

**As British as Chicken Tikka Masala:
Hybridity and Multiculturalism in
*The Great British Bake Off***

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Abstract

This essay examines the controversy that often surrounds *The Great British Bake Off* due to its diverse casting choices and status as a beloved British cultural symbol. Television is often an indicator of broader social attitudes and as such can be a revealing site of analysis. I draw on the postcolonial theory of hybridity to illustrate the connections between cultural fusion in food on reality television and cultural transformations and attempts to preserve national culture in Britain. I also describe the various perspectives on multiculturalism that have been displayed in the public discourse around *Bake Off* in recent years and draw parallels between backlash against the show's casting choices and responses to the integration of ethnic minorities in the West. *Bake Off* is representative of the negotiation of identity and cultural meaning and the larger debate on immigration and representation that has become omnipresent in former colonial powers.

Chicken tikka masala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.

-Robin Cook, former British Foreign Secretary

If a show as gentle as *Bake Off* can stir up such a sludge of lazy misogyny in the murky waters of the internet, I hate to imagine the full scale of the problem.

–Ruby Tandoh, series 4 runner-up

Introduction

“On your marks, get set, BAKE!” This unusual battle cry is a hallmark of one of the most unusual shows on television. A highly technical baking competition where the judges toss around phrases like “crumb structure” and gently rebuke the contestants for over-proofing their baguette dough doesn’t sound like a ratings giant, but *The Great British Bake Off* has consistently garnered millions of viewers for the BBC. The fifth series finale was second only to England’s match against Uruguay during the 2014 World Cup in terms of viewers, bringing in an audience of 13.5 million compared to the 13.9 that tuned in to watch the game (“TV Events in 2014”).

A far cry from cut-throat culinary contests like *Top Chef* and *Chopped* that have dominated American food television, part of *Bake Off*’s draw is its almost cloying niceness. The show is set in a large marquee tent in the picturesque English countryside, with Union Jack bunting and vintage cookware abounding. The bulk of the action, such as it is, features the contestants worrying over the consistency of their *crème pâtissière* and staring anxiously into the ovens. If a mishap occurs, the unfortunate baker laughs it off or is comforted by one of the sympathetic hosts.

That a twee, idiosyncratic show like *Bake Off* could be the focus of anyone’s ire is counterintuitive. Aside from an incident of accidental custard theft in series 4, the baking itself is almost never the subject of controversy. However, the contestants often find themselves at the center

of a bitter public discourse as the real drama plays out in the press and online. Commentators in British tabloids and on social media frequently accuse *Bake Off* of valuing political correctness and the inclusion of “fashionable minorities” over merit (Letts, 2015). The backlash against what some consider the forced multicultural agenda of *Bake Off* reached a peak after Nadiya Hussain, a hijab-wearing mother of three, was declared the winner of series 6.

Whether or not such an agenda exists is secondary to the effect that the presence of people of color in reality television has had on the British viewing public. Britain’s colonial history intensifies the issue, as the integration of sizeable minorities of the nation’s ex-colonial subjects, notably the South Asian and African-Caribbean populations, has been a source of contention for decades. In fact, *Bake Off* can be taken as symbolic of the larger debate around multiculturalism and the preservation of a national culture that is taking place in Britain and the rest of the West.

The meeting of East and West is an old theme, and one that has given rise to a host of theories that attempt to explain and predict the transformative consequences of this convergence. Without fail, the first such meetings were marked by the violent suppression and exploitation of the peoples of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa by European colonial powers. Edward Said termed this relationship, and the warped perceptions of the East that resulted from it, “Orientalism” in his 1978 book of the same name. The Orient is constructed in both spatial and essential opposition to the Occident, or the West, necessarily leading to the creation of a concept of “Self” in opposition to an “Other” (Said, 1978).

In the context of the British immigration debate, the Other becomes a foreign and unwanted presence on familiar soil, now a threat to the cohesive conception of the Self rather than a far-off curiosity. When

the Other is given access to an area deemed to be a part of the British Self, whether it be baking or the BBC, there is a reflexive backlash to the breach of the carefully maintained binary of colonizer and colonized.

Leaving behind the turbulent realm of public opinion, the dynamics of the competition itself are also worthy of consideration. By promoting, intentionally or otherwise, a space where ethnic minorities and the white British majority can interact and compete on equal footing, *Bake Off* acts as a catalyst for cultural hybridity. Multiple hybridities can be observed in *The Great British Bake Off*, the most obvious of which is culinary hybridity. The infusion of Indian flavors into a traditional British cake or pastry is not simply a reflection of the trend towards fusion cuisine, but an affirmation of the value of the culture that gave rise to those flavors. Culinary hybridity becomes a stand-in for a ubiquitous hybridity that occurs wherever there is interaction between disparate groups. *Bake Off* is significant because it places ex-colonial ethnic groups in a setting that has all the outward markings of a colonial, homogenous Britain, and yet it posits a reality wherein these groups have an unquestioned and valued position therein.

