



### “THERE ARE NO SOLDIERS ANYMORE”: THE PERSISTENCE OF ANGLO-INDIAN STEREOTYPES IN *BOW BARRACKS FOREVER*

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Anjan Dutt's 2007 film *Bow Barracks Forever* explores through a fictional framework the lives of a group of Anglo-Indian tenants living in Kolkata's rundown Bow Barracks. Depending on the review, this film is either a heartwarming homage to a “heritage” community in all its colourful detail” (Kazmi)—if one prefers stale cliché, “the ultimate story of the triumph of the human spirit” (India FM News Bureau)—or one of the most appalling films ever made: “tacky, tasteless and trite” (Rishi). Indeed, this film displays significant shortcomings which this paper will discuss at length, particularly when it comes to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of the Anglo-Indian—an issue that was largely ignored by the film's reviewers.

Despite these weaknesses, however, *Bow Barracks Forever* also contains a few potentially redeeming elements. For one thing, this cinematic representation adds to the small but growing body of work acknowledging the existence of the Anglo-Indian people, who continue to be under-represented in both British and Indian literature, film, and scholarship. Given the Anglo-Indian community's relative lack of cultural visibility and the historical neglect of Anglo-Indians in both artistic representation and postcolonial scholarship (see, for example, Hawes, Blunt and Mills), one could argue that *any* evocation of Anglo-Indian presence represents a step forward. Furthermore, the film suggests that “home” for Anglo-Indians need not always be found abroad; that there should be a place for Anglo-Indians within India; and that the community life of Anglo-Indians has intrinsic value.

Yet, as I discuss here at length, these positive suggestions are for the most part not embedded within the film's plot or characterizations but are instead appended to the

film's conclusion in a manner that feels "tacked on" or artificial. The resolution of conflicts feels too pat and simple; as such, the film fails to *earn* its denouement. This narrative flaw, along with the absence of a subjective Anglo-Indian "voice" and the glaring proliferation of timeworn disparaging stereotypes, lead to a film that, instead of dismantling Anglo-Indian stereotypes, reinscribes them. Despite some attempts to render understanding and sympathy for the Anglo-Indian community, *Bow Barracks Forever* ultimately perpetuates the Anglo-Indian caricatures that have long haunted both the literature and scholarship of the Raj, from both British and Indian perspectives; as Megan Mills puts it: "In the Anglo-Indian may well be found India's answer to the Stage Irishman" (Mills 1).

Numerous scholars have pointed out the variety of stereotypes to which Anglo-Indians have been subjected, reaching all the way back to the eighteenth century with the report of Viscount Valentia, who referred to the so-called "half-castes" as "the most rapidly accumulating evil of Bengal" and accused them of being both "pusillanimous" and "indolent" (qtd. in Anthony 22). Since that time, representation of the Anglo-Indian—whether in scholarship or in literature—has tended to fluctuate between neglect and disparagement. For the most part, the ethnically and culturally hybrid Anglo-Indians are absent from the majority of postcolonial scholarship, as Mills points out: "Historical writing on British India usually omits the Anglo-Indians' colonial administrative role despite the fact that much scholarship is now devoted to determining the nature of the colonial state and society; that the Anglo-Indians were relied upon throughout British South Asia seems not to be known or is not mentioned" (Mills 1; see also Blunt, Hawes.) Yet occasionally, canonical British literature of the Raj will include stereotypical "Eurasian" minor characters in peripheral roles, such as Kipling's hapless Michele d'Cruz in "His Chance In Life" who is saved from his slothful tendencies by the drop of "white blood in his veins," and the culturally dislocated and disaffected chauffeur in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Nor have Anglo-Indian characters tended to fare much better in postcolonial novels by Indian writers. As one example, an angry, hot-tempered Anglo-Indian schoolmaster appears in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*; as another, Mills points out that many women writers such as Rumer Godden have continued to perpetuate common stereotypes (Mills 4). Some of the most persistent of these include:

- The Anglo-Indian man as shiftless and unmotivated, often alcoholic; at the

same time, he may be amusing, fun-loving, and is quite often a musician;

