

## **The Indian family on UK reality television: Convivial culture in salient contexts**

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### **Abstract**

This article demonstrates how *The Family* (2009), a fly-on-the wall UK reality series about a British Indian family, facilitates both current public service broadcasting requirements and mass audience appeal. From a critical cultural studies perspective, the author examines the journalistic and viewer responses to the series where ‘authenticity’, ‘universality’ and ‘comedy’ emerge as major themes. Textual analysis of the racialised screen representations also helps locate the series within the contexts of contested multiculturalism, genre developments in reality television and public service broadcasting. Paul Gilroy’s concept of ‘convivial culture’ is used as a frame in understanding how meanings of the series are produced within a South Asian popular representational space. The author suggests that the social comedy taxonomy is a prerequisite for the making of this particular observational documentary. Further, the popular (comedic) mode of conviviality on which the series depends is both expedient and necessary within the various socio-political contexts outlined.

**Keywords:** reality TV, family, comedy, public television, popular culture, genre, Asian, multiculturalism, ethnicity

The Grewals live in a five-bedroom, pebble-dashed house under the Heathrow airport flight path in Windsor, England. In the summer of 2009, twenty-eight cameras, thirty-seven microphones, several miles of cabling and a production crew in the back garden were set up to film the daily experiences and interactions of the three-generation Indian family. With over one thousand hours of footage by the end of filming, the editing stage was a significant part of the post-production process, providing an opportunity for the creative presentation of this ‘reality’ programme. In the winter of 2009, Channel 4, the UK’s fourth public service broadcasting channel, broadcast its second series of *The Family* (2009) featuring the Grewals. The eight part series was aired in a 9pm peak-time slot and was part of a broader strand of multi-camera, observational documentary examining family life in Britain. The first series (2008) had centred on the Hughes, a White British family. The focus on an Indian (to be specific, a British, South Asian, Punjabi, Jat-Sikh) family, marked a departure from the typically White mainstream television representations of the British family, including in previous family-based ‘fly-on-the-wall’ television documentaries (see Holmes 2008).

Channel 4’s *The Family* has been lauded by critics. *The Grewals* (as I will now refer to this second series) has been acclaimed by Channel 4’s Head of Diversity, Oona King, as a, “seminal moment in the diversity history of...ethnic minority representation on British television” (King in RSA 2009). In a panel discussion held at the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), the production team attributed its success to the family’s authenticity, universality and entertainment values. For media consultant, Paminder Vir (herself a British-Punjabi), the series was a “credit to terrestrial television that it has caught up” [with ‘real life’ ethnic minorities] and “normalised us” (Vir in RSA 2009). In 2010 the series was nominated for a prestigious British Academy of Film and Television Arts award in its Factual Series category. Such confident endorsements, centred on the apparent realism of the series, support the truth-based claims of even those

‘post-documentary’ forms that combine factual information with entertainment values (Corner 2002; Hill 2002). They also correspond with one of the dominant arguments in reality and lifestyle TV scholarship (running alongside those based around issues of governmentality, Andrejevic 2002); that the reality genre has a progressive social agenda in how it accommodates an opening up (Dovey 2000) or “pluralling up” (Brunsdon 2003: 18) of social diversity.

I want to approach *The Grewals* from a critical cultural studies perspective: both within the context of British-Asian screen representation; and against the backdrop of broader genre and institutional developments in UK public service broadcasting. The methodology will combine reception analysis and textual analysis. The limits of this article in being able to offer extensive reception analysis based either on the sample or approach used is acknowledged. It is beyond the scope of this article to develop an extensive reception analysis in addition to a detailed critical cultural analysis of the discursive and ideological issues and contexts. What is provided is an examination of how responses to the series have been publically framed in order to determine what has made *The Grewals* so successful now and what constitutes the media’s own interest here. The responses discussed have been sourced from journalistic criticism in the UK broadsheet press (which featured the series at some length compared to the tabloid press), viewer comments collated from the series’ interactive website (set up by the producers of the series, Dragonfly TV, as part of its multi-platform activities) and from the self-described ‘progressive Sikh blog’, *The Langar Hall*), and finally from the programme publicity (including pre-existing interviews with the producers and broadcaster).

First, I discuss Paul Gilroy’s proposal that, through ‘conviviality’, a new way of living with difference has emerged; an important facet of which has manifested within popular culture. I suggest *The Grewals* is an articulation of “convivial culture” (Gilroy 2004). Then I

examine responses to the series which I argue present a set of overlapping value assertions around the programme's authenticity, universality and comedy. I am principally fascinated with what *The Grewals* is symptomatic of and the basis of the major evaluative judgements around it. I present an analysis mainly within the circuits of meaning and readings mediated by public debate to explore some of these underlying issues that relate text with context. Several points of significance appear to be involved in this representation of the Indian family, and are offered up as expositive examples: questions of 'reality' and representation, the trajectory of reality genre development and the motivations of public service broadcasting itself. These highly salient contexts will be examined together in the final section.

