

## Intergenerational Cultural Conflicts and Discrimination Against Immigrants in Blinded by the Light Film

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the life struggles of Javed Khan, a second-generation Pakistani immigrant in the United Kingdom in *Blinded by Light* film. Culturally, as a Pakistani-British, Javed lives in two worlds, i.e., the old world belonging to his parents and his current world, the world he is living in, i.e., the British society and culture. To analyze this topic, the textual content analysis is employed. As for the theoretical framework, Hall's concept of identity and some works of literature on discrimination are of importance. The result of the analysis shows that Javed's journey reveals the challenges and pressures of adaptation and acculturation faced by second-generation immigrants in general, illustrating how the tension between intergenerational expectations often creates tension and fosters growth and understanding in a multicultural context. Javed is torn between the values of the home country his father holds and the values of the new country. In addition, the discrimination experienced by Malik Khan's family reflects the experience of immigrant families in a broader context. The film encourages viewers to reflect on the societal expectations of immigrants to conform to the host society and culture, while also showcasing the importance of individual aspirations and self-expression.

**Keywords:** Cultural conflicts, Discrimination, Immigrants, Pakistani, Reconciliation.

### 1. Introduction

The United Kingdom is one of the countries that accepts immigrants from various countries, especially from its former colonies. Sunak and Rajeswaran (2014) highlight major problems that have occurred in the United Kingdom within immigrant families and the problems they experience in living with the host society. The five major groups of immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jamaica, and African countries have their own ups and downs. These immigrants are referred to by Sunak and Rajeswaran (2014) as Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), although there are also Chinese and white immigrants from Eastern European countries. Despite the struggles they go through, millions of immigrants have a significant influence on British society and culture in various fields; not only in the social, political, and economic fields, but also in the arts and culture. In their report, Sunak and Rajeswaran (2014) note that newspapers and television channels that broadcast the culture of their homelands are widely owned by immigrants, especially from India and Africa. This shows that even though they live in the United Kingdom, immigrants still hold the culture and values of their homelands. The older generation mainly maintains these ancestral cultural values, while their children who attend British schools are immersed in British society and culture. This has become a source of cultural conflicts between children and parents.

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The hard life of immigrants in various countries, not only in England, is often reflected in many works of art and literature. In the United States, for instance, literary works written by and for the people of color, or the so-called multicultural literature, reflects the struggle of the immigrants, including Asian-American picture storybooks such as Hiromi's Hands (Barasch, 2007), *The Ugly Vegetables* (Lin, 1999), *Uncle Peter's Amazing Chinese Wedding* (Look & Heo, 2006) to mention some examples. The life experiences of immigrants are also reflected in books for young adults and adults, films, and other kinds of art.

Immigrants, wherever they are, struggle for a better life and overcome conflicts within the family, especially between parents and children, due to different cultural values. In addition, they also experience discrimination by the host society. Issues like these, in addition to being reflected in literary works, are also reflected in films. The struggle of immigrants in the United Kingdom to get a better life and the conflicts they experience within their families can be seen at least in two films, *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Blinded by the Light* (2019), both directed by Gurinder Chadha. The first is about the conflict between a girl and her family from India, while the second is between a boy and his family from Pakistan.

In this paper, we specifically analyze the conflicts in the film *Blinded by the Light*, i.e. the conflict related to intergenerational cultural values in the family of the main character, Javed Khan, and the conflict related to discrimination against immigrants by the host society. Thus, different from Chouana's (2022) analysis and reviews by Gaylord (2019), Hurst (2019), and O'Malley (2019) which focus more on Javed's dream inspired by Bruce Springsteen's music, in this paper, the two research questions we formulate deal with the intergenerational cultural conflicts in a Pakistani immigrant family and the discrimination experienced by Pakistani immigrants.

Following this introduction, the paper provides a short account of the film then followed by a discussion of the relevant literature. The next section outlines the qualitative method employed for this analysis, then an in-depth analysis comes after the method, and the last is the conclusion.