- The counterpart to the “shiftless” Anglo-Indian man: the uber-responsible male earner who is excessively diligent (as if to compensate for the laziness of his less motivated brothers and cousins), and asexual, perhaps latently homosexual;
- The Anglo-Indian woman as sexually promiscuous, brassy and domineering, and garish in taste (despite these traits, she is often also stereotyped as family breadwinner due to the laziness and low earning power of her male counterpart);
- Anglo-Indians as “party animals,” enjoying food and music to excess while refusing to work toward a prosperous future;
- Anglo-Indians as incapable of change or progress, due largely to a pervasive nostalgia that steeps them in the past and creates cultural paralysis; they pine for a bygone colonial era in which they fantasize themselves as holding higher status than they actually held;
- Anglo-Indians as feeling “not at home” in India and yearning to emigrate—to Australia, Canada, or especially London, which they consider their “true” home even if they have never been there;
- Anglo-Indians of the diaspora who are “ashamed” of their mixed ethnic and cultural heritage and who attempt to pass themselves off as “pure white” in their new countries after emigration.

All these stereotypes emerge intact and unchallenged in *Bow Barracks Forever*, as this paper will proceed to discuss.

To be fair—as is often the case with stereotypes—there are sometimes grains of truth embedded within them. Most anyone with an Anglo-Indian heritage, for instance, can attest to a community fondness for big-band music and an enjoyment of food—for Anglo-Indians, a tantalizing mixture of Indian and English dishes and sweets. Indeed, the Anglo-Indian Community’s own publications, newsletters, and reunion agendas suggest that these things are important to many Anglo-Indians. Many can also attest to the difficulty of knowing where one belongs as a person of mixed ethnicity, whether in a postcolonial society or as an immigrant—the struggle that postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha calls the state of being “unhomed” (Bhabha, *The*

*Location of Culture*). Statistics demonstrate that a numerical majority of Anglo-Indians did leave India following 1947; those who remained often did so due to financial constraints, and frequently they have friends and relatives who emigrated. Moreover, the phenomenon of “passing” among diasporic Anglo-Indians has some grounding, as suggested by Noel Gist & Roy Dean Wright and Coralie Younger—though Megan Mills makes a strong case that the frequency of this phenomenon may well have been overstated.

Stereotypes may sometimes be anecdotally supportable, and that is precisely why they pose a danger: if there is just enough anecdotal evidence in “real life” to suggest that a caricature is somewhat grounded in reality, it becomes easy for those outside a targeted group to cling to their overgeneralized beliefs rather than to consider critically whether those beliefs hold true in all circumstances. One false assumption is that a stereotype applies consistently to *all* members of a targeted group in all circumstances—an overgeneralization fallacy. For instance, it may certainly be possible to find traits like laziness or promiscuity among Anglo-Indians, but the pervasiveness of a pre-existing stereotype may make it difficult to realize that the majority of Anglo-Indians do *not* meet that description. Another flawed assumption arises when one assumes that a stereotypical character trait belongs exclusively to those within the targeted group and is never displayed by those outside—a projection of disowned traits in oneself (or one’s reference group) onto a designated “Other.” Here the fallacy lies in believing that such traits as laziness, promiscuity, the desire to “pass,” or pervasive nostalgia are somehow the sole province of Anglo-Indians, never to be displayed elsewhere.

A third, more complex problem arises in that often, certain stereotypes will appear at least partially valid. The problem here arises when those doing the stereotyping conceptualize certain traits as essential, fixed and unchangeable, rather than as manifestations of the social, cultural, historical, or political contexts that have constrained and shaped a group of people. In the case of Anglo-Indians, they are often pigeonholed as preferring the diversion of music to more “serious” pursuits such as military service (one of the many stereotypes that appears in *Bow Barracks Forever*). Yet what often goes unmentioned is the historical reality that beginning in 1795, the British-East India Company prohibited all persons of mixed race from

serving its regiments *except* as "fifers, drummers, bandsmen and ferriers" (Anthony 21). If Anglo-Indians have a long collective history of serving as musicians, it is important to recognize that this may be at least partly due to the limits historically imposed on them by the colonial structure.

