

**Exploring issues of Identity and Belonging in the
films of Mira Nair:
*Salaam Bombay!, Mississippi Masala and Monsoon Wedding.***

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DECLARATION:

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With many thanks to my parents, Mark, Kaye and Prof.
Hauptfleisch without whom this thesis would not have been
possible.

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this thesis is to study the themes of identity and belonging in the films of Mira Nair. Three films form the basis of this study namely *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala* and *Monsoon Wedding*. The approach is thematic, i.e using the film to explore different socio-political themes of identity rather than looking at the methodology she uses as a filmmaker.

The analysis of each of the three films looks at a particular form of identity namely national, cultural or personal identity, and makes reference to Nair's own comments on the films as well as academic articles on the films, her work and issues such as identity, nostalgia, home, belonging, marginalization, immigrants, street children and the like, in order to interrogate Nair's exploration of the particular ideas within these films.

It examines the films as if it were a work of literature, and looks at how it deals with these issues within a filmic context. What symbols does she use to show us we are dealing with cultural identity? Which character is symbolic of the modernist movement? Finally it examines the potential effect of these films on the society from which they derive, and comes to some conclusions about the effect these films may have in challenging, shaping and/or influencing ideas about nostalgia, home, identity, and so on. The discussions of the films show that she has been superbly able to exploit all the advantages of her chosen medium to bring her remarkable visual inventiveness and artistry into play in order to communicate this to an international audience and to make them think about the issues at hand. The filmmaker is finally established not only as simply a creator of film, but ultimately as a thinker and poet.

OPSOMMING:

Die doel van hierdie tesis is om die temas van identiteit en 'n gevoel van behoort in die films van Mira Nair te bestudeer. Drie films vorm die basis van die studie naamlik *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala* en *Monsoon Wedding*. Die aanslag is tematies van aard, m.a.w. dit gebruik die films om die verskillende sosio-ekonomiese temas van identiteit te identifiseer en ontleed, eerder as om die metodologie van haar as filmmaker te bestudeer.

Die analise van elke van die drie films kyk na 'n spesifieke vorm van identiteit, naamlik nasionale, kulturele of persoonlike identiteit en maak verwysing na kommentaar deur Nair haarself, sowel as akademiese artikels oor die films, haar werk en kwessies van identiteit, nostalgie, die konsep van 'n tuiste, 'n gevoel van behoort, marginalisasie, immigrante, straat kinders en dies meer. Die doel is om sodoende Nair se idees oor identiteit binne hierdie films te bevraagteken en ontleed.

Die tesis ondersoek die films asof dit 'n literêre werk is, en neem in ag die maniere waarop dit na hierdie kwessies kyk binne 'n filmiese konteks. Daar word byvoorbeeld gekyk na watter simbole sy gebruik wanneer sy verwys na kulturele identiteit. Watter karakter is die simbool vir die modernistiese beweging, ens. Uitendelik bevraagteken die tesis die potensiële effek van hierdie films op die omgewing en omstandighede waaruit dit ontstaan het, en kom tot sekere gevolgtrekkings met betrekking tot die mate waarin hierdie films kwessies van tuiste, nostalgie, identiteit ens beïnvloed en/of vorm en bevraagteken. Die besprekings dui daarop dat sy baie bevoeg is om al die voordele van haar verkose medium tesame met haar indrukwekkende visuele verbeelding te gebruik om aan 'n internasionale gehoor die kwessies te kommunikeer en hul te dwing om aktief te dink oor die kwessies aan hand. Uiteindelik word die filmmaker Nair nie slegs as 'n skepper van film beskryf nie, maar ook as 'n denker en digter.

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INTRODUCTION:

Points of departure:

For me, this dissertation started out with an interest in Bollywood films, and especially the music and dance sequences that are so essential to an understanding of this kind of film. I had decided to do research on a subject that was quite new to me, but had elements of familiarity such as dance and song. In a small Afrikaans community in the Western Cape, South Africa, however, films belonging to this genre were hard to come by. (Had I grown up or studied in Durban, an area with a high percentage of Indian inhabitants, the results of this thesis might have been very different to what it is today, as exposure to Bollywood films and Indian culture would have happened much earlier in my life.)

In the process of scouring through video stores for any kind of Bollywood film or eventually any Bollywood influenced film, I came across *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) and *Mississippi Masala* (1992). The presence of these films on the shelves of these video stores says something in itself. Whereas true Bollywood films had not yet managed to penetrate the cultural barriers of small town South Africa, Nair's crossover films had managed to do so.