## The Film

*Blinded by the Light* was created by Gurinder Chadha (2019), who also created *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). The latter is about a girl of Indian descent who wants to become a footballer. Both *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Blinded by the Light* have similar themes, namely the conflict of cultural values between parents and children. In particular, in *Blinded by the Light*, the issue of discrimination against immigrants from Pakistan is very prominent, and the Khan family is affected by it. In relation to the first theme, cultural conflicts in the immigrant's family, whether Chadha created this film with such a theme based on her personal experiences (the conflict of cultural values between her and her parents) still needs further research. But one thing we can say is that Chadha understands issues or conflicts of cultural values and discrimination very well. The fact that she is of Indian descent who was born in Kenya, and then lives in England, is a strong indication that she understands various cultural values and is used to living with different cultural values. In an interview with *The Guardian* (Segalov, 2022), she said, "I've carved out a whole career by celebrating difference." Inferring from both *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Blinded by the Light*, for Chadha, it seems that differences—whatever they are—should not be a problem but should be accepted and celebrated. Therefore, in her two films, Chadha chooses to make peace by reaching a reconciliation between parents and children. It is *Blinded by the Light* that we analyzed in this paper.

*Blinded by the Light* is a film exploring the experiences of a Pakistani immigrant family in Britain. Released in 2019, this film focuses on the struggles of the Khan family in Luton, England. Set in the 1980s, the film narrates the story of Javed Khan, a Pakistani teenager who experiences racial and financial struggles. He writes poetry as a way to escape the prejudice in his hometown and the strict rules of his traditional father. One day, a classmate introduces him to the music of Bruce Springsteen, and Javed feels related to the singer's lyrics, seeing similarities to his life in a working-class family. Inspired by Springsteen's songs, Javed begins to find his own voice through writing to pursue his dreams. However, this film is not just

about Javed's teenage struggles and passions, but also about a broader theme of immigration: how immigrants adapt to a new culture and society, how they long to be accepted, and how they experience racial discrimination (Bayor, 2011; Hurst, 2019). Even within families of immigrants, problems also happen between parents and children. Ullah (2024) mentions that "second-generation immigrants frequently experience a clash between their ancestral culture and the dominant culture of the host country, leading to identity confusion." These are the issues that we analysed. In other words, this paper aims to highlight issues of cultural values within Javed's family and discrimination against Pakistani immigrants in a broader context.

## 2. Literature Review

Immigrants in general undergo many experiences in their quest for better lives in their new countries. Among those experiences are adaptation, acculturation, problems of identity, discrimination, and longing for the homeland (Bayor, 2011). In terms of identity, Hall argues that identity is not fixed but constantly changing. We can refer to Hall's concept in his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1996). He explains that cultural identity is not something permanent, but rather a positioning shaped by history, culture, and social situations. According to Hall, cultural identity is built through shared histories and experiences. Further, as quoted in Harman (2016), Hall posits that identity is always evolving.

Likewise, in their discussion of identity, McCarthy and Moje (2002) have a similar concept. They argue that identity has many dimensions, and the past, present, and future experiences may lead individuals to shed certain dimensions of his or her identity; conversely, he or she may also add certain dimensions to his or her identity. They also highlight that identity is not fixed but always changes. Discussing Asian-American children immigrants in Asian-American children's picture story books in particular, McCarthy and Moje argue that many Asian-American children are confused about their own identities—they are not white but are living in the US which has a different culture from that of their homeland culture.

These concepts of identity help us understand the tension between cultural expectations and personal goals in immigrant families, showing the complexity of how an immigrant positions himself or herself in the new country. In the context of this paper, this discussion is especially relevant to Javed's situation as a second-generation immigrant, where he struggles to balance his parents' traditional Pakistani values with his own dreams influenced by British society and culture. In general, issues of identity create conflicts in immigrant families, where the younger generation's desire for the new values and independence clashes with the older generations' traditional views (Patel, 2016).

Second-generation immigrants often consider themselves part of the society where they reside. Sunak and Rajeswaran (2014) highlight that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups overwhelmingly identify themselves with a United Kingdom-centric identity. They observe that ethnic minorities are three times more likely than the White population to feel that 'being British' is a significant part of their identity. For many ethnic minorities, identifying as British goes beyond citizenship; it is a profound part of their personal and communal identity, signifying a deep-rooted sense of belonging and connection to the United Kingdom. Second-generation immigrants often face the challenge of combining their parents' cultural values with the culture of their new environment (Ullah, 2024). The generational conflicts and identity struggles in the film reflect these competing identities, showing the struggles and changes that come with living in a diaspora.

