

# Cinematic empire and nostalgia in *Viceroy's House* and *Victoria and Abdul*

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## Abstract

The commercial viability of Gurinder Chadha's *Viceroy's House* (2017) and Stephen Frears' *Victoria and Abdul* (2017) can be attributed to their effective use of heritage film elements to offer romanticized versions of British rule. Decoding the teleological intent behind these romanticized versions, this article contends that the chosen films promote nostalgia in response to the postimperial melancholia that Britain is experiencing in the contemporary period. Exploring the cinematic recreation of nostalgia, this article analyses the spatial, material, and racial aspects of *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House*. The spatial analysis highlights the cinematography used to depict heritage space to commemorate British tradition, the material examination focuses on colonial gifts of economic mobility and political emancipation bestowed on the colonized, and the racial analysis focuses on Muslim stereotyping through exoticism and animalization to reinforce British pride in civilizing the "inferior race". An explication of these cinematic and narrative elements highlights the films' invocation of nostalgia for an idealized past through a return to a closed epoch of empire that uncritically and dangerously reproduces ideologies of British cultural and racial superiority. Furthermore, this invocation of nostalgia works to glorify British historical origins and strengthen national cohesion in order to allay collective anxieties about the abject loss of the empire's global recognition in the wake of Brexit.

## Keywords

colonialism, gifting, nostalgia, stereotyping, *Viceroy's House*, *Victoria and Abdul*

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Nostalgia is a pervasive part of contemporary cultural production, as it emphasizes our preoccupation with history (Jameson, 1991: 282) and our insistence upon a “bond between our present selves and a certain fragment of the past [,] of what we have lost” (Atia and Davis, 2010: 184). Coined in 1688, the term nostalgia was initially understood as a medical malady marked by feelings of suffering, pain, or grief (Muller, 2006: 747). Gradually, “nostalgia” disappeared from psychiatric manuals but attained epistemological currency as a cultural construct: it began appearing in discussions related to masculinity and nationalism (O’Sullivan, 2006; Roth, 1991; Starobinski, 1966), as a romantic aesthetic (Goodman, 2008), as an ethical principle (Dames, 2001), as a condition of generalized longing in reaction to (post)modernity (Stewart, 1988; Jameson, 1991; Hutcheon, 2000), and finally as a means of exploring identity, loss, and empire by colonial and diasporic subjects (Gilroy, 2006; Lorcin, 2013; Rosaldo, 1989). In Britain, nostalgia is often peddled as a return to an idealized or mythical past through the marketable and expedient medium of popular culture, especially filmscapes that replace the remembrance of colonial atrocities with a purified image of the nation purporting ideologies that represent “the empire as a benign and dynamic guarantor of progress” (Gilroy, 2004a: 115).

This purified image is linked to Britain’s history, which has often interpreted difference as fear and instability, with the result that “race thinking and the distinctive political forms associated with it — biopower, ultranationalism, ethnic absolutism, and so on — have sanctioned gross brutality in many diverse settings” (Gilroy, 2004a: 31). This has further resulted in Britain experiencing what Paul Gilroy calls “postimperial melancholia”, linking the country’s inability to mourn its loss of empire (2004b, 109–111) with a defensive response to the horrors of the empire — a posture in which the empire is repeatedly justified and the British themselves are made out to be its ultimate victims (Gilroy, 2004a: 94). As a result, the reimagining of the British past serves the purpose of fulfilling “the Empire’s thwarted desire for greatness, and its anxiety about the loss of imperial prestige” (Gilroy, 2006: 30).

These celebratory accounts of the British past rooted in “post imperial nostalgia” are curated through the genre of “heritage films” which Andrew Higson (1993) defines as a set of British period dramas produced in the 1980s and early 1990s — such as Hugh Hudson’s *Chariots of Fire*; Richard Attenborough’s 1982 *Gandhi*; film adaptations of E. M. Forster’s novels, including David Lean’s *A Passage to India* (1984); and James Ivory’s cinematic retelling of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room with a View* (1992), among many others. These period dramas were created with the aim of marketing and selling Britain’s past (or rather highly constructed and selective images of it) through period settings (typically Edwardian England or the British Raj), recurrent locations (the English countryside, Oxbridge, colonial India, Italy), slow-paced narratives that enhance character and the authenticity of period detail, and an opulent if static mise en scène exhibiting elaborate period costumes, artefacts, properties, and heritage sites (Vidal, 2012: 8).