In my analysis of the postcolonial significance of *The Great British Bake Off*, I make use of the work of scholars (Bhabha, 1994, 1996; McLaren, 1995; Spivak, 1990, 1993) who attempt to delineate the complexities of identity and cultural meaning in reference to the legacy of colonialism. First, I discuss the physical characteristics of the show, in terms of both location and aesthetics, and the intentional framing of *Bake Off* as “quintessentially British.” Next, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s foundational work in hybridity theory, I introduce the concept of *Bake Off* as a third space in which homogeneity is challenged and cultural symbols are appropriated by the ex-colonial peoples of Britain. I then situate

competing approaches to multiculturalism within the discourse surrounding *Bake Off*; a conservative conception that mirrors the backlash towards diverse casting choices, a left-liberal perspective, and a critical multiculturalism that advocates for a new social order predicated on negotiation of cultural meaning between groups. Lastly, I examine the ramifications of *Bake Off*'s brand of hybridity with regards to British culture.

Location, Location, Location

Early in the evolution of the field of postcolonial studies, scholars often disagreed on what the term “postcolonial” signified. A semantic and temporal interpretation of the term would suggest that it narrowly refers to the time following the exit of a colonial power from a colonized territory. However, the widely accepted interpretation of postcolonial, as first laid out in the influential 1989 handbook *The Empire Writes Back*, encompasses literature and theory that deconstructs the discourses and power structures of colonialism during and after actual imperial dominance (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996). As a result of this looser conceptualization, postcolonialism can be considered both “a textual effect and a reading strategy” (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 2). In other words, a text may have been intentionally constructed with themes of postcolonialism in mind, or postcolonial themes can be interpreted within it as a result of the wide-reaching ramifications of colonialism. Scholars analyze the works of imperialist authors such as Conrad and Kipling alongside the novels of those they colonized for this reason. The fact that these men could not have intended their writing to be examined through a postcolonial lens does not negate

the fact that they give insight into the colonial mindset and the colonizer's split perception of the colonized.

Reality television is a prolific text through which phenomena such as hybridity can be observed. As in the case of *Bake Off*, reality television can also serve as a microcosm of shifting social attitudes. Although the authenticity of interactions and judging outcomes on the show are rendered questionable by the editing process and the need to cater to an audience, the editing itself is a site of analysis. The character a show creates for itself is often as telling as the unscripted elements within it.

By all appearances, *Bake Off* is empire in miniature. The baking tent has been pitched on many a picturesque country estate throughout Britain over its seven series run. Since 2014, the marquee has found a home on the expansive grounds of Welford Park, a favorite hunting lodge of King Henry VIII, and before that at Harptree Court, a Grade II listed building of special historic interest (Vincent, 2013, 2016). The competition is intercut with footage of sprawling lawns and the occasional gamboling lamb or squirrel. As a cultural signifier, the Pastoral, denoted by idealized depictions of livestock and open land, is as identifiable with colonial Britain as high tea or cricket. The stately estate surrounded by green pasture harkens back to a time when the brutal expansion of empire and the exploitation of foreign wealth made such a lifestyle possible. Portraying the Pastoral on the page or onscreen is a self-conscious exercise in escapism, existing to invoke nostalgia for a bygone era (Sharrad, 1991). Even the interior of the tent recalls a cheery farmhouse kitchen from the last century. The adoption of the aesthetics of empire and the representation of an ideal past that is rooted in the oppression of the Other can often function as a renewal of that oppression. In many cases, "the schizoid convention of the Pastoral in

which the countryside stands for court, peasant for aristocracy, idyll for economic history, and so on, extends to the...form itself being a cover-up for cultural politics” (Sharrad, 1991, p.114). Inside the *Bake Off* tent, the fancifully-named judges Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood are akin to regents. Berry’s highest compliment for a particularly successful bake: “Queen Victoria would be proud” (Beattie, 2015, September 16).

Culinary Hybridity

The colonial nostalgia of *Bake Off* is part and parcel with its mainstream success in Britain. The “political correctness” accusations and the backlash against the show arose in reaction not to the program itself, but to the higher proportion of people of color appearing as contestants in the later seasons. In series 6, four out of the twelve contestants were people of color, a high for *Bake Off*. The presence of people of color in an aesthetically British colonial setting creates a split perception of the Other that Homi K. Bhabha terms “ambivalence” (1994).

