**Study Guide**

**Bhaji on the Beach – 1993, Director: Gurinder Chadha**

**Summary**

A group of South Asian-British women (the ‘Saheli Women’s Group’), from Birmingham, aged between 15 and 70s, go on a day trip to Blackpool.

The group includes older women firm in their Hindu traditions; teenagers looking to have fun; a mother shielding her son from her abusive husband and a medical student who is hiding a pregnancy. The group leader is a staunch feminist, she is determined for the women to have a ‘female fun time’ whilst at the seaside.

As events unfold, generational differences cause conflict. Punjabi traditions meet modern ways head-on.

**Key Characters**

**Simi**

* feminist
* group leader
* idealistic
* modern social beliefs
* caring, kind
* holds the group together

**Ginder**

* looking to escape from abusive, criminal husband
* single parent of her young son

**Hashida**

* Medical student
* Afro-Caribbean secret boyfriend
* Pregnant: making a choice between having a baby or continuing with her dreams of becoming a doctor

**Asha**

* Middle-aged shopkeeper
* Devout Hindu
* Bollywood cinema fan
* bored of her life, daydreams
* has a flirtatious ‘fling’ with an English actor whilst in Blackpool

**Cultural context**

* **Themes**

Generational differences

Racism

Marginalised communities

Cultural inheritance

Identity

* **Symbolism**

Blackpool: its beach and illuminations provide a symbol of freedom and spectacle for the women, whose lives are structured and tethered to tradition.

Being at the beach, away from their daily lives gives them a space to share their experiences openly.

* **Key facts**

*Bhaji on the Beach* is a semi-autobiographical account of screenwriter Meera Syal’s family holidays to Blackpool.

It was the first feature film of Director Gurinder Chadha.

The film was nominated for Best British Film at the BAFTAs in 1995.

When Chadha made Bhaji on the Beach in 1993, she became the first British Asian woman to direct a major feature film.

* **Genre**

British comedy drama

* **Motifs**

Chadha uses the stereotypical imagery of the British beach holiday to highlight the challenges of coming to terms with the British-Indian identity. Beaches attract the crowds, they are places where people picnic and paddle, pastimes of escape and pleasure regardless of ethnic background. Chadha sets the scene with images of striped deckchairs and donkey rides, accompanied by sounds of seagulls and seaside music. The women are enjoying their Britishness, and yet they are still outsiders – putting spice on their chips and lifting their saris to enjoy the waves whilst a Banghra soundtrack plays. Chadha is using the beach setting as a metaphor for the conflict of patriotism towards Britain whilst at the same time identifying with Asia.

* **Quotes**

Tagline: ‘A day to set yourself free’.

Simi: ‘It’s not often we women get away from the patriarchal demands made on us in our daily lives, struggling between the double yoke of racism and sexism that we bear. This is your day. Have a female fun time.’

**Critical analysis study**

1. **Study focus – the significance of the beach & the bhaji**

The title of the film *Bhaji on the Beach* sums up the meeting of two cultures through two key signifiers: the British seaside experience and a typical Indian spicy vegetable snack. The film’s director (Chadha) and writer (Syal) both have memories of picnics at the seaside, where they were ‘othered’ for eating bhajis rather than fish and chips.

**Activity**

Consider your own version of *Bhaji on the Beach*. We all have our own identities which are often a mixture of our experiences and familial connections. Create a film title and poster that uses two symbols: one from your experiences of ‘Britishness’ and one from your own personal identity.

1. **Study focus – intersectionality**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines **intersectionality** as:

“- the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage”

It is a phrase coined by Professor Kimberle Crenshaw, lawyer and civil rights activist in 1989.

When Simi talks about:

‘…the patriarchal demands made on us in our daily lives, struggling between the double yoke of racism and sexism…’ she is talking about intersectionality and how the convergence of racism and sexism discriminates against her female community.

**Activity**

How does the film deal with the issues of racism and sexism?

How are the main characters discriminated against because of their race?

How does the film deal with the complex issue of racism within the Asian community?

What examples are there of gender politics and disadvantage?

Think about your own intersectionality - your social and political identities. Create a diagram to show how there are overlapping areas relating to race, class and gender.

1. **Study focus – representation**

When the film was released in 1993, it was heralded for its warm and genuine representation of a group of British-Asian women. At the time, it was rare to see women like this on our screens, let alone have them deal with taboo issues like domestic abuse, racism, anti-blackness within the Asian community and unplanned pregnancies.

**Activity**

Gurinder Chadha was the first British-Asian female director to make a feature film in 1993 with *Bhaji on the Beach*. Investigate the picture now. What did Chadha go on to do? Write an article of 800 words giving an overview of British-Asian cinema, starting with Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach.*