In addition to issues of identity, issues of discrimination are also pertinent for immigrants. To begin with, there are many reasons why people immigrate to other countries, but two major reasons are the economic and the persecution they experience in their home countries (Dustmann, Kastis, & Preston, 2024). These reasons can be summarized that people immigrate to other countries to obtain a better life. But living in a new country far from the homeland is not always pleasant. There are many immigrants who are economically prosperous, but they still experience discrimination. This discrimination can come from the host country in the sense that it is the result of the laws made by that country; or it can also come from a group or individuals in the host society. In the United States of America, for

instance, Bayor (2011) states that the United States Government has made immigration laws since 1882, and many of these laws are indeed discriminatory. When the United States Government officially no longer allows discrimination, there are still members of the host society who discriminate against immigrants. In the context of the United States, discrimination against immigrants has a long history.

In the United Kingdom, the number of immigrants is not as many as those coming to the United States. The countries of origin that send immigrants to the United Kingdom are also fewer. This is not easy to know for sure how many ethnic groups come to the United Kingdom but based on Sunak and Rajeswaran's report (2014), there are five large groups of people who immigrate to the country, i.e., Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black people from African countries, and Jamaican or Black Caribbean. There are also immigrants from China and other European countries, but their number is not significant.

Surprisingly, the survey conducted by Sunak and Rajeswaran shows that these immigrants feel more British than the host society consisting of the English, Welsh, Irish, and Scottish. However, it does not mean that they do not experience discrimination in the United Kingdom. Discrimination can be experienced by immigrants as individuals or as a group in various forms, from verbal to physical, from subtle to violent or blatant. Currently, much of the recent literature suggests that discrimination experienced by immigrants is still present or has never disappeared completely (see for example Bor, Jørgensen, & Petersen, 2023; Dustmann, Kastis, & Preston, 2024; Fernandez-Reino & Rienzo, 2022; Kromczyk, Khattab, & Abbas, 2021; Peresman, Carroll, & Bäck, 2023; Portes, 2022; and Sunak & Rajeswaran, 2014).

Discrimination, therefore, cannot be separated from the lives of immigrants. However, whether there is discrimination or not, all immigrants have no choice but to continue their lives in a new country. This is also what happens to the Khan family from Pakistan in *Blinded by the Light*.

### 3. Methods

In answering the research questions, this paper uses qualitative textual content analysis. Textual analysis, introduced by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972) and later developed by Stuart Hall, is a method used to interpret cultural texts such as films, books, and music in order to uncover deeper meanings, themes, and ideologies. This method focuses on how these texts reflect societal norms and cultural contexts. It is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for a close examination of the narrative, dialogue, and visual elements of *Blinded by the Light*. The analysis involves the identity and dreams of the main character, interactions between characters, and issues of discrimination pertaining to Pakistani immigrants in general and the Khan family in particular. Confrontations between Javed with his father, Malik, are also important to discuss, and how Javed finds his true identity or his moments of self-discovery through Bruce Springsteen's music are highlighted in our analysis. Through this method, the analysis aims to reveal not only the tension between cultural heritage and personal dreams in *Blinded by the Light* but also the parallels with the social and cultural challenges, including discrimination, faced by immigrant families.

### 4. Discussions

#### Intergenerational Cultural Conflicts

One of the most common challenges faced by immigrants, particularly second-generation immigrants, is the issue of identity. On one hand, their parents, or the first generation of immigrants, want them to be faithful to the cultural values of their homeland, but on the other, they are also immersed in the host society and culture. This is not easy, and many of them are confused about who they are. In other words, keeping the balance of the expectations of their cultural heritage with those of the society in which they live is hard to do. Ullah (2024) notes that second-generation immigrants frequently experience a clash between their ancestral culture and the dominant culture of their host country, leading to

identity confusion. *Blinded by the Light* exemplifies this experience by depicting the clash between cultural expectations and individual aspirations within a Pakistani immigrant family in the United Kingdom.