This article focuses on two recent examples within a succession of heritage films: Stephen Frears’ *Victoria and Abdul*, adapted from Shrabani Basu’s account of Queen Victoria’s friendship with her servant, Abdul Karim (starring veteran actress Judi Dench as Queen Victoria and Ali Fazal as Abdul Karim), and Gurinder Chadha’s *Viceroy’s*

*House*, which recounts the story of Indian's Partition from the perspective of Lord and Lady Mountbatten (played by seasoned actors Hugh Bonneville and Gillian Anderson). Drawing inspiration from Narendra Singh Sarila's *The Shadow of the Great Game* (1992), Chadha depicts Mountbatten as a heroic yet flawed governor general who was assigned the herculean task of dividing the subcontinent and squarely blamed Churchill and his co-conspirators (including Mohammad Ali Jinnah) for India's division. While Sarila's account is disputed by other historians, Chadha's filmic narrative affirms it and absolves Lord Mountbatten from the tragedy of Partition, instead bemoaning his suffering as the "white man's burden".<sup>1</sup>

Although *Viceroy's House* (2017) and *Victoria and Abdul* (2017) incorporate many heritage films traits, they also implicitly address more current anxieties about racial differences and political realities, expressed in the Brexit referendum (with its vitriolic debates about race and immigration) that culminated in Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. As a result, the Brexit discourse that circuitously animates these films harkens back to the days of the British Empire, a time when Britannia ruled by virtue of her supposed racial and cultural superiority. Keeping these sociopolitical contexts of production in mind, it is important to analyse the ways in which *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House* offer seductive narratives about imperial nostalgia and a pleasurable refuge from the embittered debates of race and immigration.

Successful at home and abroad, *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House* are powerful ways of representing national identity, given that "[we] live in a world deluged with images, in which people increasingly receive their ideas about the past from motion pictures and television" (Rosenstone, 1996: 22). Furthermore, as heritage films they can be interpreted as offering a vision, or rather a "revision", of the past from the perspective of the present (Higson, 1993: 126–128). This article analyses the narrative and cinematic elements of the chosen films to argue that nostalgia is invoked through an idealized recreation of the British imperial past (Mendes, 2007: 69) as a means of positive reclamation of self- and national identification. This is redolent of the renowned sociologist Fred Davis's discussion of the positive effects of nostalgia — namely, feelings of pleasure, joy, or satisfaction (Davis, 1979: 14) — and his declaration that the primary purpose of nostalgia is the continuity of identity: "Nostalgia is one of the means [...] we employ in the never-ending works of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (Davis, 1979: 31). Building upon this idea, this article goes on to analyse the spatial, material, and racial aspects of *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House* to ask how they invoke nostalgia through an idealized recreation of the past. The depiction of the private lives of Victoria and Mountbatten in the films provides an insight into the "family aspect of royalty [which] enables people to recognize shared kinship ties, to feel themselves as a community of common descent, as a nation" (Palmer 2007: 207). This staging of Victoria and Mountbatten as heroine and hero offers endless opportunities to see empire and its commodification (Burton, 2001: 241) exemplified through the spatial aspects of the film. The spatial analysis highlights the significance of locations and camera work that produce heritage space in order to commemorate the progress and permanence of the British imperial tradition, the material analysis focuses on the colonial gifts of economic mobility and political emancipation to celebrate British power, and the racial analysis focuses on the promotion of Muslim stereotypes — exoticism and animalization — to

essentialize Muslims as savages that were civilized by the rational British, thereby reinforcing British pride in their racial superiority.

An explication of these cinematic elements highlights the films' valorization of empire through an "uncritical reproduction of Victorian racialism, Orientalism, and convictions of cultural superiority" (Burton, 2001: 30). In reproducing such convictions, *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House* invoke nostalgia for an idealized past by projecting British viewers into a comfortably closed epoch of empire. The cinematic invocation of nostalgia involves a recovery of a pure (white) and stable national identity that negates the multicultural realities and sociopolitical traumas of the present (Oliete-Aldea, 2015: 50, 83), thereby establishing cinematic nostalgia as an affective antidote to the postimperial melancholia induced by the guilt, shame, and abject loss of global recognition in the wake of Brexit.