The article considers this dense moment of representation through a series of interpretative examples linking cultural representation to complex social issues. The primary aim of the article is not to simply critique the representations at work, but to discuss the role of wider context in shaping purpose and constructing meaning. Simply positioning *The Grewals* as a ground-breaking television text obfuscates the specific techniques deployed in a reality culture that now platforms ethnic diversity in order to secure institutional support and win over audiences. Through textual analysis, the idea that *The Grewals* really can be regarded as "seminal" (as claimed) is also called to question. My reading of all eight episodes of *The Grewals* suggests that the series depends more on the repertoire of elements underpinning the social comedy genre than those of observational documentary. This is hardly surprising given that the reality genre is usefully treated as a "generic hybrid", drawing on elements from drama, documentary and tabloid journalism (Casey *et al.* 2003). The concern rather is why it is the social comedy taxonomy that is a prerequisite for the making of this particular post-documentary series. A conventionalised and caricatured modality of British-Asian convivial culture is in turn facilitated, lending itself especially well to the crossover appeal and commodification of South Asian popular culture in current

contexts. A further predicament is how this manifests itself when passed off as ‘reality’; thus obliquely calling to question the relationship between authenticity and performance.

### *A contested multicultural moment*

The major context in which the article is framed is the UK’s contested project of multiculturalism. As Britain’s streets become more multicultural, we have witnessed since the late 1990s, a critical shift against the ideological principles underpinning multiculturalism. These are based on claims to difference and inclusion and addressed by “strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up” (Hall 2000: 210). The wider European political landscape is engaged today in a neoliberal politics that is open to the idea that there is no payoff from an apparent engagement of political debate (for example, ideological concerns around cultural representation) into structural questions of redistribution in the economic sphere. The UK Prime Minister David Cameron has criticised the “doctrine of state multiculturalism” (Cameron 2011) and a ferocious mainstream popular attack on multiculturalism has been mobilised on the basis of its supposed tribalism and divisiveness. This has been particularly intensely targeted at Britain’s Muslim communities (Joppke 2009).

One of the dimensions of mainstream attacks on multiculturalism is the emphasis on cultural difference. And so it is interesting that the Grewals, British-Sikhs deriving originally from rural Punjab,<sup>1</sup> are configured here as the quintessential Indian family by the public broadcaster. Within the context of postcolonial settlement in Britain, the British Sikh and British-Hindu diasporic communities (now in their third and fourth generations) are dominantly constructed in representation and public discourse as ‘assimilated’ South Asians, specifically contra Bangladeshis and Pakistanis (the majority of which are British-Muslims). Sikhs (and Hindus) are primarily (although not absolutely) seen to represent values that are

more tolerant, inclusive, aspirational and ultimately Western, compared to Muslims who are more zealously associated with antiquated, oppressive and patriarchal values (Sian 2011). Notably, British Sikhs are also the wealthiest Indians in the UK<sup>2</sup> and largely a business-oriented community; in stark contrast British Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are extremely vulnerable in the economy (Peach 2006). The legacy of Sikh involvement in serving the British Empire, coupled with their enhanced socioeconomic status, produces an ambiguous relationship to the UK for a still marginalised group. Sian, in her discussion of growing Islamophobia in the Sikh diaspora, suggests that, “as a consequence, the West is neither totally ‘Other’ to the Sikhs nor are they the same as the West.” (Sian 2011: 124). Punjabi culture itself is commonly depicted as high-energy, colourful, fun(ny) and *convivial*, typified by bhangra (Indian folk) dancing, dhol (drum) music and Bollywood film routines. Between 2002 and 2006 BBC Bollywood was introduced by the public service broadcaster as its ident, highlighting the national significance of Punjabi culture which now has proven success in ‘crossing over’ to the mainstream. British Punjabis therefore occupy a representational space marked both by distinction and inclusion.

Public service broadcasting continues to be imbricated in this vexed politics of difference. The intensified withdrawal of multiculturalism in society has coincided with a contrasting drive within public service broadcasting; a depoliticised multiculturalism strategised as an institutionalised mainstreaming of diversity. The catalyst here was the UK 1990 Broadcasting Act, in which the public service case for earlier models of targeted multicultural programming was undermined by the emerging cultures of commercialism triggered by increasing competition, lighter touch regulation and technological developments. As the reality/lifestyle genre occupies a greater amount of the public service schedule, its popular formats have become a safe and reliable space within which ethnic difference can be performed and, additionally, a credible solution for platforming ethnic diversity.

Concurrently, the rise of ‘post-national’ diasporic TV (led by cable and satellite systems) has seen ethnic minorities (and particularly British-Asians) also alter their response to public service broadcasting as a form of media governance (Ofcom 2008). It is important to know that Channel 4 was launched in 1982 with a brief to innovate and cater for minority interests. Twenty years later, the Channel closed its Multicultural Programmes Department arguing that the minorities of yesterday had now been assimilated (Jackson 2001). In 2008, these assertions were apparently contradicted when Channel 4 announced that as part of its major review of its public service role, it was going to work on re-establishing its connection with minority audiences.<sup>3</sup> This intriguing policy U-Turn reflects the extreme pressure the channel is under; its current public-service drive is strategically entwined with its renewed diversity emphasis (which arguably sits at the heart of a public service ethos in which public value is determined). The problem of the ethical dimension for public service broadcasters is currently being managed alongside a range of these real economic requirements.<sup>4</sup> Convivial culture in this contested multicultural moment (both in terms of civic life and institutional approaches), takes on new meanings. Different South Asian groups are varyingly incorporated and excluded (arguably because of the exact market each is seen to represent) and especially caught up in the difficulties facing the UK’s public service broadcasters.

