 03)

Here is a difficult situation in terms of marriage. Ella sounds controlled even in this situation compared to Shah family. As uncomfortable and insincere smiles give way to outright animosity, George Khan is slowly led to an understanding that his children's world is not the same as his own which is the clear reflection that George fails to realize his presence in the multicultural household. While George and Ella were conversing with the girls to marry to their sons, Ella seems to have outrageous presence. Even so, she is restrained and composed to keep the fluidity at action while George is all about the bigotry as his guests are.



Ella at a marriage conversation with Shah family

Family crisis is clearly visible in George's family. This crisis emerges from the discovery that youngest son Sajid somehow never got circumcised as is preferred in Islam (which comically sends the Muslim children in the mosque into a panic). Sajid is promptly taken to the hospital to get circumcised. When Ella sees the pain her son has suffered due to circumcision, the conflict between her love of her husband and her inability to stand up to him is readily seen. Left alone the other children (barring Maneer) eat Islam forbidden bacon and sausages until Meenah sees their parents returning with Sajid. They try to hide the evidence but Ella smells it – then keeps George away just long enough for them to finish clearing up. This role

of Ella is instrumental in maintaining equilibrium in the family not to let the family be apart irrespective of Nazir's case. So Ella is one strong example of multicultural woman.

Multicultural families create 'cultural borderlands' overlapping zones of differences and similarity within and between cultures. Understanding these contexts and situations encourage them to recognize and respect the beliefs and practices of others, while building their tolerance for divergence and ambiguity. Ella in the movie stands at this platform and attends all the Muslim rituals and shows her inclination towards her own culture too. Her children are sometimes seen in the Christian rallies and at other times reading *Namaz* as well. Cultural exposure in fact enriches the perspectives of the people. As Celia Jaes Falicov (1998) puts it: "Cultural exposure increases our capacity for social adaptation: a form of "adaptive multiculturalism" (p.7). A multicultural person enables themselves to mix up in all the cultures and adapts themselves in the society which gives rise to harmony in the family and society. The problem with George is his inability and reluctance to follow practice of social adaptation whereas greatness of Ella is the realization of this reality and her actions are directed towards the same. As such, Ella is the only figure in the movie *East is East* who has maintained the multicultural scenario on the family. In this context, Shachar (2001) has made due emphasis on the powerful positioning of women for preserving the collective identities in the families and the societies (p.11).

Conclusion

Multiculturalism has become a contentious issue as other modes of coexistence are paving their way. However, this attempt to read the application of multiculturalism in the movie *East is East* comes to a closure with the statement that multicultural ethos can be established if one has the attitude of fluidity. Fixity and bigotry cannot sustain the multicultural moods. The aim of this article is an exploration of the multicultural ethos: fluidity is demonstrated as the necessary attribute in the sustenance of this policy of coexistence.

Employing the within case, comparison, and archival methods of analysis along with the framework of bigotry and fluidity, this examination confirms a bold statement that it is Ella whose multicultural mindset has turned her a lynchpin. In her absence, the family collapses. To conclude, the study is a statement of lynchpin that needs to be able to embrace the panoply of cultural values.

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