## Heritage space

In *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House*, history is visualized through space (Vidal, 2012: 85) by way of a loving recreation of period details. An analysis of the films' locations and camera work will show their use of heritage space to commemorate the plentitude and permanence of British tradition. Danny Cohen filmed *Victoria and Abdul* in a range of locations, from the lush Scottish Highlands to the opulent Osborne House (*British Cinematographer*, 2017). The Scottish Highlands were a popular retreat for Victoria and Prince Albert, as they both revelled in the beauties of the scenery and relished the picturesque pageantry of the region (Clark, 1981: 2). Osborne House on the Isle of Wight was constructed between 1845 and 1851 as a private residence for the royal family where they could escape, to some extent, from the pressures of living in Buckingham Palace and Windsor (Turner, 1998: 21). Osborne House had a deeply personal association for the Queen, and she died there surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren (Florance, 1977: 7).

Located inside Osborne House, the Durbar Room stands out as another primary film location. The scene of the Durbar Room's inauguration highlights its importance as a great hall in which the Queen displayed many of the gifts she received from Indian princes:

As a strange amalgam of private and public space, dining room and museum, the Durbar Room was an indulgent project [...] a unique case study in the display of Indian material culture and the indulgence that is the private royal museum. (Palmor, 2015: 60)

This elaborate display of Indian material culture in the inauguration scene is highlighted through Cohen's camera work, such as the low-angled shot of the Durbar Room's coffered ceiling which then pans to its ornate carpets, sculpted peacocks, stylized lamps, and gleaming glass cases. A museum of sorts, the Durbar Room's *mise en scène* combines Hindu architecture with Mughal wood carvings, and Sikh weaponry with Rajashtani decoration — all under one roof. The cinematic adaptation of the location exposes the viewer to the excessive splendour of British colonial rule through a "fetishization of period details [to] create a fascinating but self-enclosed world" (Higson, 1993: 95).

Victoria's first entry into the Durbar room signals her imperial dominance as she enters the frame strutting like a peacock and introduces the room to her courtiers, whose bewildered expressions are captured by successive camera cuts (from the rage of Edward VII to the utter dismay of Lord Salisbury to the comic bewilderment of Lord Ponsonby). Despite the high key lighting, saturated colours, and rhythmic camera movements, all the Indian characters except for Abdul remain out of focus. Abdul's unnamed wife, his mother-in-law, the Indian musicians, and the retinue of servants are a part of the *mise en scène* but never have a voice or presence. These homogenized brown bodies (regardless of race, ethnicity, gender) become a metonym for the entire subcontinent, unified and beholden to the absolute power of Victoria, the empress of India. The cinematic image is used to position Judy Dench in full frame, and her titular presence lends a sense of intimacy that enables the viewer to peer into the private world of the Queen, surrounded by her valuable Indian acquisitions. An analysis of the fetishized self-enclosed world of the Durbar Room and the cinematography reveals how they commemorate Victoria's role in enriching British heritage through cultural acquisition.

In a similar fashion, the heritage space in *Viceroy's House* also builds upon an idea of historical authenticity to promote British colonial heritage. Ben Smithard shot the film in Rashtrapati Bhavan (the original Viceroy's House in Delhi) and the Umaid Bhawan Palace (a former Mughal palace turned into a five-star hotel). Umaid Bhawan Palace becomes the stand-in for Viceroy's House, with most of the film shot on location in Jodhpur and only limited location shots done at Rashtrapati Bhavan itself. Both buildings combine Indian and European architectural traditions, and by shooting at these dual locations the cinematographer uses the architectural splendour of these buildings to emphasize the progress that the colonizers apparently brought to the subcontinent.

The opening film scene (at Umaid Bhawan) is introduced through a long shot —characteristic of the heritage film — and presents the imposing house in a picturesque, verdant landscape. Furthermore, the shots of the elaborately designed and symmetrical house are presented as evidence of Mountbatten's administrative authority, thereby making "architectural order analogous to the law and order provided by colonial rule" (Ridley, 1998: 77). The opening scene zooms in on the Viceroy's House as perceived by Lady Mountbatten, with her proud admiration for the way its clearly divided sections (tennis court, garden, swimming pool, sitting room, and so on) meet the Mountbattens' familial needs, revealing its spatial symmetry and domestic discipline. This domestic discipline is reflected in Mountbatten's swearing-in ceremony at a later point in the film. The *mise en scène* here displays an idealized image of the past through its pictorially admirable image of India: upright soldiers with guns saluting Mountbatten, the young and old cheering with flags in their hands, the manicured trees, and the retinue of servants waiting inside the Viceroy's House eager for Mountbatten's arrival.