### ***The Grewals as Convivial Culture***

Each returning series of Channel 4’s *The Family* reinforces mediations – and yet the ordinariness – of British multicultural. The respectable ratings of *The Grewals* (debuting with 2.6million) and positive critical response appear to have encouraged the Channel to extend its diversity portfolio further; a Nigerian British family, the Adesinas were selected to feature in the third series (2010) although the same ratings and critical success were not achieved. Vertovec (2010) outlines how political and sociological cosmopolitanism is based around

ideas of commonality and shared morality through everyday encounters. Gilroy argues that cosmopolitanism has been damaged by a neo-imperial agenda in Britain.<sup>5</sup> But for Gilroy, there are also signs that a more “vulgar” or “demotic” (or ordinary) turn now has the potential to replace this; in the form of a demotic cosmopolitanism he terms “convivial culture”. For Gilroy, contemporary popular culture has become a prime space where convivial culture is produced and where the struggles over what constitutes British culture (and indeed Britishness) are rehearsed. Gilroy cites as examples the ambiguous comedic incarnation, Ali G, the music of Mike Skinner (The Streets), and Ricky Gervais’ mockumentary, *The Office* (BBC). So Ali G’s critical success can be attributed to the release and relief of managing multiculturalism through humour, stemming from how this much debated character delivers a productive (and indeed polysemiological) response to the contested multiculturalism moment. The musician, Mike Skinner, meanwhile, offers an alternative to and a rejection of the imperial project (Gilroy 2004).

Gilroy’s arguments about how and why the new popular cultural practices open up ‘convivial’ spaces cannot simply be interpreted as utopianism or, for that matter, optimism. There is an ambivalence involved, identified long ago by Stuart Hall in his discussion of black popular culture, which positions popular culture as a deeply contradictory space marked by struggle and the simultaneous threat of incorporation or exclusion (Hall 1993). On the one hand, when situated in the context of market forces, Gilroy suggests that what we might be getting is a “pastiche of multiculturalism that is manipulated from above by commerce” (Gilroy 2004: 147). On the other, he maintains that convivial culture becomes a possible manoeuvre for managing the potential challenges of living with multiculturalism (and the interactions it offers). In spite of its contradictory politics, convivial culture for Gilroy offers the “ability to live with alterity without becoming anxious, fearful or violent” (Gilroy 2004:



xi); it becomes a key mode through which cohabitation is held in place, though certainly not suggestive that an end to racism has occurred.

Living with difference, an inevitable aspect of multiculturalism, becomes a core facet of the reality television endeavour. (Gilroy cites the lifestyle home makeover shows, *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force*, as convivial spaces that present, “liberating ordinariness that makes strangeness recede in a fog of paint fumes and sawdust” (Gilroy 2004: 119). *The Family*’s hand-picked English, Punjabi and Nigerian families blatantly flaunt a culturally-varied and trouble-free vision of social diversity, signalling a depoliticised version of multiculturalism and an ambivalent tie to its guiding principles. Reality television is deeply implicated here in constructing an idea of what the British national family constitutes. *The Guardian*’s feature as part of the promotion for *The Grewals* was titled, ‘Meet the Grewals, a British Indian family just like yours’ (Dee 2009). Parminder Vir assures us that the series is “about universal themes...it could be any family” (RSA 2009). Whilst the formal codes of the observational documentary bring us dangerously close to the Indian family’s private sphere, the emphasis on common humanity and sameness in these discourses reassures us that we can also do so without fear, one of the major motives for anti-cosmopolitanism (Vertovec 2010).

The primary device through which this ‘sameness’ is produced textually is, I want to argue, through its social comedy construction. The significance is that comedy has become a licensed zone for British-Asians in popular culture, and particularly prevalent within mainstream screen representations (Author 2002; Gillespie 2003). What materialises is a mediated convivial culture, accommodated by the elasticity of the reality genre. In turn, a form of cultural catharsis emerges by putting the same people (South Asians) in the same situation (comedy) whilst also successfully obscuring the empirical and problematical politics of difference.

The contradictory basis of convivial culture means that such representations also serve a major social function for a range of cultural stakeholders, from public service broadcasters, to audiences, to the so-called ‘ordinary’ participants involved. The nod to conviviality is supported by a set of institutional circumstances that require the mainstreaming of social diversity and, at least on the surface, appears to challenge the revitalised populist neoliberal racialised agendas. Before discussing these dynamic contexts on their own, I turn my attention to responses to the series. These demonstrate how reality texts depend on a lesser or greater degree of intervention from their makers depending on the precise social functions that they are set up to serve.