The film explores this conflict through the experiences of Javed Khan, a young Pakistani-British teenager navigating the complexities of his identity and his relationship with his father, Malik Khan. Javed longs for the freedoms enjoyed by white British children, such as the ability to pursue their passions without restriction. From the beginning, the story contrasts Javed's life with that of his childhood best friend, Matt, a white boy, who seems to have everything. When Matt gives Javed a diary, it becomes a symbol of Javed's love for books and his passion for writing poetry. Unfortunately, this passion clashes with the values of his father, Malik Khan. Tran (2023) explains in her TED talk speech that second-generation immigrants are often taught to blend in while maintaining their culture, prioritizing education, respecting elders, and fulfilling family obligations. This dynamic resonates strongly with Javed's relationship with his father.

Malik represents the traditional values of his Pakistani heritage. His traditional values reflect his desire to maintain the family's cultural heritage while ensuring their survival in a challenging British society. He emphasizes hard work, conformity, and practical career choices as essential for success. His insistence on practical careers over Javed's creative dreams and control over Javed's social life reflects reactive culturalism, that is, a strategy of immigrant parents to emphasize traditional values as armour against racism (Thompson, 2019). This is seen in his disapproval of Javed's passion for music and writing, which he views as distractions from more stable and respectable ambitions. He pushes Javed toward safe professions like economics because he believes creative fields are only viable for the privileged. His explicit statement that "writing is for English people—with rich parents" (Chadha, 2019, 01:07:55) reveals a dual awareness of class reality and racial barriers. Pakistani immigrants like Malik are often limited to manual labour, view stable careers as the only path out of poverty (Sunak & Rajeswaran, 2014). This protective stance extends to Javed's social life. Malik forbids Javed from social interactions with girls and encourages him to find a Jewish friend to succeed, suggesting that he sees them as both socially advantageous and safe allies in a prejudiced society. It reveals his awareness of Britain's racial hierarchy, and he intuitively understands that aligning with another minority group might offer social protection and success, perceived as a survival tactic documented in Portes' (2022) studies of immigrant networks. The film shows that Malik's protectiveness and strictness are shaped by legitimate fears of a society. His traditionalism becomes both a shield against discrimination and, ironically, a source of family conflict when Javed seeks assimilation.

In contrast, Javed represents the experience of a second-generation immigrant. He is caught between his father's protective traditionalism and his own British cultural identity. The film frames these tensions inevitably. Even though Malik's traditional survival strategies above shield against external racism, they clash with Javed's personal dreams as a British-born Pakistani. Influenced by his British surroundings and inspired by Bruce Springsteen's music, Javed wants to pursue his own dreams. The film powerfully depicts how Javed finds solace and a model for self-expression in Bruce Springsteen's music, which resonates deeply with his experiences as a young man, a son of a Pakistani immigrant family. When Javed starts listening to Springsteen's music, it inspires him to express himself and gives him the courage to follow his dreams. The lyrics of *Born to Run* by Springsteen (1980) mirror Javed's yearning to break free from restrictive norms while seeking authentic belonging, a concept defined by Hall (1996) as duality or diasporic identity. However, this creates tension in his family because Malik sees Javed's ambitions as a rejection of their cultural heritage and the sacrifices he has made.

The arguments concerning Javed's unpaid writing job or his wish to go to a concert show how this tension creates emotional distance between father and son, leaving Javed feeling isolated and misunderstood. Javed's unpaid writing internship symbolizes his rejection of Malik's transactional view of the success of factory workers vs. rich people's children. Yet his poetry—like the "Father and Son" piece—unwittingly echoes Springsteen's themes of parental sacrifice, showing how artistic expression can paradoxically bridge cultural gaps (Chouana, 2022). Furthermore, Malik interprets Javed's desperate bid to attend a Springsteen

concert as pointless disobedience, but the film frames it as Javed's claim to British teen hood—a universal rite of passage denied to immigrant children (Ullah, 2024). His father sees this fluidity as cultural betrayal, while Javed views it as survival in a society that demands adaptation.