Smithard (2017) wanted to create images that emulated archival photographs, and he used a 35mm camera for filming *Viceroy's House* to give the film an intimate period quality. In the film the camera meanders, scene after scene, into drawing rooms, garden parties, parlours, and bedrooms, with the enduring presence of elaborately dressed colonials socializing and lounging amidst resplendent décor, thereby demonstrating the use of a pictorialist camera style to display heritage attractions (Higson, 1993: 233) and invite audiences to marvel at the splendours of the idealized colonial past. This

valorization of British imperial tradition is also reinforced through the cinematic framing of Lord Mountbatten as fashionably dressed, as the camera's gaze aligns with his careful routine of dressing up for public appearance. As a result, Mountbatten's corporeality becomes an extension, frame after frame, of the presence of the British. An analysis of the locations and camera work of *Viceroy's House* establishes the film's showcasing of heritage attractions as a means to "construct a sense of Englishness according to a certain bourgeois of imperial tradition, stability and propriety" (Vidal, 2012: 9).

Furthermore, an analysis of the filming locations and camera work of both *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House* shows the ways that the films consciously inscribe topography with a covert meaning to highlight heritage space. The fetishized self-enclosed world of the Durbar Room commemorates Victoria's role in enriching British heritage through cultural acquisition and transforms heritage into an object of public consumption. In contrast, the architectural sophistication and symmetry of Mountbatten's residence and the camera work in *Viceroy's House* showcase heritage attractions in order to laud the tradition of imperial strength. The settings, architecture, furnishings, and mise en scène of objects in both films do not merely convey narrative and characterization but "nostalgically re-construct an imperialist Britain to highlight Englishness as an ancient and natural inheritance" (Higson, 1993: 93). In this way, the films create heritage space to commemorate the progress and permanence of British traditional inheritance.

## Colonial gifting

The films' depiction of gift exchange, much like their use of space, contributes to a nostalgic idealization of the colonial past — specifically through emphasizing the colonizer as the benevolent figure that endows gifts on the colonized subject, as explicated through Marcel Mauss's theory of gift exchange (2002). Drawing upon Mauss's theorization, we argue that within the colonial milieu, the colonizer bestows not only material goods but also services, entertainment, courtesies, ritual, military assistance, women, children, and feasts (Mauss, 2002: 3). Upon receiving a gift, the colonized subject must accept and reciprocate with a gift of at least equal if not greater value (2002: 10–11). In other words, the very structure and possibility of gifting defines or produces its annihilation as the gift is forever caught between obligation and gratitude. Within this culture of commodity exchange pitched as fair gift exchange, colonial societies are brought into the service of empire, enabling the empire to celebrate gifting as a part of an epic nationalist history. Within the selected films, gifting is also celebrated as part of British nationalist history, specifically the gift of economic mobility (*Victoria and Abdul*) and the gift of political emancipation (*Viceroy's House*), which thereby become metonyms of colonial power.

In *Victoria and Abdul*, the Queen's burgeoning relationship with Abdul is reflected in her gift of economic mobility to Abdul, which includes titles, residence, and health. Imperial honours and titles were among the prestigious rewards granted to Abdul Karim for his service to the Queen, enabling him to acquire a unique status among the British elite. In the film, the incremental nature of these rewards is related directly to the gratitude that Victoria feels towards Abdul in his myriad roles of faithful servant, knowledgeable teacher, surrogate son and lover, entertainer, and native informant. In fact, in an

early part of the film, Abdul is stunned by the Queen's infinite generosity when she bestows upon him the title of Munshi:

- Abdul: I am a Muslim, Your Majesty. I learnt the Koran from my father. And he taught me all the great poets: Kabir, Rumi. He is my Munshi.
- Queen Victoria: Munshi?
- Abdul: Yes, Munshi. My teacher.
- Queen Victoria: Then we would like you to be the Queen's Munshi.
- Abdul: But I am a servant. A servant cannot be a Munshi? (Hall, 2017: 43)

Abdul's incredulity at the honorific title of Munshi signifies that due to his lowly status as a servant he cannot attain hereditary honour.<sup>2</sup> However, by bestowing on Abdul the esteemed title of Munshi, Victoria introduces a new form of nobility that combines the Indian spiritual and intellectual traditions with those of the empire, thereby strengthening the systemic dependence between India and Britain. As a result, the irony of the title of Munshi is not lost upon the modern South Asian viewer who sees Munshi Abdul, a vernacular clerk, selectively imbibe the subservience and charisma necessary to ingratiate the Queen to rise through the ranks. Later in the film, to the utter dismay of her courtiers and son, Victoria decides to make the Munshi a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order as a special token of Abdul's services to the empire. This successive bestowal of titles signals the importance of gifts as the preferred mode of colonial governance.

