

Twin Films

Bohemian Rhapsody and *Blinded by the Light*

by Herbert H. Stein

In his classic book on psychoanalysis and film, *Movies On Your Mind*, Harvey Greenberg wrote about *Casablanca*, "If I know it's Schmaltsky, then why am I crying?"

I don't know if it's by chance or design that two of the best films I saw in 2019 have so many similarities that they could be siblings if not twins. Each gets its title from a famous rock song. Each takes place in England in approximately the same time period. In each, the central character is a young South Asian man facing similar conflicts around family and culture. Each story is accompanied by and told through the music of the rock group that created and performed the title song.

The films are *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Blinded by the Light*. The first starts around 1970 and came out in theaters in 2018; the second starts in the 1980's and came out in theaters in 2019. Each is based on a true story, *Bohemian Rhapsody* on the life of the self-named Freddie Mercury, lead singer and songwriter for the rock group Queen. *Blinded by the Light* is based more loosely on the life of a young man, known to us as Javed, and centered around the music of Bruce Springsteen.

We first see them living in their family homes in suburban England at that formative time in life between adolescence and adulthood, perhaps the second major experience of separation and individuation.

We are in a family home somewhere in England.

"Dinner is ready."

"I'm not hungry, Mum," a young man answers.

"Hmm, where are you going? Out with friends? A girl?"

"Oh, Mum."

"Look at you. Give your mother a kiss."

He does.

"I'm going to be late."

"You're always late."

"Hi, Papa. How was work?" a younger woman, obviously his sister calls out as a middle-aged man, dressed in a suit, carrying a newspaper comes in the front door.

He addresses the young man who is about

to leave in a somewhat stern tone.

"Out again, Farrokh?"

"It's Freddie now, Papa."

"Freddie or Farrokh, what difference does it make when you're out every night, no thought of the future in your head? Good thoughts, good words, good deeds. That's what you should aspire to."

"Yes. And how's that worked out for you?"

Freddie answers in an angry tone before leaving.

A teenage boy, Javed is talking with his childhood friend, Matt and Matt's new girlfriend in the cul de sac parking area of the surrounding row houses in which they both live when Javed's father pulls up in his car in front of their home a short distance away.

"What are they doing?" he barks at Javed, looking at Matt and the pretty girl kissing. He then continues, "How can you be friends with that boy? No shame at all. I didn't move out of Bury Park to see this. You should tell him this is very bad. Very bad behavior in a good neighborhood."

"Dad, he's English."

The father scoffs and says, "Get the shopping out of the car."

Javed sighs.

The first scene comes early in the film, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the second early in *Blinded by the Light*. The overall impression is essentially the same, two sons in conflict with their fathers. Freddie Mercury is the older of these two sons and probably further along in his development. We see him openly defiant, confronting his critical father directly. From the tone of the language alone, we get the sense that he is still feeling close to his mother.

Javed is clearly younger and although frustrated, he confronts his father mildly, as if trying to convince him with logic with "he's English," showing his frustration with an inward sigh of resignation. If Freddie is in open rebellion, Javed is resigned to his fate, to this point, defeated.

There is nothing unusual about two films that depict a father and son in conflict, but,

these two films offer a particular and particularly interesting version of this iconic face-off by highlighting the element of immigration.

Freddie Mercury's father was an Indian Parsi by culture and a Zoroastrian by religion. The family had emigrated to England from Zanzibar. Javed's family was from Pakistan and Moslem. Both fathers were born and grew up in a different culture than their sons. Each has an accent, each sees himself as foreign born and not part of English culture. The sons, on the other hand, have gone to English schools and are striving to overcome prejudices to find their place in English society. (Freddie Mercury actually went to an English school in India before immigrating, but the film does not tell us that.)

We see Javed's father taking him to his first day of what we would call high school. Sitting in the car at the school, Javed's father tells him to study hard and "look for the Jews ... do what the Jews do. They're very successful people." Javed tells him that sounds racist. His father tells him to stay away from girls, "You're here to study, okay?" He adds before leaving him off, "I'll find you a wife in good time. You leave that up to me."

In contrast, on that first day, we see Javed in a class led by Miss Clay, a young enthusiastic teacher who encourages her students to make a difference. She asks if anyone wants to be a writer. Javed raises his hand, then lowers it. She asks him about that after class. He tells her he's been writing poems and a diary since 10, "but they're not that good." When she asks him why he does it, he says to put down his thoughts and adds, "In my house, no one's allowed opinions except my dad."

The fathers clearly want their sons to behave like proper members of the culture in which they, the fathers, were born. They see their sons' attempts to find a place in the English culture as rebellion, betrayal and a failure to live up to the ideals of the father.