Ambivalence is the duality with which the colonizer inevitably comes to view the colonized. The term was originally used in reference to the cultural consequences of colonization for both the oppressed and the oppressors. While Edward Said focused on the colonizer, and postcolonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon on the colonized, Bhabha emphasized “the mutualities and negotiations across the colonial divide” (Moore-Gilbert, 1997). An inevitable consequence of the purported *mission civilisatrice* undertaken by European powers in the 19th and 20th centuries was the introduction of symbols of colonial authority into the cultural lives of the colonized Other. The colonizers attempt to strengthen their presence and authority by creating “a class of interpreters between [them] and the millions who [they] govern” (Macaulay as cited in Bhabha, 1994, p. 86).

By allowing this class of “mimic men” conditional access to the education and culture of the colonizer, it was assumed that the colonized population at large would become complacent and amenable to the imperial regime (Naipaul as cited in Bhabha, 1994, p. 88).

Colonial dominance is dependent on an essentialist construction of colonial Self in opposition to colonized Other as it is a fixed stereotype that promotes the inferiority of the colonized Other and allows for subjugation and exploitation. The stereotype is both what is already “known” about the colonized and something that must be reproduced and held constant as a justification of colonization (Bhabha, 1994). In order for the mimicry of colonial manner to be effective in maintaining the Other as a subject of difference, as inferior, it must be an imperfect imitation. The resultant class of people “can neither be ‘original’ – by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it – nor ‘identical’ – by virtue of the difference that defines it” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 107). The colonizer inadvertently creates a hybrid of their own identity and that of the Other. In this way, the symbols of colonial authority, intended to promote compliance and a degree of assimilation, have a distinctly different effect.

A similar hybridity can be considered a driving force of *Bake Off*. Woven throughout postcolonial literature, in works written by both colonizers and the colonized, is the “sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book” (Bhabha, 1994, p.102). The book acts as a stand in for the civilizing effect that the colonizer believes it has on the colonized. The colonial subject, having happened upon or been introduced to the book, is altered by the interaction, rendered more acceptable and less Other. An unintended consequence is that the book itself is subverted and turned into “grounds of intervention” where the negotiation of other cultural symbols can take place (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112).

In order to understand this concept's relevance to *Bake Off*, call it an English *cookbook* instead. The incorporation of Indian flavors into traditional British and European recipes is a common occurrence on the show and is looked upon favorably by the judges. The success of series 5 contestant Chetna Makan exemplifies this trend. Chetna, who moved from Mumbai to Britain in 2003, used distinctly Indian flavors in the majority of her bakes. Notable examples include her mango chutney-filled bread centerpiece, masala chai baklava, crispy lentil kachori, and chocolate and mango eclairs. The "explosion of spice" in her creations was often noted approvingly by Paul Hollywood. The judges' enthusiasm for unusual flavors led Chetna to take fourth place in her season and later first place in the 2016 *Bake Off* Christmas special.

Simply by gaining access to the culinary and cultural platform of *Bake Off*, Chetna renegotiated the meaning of British cooking and the "English cookbook." Her bakes were not strictly British, nor were they strictly Indian, but a hybrid of two distinct culinary traditions. In this sense, Chetna can be viewed as one of the mimic men mentioned earlier. She makes concessions to the inherently British nature of the show, while subverting the competition by altering the symbols of cultural authority—in this case, the canon of British cuisine—and as a result cannot be easily relegated to the category of Other in the eyes of the ambivalent audience.

A real-world example of hybridity in this vein can be seen in the "BrAsian" architectural forms that arose from conscious trade-offs between identity and location made by the South Asian immigrant population of Britain (Kalra, Sayyid & Ali, 2008, p. 386). In the construction of the Gujarat Hindu Society Temple of Preston, Lancashire, brick and slate roofing was combined with a beehive-esque *shikhara*

dome supported by four marble pillars, both an allowance for the sensibilities of the native residents of the neighborhood and a statement of cultural difference (Kalra, Sayyid & Ali, 2008). Like the unexpected flavor of mango in an éclair, the temple and its members were integrated into the cultural life of the neighborhood and a hybrid was created in the process.

Contrast Chetna's success with that of her fellow series 5 contestant Norman Calder. A retired naval officer from the northeast coast of Scotland, Norman often came under fire for playing it safe and his bakes were regularly labeled bland and simple. The issue was not with his technical skills, as his bakes were usually well-crafted and uniform, but with his adherence to traditional British recipes. To Norman, adding pesto to bread and making a basic tarte au citron was exotic fare. To the judges, it did not meet the standards of culinary hybridity that Chetna and past contestants had set. The hybrid is held up as a superior form than the British original.

