



QUEENIE: SMUDGING THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE

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On Sunday May 10, 1987 and Monday May 11, 1987, ABC Television in the United States aired a two-part made-for-TV movie named *Queenie*. *Queenie* is a rare example of the treatment of Anglo-Indians in popular film, television, or in this case a film made for television. The film is based on a book, by the same name, by Michael Korda. Korda's book is structured on the life of his aunt and Hollywood legend Merle Oberon, who is widely considered to have been Anglo-Indian. This paper investigates the text and context of *Queenie* in light of Ella Shohat's assertion that: "ethnicity and race inhere in virtually all film, not only in those where ethnic issues appear on the "epidermic" surface of the text."

In brief, an Anglo-Indian is anyone of European descent in the male line who is of mixed European and Indian blood. I myself am an Anglo-Indian, born and raised in Calcutta, India. I have also been involved in image-making and history-telling of the Anglo-Indian community, primarily through a television documentary that aired on national television in Canada in 1992-93. These significant experiences help frame my reading of *Queenie*. Firstly, I frame my reading of the film through my familiarity with some of the oral history of the community and some of the historical literature. Secondly, I frame my reading through my own experience of living as an Anglo-Indian - relating to others within and outside of my community; and at different points in time internalizing the stereotypes or fighting against them. These frames will become evident in my treatment of *Queenie*.

QUEENIE AS TEXT:

Queenie is a particularly rich film in its representations of 'ethnicities', it is populated with Jews, Indians, Britons, Americans and Anglo-Indians. While it is possible to do an ethnographic study of the representations of each of these peoples, my own interest and focus is on the Anglo-Indians for several reasons. It is my community, it is a community that has received scant attention in Post-colonial studies, and it is a community that has had little opportunity to depict itself in print or visual media.

As Mills points out, two enduring stereotypes of Anglo-Indians portray the community as "lackeys of the British", and as "passing" as Europeans. Both these stereotypes are picked up in Queenie. Queenie's success is based on her ability to "pass" as "white", and she is encouraged by her mother, her Uncle, her agent, and her husband - to use her looks to get ahead.

Since "passing" is one of the major themes of the film Queenie, it is useful to look at the evolution of this notion in relation to Anglo-Indians, and Shohat's proposal that "we may argue for provisional ethnic and racial identities at particular moments of history."

In the early history of the Anglo-Indian community, the administration of the British East India Company encouraged their men to inter-marry with Indian women, have children, and set-up home in India. It was seen to be to the benefit of the Company to integrate with the local population, and Indian women who had children of European men were paid an amount at the time of the child's christening. At first, the male off-spring of these men were guaranteed employment with the company, were considered European, and experienced little discrimination. Thus, "passing" was a non-issue. Two movements led to a change of status for the mixed-race community. One was the bigoted attitudes of Protestant authorities in England towards the, many Catholic, descendants of Portuguese settlers. The second was the realization by the Directors of the British East India Company in England that there was great wealth to be earned in India and, by restricting the employment of mixed-race men, they could send their own sons out to make fortunes. With this differentiation between British and Anglo-Indian, the colour of one's skin became a defining factor. "Passing" became a survival technique.

The socio-economic politics of race are inextricably tied to the stereotype of Anglo-Indians as "lackeys". Anglo-Indians were economically, culturally, psychologically, spiritually and socially dependent on the European colonizers. The colonizers were their fathers, their flesh and blood, and they could not help but have deep ties to their paternal ancestors. The colonialist structure was also the only source of income for many Anglo-Indians. In a strictly caste stratified Indian social system, women who married (or were forcibly taken) out of their caste and race were ostracized by their communities. So Anglo-Indian children did not have access to the land or other resources of their Indian ancestors and communities.

On the other hand, it can be said that some Anglo-Indians did chose to become mercenaries in the armies of the existing Princely States, which belies the stereotype. Perhaps one might argue that more Anglo-Indians should have taken this course. However, such an argument suggests a lack of understanding of familial ties and a sense of loyalty not just to family, but community as well. Besides, not everyone is predisposed to warfare.

