

## How Cultures Clash: India Through an American's Eyes in Bernardo Bertolucci's Little Buddha

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Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993) bridges Eastern spirituality and Western audiences, intertwining the Buddha's enlightenment story with an American family's encounter with Tibetan Buddhism. The film offers a lens to examine how cultural identities are translated across geopolitical and linguistic divides, highlighting both the possibilities and pitfalls of intercultural dialogue [2].

These encounters are rooted in millennia of engagement between South Asia, the Middle East, and the West. The Indus Valley civilization traded with the Arabian Peninsula as early as 3000 BCE, establishing early economic interdependence. The British colonial era later reoriented these relationships, positioning English as the primary vehicle for translating Eastern philosophies for Western consumption [6].

Cinema shapes socio-cultural identities by creating symbolic images of cultural "others." *Little Buddha* exemplifies this by translating Buddhist concepts - suffering, desire, enlightenment - into visual narratives accessible to Western audiences [7]. This translation process involves both linguistic and cultural dimensions, enabling transmission of core values while risking simplification. Bertolucci navigates this tension through a dual narrative structure that situates ancient spiritual journeys within modern Western contexts.

The casting of Keanu Reeves, a mixed-heritage actor, as Siddhartha sparked controversy. While this choice reduces ethnocultural specificity, it facilitates Western audience engagement. Interestingly, Bertolucci himself - an Italian who felt Europeans misunderstood Eastern culture - created an "oriental trilogy" (*The Last Emperor*, *The Sheltering Sky*, and *Little Buddha*), working with diverse talents like Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, demonstrating global involvement in cultural exchange [9].

Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro visually contrasts cold, industrial Seattle (blue tones) with the warm, mystical East (red-orange palette), symbolizing the journey toward enlightenment. The narrative follows Buddhist monks who identify young Jesse Conrad as a potential reincarnation of Lama Dorje. Interwoven with Jesse's story is that of Prince Siddhartha (Keanu Reeves), who abandons palace life to explore spirituality through asceticism. Bertolucci presents two additional child candidates, including a girl, thereby transcending racial and gender boundaries to position Buddhism as universally accessible.

Released when Tibetan Buddhism gained Western popularity (the Dalai Lama received the 1989 Nobel Prize), the film simplifies Buddhist concepts around compassion [7], intentionally targeting children as its primary audience. Childhood becomes a metaphor for the transition from innocence to knowledge. The film explores tulku - intentional reincarnation unique to Tibetan Buddhism - rather than general reincarnation concepts. That an American Christian-background child embodies a Buddhist monk represents cultural synthesis rather than conflict. Jesse's progressive Seattle family, with engineer father and open-minded mother, ultimately finds faith through their son's journey.

The film dramatizes tensions between cyclical Eastern and linear Western worldviews, between communal Tibetan monastic life and individualistic American culture. Jesse's gradual acceptance of Buddhist teachings suggests cross-cultural engagement can yield transformation despite profound differences [2].

Little Buddha exemplifies complexities in representing Eastern traditions through Western cinematic frameworks. While ambitiously introducing Buddhist philosophy to global audiences, its choices reveal American cultural lenses that simplify and occasionally distort portrayed traditions. These dynamics mirror broader India-Middle East-English speaking world relations shaped by historical trade, colonialism, and migration [1]. The film serves as both artifact and allegory - embodying cross-cultural translation challenges while dramatizing possibilities for genuine dialogue across difference.

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### Иллюстрации



Рис. : Still from the film "Little Buddha"



Рис. : Still from the film "Little Buddha"

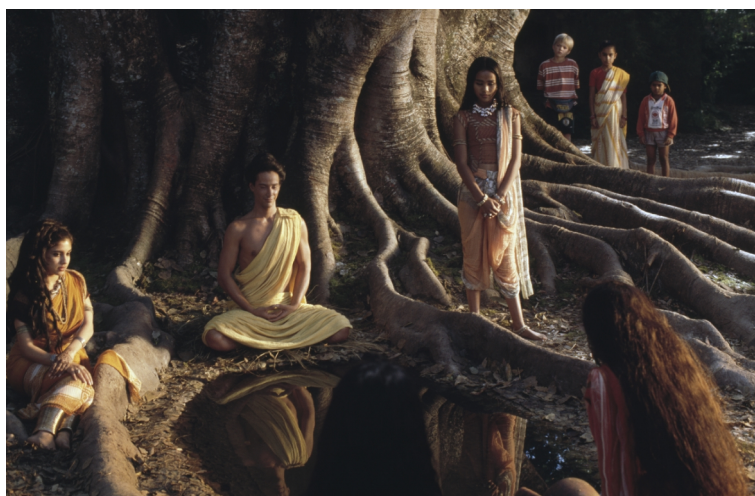


Рис. : Still from the film "Little Buddha"