There were several aspects of Mira Nair's filmmaking that attracted me to do an in-depth study on her work. Firstly she is female, an aspect which resonated with me as it is well-known that the film industry is a tough career for a woman to make her way in. Secondly, there is an emotional quality to her films that pay great attention to the minute details of each character portrayed. As I come from a performance background, this in-depth study of character interested me greatly. Nair's reputed ability to get the most out of her actors supported this conclusion. Her first fictional film, when shown at the 26th New York Film Festival, elicited the following responses from critics:

Miss Nair, 31, who was born and brought up in India and studied at Harvard as an undergraduate, has made four documentaries, all in India, which obviously helped prepare her for this work of fiction. One doesn't necessarily feed the other, however. "Salaam Bombay!" demonstrates this young director's extraordinary self-control when faced with fiction's manifold possibilities. The movie possesses a free-flowing exuberance not often associated with the documentary form.

Even more unusual is the director's success with her actors. Without the film's program notes, I'm not sure I'd be able to tell the professionals from the non-professionals. (Canby,1988:p2)

Tough and gritty, much of the location shot film serves as a visual tour of a world that most of us can hardly imagine. Having recently returned from visiting northern India, I can recognize the naturalness that Nair achieves in this remarkable film. It's an honest and haunting portrait that lingers long after viewing. (Nesbit,2006:p1)

The research question

But what authority did I have to write on the subject of identity in Nair's films, when I myself had never been to India nor possessed a lifetime of knowledge about the history of India and Indian filmmaking? Culturally I am quite far removed from the realities depicted in Nair's films, although I work with Indian colleagues and have access to their stories and perceptions. Even they, who seem more linked to India through family and culture, confess a feeling of distance when speaking about India and its traditions and history, especially if they were 2nd or 3rd generation Indians and had never been to India.

I therefore had to find other ways in which I could directly relate to issues in Nair's films. A preliminary analysis of the issues raised in her films made me realise that contrary to my initial perception, I possessed a history that had quite a lot in common with the subject matter of her films. This includes issues of identity, migration,

origin, language, belonging and concepts of home - central to understanding Nair's filmmaking.

I am white and Afrikaans speaking, but essentially African. I am the 7th generation of my family born and raised in Africa, but I still sometimes feel that I don't belong on this continent. I therefore have my own insecurities concerning identity. There are also more correlations. For example, as much as the growth and development of South Africa can be seen as influenced by all the political happenings in the country, (such as colonialism, apartheid and independence) Indian film has also been influenced by Partition and the colonial encounter. My interest in the effects of Indian film on diasporic communities could be linked to the fact that I'm not originally from South Africa, but from Namibia, and that I can relate to the particular kind of nostalgia (evident in most modern 'Bollywood' films featuring non-resident Indians or NRI's) that colours one's view of the homeland. Lastly, I am familiar with a sense of marginalization as a woman in a patriarchal Afrikaans community, and can therefore relate to some of the situations with which the female characters in Nair's films struggle.

Therefore, like an actress seeks to find an emotional trigger to be able to associate with a certain experience in the life of a character, I had to discover in myself the capacity to equate some of my experiences to the emotions Nair evokes in her films. As someone who moved around quite a lot as a child (I attended a total of six schools), I have become quite used to being on the outside of the familiar or known. In order to make peace with my situation I had to develop, through the years, a strong sense of who I was and what I stood for. I couldn't afford to show any uncertainty regarding my identity, as high school children have the uncanny ability to spot insecurities and fears and exploit them. When watching Nair's films I came to realise that this feeling of standing on the outside of a group, looking in and either wishing to belong or hoping that I would never have to, is a subject Nair is very interested in. This immediately became my focus as I could really identify with this aspect of her films.

In summary, I find that it is not unusual nor inappropriate to write on a subject I have no specific cultural or linear references to, and feel my view will be as valid from an

'outsiders' point of view, as from someone living 'inside' it. Furthermore, through this process I will also be exercising my own form of self-expression and discovery, which adds meaning and definition to my world.