Victoria also gifts Abdul a sprawling home, Frogmore Cottage, on the Windsor estate. Upon her insistence, Abdul brings his family from India and they all comfortably settle in the palatial cottage, benefitting from the hospitality of the Queen. His family's interaction with Victoria is framed as a significant moment in the cinematic narrative, as Abdul rhapsodizes on the hospitality and shared affection between the Queen and him: "The gift of hospitality and friendship to strangers is of very high importance in our culture and we are honoured to repay it in our very small way. What is ours is yours" (Hall, 2017: 58). Abdul embraces his role as recipient of Victoria's generosity and in return offers the Queen privileged access to the other, with the result that "gifts [become] a transaction of social caring, which is simultaneously bound up with self-interest in mutual survival and reproduction" (Mauss, 1969; qtd. in Fowler and Mati, 2019: 729–730).

Victoria also offers Abdul the gift of health to preserve his physical appeal and sexual virility. In the first encounter between the duo, Abdul, who is introduced as one of the "Hindoos" (Hall, 2017: 13) and described by Victoria as "tall" and "terribly handsome" (2017: 22), initiates physical intimacy with the Queen by staring directly at her, and in doing so, breaks royal protocol. No explanation is offered for Victoria's desire for Abdul, reinforcing that the colonial possession of any person or object as a consumable "gift" is perfectly acceptable. The revulsion that the royal household expresses towards Abdul's corporeal presence contrasts sharply with the Queen's investment in improving Abdul's physiological and sexual health and offers a further example of the hidden cost of a colonizer's gift to her subject. Victoria urges Abdul to follow the strict health and hygiene routine of the British along with offering him medical treatment for his fertility issues, thereby emphasizing the necessity of the colonial gift of health. Though Victoria's

concern over Abdul's fertility is shown as maternal, it also perpetuates the colonial desire to produce bodies indebted to the colonial power for their sustenance. Furthermore, the fact that Abdul receives his gift of corporeal protection directly from Victoria herself imbues it with a degree of prestige that is impossible to get rid of, subsequently distancing him from the health and lifestyle norms of his own community.

In *Viceroy's House*, Chadha frames Lord Mountbatten as a saviour offering Indians political emancipation through the gift of freedom. Mimi Thi Nguyen claims that the "gift of freedom" (2012: iii) promises good governance and individual freedom by producing new subjects and actions — and in doing so, imposes a debt that prevents the subjects from escaping those colonial histories that deemed them unfree in the first place. Therefore, to receive the gift of freedom is to then be indebted to empire, perhaps without end. This indebtedness is established through the montage sequence that juxtaposes Mountbatten's arrival with shots of an emotionally charged crowd that eagerly anticipates the arrival of their British master. The montage establishes Mountbatten as the heroic sovereign who will resolve political chaos through his diplomacy and gift of political emancipation. His daughter's rhapsodizing remarks about her father's heroism in "giving a nation back to its people" show the link between gifting and colonial power (Berges, 2017: 7).

In contrast to Mountbatten's "gift" of political emancipation, Edwina embodies the soft power of colonialism that is "not strictly coercive, repressive, or explicitly violent in nature" (Coulthard 2014: 152) through the performance of domesticity, charity, and cultural sensitivity towards her Indian subjects. Immediately after arriving in India, Edwina refurbishes the Viceroy's House, orders her staff to cook Indian food, utilizes her domestic skills to make Indians feel welcomed, and in doing so, eradicates the "smell of failed negotiations" from the mansion (Berges, 2017: 9). Edwina further frames her colonial gifting through the vocabulary of reformation as she advocates "change" for the illiterate masses by framing India as a destitute society pleading compassion from its colonial masters.