Similarly, the fact that between 1857 and 1947 Anglo-Indians served in intermediary capacities—railways, telegraphs, police services, schools and hospitals—reflects the historical reality that these were the jobs the British colonialists reserved for them. The stereotype that Anglo-Indians lack ambition or the desire for higher education obscures the fact that they were prohibited from rising into upper-level positions or from obtaining higher education in Britain. Moreover, Anglo-Indians were prohibited from owning property; thus any tendency to "live in the present," if it exists, may be at least partly a reaction to the systematic limitations placed upon them by colonial rule rather than to an internal inability to plan ahead. The work of Adrian Gilbert demonstrating the entrepreneurial success of diasporic Anglo-Indians provides compelling evidence that, when their circumstances offer them more opportunity than they had previously experienced, Anglo-Indians proved themselves more than capable of succeeding (Gilbert, *The Anglo Indians in Australia*).

When it comes to "passing," it is important to bear in mind the harsh racism and color-consciousness in most societies, especially prior to the worldwide civil rights movements of the 1960s. It is often easy to forget just how much rancor has historically existed (and still exists) against people of color in many Western countries; if some diasporic Anglo-Indians chose to ignore their complex racial origins, could that be construed as a necessary survival mechanism in challenging circumstances rather than as an inherent character flaw? It is problematic to stigmatize emigrants who may have attempted to present themselves as white in such a context, rather than indicting the systemic racism that might have motivated them to make that choice in the first place.

This is finally what is missing from *Bow Barracks Forever*: a contextualized exploration of the historical and cultural context in which the Anglo-Indian community has functioned—the power dynamics of colonialism, centuries of years of exploitation and oppression, political challenges of the postcolonial era, and

pervasive structural limitations that forced Anglo-Indians into a narrow range of options. An exploration of the colonial system that both produced, constrained, and finally abandoned the Anglo-Indian people—along with the aftermath of British withdrawal that left Anglo-Indians largely to fend for themselves—would help to explain *why* some of the film's characters display certain characteristics, allowing them to emerge as compelling individuals rather than as mere “types.” The opening credit does attempt to introduce the “fading community of Anglo-Indians,” “whose mother tongue is English but who are very much Indian.” Yet it stops short of exploring the systematic limitations placed upon Anglo-Indians during the colonial period by their British overlords or the lack of provisions made for them in an independent India. Certainly it is reasonable to assume that the dual marginality discussed by sociologists Gist and Wright in *Marginality and Identity* has affected on the Anglo-Indian people; a more in-depth exploration of these issues would have helped viewers to understand in a more nuanced way the multiple political, social, cultural and historical forces that have shaped, and often circumscribed, Anglo-Indian lives.

Instead, what the viewer sees in *Bow Barracks Forever* is a lineup of “the usual suspects” from the annals of Anglo-Indian caricature. It may be true that the majority of Anglo-Indians left India after 1947, but the film perpetuates the notion that those left behind are obsessed with delusional fantasies of life becoming “perfect” in a westernized society. As the film opens, one of the building's tenant families—the Dawsons—is preparing to move to Australia where, a neighbor tells them, “your problems will be over.” Meanwhile, the character of cake maker and wine dealer Emily Lobo (played by Lilette Dubey) obsesses over her desire to join her emigrant son Kenny in London. Emily makes endless calls to Kenny's unanswered voice mail and leaves rambling phone messages urging him to contact her as soon as his new house is ready for the rest of the family to join him; but we know, from the first time we hear her unanswered monologue, that Kenny never calls her back and probably has no intention of doing so. The off-screen character Kenny's post-emigration neglect of his family of origin provides yet another stereotype—that of the diasporic Anglo-Indian who prefers to “pass” in his new country and thus cuts himself off from his family in India.