That being said, the power of being able to exercise the right to express myself started what would become for me a four-year obsession with Nair's work. The term 'obsessive' seems fitting in this regard, as it is a term Nair uses herself to describe her approach to filmmaking:

Making independent films is an obsessive task - having an idea, writing the script, finding finance, casting, shooting and editing. Then comes the big struggle to make sure the film is distributed throughout the world. All of this could easily take one or two years. In order to live with a project every day for two years I have to be obsessed by it. I can only make films about subjects that get under my skin and make my heart beat faster. I am not in the business of producing films which offer a pleasant way of filling a Sunday afternoon. That is for others to do, and I don't dismiss it. But I am attracted to ideas that will provoke people and make them look at the world a little differently - stories that come from my part of the world... I must say I enjoy the responsibility of exploring and portraying these stories through film-making. After all, film, unlike academia, reaches millions. This is another dimension of my work which I really enjoy - the ability to reach so many people. Yet at the same time, I don't forget or underestimate the individual viewer in the audience. (Anbarand and Otchet,1998:p1)

Reaching out to her audience is exactly what she manages to do. Nair is one of those rare individuals who uses the medium at her disposal, namely filmmaking, to investigate the universal need for a definition of self, and uses it to enhance understandings of culture and identity world-wide. She accepts the responsibility that comes with her chosen profession, and in fact embraces it. I use the term 'rare' individual because I wish to highlight her commitment to making films that challenges the viewer, as opposed to simply making films that are for entertainment value only.

For me this was reflected in her first fictional film *Salaam Bombay!*, released in 1988. At the time I was 6 years old, yet by the time that I watched this film, about 15 years later, the film still had a resonance that was unmarred by the passing of time. Since there were no special effects or trendy, cutting edge editing, the film did not age in the visual sense. What made it even more timeless was that it dealt with subject matter depicting a social problem that would never entirely disappear, and thus its relevance was preserved.

After watching *Salaam Bombay!* a multitude of questions raged within me. What is it that keeps the young boy Krishna clutching so tightly to his dream of home? How does he manage to maintain that bright light of hope despite all of the dirt and squalor around him? I kept seeing that little boy's face and this image just would not leave me. It is what nightmares are made of. How can we watch films like this and not get up and go do something about the issues surrounding street children? Was this why Nair made the film? How did it affect her as a person? It took me days to work through all of the emotions that the film had evoked within me.

In the end I came to the following conclusion: Nair has the ability to look beyond the situation individuals are caught up in, be it the streets of Bombay or a dusty American town, and isolate that one element that drives them. Her storytelling aims to expose the truth at the heart of the matter. What her films say is that we should look beyond what there is to see. Look deeper and you will find real people with their own pain, happiness and sorrows, but above all, see that they are human and that they are real. As humankind we are infinitely diverse, but at the core, the same. If we are able to watch these films and our world and understanding of it expands, then Nair has succeeded in being a meaningful filmmaker. Emotionally, it would probably destroy me to work with children in such circumstances. It takes immense bravery to face up to the reality of these children who live on the streets, and maybe I am not made of stern enough material to deal with this every day. But what I can do is open to my mind and my understanding of difference, and implement this in the way I live my life. That in itself adds perspective and meaning. It also keeps me rooted in reality, as opposed to becoming caught up in the manic and materialistic pace of the world around me. After I had seen the non-fiction film *God Grew Tired of Us: The Story of*

the Lost Boys of Sudan (Quinn, Walker: 2006), I experienced what many other viewers also felt:

If nothing else, watching "God Grew Tired of Us" will make Westerners realize just how much they take for granted in their daily lives. For this is a wonderful and deeply moving documentary about three young men from Africa and their first, awe-inspiring encounter with the modern world.
(Zwick,2007:p1)

Both of these films, *Salaam Bombay!* and *God Grew Tired of Us: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*, although created almost two decades apart with one being fiction, and the other a documentary, have the ability to change our perception of the world.

Nair, with the passing of time, has proven that regardless of the subject matter she is capable of facing up to this challenge. The way that she attempts to do this is through a focus on identity and the formation thereof. In each of her films, be it her documentary films like *India Cabaret* or *Children of a Desired Sex*, or her fictional works such as *The Namesake*, she attempts to show us some of the influences that finally define the personality. Is it culture, circumstance, their family, their religion, or is it something more personal, like a need to do the 'right' thing? Even in *Vanity Fair* (2004), a film version of the Thackeray classic which does not strictly fit in with her India theme-based films, Nair is inspired to show us why people acted the way they did and where their choices stemmed from. She says of the film:

Thackeray was taking the layers [sic], revealing the sham, and the hypocrisies, and the vanities, sometimes with great affection and sometimes with great bite. That was what I wanted to do, cinematically, all the time. Literally revealing the layers, revealing the shams, taking off stuff that you are putting on to be a certain way, which we all do, of course. But, to make the modern audiences not look at these people as fossilized specimens from another age, but just people like you and me, who like to take baths, who hate to wear that wig they keep for the visiting aunts. I wanted to keep that reality base, very much. (Cavagna,2004:p8)

In order to be able to keep this 'reality base' evident in all of her films, Nair admits that she uses much of what she knows and understands herself within her films. In the interview with Greer this self-understanding and knowledge comes through clearly:

BG: My next theme is exile, loss and a longing for home. This seems to be a big theme in your work. Can you talk a bit about it?