### ***Real, Universal and Funny: Determining Value in the Television Text***

Media and cultural analysis highlights how, rather than simply reflecting or presenting reality, the work of representation constructs reality and, more than that, serves an important role in how social relations develop and ideologies are constructed. Roger Silverstone in his discussion of narrative form remarked how “Television programmes, as all culture, have the status of ‘as-if’ constructions. Even in their claims to present reality they present fiction” (Silverstone 1983: 137). The idea that *The Grewals*, fronted by apparently ordinary people in their private sphere, is somehow more real or authentic is a peculiar proposition set against these social constructionist arguments. Analysis of the journalistic and viewer responses to the series suggests a convergence on the series’ emotional, historical and social significance and explicitly on three, overlapping value assertions which I utilise here as analytic categories – authenticity, universality and comedy. Charlotte Brunsdon underlines the importance of problematising how evaluative judgements of television are made, urging, “Judgements are being made all the time, so let’s talk about them” (Brunsdon 1990: 90). Robin Nelson who,

along with Brunsdon, has addressed the question of ‘quality television’, has argued that “when value-assertions are made, it is always worth asking what is the discursive position” (Nelson 2006: 61).

### *Authentic*

Arvinder and Sarbjit Grewal had an arranged marriage and have been together for thirty-five years. Their eldest son, Sunny, is a BMW-loving Heathrow airport security officer who aspires to be a film director. His fiancée, Shay, is a recruitment consultant in the City of London whose family have shunned her because they disapprove of Sunny’s different caste. Then there is daughter Kaki and husband Jeet. Finally, youngest son Tindy, is a twenty-three year-old graduate who sleeps all day and parties all night. The major dramatic narratives that span the series are Shay and Sunny’s pending marriage and a possible resolution with Shay’s Mother in time for the wedding and Kaki’s pregnancy which faces complications. The Diasporic connection with India is represented by Jeet, the son-in-law, and the fourth episode follows the return to his homeland; a storyline with heightened dramatic energy because of his and Kaki’s imminent and subsequently premature baby.

The recurring motifs, however, are centred on the relationships and interactions involved in mundane, everyday life. Arvinder and Sarbjit constantly spar and this is triggered by his blatant sexism (“I want cup of tea”; “gimme the food”; “bring the tea”; “I asked for jam on this...silly fool”, “you are snoring like a pig” and “I couldn't go on *Big Brother*. Who would cook for me?”) The gendered power relations fuel the comedic overtones of the entire series. The heteronormativity of social comedy typically renders women the routine objects of humour and gender conflict is often based around such personal squabbles, not related to broader hierarchical structures of gender (Mills 2004). Whilst Arvinder’s sexism is the axis around which much of the comedy operates and simultaneously reinforces culturalist

assumptions about patriarchal Indian family life, it also appears to be the aspect around which many of the *affective* responses from viewers and critics reside.

*The Langar Hall* is an online space “dedicated to the experiences, reflections, and interests of a diverse group of young individuals – tied together by our common and varied identities as Sikhs in the diaspora” ([www.thelangarhall.com](http://www.thelangarhall.com)). After the screening of the first episode, *The Langar Hall*’s Comments section highlighted perceptions of the Grewals as an authentic Indian family.

It’s not taking the mickey out of the Sikhs or Indians, but maybe it will show the white population that Indians have the same problems, and same issues that they do and at the end of the day they are no different as families go. The mother does seem to hold it all together, just like in most families. (Tony D, *The Langar Hall*)

Another viewer, Roopi, joined *The Langar Hall* discussion stating, “My in-laws however frown upon it but i think it is a true depiction on a typical asian family” (Roopi, *The Langar Hall*). This idea of the Grewals as a “true depiction” also permeated journalistic criticism, particularly in the *Guardian*, the left of centre British broadsheet, which presented various articles on the series. For the paper’s television critic, Grace Dent, *The Family* was more ‘real’ than other (celebrity) reality television versions of family life seen such as, “the Hogans, Kardashians, the Hasselhoffs and Andres [who] are fighting to show you ‘their reality’.” Dent writes:

I love how daily life chez Grewal with mum, dad, Sunny, Shay and Tindy pivots around family themes most of us identify with; incessant piss-taking, in-jokes,

cuddles, nagging and quiet exasperation all played out with a TV blaring in the background. (Dent 2009)

Importantly, Dent's review suggests that the Grewal family offer a more authentic version of reality because of their 'civilian ordinariness' (as non-celebrities to begin with) rather than the 'celebrity ordinariness' of the Kardashians et al. The latter, although more usefully regarded as "celetoids"<sup>6</sup> (Rojek 2001) are still public figures who invite the programme-makers and the public into their private spheres (Rojek 2001). We can consider the particular value assertion around the authenticity of *The Grewals* in relation to the blurring of the public and private and the expansion of celebrity culture to encompass even ordinary people.

Early forms of social documentary, also often based on the lives and circumstances of ordinary people, were geared towards what Stuart Hall (in his analysis of the photographic journal *Picture Post*) has termed, "the democratization of the subject" (Hall 1972: 83). In public service broadcasting's formative years, documentary played a key integrationalist (tasked with binding different classes and communities into a single nation) and instructive role (of informing 'the people' as a classic form of public service). The dominant approach in race-based documentaries was an anthropological mode of social realism, designed to de-alienate the White viewing majority by depicting the 'real life' customs and cultures of visible ethnic minorities and thus promoted the form's pedagogic value and democratising impetus.