In the opening scene, while enjoying tea and scones, she tells Mountbatten, "Darling, did you know that 92% of the population is illiterate? And that one in five babies dies before they're four months old?" (Berges, 2017: 9). She later remarks, "India's problems are not just political. They are social and economic" (2017: 10). Conveniently overlooking the role of the British in India's destruction, Edwina squarely frames India's destitution as its inherent failing. By framing her colonial patronage as an equal partnership (between colonizers and colonized), Edwina humanizes her colonial self but at the same time denies the full humanity of her subjects by reducing them to impoverished masses. Edwina's failure to recognize Britain's role in the flaws she finds in India recalls a phenomenon that Shashi Tharoor (2015) explores in his critique of colonial patronage. While demanding reparations for India, Tharoor in his speech argues that the British Empire often ignores the truth that India, once the richest and most industrialized economy in the world, had been reduced by imperial rule to one of the poorest, most illiterate, and diseased societies on Earth by the time of independence in 1947. Thus Edwina's "gift" is not only in the interest of upholding her husband's image, but also part of a pattern of British denial of the consequences of colonialism.



Extending the discussion in the film about the gift of freedom is the way that Chadha positions Mountbatten's valet Jeet as a defender of the Viceroy. Jeet remarks, for instance, "Mountbatten sahib is a heroic man. He freed Burma. Now he has come to free India" (Berges, 2017: 2), thereby situating Mountbatten as a hero and a gallant saviour (even before his onscreen entrance). To further celebrate the myth of Mountbatten's heroism, Chadha's narrative conspicuously focuses on Mountbatten's lavish lifestyle, his virtuosity with language, and his sartorial refinement. Mountbatten's administrative service to the Crown also includes the categorization of people — an essential aspect of Mountbatten's gift of freedom, and a necessity for good governance. However, the categorization is based on rules such as giving credence to certain voices while dismissing others. A case in point is the scene where Mountbatten praises the Hindu leader Nehru for his fervent defence of Indians while castigating Muhammad Ali Jinnah for the same virtues in the next scene.

The cost of freedom bestowed by Mountbatten entails incommensurable losses for the Indians while for the British, the colonized bodies are treated as expendable for good governance and the lasting protection of their interests. Perhaps the most violently impacted by Mountbatten's gift of freedom are the Hindu-Muslim duo, Jeet and Aliya. Compliant and trustworthy, Jeet and Aliya are dependable subjects cautiously convinced of the essential goodness of the Mountbattens, as we see when Aliya enthusiastically remarks at one point, "[A]bba, the Mountbattens will be different [since they are] actually interested in us" (Berges, 2017: 38). In exchange for loyalty and service, the Mountbattens offer Jeet and Aliya social and economic benefits along with an emancipation from their common existence. Aliya strikes up a friendship with Lady Pamela Mountbatten and assists Edwina Mountbatten in building her friendship and reputation amongst Indian begums, while Jeet earns the trust of Lord Mountbatten by dressing him regularly and sharing information. In the process, Jeet attains insight into administrative practices by learning, as he puts it, "from the very best [of the British]" (Berges, 2017: 2). Yet, however much Aliya and Jeet may personally benefit, the colonial gift exchange between the Mountbattens and their Indian subjects nevertheless results in a deeper loss, in that it practically annihilates the immediate families and communities of Jeet and Aliya. A mass carnage and "rearrangement" of India subsequently leads to the union of Aliya and Jeet under the banner of two sovereign Indian states. As a result, for Aliya and Jeet, the so-called gift of freedom engenders a new social order (which opportunely fits into the existing hierarchies of race and coloniality) with an abstruse promise of a better future for the interfaith couple in the new India.

By reading colonial patronage as a form of benevolent gifting, films such as *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House* in turn become gifts to the former British Empire. Rather than delving into the complex questions of colonial possession in relation to gifting practices, the films overlook the unequal nature of the gift exchanges between the British and Indians. The material and metaphorical gifts serve to promote the benevolence of the colonial project. Overall, analysing these benevolent interactions between colonizer and the colonized helps us understand how gifting creates nostalgia by invoking memories of imperial power to help "British audiences maintain a sense of continuity in their identity over time and across different contexts" (Drieënhuizen, 2014: 515, 525) in addition to situating the empire as a benign and altruistic autocracy committed to offering peace and

order, the rule of law, and stable fiscal and monetary policies, as well as public goods, such as transport infrastructure, hospitals, and schools, which would not otherwise exist (Ferguson, 2005: 2).

## Racial stereotyping

The films' use of gift exchange emphasizes imperial benevolence, which controls and guides the colonized subjects who are repeatedly stereotyped in the films. Ignoring the complex racial makeup of the subcontinent, the films offer essentialist depictions of Muslims based on pernicious constellations of character traits that provide the impetus for racial prejudice (Shohat and Stam, 2014: 198). Building upon Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's work, we explicate the stereotyping of Muslims as exotic and deviant beings in *Victoria and Abdul* and *Viceroy's House*. The reinforcement of these stereotypes plays an integral part in objectifying Muslims and works in tandem with the chosen films' propensity to justify "the projected narratives of nations and empires" (Shohat and Stam, 2014: 101).