Javed's story reflects a larger generational gap, where second-generation immigrants like him struggle to balance their parents' cultural values with their own goals influenced by the society they live in. The clash between Javed's dreams and his father's expectations creates a deep divide between them. Malik Khan struggles to understand Javed's passion for music and writing, viewing it as a distraction from his studies and future. Javed, in turn, feels misunderstood and frustrated by his father's inability to embrace his dreams.

Still, the film does not present these clashes as entirely negative. Instead, it shows how understanding and growth are possible. The pivotal moment occurs when multiple voices of Javed's teacher, Miss Clay, his classmates, and even an elderly neighbour read his poem and praise the bold originality and potential to inspire change. This collective encouragement mirrors the film's broader message about the power of artistic expression to bridge divides. By the end, Javed and Malik reconcile, as seen when they both find meaning in Springsteen's music. The incident of Malik finding Javed's poem "Father and Son" allows for a deeper connection between them. Malik eventually accepts Javed's dreams. The film's conclusion, with Javed leaving for university but with a newfound sense of connection to his family, highlights the potential for finding a balance between intergenerational cultural expectations, even if it is a complex and ongoing process. This demonstrates how empathy and communication can help bridge cultural differences.

Javed's experiences shown in *Blinded by the Light* reflect the real challenges faced by many Pakistani immigrants in Britain during the 1980s. This was a time of big social and political changes, with increasing racial tensions and economic difficulties. Many Pakistani families moved to Britain hoping for better opportunities but often faced discrimination and hostility from some parts of the British society. The film shows how these outside pressures affect family relationships. Malik worries about fitting income from his own struggles as an immigrant dealing with prejudice and financial uncertainty. His strict rules about Javed's social life show his efforts to protect his family from harm in a society that can be unwelcoming. At the same time, Javed's journey to find himself reflects the experiences of many second-generation immigrants trying to balance the expectations of their culture with those of the society they live in. For example, Malik's job loss increases the pressure on Malik to hold onto tradition for stability, while Javed tries to escape these limits and create his own future. Javed's eventual reconciliation with his father offers hope for better understanding between generations. In general, this theme speaks to immigrant communities trying to find acceptance while staying connected to their cultural roots.

### **Discrimination Against Immigrants**

Although has been touched upon above, in this section we specifically discuss the issue of discrimination further. In one scene, Javed is ambushed by a white man who sprays water on him after writing "Pakis Out!" on the wall. This act serves as a symbol of humiliation, reinforcing Javed's sense of "otherness" and exclusion from British society. However, Javed stays strong. This is reflected in his reaction to the attack, as he processes humiliation through a trembling monologue:

The boy spat at me today after he wrote insult on the wall. This time, I try not to run. This time, I try to stand tall and say, 'I'm not scared of you, clown, you are not better than me, this is also my hometown.' Stand up to him! Why do you run? Face that NF, you are better than this! (Chadha, 2019, 00:15:30)

The water-spitting mimics historical racism, such as those used during colonial-era subjugation, and reduces Javed, a non-white person, to a target of public disgrace. Although he initially stands firm, his immediate retreat to Matt's house reveals the emotional struggle between resistance and survival. On one hand, he is determined to assert his place in the United Kingdom; on the other, he instinctively understands that the streets do not fully belong to him. His angry words, "Stand up to him!" show his desire to fight back, but his actions

show the reality of feeling unsafe. This moment perfectly illustrates Hall's (1996) idea of "unhomeliness"—a condition of feeling like an outsider even in familiar spaces. Furthermore, this scene aligns with Portes' (2022) argument that second-generation immigrants often feel "homeless"—alienated from both their host country and their ancestral homeland.

Javed's initial courage in declaring "I won't run" quickly dissolves into self-doubt "Why do you run?" also demonstrates the constant exposure to racism, forcing him into a state of insecurity about his place in society, where he is caught between the desire to belong and the fear of rejection. This internal conflict illustrates the long-term psychological toll of exclusion and the struggle to define one's identity in an unwelcoming society.