MN: I haven't ever been in exile because I have chosen to cross many oceans, but only in a voluntary manner. It is very different for friends of mine - artists, poets and writers I love - who have had exile imposed on them. I feel very much that cinema is born as a medium to capture exile. The idea of going out of your hotel in Mississippi and looking out of your window and seeing your garden in Kampala. This something that cinema lends itself to brilliantly, almost as much as literature.

BG: So this is something you are saying is part of cinema itself?

MN: No, I say it because I know what it's like to be in one place and dream of another. I also know what it's like to feel that nostalgia is a fairly useless thing because it is stasis. It does not take you many places. I am just telling you, on the side, that cinema, something I am afflicted by, is something that lends its beautiful voice to this phenomenon of being in many places at once. I have chosen a form, or a form has chosen me, that can represent that. It's something I understand very well. I always try to make films about things that get under my skin. (Greer,2002:p3)

From the abovementioned quote one can deduce that Mira Nair is a filmmaker who really engages with these questions regarding the origination, definition, development and growth of identity through her films. Not only does she question and search for that one defining element that makes the individual complete, but she also shows us the context surrounding that individual as well as all of the nuances and intricacies that are part of their make-up.

Ravinder Kaur recently pointed to a reciprocal element in this social engagement by film makers:

Popular cinema, like all other cultural forms, neither exists for a self-gratifying purpose, nor does it have an autonomous project. It deals with narratives that emerge from socio-political transformation in society, including an acute emphasis on all-encompassing commercial factors. Popular cinema not only influences the society, it effectuates a 'reciprocal-influence' where the society presents the raw stock to be woven into film narratives. (Kaur,2002:p202)

When we look at the various kind of films India produces from this perspective, the realisation dawns that the very nature of the Indian film industry is inextricably linked to themes of identity in crises, which can be seen as a positive or negative characteristic. It is positive in the sense that it is an active process of looking for meaning and definition, but negative because it creates the sensation of being caught up in a crisis. Whichever way one views it, the industry seems to be caught up in a constant, dynamic process of change and growth. And Mira Nair, more than most, has consciously chosen to explore and even exploit this complexity in her films.

Nair's themes: Aspects of Identity and Belonging

From my first engagement with the three specific Nair films I want to focus on in this thesis, namely *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala* and *Monsoon Wedding*, I became aware that they all appear to share a central theme, despite differing in location and socio-cultural setting: the search for a specific identity and a sense of belonging. The main protagonists of each, Krishna, Mena and Ria, (as well as other characters) are all looking to find some kind of definition of self in order to be able to understand where they fit in the broader social context. The notion of identity is a social construct, largely governed by perceptions and beliefs within specific communities and societies. However, no matter what the source, it affects all aspects of their lives: how they interact with their families, their enemies, their city and its

rules and idiosyncrasies. It affects the way they view themselves in relation to the people around them. It makes them fearful, hopeful and despondent at times.¹

Nair's technique for dealing with this in her films is to focus on the intricacies of each of the main characters, particularly in terms of their search for identity and belonging. In every film this is done in a different way, with a different slant to the search for identity itself, yet there are certain common themes that run throughout all of these films. For example, in all three films, *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala* and *Monsoon Wedding*, there is at least one character whose narrative journey is solely concerned with establishing his or her identity in some way or other. However, for each character, the notion of identity appears to be something different. Central to our understanding of the main character of each film is the particular internal struggle that they are faced with. This struggle may be conscious or subconscious, but is always in some way directly related to issues of identity. In addition, it is also important to note that these three characters are not the only ones engaged in a search for identity in the films – as we shall see later in the ensuing discussions. In fact, all of the characters in Nair's films seem to still be busy trying to find a figurative (and sometimes literal) “place of belonging”.

For example, not only are we as viewers engaged in Lalit's attempt to assert himself socially in *Monsoon Wedding*, but we are also intrigued by Ria's reticence to engage with her uncle and the rest of the family, as well as her cousin's attempt to balance her sexuality within her cultural context. In such a way Nair shows us how different people within the same physical space can have different expectations and therefore experience vastly diverse processes of change. For example, in *Mississippi Masala* Jay and Mena share the same physical space in the hotel, yet because their outlook at the start of their journey from Uganda is so different, they experience change and the effects of exile in exceedingly different ways, and therefore end up having to resolve these issues in very different ways.