Meanwhile, Emily's other son Bradley (Clayton Rodgers) epitomizes the stereotype of the shiftless, indolent Anglo-Indian male. Bradley, a shiftless musician like his father before him, loses his job in a music store due to repeated tardiness thanks to his frequent morning dalliances with his older married neighbor Anne, the victim of an abusive Armenian smuggler husband. The script suggests that the off-screen character of Bradley's deceased father displayed similar traits: "He was a musician, nothing but a musician," Bradley tells his mother (*BBF*). As if one shiftless Anglo-Indian male were not enough, the film also offers the character of Peter the Cheater (Victor Banerjee), a trumpet player and charlatan "antiques dealer" who makes fraudulent deals and at times comes in for beatings from his dissatisfied customers. Meanwhile, the community of Bow Barracks boasts an example of the other stereotypical male—the earnest yet dull Anglo-Indian man who works hard, perhaps too hard, and who may be latently homosexual. This stock character appears in the character of Melvin de Costa (Avijit Dutt), who—the film suggests—lacks sexual desire for his wife Rosa (Moon Moon Sen), which motivates her to engage in daytime sexual escapades with an Indian insurance agent.

Many of the female characters, meanwhile, perpetuate the caricature of the Anglo-Indian woman as promiscuous and opportunistic. Here again the viewer is offered more than one such example: Melvin's dissatisfied wife Rosa D'Souza engages in vigorous afternoon sex with her insurance agent while her earnest husband Melvin is at work; Anne (Neha Dubey), the wife and victim of a violent and abusive smuggler, seeks comfort in the arms of the much younger Bradley Lobo. (Though given the situation established in the film one could hardly blame someone in Anne's position for seeking comfort elsewhere, her character also needs to be considered in light of the larger context of Anglo-Indian representation, in this case the historical disparagement of its women on the grounds that they are sexual infidels.) Meanwhile, one of the resident female teenagers, Sally (Sohini Pal), is apparently obsessed with boys and, toward the end of the film, she fulfills the worst fears of her reputation-obsessed aunt Mona (Roopali Gangooli) by running off to Mumbai with one of them; she then returns to Bow Barracks as a successful singer.

The film's plot centers around the abuse of tenants by the greedy and violent landlord Mukherjee, who deliberately keeps Bow Barracks in a state of disrepair in

order to hasten the likelihood that the city will tear it down and replace it with something more profitable, allowing Mukherjee and his thugs to line their pockets. Yet the building is a site of historical importance and, if necessary repairs and renovations are made, could land on the historical register and become immune to future demolition, preserving a home for the Anglo-Indian tenants who live there. This plot, while intriguing, is never fully developed. As the film draws toward its conclusion, Emily offers her only valuable possession—a wedding necklace—to her soon-to-be daughter-in-law Anne (who plans to marry Bradley, having divorced the smuggler). Anne declares the necklace will be sold and the profits used to restore the building. Yet we never see this actually happen in the film; in fact, when the credits roll we see that the film is “based on a true story” and we learn that in real life, at the time of the film’s release the real Bow Barracks *still* had not been renovated.[1] The dilapidated, un-renovated surroundings stand as a metaphor for Anglo-Indian unwillingness to move into the future—or even the present—perpetuating the standard representation of the Anglo-Indian as steeped in nostalgia, unmotivated, and unable to move forward.

Obsession with a mythical glorious past is evident when various characters evoke the “better days” of the colonial era, as in this post-coital conversation between Anne and Bradley:

“Anne: Daddy used to say I’d live in military quarters and all.  
“Bradley: This is a military building, Anne.”  
“Anne: There are no soldiers anymore, Brad.” (BBF)