Within the colonial system, Anglo-Indians were relegated to the civil services. Because they were fluent in both English and Indian languages, they acted as translators and easily understood instructions. Their lineal ties to the British engendered loyalty which was exploited by the authorities, and they were perceived as a buffer zone between the colonizers and rebellious natives. This earned them the stereotype of "lackey".

In Queenie, the lackey is played by Queenie's Uncle Morgan. He cowers down before his English mistress, and her husband Sir Burton Rumsey, when he is discovered kissing her in the hallway of the Calcutta Cricket Club. He also displays his weak-kneed character in his dealings with the nightclub owner in London who gives him and Queenie their first jobs in their new "Home". His quivering lips, widened eyes, hands raised like a mouse, all attest to his submissiveness before white authority.

A third stereotype of Anglo-Indians that appears prominently in the film is the irrational desire to go "Home". "Home" for Anglo-Indians - in this case Queenie, her

mother, and her uncle - was England. Even though they were born and raised in India, many Anglo-Indians thought of England as their home, and a place they would one day 'return' to. Given their subservient position within the colonial system, and their father's and forefather's talk of "Home", it is understandable that they would internalize this desire in a way that would have paralleled the hope of their Christian faith for a 'promised land'.

In the film, Queenie's British father and grandfather did return "Home" after promising to send for their wives and families. So the desire of Queenie's mother to go "Home" and her hopes for her daughter to go to England, are fuelled by a very real longing to be re-united with her husband; for Queenie to meet her father; and for a better life for all of them. This desire for re-union is problematized by the stereotype, not the fact that the British men who made promises to send for their families did not live up to them.

Anglo-Indian women have also been stereotyped as objects of desire; unfortunately, both from within and without the community. In 1969, when writing a history of the community, the head of the All-India Anglo-Indian Association wrote: "No mention of Anglo-Indian women would be complete without a reference to their striking beauty." He goes on to boast about various renowned beauties who were Anglo-Indian. While the community has prided itself on the features of its women, the other side of the coin is that Anglo-Indian women have borne the burden of being perceived as promiscuous. Since for most of the Raj, few European women ventured to India, and since most Indian women are sheltered within their families, in comparison Anglo-Indian women were visually and physically accessible. This was translated by many to mean they were also sexually available.

In Queenie, the main character is the object of desire from a very young age. While still in puberty, her English teacher (in both senses) offers her private elocution lessons and then attempts to molest her. A few years later, when she visits Sir Burton Rumsey to plead for her uncle's job back, Sir Burton Rumsey rapes her. But only after telling her, "Your black blood makes you so exciting." Later she is raped by the same uncle. Having discovered her sexual assets, Queenie becomes a stripper in London before being discovered for films. Her beauty is linked repeatedly to her

mixed-blood. Her first employer, Dimitri, the owner of the strip club who later becomes her agent, tells her she has dark and exotic looks for an English girl. Her intrigue as a stripper and later as an actress is based on the hint, behind her white skin, of something mysterious.

Part of the appeal of this Cinderellian, rags-to-riches story, is Queenie's evasion of the "colour bar", and her surreptitious crossing of boundaries between black and white. Along with this comes the ambiguity of whether people can tell whether Queenie is white or black. The film repeatedly makes the point that Queenie looks 'white', often through the ways that minor characters speak to her or act towards her - the policeman in Calcutta who tells her she shouldn't be walking outside the foreigners enclave, the servant who greets her at the door to the Rumsey residence, the cab driver in London, the shock of the audience at the premiere of her diegetic film when she asks for her mother to come forward. However, there is often the suggestion that even those 'whites' who perceive her as 'white', sense that there is something exotic about her, as if there are essential characteristics of difference that they feel yet cannot define. This first occurs when her schoolmate Prunella Rumsey taunts her on the playground, and Prunella's character serves as one of the primary plot techniques to keep this point alive throughout the film. So while the film, on one level is predicated on the lack of definitive race demarcations, it still serves to perpetuate essentialist ideas of race.