One form of stereotyping is exoticism, which fetishizes its object for the exoticist's pleasure, using the colonized other as an erotic fiction in order to reenchant the world. (Shohat and Stam, 2014: 183). In *Victoria and Abdul*, this exoticism comes from Abdul's performances of oriental roles (Munshi, philosopher, Persian emperor, Hindustani peddler) which are essentially ascribed to his Indian origins. These successive transitions erase Abdul's humanity and present his exoticness as a ruse for his cunning anticipation and satisfaction of Victoria's desires for his personal gain. Abdul functions either as an echo chamber for the amplification and fulfilment of Victoria's psychological desires, or he is relegated to the position of an indignant object through phrases such as "stupid, bloody Uncle Tom" (Hall, 2017: 65) and "pox-ridden Indian shit" (2017: 81).

To ensure his survival and to entertain the Queen, Abdul performs a range of roles in the annual royal tableaux, from an African tribal chief to the Prince of Persia. Abdul uses makeup and varied costumes to replicate other ethnic groups, offering a naive perfunctory reading of these colonized people (which he considers "similar" to Indians) for the comfort and alleged edification of the Queen. By functioning as a stand-in — or as a generic brown/black person — Abdul simplifies the history of these far-off places in a ten-minute tableau, thereby willingly partaking in his objectification for the exoticist.

This repackaging of oriental allure is heightened through the complementary musical score by Thomas Newman, which augments sound through the use of a broad array of traditional Indian instruments, including the sitar, the tabla drums, the santur hammered dulcimer, and the harmonium, creating the emotional vibrancy of a raga (Broxton, 2017). This is particularly true for the piece "All the Riches of the Orient" that accompanies Abdul's performance of the ostentatious Orient to entertain the Queen, which complements his performance with a series of gong clashes, regnal fanfares, and complementary woodwinds. The dramatic music adds a quasi-comedic effect to Abdul's performance and works to heighten Victoria's admiration of Abdul's antics. Ultimately, Abdul's stereotyping in the film is meant to serve Victoria's pleasure, thereby providing a respite from her banal existence through her use of the colonized other as an erotic fiction in order to reenchant the world (Shohat and Stam, 2014: 183).

In *Viceroy's House* Muslims are presented as an unruly and violent mass hellbent on the destruction of the Indian subcontinent, thereby indicating the film's use of the common colonial trope of animalization, which, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2014: 137), is the basis of colonialist discourse that renders the colonized as wild beasts in their unrestrained libidinousness. In this regard, the film stereotypes young Muslim men as animalistic beings, as demonstrated by the following examples: Muslim staff erupting into a nationalist slogan frenzy (screaming "Pakistan Zindabad") and creating tumultuous uproar in the Viceroy's residence, Muslims inciting bloody brawls over discussions of an impending partition, and two Muslim employees physically assaulting senior British officers after being subject to corrective action. In this way, the film demonizes the Muslims as violent others responsible for the eventual destruction of the Indian subcontinent, as pointed out by Fatima Bhutto: "[India is] gone, all of it burned to the ground by Muslims who, in this film, are always the perpetrators of violence, never its victims" (2017: n.p.).

Chadha (2017) vehemently denied the charges of being anti-Muslim that were levelled against her by contending:

My film was wilfully misrepresented as anti-Muslim. [...] Part of [my creative] process was to share the script and the film with many Muslim, Hindu and Sikh academics and historians to ensure that the scenes I depicted were a fair and reasonable representation of events. [...] Bhutto's piece plays straight into the hands of those who promote communal division — something that plagues India and Pakistan to this day.

However, a closer examination of Chadha's portrayal indicates a different reality; *Viceroy's House* depicts Muslims as violent, turbulent, superstitious, and irrational. The repeated stereotyping of Muslims as a barbaric force signals to the audience that these violent mobs pressured Mountbatten to divide the subcontinent, thereby relieving him of any responsibility for the subsequent Partition genocide. The stereotyping of Muslims is also insinuated through the musical score; in one poignant scene, the sound of tabla and sarangi accompanies the grief of the Hindu leaders (Nehru, Gandhi, and Sardar Patel) as they ruminate over Partition while the Muslim mobs thunderously scream "Alhamdulillah" (May Allah be praised) and "Pakistan Zindabad" (Pakistan forever). In all of these ways, the film clearly deploys the animalization trope to present Muslims as a savage race in dire need of salvation and civilization by their British masters.