Hybrid identity exists in a liminal "in-between" that Homi K. Bhabha styles "third space" (1996, p. 54). The existence of the third space challenges the belief that culture is ever truly homogenous and allows for the appropriation and translation of cultural symbols to create new meaning (Papastergiadis, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). A "median category" emerges within this space that is neither completely new nor completely familiar (Said, 1978, p. 58). The *Bake Off* tent serves as a third space in this respect, located within the British Pastoral but at the same time supporting the integration of the Other. Hybrid identity within the third space acts as a "lubricant" in the convergence of cultures (Papastergiadis, 1997, p. 261).

Multiple Multiculturalisms

Multiculturalism has become something of an empty signifier, notable for its lack of meaning and catch-all nature. It seems to imply homogeneity and heterogeneity at once, both one unified culture and several equal yet distinct cultures (Bhabha, 1996; Frello, 2013). Some theorists have disavowed use of the term entirely, pointing to its frequent co-option by the State in nation-building and assimilationist projects (Gunew, 1997). Multiculturalism is often more efficient in erasing pressing issues of cultural prejudice than in elevating marginalized communities or critiquing the imperial structures that lead to said prejudice. When an op-ed writer complains about forced multiculturalism, the nebulous nature of the term makes it difficult to determine what exactly is being complained about.

The division of opinion within the viewing public, between acceptance of the third space and rejection of the multiculturalism which it is taken to represent, is augmented by the portrayal of real narratives and personalities as opposed to the fictional constructs usually found on television. To those who feel threatened by the increased presence of ethnic minorities in their daily lives, their presence on television is perceived as a further infringement. The different perceptions of *Bake Off* can be outlined through Peter McLaren's analysis of the distinct categories of multiculturalism.

Conservative multiculturalism traces its roots to colonial essentialism. While outwardly distancing themselves from scientific white supremacy by touting the cognitive equality of the races, conservative multiculturalists present whiteness as the absence of race and the "common culture" to which other ethnicities should aspire (McLaren, 1995, p. 92). The onus of assimilation into the dominant white

culture is placed on the racial Other, with the expectation that all markers of otherness are removed in the process. The vitriol directed at series 6 winner Nadiya Hussein reflects this expectation. Wearing a hijab made her the most visibly Other of the ethnic minorities among the contestants and therefore the target of the most hatred. A columnist at the *Daily Mail* went so far as to suggest that Flora Shedden, a young middle-class white woman, was passed over in the semi-final round because she was not as politically correct as Nadiya, a Muslim mother, Tamal, a gay Indian doctor, or Ian, a stay-at-home father. The columnist suggested that Flora might have made it to the final episode if she had baked a “chocolate mosque” instead of a chocolate carousel in the showstopper challenge (Lee, 2015). The implication of this accusation is that Nadiya did not reach the final, and later win the season, because of her own baking merit but because the creators of *Bake Off* wanted to project a certain image.

Liberal multiculturalism posits an intellectual equality among racial populations but, unlike conservative multiculturalism, attributes social inequality to lack of access to educational and social opportunities rather than to cultural deprivation or weak values in ethnic communities (McLaren, 1995, p. 96). In this iteration of multiculturalism, there is a belief that the modification of institutions can lead to a more equal playing field. Nevertheless, the standard of equality to be reached is still associated with white cultural norms and the systems that produced the conditions of inequality are not interrogated. There is an implication of a “special interest” that exists in opposition to the general interest (Mohan as cited in Gunew, 1997, p. 26). The representation of people of color is the special interest in this context, as opposed to a merit-based approach to selecting contestants. The complaints of a contestant line-up that is unrepresentative of the “humdrum, plain-as-white-flour, Middle-English”

majority that is assumed to have applied for the show would fall into this category (Letts, 2015). In other words, liberal multiculturalism desires a diversity of fixed identities rather than a hybridity of identity.