¹ At this point I would like to raise the post-colonial connotation that this issue with identity implies. Another approach would have been to study the subject from a post-colonial perspective. However this would bring into play a number of additional issues that are beyond the scope of this thesis. I have included the references to post-colonial texts in the bibliography, as they were essential to understanding the development of the Indian film industry to what it is today.

Clearly these notions of *identity* and *belonging* are quite complex matters, as an analysis of Nair's work shows. To demonstrate, let us look at the rather wonderful scene in *Monsoon Wedding* where the young servant girl, Alice - a quiet and unassuming member of the household - is shown tidying up the bride-to-be's room. In the process, she spots a jewellery case full of bridal adornments on Aditi's bureau. Nair shows us Alice's fearful look around to see if anyone is near, and her subsequent surrender to the temptation of looking at and touching the jewellery. She is shown to carefully reach out and remove it from a box, and then slowly and painstakingly placing the dot on her forehead, all the while watching herself in the mirror. What the scene does is to show us a kind of attempted transformation of self, with Alice 'trying on' a different kind of identity - that of the middle class Punjabi bride. She lifts her sari and flutters her eyelids, as she has certainly seen other girls do, but with a shake of her head shrugs of this make-belief. She seems to reject the image she sees in the mirror, as if it does not match up to what she feels inside. When she is then spotted by Dubey and his workers, and they assume that she is stealing, we see a glimpse of another aspect of identity - this time from an outside perspective - akin to a stereotypical social response.

This scene illustrates the point made above: what I refer to as *personal identity*, is clearly not a singular, one-dimensional subject, but is really a complex of issues, including aspects one may term *actual identity*, *perceived identity* and *ideal identity*. The *ideal identity* in this case is the one Alice tries on and sees reflected in the mirror. Her *actual identity* is the part which makes her shake her head and take off the jewellery and dot, deciding that it does not really suit her. The *perceived identity* is that which Dubey and his colleagues think they see: that of a poor servant girl stealing jewellery from her middle class mistress. The reaction of the workmen supports this, as they call out and try to draw attention to the supposed crime.

However, personal identity is not the only kind of identity explored in Nair's films, there are others, as we shall see – and each of them is an equally multifaceted and shifting phenomenon, as Bookhout, Schmidt and Seta (2006:p356) have shown:

Individuals within a culture also differ in the extent to which social and personal factors are emphasized in their identity. For some persons, social

dimensions (e.g. how they appear to other persons) are most important whereas for others, personal factors (e.g., their own individualistic values) are most important.

So, in order to make sense of the different variations and nuances of this feature of Nair's characters during my research and analysis of the films, I sought to identify certain commonalities in the films regarding their treatment of notions of identity and belonging and to categorise them in some coherent way. This led me to postulate three broad types of *identity*, found in the various films, categories I provisionally define as follows:

National Identity: This refers to the belonging to a “nation” – which can include country, continent or similar place of belonging, and all of the associations and laws or rules applicable to *nationality*. It can therefore also include race, if part of a national identity formation. The term ‘nostalgia’ carries specific meaning in association with national identity, as it is the motivating factor for many of the insecurities around national identity. Diasporic experiences and migrancy are also terms that can be linked to this type of identity, as it deals with crossing borders. (see p20) This tends to be the central issue in *Mississippi Masala*, where there appears to be a distinctive need to attain and develop a sense of national identity and pride (though this is also strongly influenced by notions of cultural identity). This will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Cultural and Social Identity: This refers to racial, cultural, religious, familial and sexual identity, as found for example in *Monsoon Wedding*. Here characters such as Ria are trying to ascertain what their position and responsibilities are within the culture they find themselves in. This kind of identity, like that of national identity, is externally influenced by society/nationhood. Although cultural and social identity deals with more figurative demarcations of ‘borders’ and frameworks, nostalgia and diasporic experiences can also be ascribed as terms relevant to this kind of identity. This is the subject of Chapter 3.

Personal and Moral identity: Includes an understanding of actual, immediate identity, perceived identity and ideal identity. This kind of identity means stepping away from

externalised identity to internalised identity – and can include issues of personal relations and loyalties, moral issues, and the like. This tends to be the foremost issue in *Salaam Bombay!* where Krishna is faced with important decisions regarding his own relationships and morality. Chapter 4 looks at these issues.