Javed in particular is squeezed between the two cultures. Practically ordered by his father to avoid absorbing British values, he is given a similar message from the other side by openly hostile bigots who write hate phrases on the walls of the town in which they live and chase

him and a friend from a table in a coffee shop.

There is an active psychoanalytic literature on the subject of immigration. It has in recent years been the subject of regular discussion groups at the meetings of the American Psychoanalytic Association. I am not an authority on the subject and will not attempt to play one here, but will rely on these two films as my authority.

What they both reveal is the effect of immigration on family dynamics, intergenerational differences, and what we as psychoanalysts tend to package under the Oedipus complex. What we see and experience with each of these films is how immigration may dramatically widen the divide between generations, in this case between fathers and sons. The divide begins with ideals. I have already indicated that both Freddie and Javed's fathers view their sons as failing to live up to the ideals which those fathers grew up with. Freddie Mercury's father condenses it into a simple rule, "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds."

But the failure of ideals is mutual. Freddie is openly dismissive of his father: "And how's that worked out for you?" His dismissive words and tone tell us that he does not see his father as an ideal to live up to, but as something of a failure. Similarly, we see in *Blinded by the Light* that Javed see his father as peripheral to the suburban English society in which they live. He tries to bridge that gap by telling his father about his friend, "He's English." In effect, he is also hoping to make his father aware of the unspoken fact that he, Javed, is also very much English. In part that divide has to do with the bigotry of the society, but in part it has to do with his father not understanding the workings and values of the society in which the young man hopes to grow.

This is something which I think a number of readers have some immediate access to in their lives as well as their work. Speaking for myself, my parents grew up in this country, my father having gotten here at a young age. They were clearly identified as Americans, and had values and goals in keeping with that. Their parents, my grandparents, came to this country as adults. Their backgrounds and

Twin Films
Stein

childhood memories were from a different place and culture. They varied in their own ability to recognize the differences and attempt to adapt to the new culture, but in all cases there was clearly a broad divide between generations, a divide that I could see as a child, more strikingly in the case of my mother's family. I'm sure that many of those reading this have a similar family history and some level of experience with immigration.

What these two films bring to us is that the Oedipus complex from a Freudian perspective and the issue of idealization from a self-psychological perspective are dramatically affected by this element of parent and child having been born into different cultures. In fact, if we look at the development of the two stories, I think we find that neither Freddie nor Javed could successfully negotiate his way in the society in which he lives without separating himself from the values and ideals of his father. Freddie Mercury, as we know and will also experience through the film, achieves success as a brilliant writer and performer of rock music. Javed has chosen to be a journalist, an ambition that conflicts with his father's view of the world which would have him study business and finance.

Enter music. In each film, music plays a role as the vehicle that gives the young man strength and helps him to succeed in the new culture. In the case of Freddie Mercury that is obvious, and follows from the biopic that gives the film its name and central plot. Through his music—his singing, writing, performing—he will achieve incredible and unquestioned success. For Javed, the music gives him an ally, a source of inner strength, and the words needed to express his pain and his desires. He gets that through the music and lyrics of Bruce Springsteen, "The Boss," and I don't think we should dismiss the paternal significance of that title.

Both of these films demonstrate the power of music to move us. I found this particularly true in *Blinded by the Light*. One moment, we see Javed almost in despair, hopeless to overcome the control of his father and the threat of violence and rejection from members of the community, really the only community he has

known and lived in all his life; the next moment we hear the drums beating and horns blasting and the lyrics coming from Bruce's voice and then see the lyrics flashing across the screen in the air and on the walls of the town as people begin to magically dance to the music all over Luton, England in an Arlowian mix of fantasy and reality. Like Freddie Mercury, Javed is freed with the help of the music to follow his creativity.

Each father has warned his son to contain himself to fit the ideals of the culture from which the family came. Freddie's father corrects him with the credo of his religion and beliefs, not a bad credo, but used more as a cudgel than an invitation: "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds." He tells him that he shouldn't be going out every night and becoming involved in the world of rock music. That might be good advice for some young men, but not for Freddie Mercury.

Javed's father wants him to work hard studying to prepare himself for a life in business and money, but Javed envisions himself as a writer. Like, Freddie's father, Javed's father thinks he is wasting his time and foolishly trying to join in English culture, leaving his own behind. Javed has allies: a woman writing teacher at his school; a girl in that same class, Eliza, who also becomes a fan, friend and girlfriend; an older man, a very British older neighbor who accidentally sees a sample of Javed's writing and brings it back to him with high praise and encouragement; and, of course, "the Boss," the idealized father figure, Bruce Springsteen.

Like Javed, Freddie also has allies: the members of his band, "Queen," and, like Javed, a young woman he fell in love with early in his career (before realizing that he was attracted to men), and who became a stable element in his life, at one point re-directing him back to people who were his true allies and away from an agent who was using him and isolating him.