Although *The Grewals* has emerged in a starkly different institutional and historical moment, the turn to the 'demotic' (as in the demotic cosmopolitanism described by Gilroy) is the point of significance in mapping how these ideas of authenticity emerge and how 'authenticity' itself is manipulated by the form within which it is expected (and claims) to operate. Early social documentary (critiqued by Hall for having a strong social lens but a

weak political one, Hall 1972) relied on the classic liberal technique of talking on behalf of the Others while simultaneously arguing that they are silenced, marginalised and denied access. This was a key point of contradiction in the social-democratic discourse of early actuality texts. With the broad-based participation that the reality genre has allowed, there is a question of whether the turn to the demotic has also enabled a type of social democracy (or liberal multiculturalism); an assumption which appears to be certified by the public consensus around the family's seeming authenticity. Rather, I suggest that another way of interpreting *The Grewals* is as a form of public service post-documentary, that demonstrates a generic shift in emphasis away from traditional social documentary (and to an extent democratic) values towards "diversion, playful entertainment" (Penzhorn and Pitout 2007: 62). Such developments have also, according to Penzhorn and Pitout, materialised in an alteration from *cognitive* to *affective* audience responses. Most of all, the simple message of *The Grewals* is that families should stick together, positioning it as an intently moralist text anchored in emotional and affective significance.

Much has been said and written about the 'democratization of celebrity' in reality television (Andrejevic 2002). The idea here is that the genre passes itself off not as a form of social control but rather one which transforms 'ordinary people' into celebrities as part of a democratising process. Graeme Turner argues that, "Diversity is not of itself intrinsically democratic irrespective of how it is generated or by whom" (Turner 2006: 158). Following Turner, I want to refute the proposition that the demotic turn – or demotic cosmopolitanism – that *The Grewals* is a fascinating example of, necessarily carries with it a democratising politics (a fundamental concern of which centres on social equality).

Instead, *The Grewals*, *vis-à-vis* a range of production mechanisms of the reality genre and the way the series is institutional positioned by Channel 4, is utilised to promote an *impression* of diversity and equality in a multicultural democracy. Democracy is nothing

more here than a much needed social-purpose within the contexts I am foregrounding; convivial culture is co-opted, packaged and re-oriented to deliver this in the style of an “‘as-if’ construction”. What is missing in the public accounts of *The Grewals* is a distinction between what I am arguing the series achieves (progress with regards to access and visibility; the demotic), and what it does not (progress with regards to textual, discursive and ultimately ideological framing; its democratising potential).

Exploring these production mechanisms further, *The Grewals* reveals a particular tension between ideas of authenticity and performance. The dynamic between what Calvert calls “mediated voyeurism” (Calvert 2000) and “mediated exhibitionism” is a useful idea because the Grewal family are already conscious of themselves as performers prior to filming. Not only are they to be featured in the high-profile Channel 4 series, but some of them are also theatre practitioners and aspiring artists in their non-televised ‘real lives’. Press interviews reveal that the Grewal family were discovered by a television producer in a West-London arts centre where Jeet, a former Bollywood actor, was performing. Kaki and Jeet run the Matribhoomi Theatre Company, which produces Asian language comedy plays. Following the success of *The Grewals*, the company toured with their new play, ‘*Obviously You Are Pregnant and You Look Fat!*’ a recognisable comedic strap-line from the opening credit sequence of the television series. Episode Three follows their journey to the Drum theatre in Central England where they are to perform their stage-play against the odds. The ‘semi-professionalism’ of the Grewal family is already an important part of the making of the series. Their conviviality is already *in situ*. The reality effect helps blur the line between ‘ordinary’ and ‘celebrity’ and between ‘life’ and ‘art’. All of this threatens to bring to the fore the major epistemological concern of performativity in the reality text (see Holmes 2008); a challenge, in fact, to this presentation of authenticity.

The Matribhoomi Theatre Company's work stems from a Punjabi-based, traditional theatre practice that trades on more stereotypical aspects associated with South Asian identity such as generational conflict, arranged marriages (*My Perfect Desi Bride*), and an apparent thirst for money (*Paiseyan Di Hera Pheri/Everybody is After the Money*). The Grewal family have since capitalised on their newfound mainstream success (a BBC radio show for Sunny and Shay and numerous Personal Appearances) and enthusiastic feedback continues to circulate on their various Facebook fan pages. If the series depends on pre-production techniques of non-democratic participant selection (this family was evidently not randomly selected), then so it does on post-production techniques motivated by conventionalised (comedic) approaches to mainstreaming diversity in popular culture. The Grewal family – standing in here for the hegemonic authentic Indian family according to these responses – have just the ‘right amount’ of cultural difference to define the possibilities of a thriving British multiculturalism at a time when the very notion is under attack from various sources.

### *Universal*

I have been discussing the notion of ‘authenticity’ and how this is linked to questions of ordinariness and social democracy. I will now go on to examine the claim of *The Grewals* universality and link this to issues of stereotyping and racialised screen representation. The family has been a key motif and framing device for documentary and post-documentary makers and audiences. Global reality/lifestyle formats such as *Supernanny* and *Wife Swap*, give the illusion of daily reality for ordinary families. Su Holmes, in her analysis of Paul Watson's *The Family* (BBC 1974), cites *Sylvania Waters* (BBC 1992) and Craig Gilbert's *An American Family* (PBS 1973) as examples of “observational documentary's domestic gaze” (Holmes 2008: 196). Jon Stratton and Ien Ang also remark on television's ‘spectacularisation’ of the nuclear family (Stratton and Ang 1994: 6).