In respect of this topic, I should like to end this chapter by briefly considering a very useful distinction made by Susan Friedman (2008).

About *boundaries and borders*

As shown in above, Nair's work can be classified in a number of ways. One clear distinction seems to me to be between what I would call "internationally based films" and "locally based films". The distinction is made partly on the basis of the actual location where the film is set, where it was shot, as well as the source of the funding for the films, but also on the basis of its theme. Thus, for example, *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* were both internationally made, in other words they are set in and were shot at multiple locations internationally, and thus they investigate themes that cross international borders. They play out against an international background, mostly moving in between two central locations, such as Kampala and Greenwood, in the case of *Mississippi Masala* and New York and India in the case of *The Namesake*. The themes address issues inherent in this trans-national set-up: the characters themselves struggle with what one may call a "sense of identity" in respect to their international movement. They were all born in a specific country with a certain identity, and then due to migration, had to adapt to a new country and a new national identity.

This is in strong contrast to the unique and different experiences of the characters in films such as *Monsoon Wedding* and *Salaam Bombay!* who do not travel across borders in the physical sense, for the films are set in single locations and the focus is on issues of one culture. However, these character do traverse borders, even if only figuratively. The differentiation between *literal* and *figurative* borders is very relevant to studying Nair's films, as they not only deal with the changes that physical migration brings, but also refer to those changes a person goes through internally

when in search of belonging and identity – an important point for our discussions in Chapters 2-4.

With respect to Susan Friedman's redefinition of the terms *boundary* and *borderland*, which I found most useful, as they seem to offer interesting dimensions for the discussions to follow:

More recently, Susan Friedman has experimented with the idea of boundary and borderland, where by boundary she means "a fixed line separating one side from another, often symbolically marking different sovereignties and loyalties", by borderland, she means "an indeterminate, potentially shifting and broad terrain across and through which intercultural traffic and transaction circulate". (Souter and Raja,2008:p22)

If we had to apply Friedman's ideas to an "international" film such as *Mississippi Masala* for example, one might argue that the characters have crossed an external *boundary* and are therefore now bound to a different set of laws and loyalties, which impinge on their lives. By contrast the characters in the "local" films *Monsoon Wedding* and *Salaam Bombay!*, with their internalized conflict and focus on issues with identity, are clearly caught in a 'borderland' *within themselves*.

Aim of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is thus to explore the work of Indian filmmaker Mira Nair, and to engage with her engagement with themes of identity and belonging in three of her major works. The approach is specifically and primarily a thematic analysis of the three films in relation to the issues in question, focussed on characterization and contextualization, rather than a discussion of Nair's methodology as film-maker in cinematic terms. Naturally aspects of her technique will be considered, notably her use of audio-visual metaphors and characterization, and this will be discussed in relation to a number socio-political and social-psychological issues derived from general background research.

Structure of the thesis

To provide a context for my discussion of the three films I have chosen to work with, namely *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala* and *Monsoon Wedding*, I have discussed notions of identity and belonging here, and Chapter 1 will utilise critical work, interviews, and other published sources relating to film to briefly describe Nair's development as a film maker and consider some of the key qualities of and influences on her work.

Chapters 2-4 will undertake an analysis of the three films, looking at a particular form of identity (see the provisional categories above), referring to Nair's own comments on the films as well as academic articles on the films, her work and issues such as identity, nostalgia, home, belonging, marginalization, immigrants, street children and the like, in order to interrogate Nair's exploration of the particular ideas. The 3 films will not be studied in chronologic order, but will rather be studied in a sequence that allows us to look at the different aspects of identity from the outside in, as further diagrams in Chapter 1 will illustrate. This will pull the focus on identity slowly from national identity to personal identity.

The concluding chapter (5) will turn to the potential effect of these films on the society from which they derive, and will seek to come to some conclusions about the effect these films may have in challenging, shaping and/or influencing ideas about nostalgia, home, identity, and so on.