For Javed, his English girlfriend also acts as a link for him between the cultures, helping him to connect with his father.

Which brings us to the final similarity.

I have presented these two films as siblings,

Twin Films
Stein

parallel process on the screens in the theaters—fathers and sons, South Asian culture, rock music, creativity vs. conformity, immigration and its intergenerational effects.

To this, I will add one more parallel. It is the one I alluded to at the beginning of this piece—the very beginning.

“If I know it’s Schmaltsy, then why am I crying?”

In both cases, the tears were accompanied by and brought on by music. I don’t think I’m surprising anyone when I say that music can seemingly reach down directly to that part of our brains (the periaqueductal grey?) that brings out affects, emotions, feelings.

Tears came to my eyes earlier in *Blinded* than in *Rhapsody*, and I’ll begin there.

The tears began for me—unexpectedly—at a point early in the film. We have seen Javed’s struggle with his desires and ambitions, simultaneously beaten down by the well-meaning pressure from his father encouraging him to hold on to time honored traditions and the hate mongering of bigoted, xenophobic neighbors who put up signs on the walls telling “Pakis” to go home, get out.

At that point at which we are feeling the weight of defeat, hopelessness on Javed’s shoulders, he listens to Springsteen. After his father has lost his job due to cuts, a despairing, frustrated Javed tries to throw his poetry into the outdoor garbage only to have it blown away by a violent storm and spread around the neighborhood. Back in his room he puts on earphones and plays a disk of Springsteen music leant to him by another student, a Sikh, who wanted to introduce him to “The Boss.” As we listen with him, Springsteen’s words come up on the screen. I was immediately struck by how well they suited his situation:

“nothing but tired ... tired, bored with myself ... I aint getting nowhere. I’m just living in a dump like this. There’s something happening somewhere”

And as it goes on and we see Javed walking and looking and remembering, Springsteen’s words offer him hope as he changes songs.

“I aint a boy, no I’m a man, and I believe in a promised land.”

We see Javed walking in the windy street with a look and stride of confidence.

I have always liked Springsteen’s music, but I had never before understood with such immediacy how he was reaching out to a part of the culture that was beaten down by poverty and lack of opportunity or, in this case, to an oppressed minority. As the film progresses, we hear and see that music and those lyrics appearing all over with people dancing to it in the streets as if the fantasy that we are experiencing through Javed has taken over the entire film and everyone in it.

Springsteen’s music also gives Javed another positive father figure, the father of his friend, Matt, who is from the older generation that revered Springsteen.

That’s where the tears first came to my eyes, essentially tears of joy. But those are not really the tears that I am alluding to as the ones that unite these two sibling films. Those came closer to the end, so I’ll fast forward, starting this time with *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Like Javed, Freddie Mercury also endures a crisis. Through the machinations of his agent and his own distrust of attachments, he becomes isolated from his family, his band, Queen, and Mary, the former girlfriend who he continues to love. It is Mary who acts as the catalyst to bring him back from this isolation. She meets him at an isolated house at which he is staying and awakens him to the fact that his agent has been filtering his contacts.

She also tells him that the agent has kept from him information about a worldwide series of charitable concerts being planned under the name Live Aid and including a massive concert to be given at London’s Wembley stadium. Freddie recontacts the band members and a sympathetic lawyer who has helped them and helps arrange to have Queen take part in the Wembley stadium concert.

Freddie also faces another crisis. He has been diagnosed with AIDS, a virtual death sentence in the early ’90’s. With this added weight, he approaches the date of the concert. In a series of scenes we witness him re-uniting with the band, then with a somewhat older gay man, Jim Hutton, presented to us as ethi-

Twin Films
Stein

cal and empathic, whom he had met by chance earlier in the film. He goes with Jim to meet with his family. When his father asks how he and Jim know each other, do they work together, Freddie puts his hand on Jim's, saying that Jim is his friend. He then tells them he is going to the concert. His sister tells his parents that Freddie will perform at Live Aid and Freddie explains,

"We're all doing our bit for the starving children in Africa, and nobody's taking any money."

Hearing this, Freddie's father slowly approaches him.

Freddie tells him, "Good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Just like you taught me, Father."

His father embraces him and they share a long, warm hug. As he leaves, he promises to blow his mother a kiss when he's on the stage.

How could I keep from crying.

The film has actually begun with Freddie going up onto the stage at Wembley, but at that point we don't know the significance of what we are seeing. Now he and the band go up on that stage in front of an audience of thousands, broadcast to an audience of millions, with Mary and her man beside Jim Hutton nearby watching and Freddie's family, with his father at the center, also watching them on the Telly.

It is 1985. With all this in mind, we see Freddie onstage at Wembley on the piano, singing.