The characters all live in squalor, with nobody cleaning and, apparently, nothing ever being thrown out. In one scene we even see shoes stored in the refrigerator. The tenants have trouble getting motivated or organized, and their tenant meetings go nowhere. (Perhaps one can hardly blame them; toward the end of the film the Indian organizer-activist in the tale, Manish, is killed by Mukherjee’s thugs.) Anglo-Indians are once again depicted as resistant to change: “The world may change, but we won’t change,” says Peter the Cheater (BBF). The residents of Bow Barracks are characterized by inertia and what psychologists might call “low self-esteem,” as expressed by Bradley when he tells Emily: “Nothing is going to change, why can’t you understand that? . . . I am a failure because that is the best I can do” (BBF). Toward the end of the film when Anne foils her smuggler husband Tom’s violent

attack by pointing the gun Bradley brought her, she proves incapable of shooting him and Tom ends up with the weapon, which he then fires on a hapless Bradley who has instructed him to "leave Anne alone." Even when one of the characters finally takes an assertive stance—Peter the Cheater confronts Mukherjee's threatening goon Keshto with a gun, boldly declaring "I've got a soldier's blood in me"—the gun turns out to be a toy, reaffirming the Anglo-Indian as powerless.

The religiosity of Anglo-Indians is challenged, portrayed as superficial rather than genuine. The residents of the cinematic Bow Barracks are apparently Roman Catholic, as are approximately 60% of Anglo-Indians, with approximately 30% Anglican and 10% evangelical Protestant (Gist & Wright 9). The film emphasizes the distance between the characters' professed faith and their behaviors. In one scene, Peter the Cheater proposes to Emily that she increase the profits on her wine by adding water—a comic inversion of the miracle in which Jesus turned water into wine. In another scene, Rosa and the insurance agent have illicit sexual relations underneath a picture of Jesus the shepherd, who cradles a sheep. During one extended sequence, Peter the Cheater plays "Amazing Grace" repeatedly on his trumpet while we witness the squalor and constant threat of annihilation under which the residents of Bow Barracks live (while initially effective, the device is dragged out so long that it loses its impact). Surely it is not unusual for there to be a noticeable gap between the professed ideals of a religious faith and the actual behaviors of its adherents, but this is hardly a problem unique to the Anglo-Indians (nor is it fair to suggest that *every* Anglo-Indian is a religious hypocrite).

Yet, as I asserted in the beginning of this paper, there are some ways in which the filmmakers attempt to offer a more positive and sympathetic view. Bradley may have been wounded by the smuggler Tom's gun, but he is not killed, and despite his description of himself as a "failure," he achieves his goal of marrying Anne, who is able to divorce her violent husband Tom. Rosa and Melvin reunite after Rosa tearfully returns and acknowledges she has made a mistake, and Melvin announces his intention to display more desire for her. In a fit of emotion, Emily's younger son Bradley finally pierces through his mother's delusions to point out that "Kenny is not calling, not ever; he has not called you in four years; he is not calling!" (*BBF*) Emily comes to accept her circumstances, to cease fantasizing about the utopian life that

awaits her in Europe, and to appreciate her home and community in Bow Barracks. One could argue that knowing how to appreciate the good in whatever situation one finds oneself is a good lesson for anyone to learn (not just Anglo-Indians). Even Peter the Cheater achieves a symbolic victory in that Keshto does not *know* the gun Peter wields is a toy; thus his intent to drive Keshto away, though somewhat hapless, is still realized. The survival of these characters toward the end of the film, the removal of the film's most dangerous characters, the resolution of conflicts that allows the residents of Bow Barracks to come together as a community, even the jaunty liveliness of their music, could be interpreted as suggesting that not only the literal Bow Barracks but the metaphorical "Bow Barracks" and all it represents—the Anglo-Indian people, their history, and culture—should, and do, survive.