Both liberal and left-liberal multiculturalism tend towards Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism," which repurposes essentialism as a political tactic of representation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007; Spivak, 1990). Left-liberal multiculturalism is more cognizant of cultural difference as opposed to a false common culture, but inevitably relies on essentialism to portray difference. An individual's status as a member of a marginalized group is taken as authority to speak for the whole of the group and a single authentic group experience is posited (McLaren, 1995). While acknowledging that colonialist application of essentialism is negative, Spivak maintained that essentialist ideas are useful with regards to postcolonial peoples rebuilding the sense of value and identity that was lost during the imperial period (Ashcroft et al., 2007). It can function as a temporary outward-facing erasure of internal group difference in order to achieve specific goals (Spivak, 1990). With regards to representation on television, this attitude manifests itself in a "checking boxes" approach to diversity. When, as has been common in the past, a season of *Bake Off* only includes one member of a certain ethnic group and places the responsibility of representing the entire group on that contestant's shoulders, the opportunity becomes reductive rather than beneficial. Spivak herself later abandoned the concept due to its widespread misuse as an argument for essentialism (Danus, Jonsson & Spivak, 1993).

If *Bake Off* intentionally pursues any form of multiculturalism, it is this one. Anna Beattie, creator of *Bake Off*, explained that contestants are first selected based on their ability to bake both breads and cakes,

then on their ability to bake and talk at the same time, and finally on whether the final line-up is a “representative mix” of Britain (Khomami, 2015). Claiming that a single Indian woman on a British television show can be in any way representative of the entire South Asian British population is absurd. Although ethnic minorities may enter the *Bake Off* tent, the complexities of everyday life do not. The Britain rendered onscreen is post-racial in the extreme, a space where distinctions are erased and the main determinant of success is not skin color but talent. Many scholars have concerns with this approach, as portraying a utopian, hybrid society where such a one does not exist “leaves all the old problems of class exploitation and racist oppression unresolved” (Werbner as cited in Kraidy, 2002). It’s questionable if anything that is packaged by a major broadcaster and sold to the public in the form of brand name cooking tie-ins can be truly revolutionary. However, concessions must be made to the television format. While it may be impossible to portray the breadth of the British minority experience within the confines of the *Bake Off* third space, there is still the potential for subversive hybridity.

Peter McLaren (1997) presents an alternative to the established forms of multiculturalism which he terms “critical multiculturalism.” Instead of advancing accommodation to the existing social order, critical multiculturalism envisions the creation of a new social order as a result of the struggle over meaning and culture that is intrinsic to interaction between groups. McLaren frames his idea in terms of poststructuralism, but his work is deeply linked and referential to conceptions of hybridity and cultural negotiation within the third space (Gunew, 1997; McLaren, 1997). Although the creators of *Bake Off* are approaching multiculturalism in a left-liberal format, if at all, they are unintentionally

bringing about a third space which allows for a hybrid critical multiculturalism.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding *The Great British Bake Off* does not exist in a vacuum. Television is both a bellwether for social conflict and a powerful reflection of existing tensions. It can also serve as a normalizing force, bringing the average viewer into contact with cultures and practices they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with. Due to the strong links between what is shown onscreen and what occurs in daily life, connections can be made between the pressing political issues of the day and the conversation surrounding popular television shows. The discourse on multiculturalism, both for and against, that has followed *Bake Off* throughout its run on BBC One is indicative of the larger debate on immigration and representation taking place in Britain.

As is often the case, the subtler and more transformative forces of hybridization that are at work within *Bake Off* go unnoticed. Contestants like Nadiya Hussein and Chetna Makan didn't succeed in spite of their culture and traditions, but because of them. It's no accident that Nadiya's winning bake was a classic British lemon drizzle cake adorned with a red, white, and blue sari (Beattie, 2015, October 7). The symbolism is hard to miss. However, these signifiers of cultural negotiation are overlooked by *Bake Off* malcontents in favor of challenging the very presence of ethnic minorities on mainstream British television. The exaggerated colonial British aesthetic of the show both raises the stakes for viewers who feel as if the national culture is disappearing and strengthens the potential for meaningful hybridity.

The main limitation of this research, and of most hybridity theory, is that hybridity is understood to be both a ubiquitous condition and a revolutionary occurrence. It is thought to be both subversive and commonplace in any interaction between cultures. The definition of hybridity is often so broad that it can be shaped to fit any criteria. It is difficult to quantify the effect that *Bake Off's* hybridity has had on the show's audience simply because there is no set boundary to what can or should be considered hybridity. I have focused mainly on culinary hybridity because of the nature of *Bake Off*, but factors like language and dress could have also been analyzed.

An interesting continuation of this research would be to analyze reality and reality competition television shows produced in other Western countries in order to discern parallels between popular culture discourse and national social discourse. This could be fruitful in the same vein as my analysis of *Bake Off*, especially in reference to the growing nativist sentiment across the West. The legacy of colonialism is such that contemporary social attitudes almost always have their roots in the original historically disruptive meetings between East and West, between the colonizers and the colonized.

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