In spite of the situation of Diasporization that the Grewals find themselves in, the concern of the series is with local forms of life. The Grewals combine particularity (the specific situation of a Jat-Sikh, British, Indian family) and universality (the main themes being centred on love, marriage, and family relationships). Inevitably perhaps, what emerges in the public responses is a rather muddled debate on stereotyping that suggests the series transgresses pre-existing stereotypes through its emphasis on universal social values. Here are journalistic responses from the *Guardian* and *The Times* respectively:

...if any viewer is still harbouring backward opinions about Indian families they are about to get them squarely bashed in *The Family*. (Dee 2009)

The only way they could be more stereotypical would be if they ran a corner shop. But having said that, the show is also brilliant. Why? Because stereotypes exist for a reason: they are often rooted in truth. Asians do have an obsession with BMWs, and the question of marriage dominates Asian culture. (Sanghera 2009)

On the one hand, there is an assertion in Dee's review, that the series challenges traditional stereotypes of Indian families. On the other, Sanghera (himself a well-known British Punjabi journalist) is arguing that the realism of the series is precisely because of the recognisability of the Asian stereotypes it produces (and moreover that the brilliance of the series is that it presents these). Whilst 'typing' has to be recognized as an inevitable and necessary system of representation, Sanghera's argument which chimes with the "grain of truth" hypothesis in stereotyping theory requires more systematic analysis. How do we relate this notion that stereotypes have at least "a grain of descriptive truth" (Campbell 1967: 824) to the context of reality television representations of ethnic minority cultures? Since stereotypes are the primary device through which representations of race circulate in media texts, it is also

necessary to acknowledge how stereotypes function as a representational practice.

Particularly when we retrospect early social-problem oriented public service documentaries such as *Asian Teenagers* (BBC 1967), it is evident that compelling myths proliferated around South Asians as ‘over-culturalised’, deemed as overly moralistic, oppressive (men)/oppressed (women), alien and tied to cultural difference (Author 2002).

So what is it about *The Grewals* that has secured it as groundbreaking, regardless of whether one considers it to challenge or reproduce stereotypes? Because the reality genre passes itself off as reasonably unscripted compared with non-reality or narrative television (for example, sitcoms or drama), it largely escapes major accusations of misrepresentation, lack of authenticity or ‘negative’ stereotyping; criticisms that television producers, editors and script-writers have long wrestled with. This appears to make the inclusion of ethnic minorities less politically-charged, exempt from the ‘burden of representation’ (debates) and contained in reliable, safe formats.

The family too has been one of the defining tropes through which the South Asian community has been represented in media discourse, as bound by traditional and patriarchal frameworks, albeit through comedic melodrama (consider *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, *East is East* and *West is West*). These social comedy films have typically offered a satirical take on South Asian family life, from a second-generation perspective; arguing the case for transgressive identities (interracial, interethnic, homosexual) and assimilation into liberal, western norms through a critique of, as Pnina Werbner put it, “the older generation’s profligate consumption, false ethics, superstitious religiosity, blind prejudices and obsession with honour and status” (Werbner 2004: 901). *The Grewals* does counter some of these hegemonic narratives. Arvinder’s chauvinism, heteronormative masculinity and indeed authority are routinely undermined by Sarbjit’s sarcastic comebacks, suggesting a resistance to common tropes of female passivity. Shay is an independent,

professional woman and although she faces deep conflict with her own Mother, is portrayed as a loyal and strong-minded daughter-in-law. If *The Grewals* is counterhegemonic in some ways, the social realist aesthetic can be problematic when the basis for the acclaimed ‘authenticity’ is the same as that which is criticised in mainstream contexts for being dependent on ‘negative stereotypes’. In turn, an unresolved tension is produced between the making of the text and the preferred narrative associations and identities that are licensed through it. There is nothing to suggest that because a media text is critically and commercially successful and because of the mode in which diverse inclusion is mobilised, it has also inevitably transgressed earlier mainstream representations of the communities it chooses to foreground. But any concern is offset by the hybrid comedy and reality generic frameworks through which this series is constituted.

### *Funny*

The third value-assertion, premised around the series’ humour provides an opportunity to consider the underlying question of genre. In contrast to Channel 4’s first series of *The Family* based on the Hughes, *The Grewals* is explicitly dependent on aspects of heightened performativity, for example through direct interviews with its participants, a recurrent ‘talking-heads’ component, and on filming the family outside of the home environment and in dramatic contexts (the hospital, the theatre). *The Grewals*’ director, David Clews, has commented that the series, “was not reality television...we weren’t trying to tell linear stories. It was about finding these universal themes so things would then stand out and we would take it from there really” (RSA 2009). What emerges is the specific comedy subgenre of melodramatic parody; a form of social realism with a strong comedic register. Like many previous representations of the South Asian family, *The Grewals* is a generic hybrid (social-realism, drama, documentary, and comedy) where the codes and conventions from one genre

to another coexist (Penzhorn and Pitout 2007). Most of all, its comedic overtones provide audiences with a particularly watchable frame of reference which produces an “interaction between two interdependent dimensions, conventions and expectations” (Luders 2010: 947); the conventions of the form and substance of comedy, overlaid here with the expectations of how South Asians have routinely and securely been positioned within popular culture.