Yet this positive message is ultimately weakened because it feels "tacked-on" rather than earned through dramatic development. The pat resolution is achieved too easily, with Emily's change of heart taking place off-screen rather than represented artistically (to paraphrase the creative writing dictum, the resolution is "told" rather than "shown"). The filmmakers attempt to use cinematic technique to indicate shifting perspectives by playing with light. Like so many films regarding Anglo-Indians, much of the film is shot in shadow and darkness (this approach to lighting in Anglo-Indian films has become nearly a cliché), and the background brightens noticeably as the film approaches its resolution. Primarily, however, the dilemmas of the characters are worked through off-screen and narrated through a voiceover using the device of Emily's letter to her absent son Kenny. Because we as viewers never witness the change or the epiphany, the film's denouement does not feel credible; the characters' insights do not feel believable, and the viewer is left not so much with a sense of Anglo-Indian resilience as with a memory of the pervasive, all-too-familiar caricatures that haunt the Community still. The weak denouement is exacerbated by the film's failure to invoke a specifically Anglo-Indian subjectivity; the film is narrated not through an Anglo-Indian voice but through a distant narrator who, though ostensibly omniscient, seems not to know much about the deeper historical and social context that has shaped Anglo-Indian experiences. Once again, this is a story about Anglo-Indians told not by members of that community but by outsiders. Both a stronger Anglo-Indian viewpoint and a deeper exploration of context would have made the characters' circumstances and subsequent epiphanies feel more

compelling.

The Anglo-Indian people are often portrayed as little more than relics of a colonial past, nostalgic for a bygone era in which they may have been relatively low on the finely graded British colonial hierarchy yet they at least had a clearly delineated and defined place in which to function. Anglo-Indians today are often depicted not only as yearning for those times, but as delusionally believing they held higher status and importance than was actually the case. Postcolonial scholars and imaginative writers alike, both British and Indian, often fail to consider Anglo-Indians in any other way than as reminders of a lost "past." Yet, as Blair Williams points out in his introduction to the Anglo-Indian self-publication *The Way We Are*, it is equally possible to reconceptualize the Anglo-Indians not as mere "relics" or artifacts from yesterday, but as "prototypes" or leaders toward a multicultural, global future. (Williams) After all, Anglo-Indians were ethnically and culturally hybridized and globally aware long before the rest of the world started moving in that direction. (As a relative of mine once put it, "We were multicultural before multicultural was 'cool'.") While racism and prejudice against people of mixed race and those of color have hardly disappeared from the world, there are unmistakable signs that over the last several decades, progress has been made—the election of multiracial U.S. president Barack Obama, the rise of multicultural marriages in many societies, the continued pace of immigration. Perhaps, Williams suggests, the Anglo-Indian is not so much a "relic" of the past as a portender of things to come.

The Anglo-Indian experience also reminds us that political and historical machinations of power, such as imperialism, have consequences in the personal realm. To harp on the stereotypical perceived character flaws of Anglo-Indians rather than to investigate the elaborate context that produced them is in effect to "blame the victims" of colonialism, with its brutal class and race-based hierarchy. To continue to buy into glib stereotypes regarding the Anglo-Indian is to continue to accept the discourse of inferiority discussed so well by African postcolonial scholar Ngugi Wa Thiang'o, who reminds us that we must also "decolonise the mind" (Wa Thiang'o).

Despite many efforts on the part of various storytellers and filmmakers, the Anglo-Indian story has yet to be fully told in a mainstream context in a manner that does

justice to the complexity, history, and uniqueness of this group of people. While certain aspects of *Bow Barracks Forever* represent some progress, the proliferation of stereotypes makes it difficult for viewers to see beyond the caricatures and understand in a more nuanced way the complex experiences and viewpoints of the Anglo-Indians. *Bow Barracks Forever* could have been groundbreaking, and indeed it makes some gestures toward telling a story that sympathetically evokes the Anglo-Indian perspective. Yet finally, the lack of a truly Anglo-Indian voice, the lack of cultural and historical context, and most of all the proliferation of the same tired old stereotypes that have haunted the Anglo-Indian Community for centuries, result in yet another film that perpetuates rather than challenges these tired, disparaging assumptions. For those of us invested in telling the stories of the Anglo-Indian people in our voices and from our vantage points, it is clear that much work still remains to be done.

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## NOTES

[1] Sean Auckland's August 2007 blog entry, "Bow Barracks Will Be Forever," reported that the West Bengal Urban Development and Municipal Affairs Minister plans to demolish and rebuild Bow Barracks, offering temporary accommodation to the current residents (of both Anglo-Indian and other ethnicities) and allowing them to return after the rebuilding.

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