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## Blinded by the Light

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# Blinded by the Light

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Blinded by the Light* (2019) directed by Gurinder Chadha.

## **Author Notes**

Amir Hussain is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, the Jesuit university in Los Angeles. He teaches courses on Islam and comparative religion. From 2011 to 2015, Amir was the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and he is currently on the board of directors of the American Academy of Religion. He is an advisor for the television series *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman*. His most recent book is *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*, fourth edition, published in September 2019 by Oxford University Press. The author or editor of nine other volumes, he has also published over 60 book chapters and scholarly articles about religion.



Viveik Kalra as Javed in *Blinded by the Light* (2019)

To begin most simply: *Blinded by the Light* (2019) is an extraordinary film that rewards the viewer and deserves repeated watching. It leaves you happy and even joyful as you leave the theatre, and in these dark days, joy is often in short supply. What makes the film even more powerful is that it is based on a true story, *Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion and Rock N' Roll*, a memoir published by Sarfraz Manzoor in 2007. Manzoor was born in Lyallpur (coincidentally, the city of my birth), Pakistan, and moved when he was a child to the town of Luton, some 30 miles northwest of London, England. It was there that he discovered the music of Bruce Springsteen, and by his own account Manzoor has been to over 150 Springsteen shows. I am obsessive about some of my musical heroes, but I don't think I've seen a single artist or group any more than 15 times, so one gets a scale of Manzoor's fandom.

The film is a coming-of-age story, directed brilliantly by Gurinder Chadha, who is most famous for an earlier feminist coming-of-age story, *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002). It stars Viveik Kalra in his first film role as Javed, the fictionalized version of the young Manzoor. The film is set in Mrs. Thatcher's Britain of 1987, around the time of her third election victory as Prime Minister. It is a time of economic hardship for many, with a rise in racial tension and violence, including a march by the far-right Fascist party, the National Front. The parallels to the contemporary situations in both the United Kingdom and the United States are obvious, and make the film even more relevant in both countries.

Javed begins high school at the start of the film, where he has to negotiate both the new environment at school, as well as his relationship with his immigrant family, played superbly by Kulvinder Ghir as his father Malik, Meera Ganatra as his mother Noor, and Nikita Mehta (also in her debut film role) as his younger sister Shazia. At school, Javed takes an English class because he yearns to be a writer, but his immigrant father wants him to become a lawyer or a businessman. Many of us who are the children of immigrant parents know this first-hand: the pressure to succeed, coupled with the measurement of that success being either a doctor (not a PhD, but to quote my blessed mother, “a *real* doctor, the kind that helps people”), a lawyer, an engineer, or a business owner. There are often no other career options presented to us.

Javed's English teacher Ms Clay (a beautiful performance by veteran actor Hayley Atwell, familiar to fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as Peggy Carter) helps to develop his talents, and pushes him as a writer. He makes friends with a fellow Punjabi at school, a Sikh named Roops (Aaron Phagura, who plays the role perfectly), who introduces Javed to the music of Bruce Springsteen. In the same English class Javed is attracted to a beautiful young student, Eliza (Nell Williams, who is masterful in her role, portraying the jumble of emotions that exist within every

high school student), but he has no idea how to approach her or even talk with her since he's never had a girlfriend. It is these relationships that make the film as authentic and powerful as it is. Ms Clay is no "White savior," as in real-life there wouldn't have been a lot of Pakistani Muslim teachers in Luton in 1987. The connection with Roops is also realistic, for though they come from different religious backgrounds, they would share many things in common as Punjabis (my own native Urdu, for example, is mixed with words and phrases in Punjabi, and my favourite Indian restaurant is run by a Sikh family). Also in the 1980s, there weren't as many South Asians in the school as there would be now, so it's not surprising that they would literally bump into each other. As an immigrant coming from a culture where arranged marriage was the norm (Javed's older sister, Yasmeen, is married off in just such an arrangement), Javed certainly wouldn't be expected to date, or have the success with girls that his best friend Matt (played wonderfully by Dean-Charles Chapman) has.

The film deals with the harsh realities that Javed has to face. He's threatened by a skinhead who abuses him, and paints racist graffiti on the housing complex where Javed lives, telling him to "go home." He sees young children racially torment his Pakistani neighbours. He has to deal with the economic uncertainty that arises when his father loses his job at the local Vauxhall car plant, and watches as his mom works late into the night sewing dresses to make ends meet and sells her gold wedding jewelry to pay for his elder sister's wedding. Moreover, he has to deal with his demanding father who wants the boy to work and help support the family, rather than write poetry and try to get an article published in the student newspaper. What makes the film work so well isn't simply the lightness of the film as it deals with these heavy themes, or the happy ending, but the relationships within Javed's family. There is a genuine love revealed between the mother and father, as well as a love that they both have for their family. There are genuine, authentic

relationships between the characters, not just between Javed and Emily, but between Javed and Matt, Javed and Roops, and Javed and his sister Shazia. In one touching sequence, he takes her to a “daytimer,” where South Asian kids can dress up and dance with each other in a nightclub that operates secretly in the day, allowing the kids to mingle in a way they never would be allowed to at night by their parents. In doing so, he learns something about his sister, which in turn deepens their relationship.

That is the heart of the movie, a celebration of the poetry of the ordinary lives lived by the characters. That’s the connection that Javed finds in the music of The Boss, who has often been called the poet of the working class. In 1981, when I was in high school, I saw Springsteen for the first time on the second leg of his tour for *The River*. In 1988 I would see him a second time on the magisterial Human Rights Now tour in support of Amnesty International and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Those performances were legendary Bruce epiphanies, marathon sets that showcased his music, the work of his extraordinary band, and the transformative power of rock and roll. I also got my first Sony Walkman in high school, and it was the music of Dire Straits (and the sublime Mark Knopfler) that was often on my headphones. *Blinded by the Light* captures the primal power of music to move people, and to help them connect to other people, if only briefly in a shared song.

It is the music that connects a young man from Bury Park in the UK to the man who made Asbury Park famous in the USA. It’s after a trip with Roops to Springsteen’s hometown and early environs that Javed is able to reunite with his family, helping them to understand that it is their love and support that will allow him to go away to university to further develop his craft as a writer. When I speak, as a Muslim academic to Muslim audiences, I often tell parents that we have enough

Muslim doctors, Muslim engineers, and Muslim business owners. What we need are more Muslim artists, Muslim writers, Muslim musicians, in short more Muslims who can tell our own stories.

Another gem about the film is that the religious identity that Javed and his family have are part of who they are, but not the sole determinant of their identity. Being Muslim plays a role, but so does being an immigrant, and being straight, and being a minority, and being poor, and all of the other parts of the complex that make us who we are. Gurinder Chadha has already earned her accolades as a director, and this film will only add to them. There is, to pardon the obvious pun, no wrong note in the movie. The revelation is Viveik Kalra, who makes a stunning debut as an actor. You leave the film happy, reveling in the character that he has created, and the story that Manzoor has told. This is a film that I will use as often as I can, both in my religion and film classes, as well as in my Islam classes. The movie is a masterpiece.



Nell Williams (Eliza), Viveik Kalra (Javed), and Aaron Phagura (Roops)