British-Asian social comedy involves working with narrative themes and visual forms that are in accordance with the audiences’ (both Asian and non-Asian) now well-established taste of what the hegemonic authentic Indian constitutes within South Asian popular culture. This is often in line with the proven conventions that have found success in mainstream cinema but also on British television, most notably with the BBC’s hit comedy sketch show, *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC2 1998-2001). This British-Punjabi led sketch-comedy series, which ‘crossed over’ to an eighty-five per cent White viewing audience. For Marie Gillespie, *Goodness Gracious Me* highlights how, “well scripted television comedy can achieve more than a thousand earnest documentaries in combating racism” (Gillespie 2003: 93). Interestingly, the politically astute and omniscient cultural politics of *Goodness Gracious Me* centred on an open presentation of cultural-linguistic heritage *and* implicit self-awareness of popular perceptions of British-Asians. Similarly, the ‘semi-professional’ (theatre practitioner) Grewals appear to solicit extra-diegetic knowledge through bilingualism and Punjabi cultural references, code-switching and linguistic play, all of which cement the comedic air that permeates their household throughout.

These viewers’ comments sourced from the Channel 4 official interactive website for the series also reveal an unanticipated gap between conventions and expectations:

Can't help but feel it's been tampered with. The first series worked so much better as a genuine fly-on-the-wall. You felt like you were stealing a glimpse of real lives, things

seemed to be allowed to play out at a slower more natural pace...Why do we need the staged interviews? It feels contrived. Real shame. (Stripes, 04 November 2009)

Another viewer also commented on the programme's social construction:

Enjoyed this episode but only thing that bugged me theres (sic) to (sic) many one to one interviews and also last time it was centerd (sic) on the family house hold not out and about asking them questions whilst filming. sure i'll get used to it but thought the idea was to see uninterrupted (sic) family life. just my opinion. Just to point out again i did enjoy this just not what i was expecting. (Iced UK, 04 November 2009)

The view from 'Iced UK' that *The Grewals* was "just not what i was expecting" is significant, as are the responses presented here because they stand out as rare occasions when viewers articulate value assertions based on the formal elements and production techniques of the series rather than on the more common concerns with the family's 'authenticity.'

Although categorised as an observational documentary by the producers and as a Factual Series by BAFTA, the series is openly stage-managed and hinged on comedic elements in line with the sitcom; drawing on formal codes of the sketch show and situation drama (Hartley 2008). Brett Mills tells us that the sitcom is a genre, "criticized for its simplistic use of stereotypes, outmoded representations and failure to engage with social or political developments" (Mills 2009: 63) and a genre broadly understood as fundamentally conservative, an aspect upheld by its "stable form" (Mills 2009: 65). At work here is also what Hamamoto in his analysis of 'Nervous Laughter' has described as "repression" or further, a form that is "repressively commercial" (Hamamoto 1989). Oona King (Channel 4's Head of Diversity) was pleased that *The Grewals* had produced "comedy gold" (King in RSA

2009). I am asserting not simply that comedy becomes a by-product of the social realism, but that the making and sustainability of the series depends principally on cementing this Indian family as comedic and thus as a source of convivial pleasure.

### ***Highly Salient Contexts***

I want to pull together these value assertions of *The Grewals*, based around its authenticity, universality and comedy, by suggesting that media meanings are constructed within and emerge out of particular social-political, cultural and ideological contexts. Convivial culture has arisen in highly salient contexts allied with the neoliberal ‘free market’ agenda currently challenging public service broadcasting and, possibly more pertinently, against the grain of an increasingly hostile era of post-multiculturalism. In foregrounding the broader politics that *The Grewals* is symptomatic of, I have been arguing that there are a range of political, industrial and genre dimensions that make it a compelling text within these broader domains. The first is the altering socio-political context of mediated multiculturalism; the second is the institutional context of public service broadcasting; and the third the changing landscape of actuality programming.

The paradox of mediated approaches to multiculturalism is how they can adapt to suit different contexts. In the same moment that political discourse retracts from multiculturalism in policy-making, it is being utilised by the public service broadcasters as a source of public value. *The Grewals* now sits proudly as a beacon in Channel 4’s latest diversity branding strategy. It signals the beginning of a more mainstream definition of multiculturalism in an attempt to attract bigger audiences; of the kind that were so active in their praise of *Goodness Gracious Me* in the 1990s. So *The Grewals* are featured prominently on the Diversity department’s web page along with other reality stars such as the British-Chinese ‘fashion guru’ Gok Wan. This is also an environment in which, as delocalization develops, the

national public service broadcasters (in attempt to retain public value) exhibit themselves as a form of ‘social glue’ that produces the ideological pursuits of common culture and national unity.

