

East Is East

Dir. Damien O'Donnell UK 2000 Certificate 15



The Themes of the Film

'Oh East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'

Rudyard Kipling

In the film *East is East* the 'twain' have met for a Moslem man from Pakistan has married a Catholic woman from Salford, near Manchester. They have had seven children, six boys and a girl, and are running a fish and chip shop near their home. The parents both have a very strong vision of themselves. The father, George, wants his children to be accepted by the Moslem community and live by its rules and customs. The woman, Ella, has agreed to this on her marriage but is still herself a Catholic and has influenced her children with her ideas.

The film considers the ideas and loyalties of the children. Are they Moslem or Catholic and how do they fit into the world of Salford in 1971?

The theme of East vs West is explored even further:

- George has many connections with Bradford which is seen by him as a place where he would find it easier to bring up his children in a more traditional way. He even looks for prospective brides for his sons there. Bradford is in the east of northern England; Salford is in the west.

- George originally comes from Islamabad, which in 1971 is in East Pakistan. His first wife is there and the country is at war with India. He keeps threatening to bring her to England.

East is East: A film about racism

The family are in crisis. They do not fit into either the Pakistani community or the white community. George is acutely aware of this and he is forcing his children against their will to conform. He sends them to Urdu classes, he has his youngest son circumcised because it has been overlooked and he arranges marriages for his children against his wife's and his children's wishes.

He is also worried about the war in his homeland and the rising tide of racism sparked off by Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Powell was suggesting that unless people were repatriated there would be a rising tide of violence. He ignored the fact that many people had been born in this country, were British citizens and were in their country of birth. Because Powell was a well-known, influential politician his extreme views encouraged many people's prejudices because they felt his speech gave them permission to act in a racially prejudiced way.



The title of the film comes from a quotation by Rudyard Kipling, the late nineteenth century British writer, who had strong views about the British Empire and its position in the world, especially in relation to India.

This is the background to George's fears for his family.

Task one

Racism - The irony in the film

Look at these situations and consider the irony of the situation.

- George does not want his son to marry a white British woman
- The man over the road is very racist and advertising Enoch Powell coming to talk in the city. The man has two grandchildren. The little boy is called Ernest. How does he feel about the Khan family? How does he speak to them? How does he feel about the youngest boy Sajid? How does he feel about the girl, Meenah?
- Ernest's sister is called Stella. How does she feel about the Khan family?
- When Mr Shah is coming with his wife and daughters to the house the youngest boy, Sajid, cries out, 'The pakis are coming.'
- George does not want his children to be like hippies. Who were the hippies and where did they go to find spiritual enlightenment?
- George makes a living selling fish and chips and his shop is called The English Chippy.
- When Tariq goes to the local disco he calls himself Tony.
- George asks the doctor, who has operated on his son, if he is Indian.
- The family go to an Asian cinema even though they cannot understand the language.
- Mrs Shah says that Meenah's sari is not modern.

Task Two

The Ironic Image

This irony is present not just in the subject matter of the film but in the imagery. Consider these images. What is ironic about them?

- The children are first seen carrying a crucifix and a statue of the Virgin Mary and child.
- Sajid is scattering rose petals.
- Meenah kicks a football through the window of the man opposite.
- Saleem's sculpture lands on the lap of Mrs Shah.
- Nazeem brings the runaways back in a Rolls Royce.
- The priest visits the fish and chip shop in clerical garb.
- Meenah's dance in the backyard.



Every picture tells a story

Task Three

Representation of Place

The main story is set in Salford in 1971. It is a very specific place with its red brick terrace houses, backyards and alleys.

■ How is it filmed? Particularly look at the opening sequence with its aerial shots and odd angles.



What is the effect of:

1. The crane shot over the street and the alleys. What action is occurring to heighten this effect?
2. Static shots with the characters running through the frame.
3. Close-ups on the children with the camera moving with the characters.
4. Shots of the mum and dad standing together with the characters moving behind them.
5. How does the editing of this sequence affect the initial impression of the location?

■ The design of the film is very clever. Look at the mise en scène set inside the house. What impression is given of how the family lives? Where do they all sleep? What do they do inside the house? What do they do outside?

■ Much of the film is set inside the house. How does the look of the house contrast with:

- the fish shop
- the house in Bradford
- the wedding ceremony
- the hat shop
- the discotheque

■ How are these places filmed?

Task Four

The Representation of the Family

Look at the following statements:

'I'm not having my kids accused of bad manners. People are quick to point the finger when they see they are a bit foreign.' (Ella)

'They are only trouble because you don't listen to them.' (Ella)

'Pakistani sons show respect.' (George)

'Dad I'm not Pakistani. I was born here.' (Tariq)

'Dad's coming...throw the bacon away.' (Meena)

'You and your bastard kids misses.' (George)



■ How does the family see itself? Is it at war with itself? Look at the changing factions and allegiances in the film. Would they have been different if the family was not composed of two races and religions?

■ The central character is the father, George. How does the relationship between him and the rest of the family change during the film? When is he very aggressive to his family? When is he very affectionate?

■ How is Ella with her children, her sister and her husband? How does she behave when she goes to Bradford and meets the other family's mother?

■ What are the differences in the physical representations of the sons? Do they dress differently for different settings and occasions? Why does Nazeem call himself Mr Nigel in the hat shop?

■ What do the filmmakers do when we see things from Sajid's point of view? How does this fit into his visual theme of seeing and hearing things through keyholes?

■ How does the representation of the children contrast with the other young people in the street, Ernest, Stella and Peggy?

Task Five

Representing a Point in History

What disadvantages are there for filmmakers in representing a point in history that is only thirty years ago? What advantages do the filmmakers have?

Consider the moments when the historic period is very accurate:

1. the television footage of Enoch Powell and the footage of the conflict between India and Pakistan
2. the children's television programme
3. the discotheque
4. the representation of the hat shop
5. the space hopper

What did you know about the 1970s before you saw the film? How important is it to the film that it is set then? Would it have been a different film had it been set now?

Task Six

Images of Bollywood

When the family goes to the cinema they want to see a specific film. As the cinema manager is their relation he puts the film on for them.

- What are the images from the film like? Why do the family like them so much?
- How do they tie in to the themes of the film?
- Compare and contrast them with the real lives of the family.



The Audience for the Film What is its Genre?

Task Seven

East is East has been a very successful film. It was originally a play performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London, a venue known for its championship of original bold writing.

Ayub Khan-Din wrote both the play and the screenplay and had a vision of how he wanted the film to be.

'I was influenced by the bitter-sweet northern films of the 1960s, like A Taste of Honey, Spring and Port Wine and This Sporting Life. Although people try and marginalise films like East is East as 'Asian' for me it has always been a northern comedy in tradition.'

- What is bittersweet about this film and is it in a northern comedy tradition?



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Written by Crispin Harris

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