CHAPTER ONE:

Mira Nair as Filmmaker

Allow me to clarify some of the language that I am using here. First, is hybridity a static state of being or a process of becoming? I think that there is a tendency to oscillate between the two possibilities; however I prefer to think of hybridity as a dynamic entity, always in the process of being and becoming at the same time. By using the term hybridity, I am allowing for hybrid identities to be vulnerable, if not openly, to transformation. (Viswanathan,2005:p13)

Introduction

Since the release of her first major fictional film, *Salaam Bombay!* , in 1988, Mira Nair has steadily built up an enviable reputation for her art films. In the first place she has established herself as a respected female director in the world of Indian film with an impressive repertoire of films over the past 20 years. In the same period she has also gradually become an internationally recognised director, amassing audiences in the West with some of her more popular films, such as *Monsoon Wedding (2002)* and *Vanity Fair (2004)*. The respect gained in the West has allowed her to make films on bigger budgets, with high profile actors that have resulted in even more audience members watching her films. All of this has been accomplished despite the secondary position women tend to hold in India, and indeed the relative obscurity of Indian film in the world.

Nair's training and history seem to have had more than just a passing influence on the kind of filmmaker she has become. She is a citizen of the world, having lived in India, New York, Uganda and South Africa respectively, but this multi-national aspect of her life seems little more than an extension of her youth, which she spent growing up in India and studying at Harvard. In the process she has developed something like a multi-cultural filmic voice, making films about relocation, immigration and multiple national identities and gradually amassing a vast range of experience.

Starting out as a documentary filmmaker at Harvard University, she gradually moved on to the fictional film, first with a local focus, later with an international focus - but

all the while tapping into her own cultural roots, including the Indian stage and film industry. Visually one may illustrate her position in the form of a diagram (see Figure 1)

However, how does all of this information have an impact on our understanding of Nair as filmmaker?

If we had to look at Nair as a filmmaker in relation to all of these matters mentioned in the chapter, namely her documentary background, her role as an international filmmaker, her positioning in terms of typical Bollywood film and her filmmaking as a female minority in a male dominated industry, a specific picture of Nair is developed. We may view her as a filmmaker on several levels. If we move from the outside inwards in her circle of belonging, as shown below in Diagram 1, we will see that she is representative of quite a few roles.

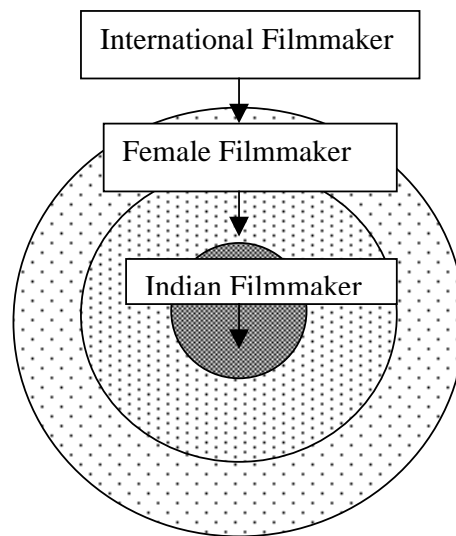


Diagram 1

Under each of these ‘titles’ Nair functions in a specific way, and it is important to note this as it will provide context and background for each of her films, which in turn relate to each of these ‘roles’. With this diagram I propose that Nair is first and foremost an Indian filmmaker, with the subject of India and its people being closest to her heart. One could also say that this is the aspect of her filmmaking that has become part of her filmic signature, the element that we recognize her films by.

Second to her Indian filmmaking identity is that of her female identity. Her filmic voice is very strongly associated with that of the female, in the way she portrays strong, multi-faceted female protagonists, as well as the attention to detail that is apparent in every relationship within her films. We will also look at this aspect in more detail in the latter half of this chapter. Lastly, as stated in the beginning of this chapter, Nair has grown into an international filmmaker of some esteem; however this aspect of her filmmaking is still in development, and not yet as established as the two other characteristics. Furthermore, we can look at these aspects of her filmmaking identity in relation to her films: in *Mississippi Masala* Nair is positioned primarily as an international filmmaker, in *Monsoon Wedding* I propose that she is exercising her power as both an Indian and a female filmmaker, and in *Salaam Bombay!* she is acting as a Indian filmmaker, commenting on the social issues of her country.

Just like Nair's identity as a filmmaker can be seen to have different levels of belonging, her films can be further categorized and analyzed in the same way. This I will attempt to do in Chapter Two to Four. The aim is to apply this model to the films themselves and use the information to gain more understanding about how these films can be related to the different kinds of identity. Hopefully this will enable me to draw a diagram of belonging that will show the levels of identity and integration that each of Nair's characters experience within her films.

To illustrate this, let us turn to Figure 2, where I revisit the "circle of belonging" illustrated in Figure 1. Here I seek to categorise Nair's films according to their focus.