When the Khan family is about to marry off one of their daughters, suddenly there is an anti-black demonstration by members of the National Front, a far-right, fascist political party in the United Kingdom. They target immigrants. Among those demonstrating against the existence of colored people in the United Kingdom are people who shout at Pakistanis to get out of the United Kingdom, and they shout at them with the derogatory term, "Paki". This indicates that discrimination exists, and it is a way, in our interpretation, for Gurinder Chadha to address this issue. In that scene, we also learnt that, as Sunak and Rajeswaran (2014) highlight that many first-generation Pakistani immigrants come from lower classes, cannot speak English, hold on to their cultural values very tightly, and they have not been free from discriminatory life experiences in British society.

In a broader context, discrimination against BME, not only against Pakistanis, is real. Kromczyk, Khattab, and Abbas (2021) note that in general, white Europeans look down on immigrants of color. For white Europeans, people of color who come from former colonies are inferior and primitive. Of course, this is an incorrect stereotype. This kind of stereotype itself is a form of discrimination against immigrants. Discriminatory attitudes towards immigrants have various causes. Peresman, Carroll, and Bäck (2023), citing various previous studies, state that there are two important factors that trigger anti-immigrant attitudes or discrimination against immigrants, namely economic conditions and cultural aspects. In terms of the economy, there are groups of white people who feel threatened by the number of immigrants because they will take the available jobs, even though, in fact, immigrants are key workers in Britain (Portes, 2022). Meanwhile, from a cultural perspective, there are groups in white society that feel threatened. These groups want to protect white society's cultural norms and values from the penetration of immigrant cultures.

It is intriguing, therefore, that specifically the anti-immigrant protests in *Blinded by the Light* are aimed at the Pakistanis. Protesters from the National Front say, "Pakis, go home" through banners and fliers. Some of them do physical harassment to the Pakistanis, including to Javed's father. The term "Paki" is derogatory. There are also groups who want to close the mosque. For the Pakistani (and Bangladeshi) immigrants, the mosque is very important because, in addition to being a place of worship, it is also a very important cultural symbol for them. Javed, who fights through his writings, prevents the mosque from being closed down.

In this sense, *Blinded by the Light* is a reflection that discrimination and physical violence are still experienced by immigrants. It is important to note here that the British Government has officially loosened restrictive rules against immigrants (Portes, 2022). This means that immigrants are officially more accepted. However, this official stance of the Government does not necessarily mean that there are no more people in British society who are discriminatory and racist.

What is depicted in works of art, including films and literature, certainly cannot be said to be the same as to what happens in real life. As a director, Gurinder Chadha probably wants to say that this is indeed the case. In the end, as happened in *Bend It Like Beckham*, Chadha chooses the path of reconciliation, both between Javed and his family and between the immigrants and the host society. Not all white people are racist and discriminatory. There are always people who sympathize with immigrants.

## 5. Conclusion

*Blinded by the Light* shows the challenges immigrant families face, especially Pakistani families in Britain during the 1980s. The film explores the intergenerational cultural conflicts within families and the relentless discrimination faced by immigrants. The conflict between Javed's dreams and his father, Malik's traditional values, highlights how hard it can be for second-generation immigrants to balance their family's cultural expectations with their personal goals, especially in a society with racism and economic struggles. Crucially, the National Front's protests and Javed's water-spitting attack are not just backdrops as they actively shape Malik's fears and Javed's rebellion. Yet, in moments like Malik listening to Springsteen or reading Javed's "Father and Son" poem, the film suggests that reconciliation is possible, not by erasing differences, but by acknowledging how discrimination forces immigrants to navigate impossible choices. This analysis reveals three insights for immigrant narratives globally: how parental strictness often responds to systemic racism and art (in this context is music) becomes a tool to confront both societal hate and familial misunderstanding, and, last but not least, the film challenges host societies to see immigrants as more than stereotypes but a lesson urgent for nations grappling with diaspora identities.

This paper is just a beginning for looking at the life of the British immigrants from a work of art. For future research, it is important to delve into other forms of arts, such as ethnic painting, literature, and music, if they reflect the life experiences of immigrants. In the long run, more research of this kind must be done to reach an understanding between people of different cultures to create a harmonious global society.

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