A comparative analysis of essentialist depictions of Muslims in both films highlights the social functionality of stereotypes, demonstrating that they are not an error of perception but rather a form of social control (Shohat and Stam, 2014: 198). The repeated framing of Abdul's performance as exotic and the pervasive scapegoating of Muslims as inherently violent work towards reinforcing the deviance which can only be tamed or contained through colonial discipline. And so, the stereotyping works for the purposes of imperial domination through an association of whiteness with "order, rationality, rigidity" and brownness with "disorder, irrationality and looseness" (Dyer, 1993: 145). Overall, popular stereotypes in both films play a "constitutive role in 'figuring'" European superiority through a demonization of the non-West and its deficiencies, real or imagined (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 296), in order to justify imperial control and valorize racial pride.

## Conclusion

In *Viceroy's House* and *Victoria and Abdul*, the glorification of the British Empire is based on an idealized representation of Britain's imperial past and an emphasis on building a proud and patriotic citizenry for its present. However, this project of nationhood violently erases the narratives of the victims of imperialism and reimagines the past through an aesthetic distance for entertainment primarily. To further allure the viewers, the films curate historical locations as part of heritage space, deploying these historical sites to evoke nostalgia for the permanence and progress of British tradition. Furthermore, by celebrating colonial patronage through the gifts of economic mobility and political emancipation, the narratives evoke nostalgia and the empire's supposedly benign autocracy through gifting. Through the racialization of Muslims, the narratives further justify colonial disciplining as necessary for maintaining communal parity, thereby reinforcing the idea of the inherent superiority of the British race and a justification for empire. In the contemporary moment, this recreation of the past — this exoticisation of colonial history — is also suggestive of a loss of identity, generated by the continuing trauma of the breakup of empire and translated into aggressive nationalism and increased isolation from the European community (Mendes, 2007: 67). As a result, the nostalgic underpinnings of the films can be best understood as an attempt to retrieve and reinvent the past to allay communal fears in a fraught political climate engendered by Brexit (Koegler et al., 2020: 587–588). Against this backdrop, it is especially important that we recognize the cultural instrumentalization of nostalgia for what it is: a means of “displac[ing] the violent legacies of enforced racial hierarchy, military subjugation, and theft of resources from colonized peoples around the globe” (Franklin, 2019: 51–52) in order to glorify British historical origins and strengthen national cohesion.

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## Notes

1. Sarila, an aide-de-camp to Lord Mountbatten, blamed Churchill and Britain's hawkish foreign policy interests for the Partition. However, Sarila's viewpoint was dismissed by the historian Philip Ziegler who considered Sarila's understanding of Partition as contrived and “essentially wrongheaded” (Ziegler, 2006). In addition, other historians such as Stanley Wolpert fiercely condemn the frenzied flight of Lord Mountbatten from India, labelling it as a “premature hurried scuttle” fully responsible for the ensuing violence of Partition (Wolpert, 2009: 132).
2. Derived from the Arabic “Nisha”, which means “to educate a youth, as well as to compose” (Yule and Burnell, 1966: 44). the term “Munshi” was reserved in Arabic and Persian for intellectuals — a special designation like “Aalim” or the expert. Christopher Bayly (1996) has traced the shifting position of the “Munshi” arguing that while the Munshis in the Mughal court were categorized as teachers and scholars, in the nineteenth century they were reduced

to being “mediator[s] of colonial knowledge” (1996: 74). Bayly further argues that with the political ascendancy of the British, the Munshis were required to be proficient in English, a role “tied closely to British patronage”, and were subsequently reduced to “translat[ing] early Victorian schoolbooks into Urdu and Hindi” (1996: 229–30). Whereas earlier Munshis were scholars and were able to treat European knowledge as equal to Indo-Islamic learning, the new ones were, in Bayly’s terms, diarists rather than diplomats with pitifully low wages and little respect accorded to them (qtd. in Joshi 2016: 263). This denigration carried into postcolonial India with canonical films such as *Shikast* (1953) and *Naya Daur* (1957) portraying the Munshi figure as a caricature — calculated, cunning, and comical — but always unwavering in his loyalty towards his powerful masters.

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