The connections between race and space in *Queenie* provide an illustration of Shohat's point that, "Positing ethnicities in relational terms can help us envision the possibility of a critical reading which complicates the "center/periphery" dichotomy." When living in India, before going to England, Queenie and her family occupy a transitional space between the British colonizers, and the native Indians. Queenie goes to an English school, which her friend Radha cannot attend. Her Uncle Morgan takes her to the Calcutta Cricket Club where he plays in the band, but she gets thrown out after being identified by Prunella. The British parts of the city are big, sparsely populated, clean and airy. The Indian areas are shown as crowded marketplaces, with narrow streets and lots of vendors. While the Kelley residence is located within this crowded native locality, inside it is spacious and decorated with Victorian furniture. However, it is not as spacious as the Rumsey residence. The audience is never shown the inside of an Indian residence, thus making it clear that

the Indians in the film are just part of the backdrop, without any interiority. [As a sidebar to this question of space, it is very telling that the opening scenic shot of the film shows a crowded street in an Indian city, with mountains in the background. The titles indicated that this is Calcutta in 1931. The only problem is that the real city of Calcutta lies in the delta of the Ganges river, close to sea level, on flat land. The film makers make no attempt at geographical accuracy.]

As a rags-to-riches story (the video cassette cover reads: "Born in a Calcutta slum, a young woman grows up to become a glamorous Hollywood star."). Queenie curiously fails to tackle the most important liberatory themes of the historical time in which the story takes place. Organized political resistance to the British occupation of India was mounting in the early part of the 20th Century, yet the only evidence of this in the film are several riot scenes. Likewise, the All-India Anglo-Indian Association, led by Lt. Col. Sir Henry Gidney from 1920-1942, mounted valiant campaigns for the liberation and legitimization of Anglo-Indians. Yet, Queenie and her family exhibit no sense of community pride or activism. The film, essentially, fails to question the presence of the British in India, taking colonialism for granted.

In its unquestioning acceptance of colonialism, the film positions the audience in the spectatorial seat of the colonizer. In doing so it makes the Anglo-Indian characters, Queenie's mother and Uncle, look ridiculous; especially as they are played by 'white' actors in brown make-up and with pseudo-Indian accents. The film also forces the audience to become collaborators in the persistence of racial and cultural stereotypes. Dimitri the Jewish nightclub owner is depicted as a money-loving, international fugitive. Indians are depicted as riotous, or subservient. The English are pretentious. And the Anglo-Indian stereotypes have already been discussed.

QUEENIE AS CONTEXT:

A Post-modernist reading of any work requires an understanding of it as a construction within its particular contexts. The contexts of the film Queenie are various. It is a cinematic incarnation of a story that had previously appeared as a novel, and perhaps prior to that as various magazine articles, and even before that it was embodied in the life of a real person.

The real person in question is Merle Oberon. She is variously documented to have been born in New York City, Bombay, Calcutta, and Tasmania; in 1915, 1911, 1917, and 1904. In an interview published in *Films in Review*, February 1982, Oberon admits that she made up film credits that appeared in her film publicity biographies. For instance, she admits that she never appeared in "Service for Ladies" and "Never Trouble Trouble". In the same interview, Oberon claims that she was born in Tasmania but lived for a while with relatives in Calcutta. In his novel, *Queenie*, Merle Oberon's nephew Michael Korda, puts the main character's place of birth as Calcutta and has her make up the story about her Tasmanian roots as a way to get employment in England and evade police investigations.

All of this leads to questions of epistemology. While the publicity blurbs for the novel and the film are careful not to explicitly state that they are telling Merle Oberon's life story, they equally carefully plant this idea in the minds of the reader and audience. The first page of the book reads: "The nephew of Merle Oberon and the great Alexander Korda...Michael Korda grew up surrounded by the glitz and glamor (sic) of Hollywood in its heyday." The dust jacket of the video cassettes are less obtuse, they simply state: "Queenie" herself is loosely based on legendary actress Merle Oberon." Given this referential ambiguity, it leaves the audience always wondering to what extent the story is true. Reference to the book does not satisfy one's search for what really happened, and interviews with Oberon only obfuscate the matter more since she demonstrates that she is capable of lying in the interests of her career. It also serves to bring to the forefront the curiosity audiences have about celebrities and their origins.