"Mama, just killed a man.

Put a gun against his head,

Pulled my trigger now he's dead.

Mama, life has just begun,

But now I've gone and thrown it all away."

As he goes on, we see his sister, mother and father watching at home, while Mary, wide-eyed, with her man and Jim just behind them, looking on close to the stage..

"Mama, I don't want to die, but sometimes wish I'd never been born at all."

As he moves to another song, "Radio," the entire stadium sings along. A man who has lived his life with ambivalent attachments now finds himself united with friends, family

and thousands of others. We see the phone operators taking a barrage of calls for donations around the world.

And then us, the audience in the theater, feeling a reunion with a man who has struggled with self-imposed loneliness as he sings, "We are the champions, my friends." As he is finishing the song, we see Mary reaching out to Jim and see his mother with tears in her eyes.

In *Blinded by the Light*, Javed is faced with a smaller venue, but the effect is no less dramatic. He is the first honoree to speak at a prize-giving ceremony (1988) at his school. Here, too the young woman in his life, Eliza, plays an important role in his "reunion" with his family. We see her coming to Javed's family's door and introducing herself to his mother.

At the ceremony, Javed is introduced as reading an extract from "A Runaway American Dream in Luton."

He says, "Bruce Springsteen was, to quote the album he is most famous for, born in the USA, but he has fans around the world, including me. I was not born in the USA, and I grew up not in Asbury Park, New Jersey, but Bury Park, Luton. But the reason I connected with Springsteen is because what he sings about and champions are not only American values but are the best of human values. He talks about working hard and holding on to your dreams and not letting the hardness of the world stop you from letting the best of you slip away. In these words, I see a bridge between Springsteen and my own Asian upbringing."

At this point, his family enters the room and stands in the back.

"And that is why the music and values of Springsteen's American dream can reach and touch a boy from ... "

He sees his family and says, "I don't know if I can read this," but is encouraged to go on. He does continue, now looking at his family.

"When I wrote this, I really believed every word, but now... A lot has happened since I wrote those words. Then, I thought Bruce Springsteen was the answer and all I had to do was live by his words. I don't think that's true

Twin Films
Stein

any more. Bruce Springsteen got out of New Jersey by following his dream. Bruce sings, 'If dreams came true, well, wouldn't that be nice? But this ain't no dream we're living through tonight. If you want it, you take it, and you pay the price.' So the question I'm asking is: Can I pay that price? I know having dreams doesn't make me a bad son. I also know that everything I am is because of the sacrifices my mum and dad made. My dad's not a typical dad. We don't have jokey chats. He's not like the dad you see on telly. A lot of the time, he seems pretty angry at the world. I think Bruce Springsteen would understand my dad, cause like his father, they both came from poor backgrounds, both worked hard in factories, both had dreams that never came true, which left them angry. And they both had sons who wanted the chance to make them proud. Bruce has a song called "Blinded by the Light." And when I first heard it, I thought... I thought it was about love and being blinded by the love we might have for a girl or money. But last night, I listened to it again. And Bruce is saying so much more. I was blinded by the light when I first heard Springsteen because I was only thinking, in that moment, about Springsteen and me. But we're not all just individuals. We have friends ... and family ... and what they think does matter. Success without them isn't really success. Being blinded meant I couldn't see how much I am like my dad and my dad is like me. And as much as I wanted to leave Luton, I understand that it will never leave me. Bruce says no one wins unless everybody wins. My hope is to build a bridge to my ambitions but not a wall between my family and me. That's my dream. My American dream. In Luton."

After the talk we see him standing near the stage, where he is approached by Eliza. He had stopped seeing her, in part out of hopelessness. Now, he tells her,

"I'm so sorry. I've missed you like mad."

She answers, quoting Springsteen, "Like a river that don't know where it's flowing, you took a wrong turn and you just kept going. But everybody's got a hungry heart."

He echoes, "Everybody's got a hungry

heart."

They come together and have a brief, but very loving kiss.

"You told my family, didn't you? Thank you."

She smiles acknowledgement and tells him, "Now go and speak to your dad."

He does, first greeting his mother and sister. His dad's words are equally touching.

"Son. This Bruce Springsteen, are you sure he's American? Yes. And not Jewish. I read his songs. He said work hard, don't give up, respect your parents. This man must be Pakistani. Son, write your stories, yes. But don't forget ours."

I probably don't have to make the point here that these fraternal films bring us in touch with a conflict between separation/individuation and attachment. In each, the tears of joy flow from a young man's reunion with his family, but a reunion not as a child, but as an adult.

They also clearly focus, within that theme, on fathers and sons, giving us a glimpse of an aspect of the "male Oedipus complex" that isn't always emphasized, the need for a reunion of father and son on equal terms in acknowledgment of their love for one another.