

What Difference Does Writing Make?

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Bride and Pride: Austen Meets Bollywood in Culture Shock

By Sara McCasker

Indian director Gurinder Chadha has a reputation for challenging conventions. Her latest film, *Bride and Prejudice*, does just that, but in an old-fashioned way.

Bride and Prejudice is Chadha's adaptation of Jane Austen's late 18th century look at love and marriage, *Pride and Prejudice*. Sporting the "greatest heroine in the history of literature", *Pride and Prejudice* is arguably the finest exposition of Austen's wit.

Chadha's second foray into Hollywood films, *Bride and Prejudice* takes a comic position to India's mega movie industry, Bollywood, and from the outset combines vivid song and dance acts with dazzling costumes. Indeed, the movie is an hour-and-a-half-long visual feast, however, this Bollywood brilliance doesn't continue into the translation of the original biting text to the modern setting.

Pride and Prejudice highlights the businesses of inheritance, entailing and marriage in Austen's time, using a family, the Bennets, who belong to the lower cusp of the English gentry.

With five daughters and no sons, it is the prime business of Mrs Bennet, a silly and ignorant middle-aged woman, to arrange suitable marriages for her daughters before her husband dies and his estate is entailed away to the closest male relative.

This was a very real problem in the 17th and 18th centuries in England, as the wife and daughters of a man whose estate was entailed away after his death more often than not

faced lives of poverty. The reality that women could not gain work except as a governess or lady's companion, jobs which afforded little respectability or monetary reward, are hard for contemporary viewers to understand.

The similarities between these ideas and the Indian traditions of a woman's place and work being in the home should have provided a good platform for *Bride and Prejudice* to convey these cultural assumptions to a modern audience. Sadly, Chadha made only limited and shallow overviews of these important themes in the story, rendering simply the stereotypical 'backwards' view of India.

The pride and prejudices mentioned in the original title make way for the relationship between the novel's heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, and the seemingly ill-mannered and 'exceedingly proud' wealthy gentleman Fitzwilliam Darcy. These mistaken first impressions Elizabeth has of Darcy, and his prejudice towards those of lower social class than himself, bring to the fore the then intrinsic Christian concepts of self-reflection and moral evaluation. These are the things which allow Elizabeth and Darcy to discover the true nature of their own self-deceptions.

In the adaptation, Elizabeth has been replaced by Lalitha Bakshi, a young Indian woman with ideas of independence. Her relationship with Fitzwilliam Darcy's counterpart, Will Darcy (here an American hotelier), also changes and develops as more is revealed about one to the other, but it is not the counterpart of the English cultural assumption that allows this, rather it is attributed to her intelligence. In contrast to the values of Austen's time, the idea of self-reflection, so central to the novel, is difficult for current audiences to grasp, and so is all but left out of the updated version to make it more palatable.

In *Bride and Prejudice*, the attitudes of the central characters towards marriage range from one pole; marriage as a means of obtaining security, to the other, marriage as a vehicle only for love. In Lalitha's best friend, Chandra Lamba, we see a young woman who cherishes no hopes of love, but who seeks only to secure a husband for both financial and personal security. She cannot possibly think of waiting for a husband whom she will

love, as this may not happen, and it is the general consensus of the film, and thus, we must conclude, the culture, that marriage is an institution which all must some day enter into, willingly or not.

The original text shows much of the same thinking, especially in the character of Mrs Bennet, about whom it is said, 'the business of her life was to get her daughters married'. She strives, mostly in vain, to find profitable marriages for all her daughters without giving a thought to their personal happiness. She makes much mention, however, of the possible suitors' fortunes and social standing. In this it is Mrs Bennet who reflects her culture's ideologies that love and even happiness in marriage is not a requirement, and that its purpose was neither.

The tying of a family's reputation and those of the individual children features heavily in the Indian culture as seen in *Bride and Prejudice*. The embarrassing behaviour of Mrs Bakshi when out in public, or even when entertaining at home, is a constant worry for her family. We see that her behaviour could even affect her daughters' chances of 'marrying well'. When Darcy tells Lalitha that he wants to marry her for the first time, he declares his love for her, in spite of her family. 'Oh, so you think my family isn't good enough for you?' she replies. This sense of honour and a family's respectability is a concept that did not have to be borrowed from *Pride and Prejudice*. Both cultures place a demonstrated value on the respectability of a girl and her family.

Hand in hand with this goes the class system evident in both modern India and Regency England. It is partly because of this that both the Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, and that of *Bride and Prejudice*, initially resist Elizabeth and Lalitha, who, although beautiful and intelligent, are only living in the 'barely civilized' English country, and small town, India respectively. With today's women's liberation and equal rights movements, these ideas come across to Western audiences as outrageous and bizarre. The closed-mindedness bred into today's generations makes it impossible for most people to understand and accept a culture's differences to their own. When making *Bride and Prejudice*, its creators seem to have taken this into account,

extracting the superb original, ironic, societal jibes, and inserting a whipped cream version of cross-cultural harmony. Unfortunately, all this leaves is a sour aftertaste.

With a Western attitude and popular, gimmicky appearance, the film is bound to be a big hit with young, and not so young, viewers who haven't been educated in the perceptions of either culture. Its enhanced appeal to the commercial market brought in the big bucks, but it appears to have been at the cost of the story's aim.

To watch a Jane Austen adaptation, you may no longer need to understand the social ramifications of an elopement or the redundancy of love in her time, but without them, even the general concepts of the stories which have drawn readers for over 200 years seem to have been lost in translation, and Indian, regrettably, isn't the missing link.



Sara McCasker wrote this essay in 2005 when she was in Year 12 at Gilroy Santa Maria College, Ingham, Queensland.