In the case of Merle Oberon/Queenie, the curiosity with the woman/character is underpinned by a preoccupation with race. Through her career Oberon was dogged by questions about her racial origins. Queenie is also shadowed by the secret about her mixed-race genealogy. Such experiences only rise out of a system where racial delineations are given primary importance and where the economics of employment, social status, geography of residence and access, are bestowed upon some and denied to others.

In researching this paper, watching the film "Queenie" and two of Oberon's films - "Wuthering Heights" and "A Song to Remember"; reading "Queenie" and interviews with Oberon, I have had to ask myself where my own interest in her racial identity lies. As I stare at her face in photographs or on screen, my mind tries to identify features that are Anglo-Indian - her complexion under certain lights, the shape of her eyes, the bone structure. I realize that none of this matters. Her images are constructions - the lighting, costuming and make-up could have been designed to make her look more or less 'white' and what I see may only be one representation of her. The boast of Anglo-Indians that we can spot another Anglo-Indian out of a crowd fails me here.

I ask myself, do I want her to be Anglo-Indian? A part of me does. Why? Perhaps, because I want or need icons of success from within my community. Since a majority of the images of my community are negative, I want to balance them out with some positive ones. This part of me wants the 'truth' to be known, and by this I mean the diversity within the community. Along with this is a certain sense of outrage that 'white' communities, especially the British, claimed as their own Anglo-Indians who achieved a degree of success and could pass as white. Thus depriving us of our role models. Unfortunately, these high achievers played into this rewriting of history, and the Anglo-Indian community can only pass around the rumour that a Merle Oberon or Cliff Richards is one of us.

More than that it gets back to the notion of race as a concept put forward by colonizing forces to separate. It came out of European scientism, and empiricism, and when equated with notions of racial superiority, and political domination in the 19th century, it resulted in imperialism. This positivist attitude led to legal delineation, that cannot be reasonably maintained because human beings as a species demonstrate spectrums of characteristics and do not easily fall into categories. The Merle Oberons of the world bring the positivist racial categories crashing down and it is enticing for people with post-modern sensibilities to applaud Oberon's boundary smudging.

However, it behooves us to be careful of such enticements. Shohat makes the point that, "immigrants themselves played a major role in Hollywood, occupying a

contradictory position. Thus the study of American cinema is necessarily as well the study of the projected "American Dream" of these immigrants, their manner of perceiving the image that hegemonic America would desire for itself." Queenie as a cultural artifact, particularly an American artifact, serves to promote racial delineation and power structures even as it purports to blur them. On one level Queenie seems to demonstrate a crack in the colonial/race wall, and Hollywood can point to Merle Oberon's life and say, 'she made it therefore we weren't as racist as we're made out to be. See we let her in.' However, she was let in because she was thought to be 'white'. The production codes in Hollywood at the time would not have allowed her to play opposite the likes of Laurence Olivier and Paul Muni had she been known to have been touched by the 'tar brush'. Oberon succeeded despite the racist production codes. However, the success of people like her can be used to deny the need for real change in cinematic production - on and off-screen.

In conclusion, returning to Shohat, one sees that while dealing with the ethnicity of Queenie the Anglo-Indian girl who 'made good', Queenie is equally about the ethnicity of the American producers and audience. Americans can look at the film and condemn the British for their imperialism, under which Americans also suffered. At the same time Americans can pretend, as the film does, that racial issues were not dividing their society in the 1930-60's, or for that matter in the 1980's when the film was made. A tolerant multi-racial American society is assumed by the very absence of these issues being presented. It is further supported by the magnanimous attitude of the Director David König when he discovers Queenie's true story and saves the day by marrying her instead of seeing his star actress go to an Indian jail. As the most prominent American character in the film he symbolically projects a tolerant American society. Ironically, König is based on Alexander Korda who was not American, he was Hungarian born and made his career in Britain.

Furthermore, by not dealing explicitly within the film with questions about race - how is it conceived, by whom, and for what reasons; questions about truth; questions about historical accuracy, and questions about power relations within imperialism, Queenie serves to position the spectator as a collaborator on these issues in a particular but undefined way. So while British colonialism in India ended 50 years ago, the perceptions of the Anglo-Indian community that were created during the Raj

continue to be sold to an unknowing audience of Americans, and others around the world, who have access to Blockbuster Video stores.

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