Reality television has been abundantly used in this moment of unsettled negotiation between the media and the public. Debates around reality television have tended to proliferate around questions of cultural value rather than the wider significance of reality television as a product of shifting social, political and institutional orientations (Bignell 2005). The (r)evolution of the genre, linked to the changing public service broadcasting landscape, has been a turning-point in the fraught relationship between ethnic minority representation and television. The hyper-visibility of multicultural societies (against the backdrop of ‘post-multiculturalism’ that we are experiencing) has produced an interesting dynamic between on and off screen contexts. The reality genre with its racially-neutral connotations (racial difference and social divisions are rarely openly discussed) also suggests that racial power structures appear to be broken. *The Grewals*, certainly through its comedic construction, becomes a low-risk solution for Channel 4. This is a Channel, after all, that is tasked with a variety of cultural and economic expectations and from a range of public stakeholders; one constituent of which is the increasingly powerful and growing British-Punjabi demographic with an abundance of media choice.

### ***The Pleasures of Conviviality***

I have been arguing that in spite of the obvious pleasures of *The Grewals*, it also meets ‘culturalist’ representative expectations of what constitutes ‘South Asianness’; the same kinds of people seen in more or less the same situation. *The Grewals* appears to help fulfil various, seemingly contradictory, social functions. These include the renormalization of ideas of cultural difference which overwhelmingly hold expectations and conventions in

place; the apparent mobilisation of access for otherwise marginalised social groups; and the blurring of private and public (and I would add generic comedy and actuality) domains to meet our current demands for both ‘mediated voyeurism’ and ‘mediated exhibitionism’. For all the emphasis on universality in public debates around the series, it simply would not have worked in the same way outside of the framework of the South Asian popular.

Returning finally to this idea of convivial culture, *The Grewals* has emerged against the grain of post-multicultural momentum. As Claire Alexander points out in her discussion of South Asian popular culture, these flashpoints can serve as “a cultural diversion from the pursuit of social justice and equality” (Alexander 2008: 4). One of the characteristics of convivial culture, according to Gilroy, is that it is also importantly a kind of culture that positions itself as racism free. Through the documentary’s stylistic conventions, *The Grewals* gives an impression of truth, unmediation and actuality, cast to be representative of the *real* lived diversity out there; a typical Indian, working-class family. It comes as some relief then that they never talk about structural inequalities or social issues of race that occur outside of the Indian community; thus helping produce a sense of post-racial catharsis because they symbolise an unproblematic and thriving cultural pluralism and, indeed, a depoliticised multiculturalism.

Such versions of convivial culture come with both opportunities and pitfalls. I want to add, they are demotic *not* democratic. Whilst reality television has become an important genre both for contemporary representations of ethnic diversity and ‘ordinary people’ on screen, it tends not to address structures of racism or for that matter, challenge the media production of racialised regimes of representation. In the face of its conservatism and apparent lack of requirement for radical reformism, it can help renormalize our understanding of cultural difference and therefore act as a fundamentally conformist cultural experience, maintaining social order. This reality series facilitates a sense of stability and social



equilibrium in a complex society in which the very idea of cultural difference is being problematised in the public domain. As the Documentary section of the Channel 4 website says, “We are itching to do more big series that combine scale with simplicity in the manner of *The Family*... we will be selecting ideas which put a premium on humour...” (Channel 4 2011).

Through this interpretative analysis of the text and its reception I have been arguing that the social function of democracy and cultural pluralism that reality television superficially delivers requires deeper probing. The shifting rhetorical value of ‘convivial culture’ means that processes of commodification, incorporation and identification are all involved in how these ultimately racialised discourses are mobilised and subsequently become institutionalised. This complicates the way we understand and receive such ‘ordinary’ representations. A logical consequence at this point is further audience analysis, particularly centred on the reception of the series amongst South Asian diaspora viewers. In spite of popular notions of *The Grewals* as authentic, universal and funny, it also needs to be approached as a contestable and ambivalent text implicated in a struggle to produce mainstream discourses of social diversity. This is a critical concern in how we begin to evaluate what an ethnically diverse media representation needs to ‘do’ in order to be considered significant in current contexts.

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## Endnotes

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1 The 2001 census recorded 336,000 Sikhs living in Britain (the vast majority of which are Indian) and it is estimated in 2011 that there are approximately 750,000 in Britain, forming the largest Sikh community outside India.

2 Sikhs are the second wealthiest religious group after Jewish people in the UK, with a median total household wealth of £229,000. (LSE. 2010. An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK. Report of the National Equality Panel. The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion. 2010-01-29. <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/CASereport60.pdf>. Retrieved 16th February 2012.)

3 Oona King, Channel 4's Head of Diversity, stated in the context of her discussion of *The Grewals*, "one of the biggest issues for diversity *per se* is this mainstreaming issue" (King, cited from RSA 2009).

4 In 2007, Channel 4 sought government funding support but this was rejected. Subsequently, the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Andy Burnham, called for "broader decisions about the future framework of public service broadcasting" (BBC News, 2008). Whilst considered central to the UK's creative output and a strong public service competitor to the BBC, Channel 4 is expected to report an annual deficit of £150m a year from 2012.

5 In *After Empire* (2004), Gilroy discusses the cultural consequences of this within the context of what he terms, "postcolonial melancholia".

6 In his work on celebrity, Chris Rojek uses this term for those who now receive concentrated

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media attention in spite of their limited talent or skills.