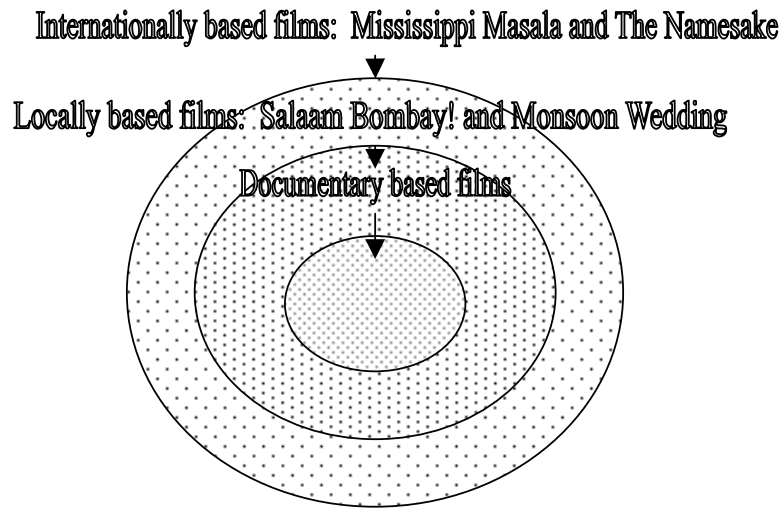


Diagram 2

Following the formula of the previous diagram, the influence of documentary films would therefore form the basis or core of Nair's collection of works. This includes some of her first films like *India Cabaret*, etc. Next follows her locally based films encompassing these documentary film styles and widening her circle of renown and expertise. Lastly, her internationally based films are probably the furthest removed from her original training yet have exposed her to a wider film base, and increased her renown amongst international audiences. When studying her films, as mentioned in the Introduction, I wish to start working from the 'outside in', with *Mississippi Masala* as my point of departure, working up to *Salaam Bombay!* to conclude.

Some key influences and contexts

There are many influences one might discuss, but in this chapter I want to focus on four issues which seem to me important in the discussion of the three films to follow in Chapters Two to Four: Her work in documentary film, her exposure and response to Bollywood, her relationship to other prominent Indian film makers and the situation women face in Indian society. These influences led her to develop a distinctive signature, a specific "voice" in film, which we look at before we turn to a consideration of the thematic responses to her own itinerant international life in Chapter 2.

Nair and the documentary film

Nair started out as a documentary filmmaker at Harvard University, making amongst others *India Cabaret* (1985), a film about exotic dancers, *Children of a Desired Sex* (1987), a documentary about the abortion of female foetuses and *So Far From India* (1982), about the life of a newspaper seller and his family. When she turned to making feature films in 1988, her films were strongly influenced by this experience, and she tended to echo the grittiness and intimacy characteristic of the documentary style. In *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) for example, the lack of visual opulence and colour, as well as the close and personal scrutiny of the characters within their specific environment seem purposely to suggest we are looking at a documentary film. The subject matter focuses on the lives of the street children within a large city such as Bombay. The film almost resembles a wildlife documentary about baby animals surviving in a jungle. The children are seen attempting to cope with abandonment, foraging for food, searching for shelter and fighting for survival. This film documents different types of behaviour amongst different groups occupying space in the city. Nair thus uses elements of documentary type films to relay a sense of reality and truthfulness to the audience member.

In *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) the same effect was created through the use of hand-held cameras, a technique which results in the audience feeling as if they are watching the work of someone who has secretly been filming on a home video camera, capturing truly natural and believable interactions between family and friends. This technique reminds one of the Dogme films - an attempt to steer away from any kind of smooth and polished film created through post-production, but instead shot in real time, with very little added effects. This is not to say that she is a follower of the movement at all, but there are strong similarities. More than the visual elements, it is the search for truth and meaning that comes with documentary style filmmaking that seems to have had the greatest influence on Nair's work. Even though the budgets allocated to her films have grown, and hand-held cameras and actual street scenes are no longer compulsory, Nair has maintained the honest and scrutinizing approach that is required of a documentary filmmaker. Kemp explains the origin of this 'honesty' in documentary film:

In the 1930s the idea arose in Britain and the US that the documentary was a kind of social truth-telling, and could be used as a popular educational tool. It was at this time that the documentary's somewhat dry reputation as an educator was cemented... By this time some common documentary characteristics began to emerge: a general rejection of artistic and political values of the commercial cinema as represented by Hollywood, an absolute belief in film as an art form, and for the most part a political bias to the left. Also after the Second World War came the introduction of lightweight 16mm equipment, which made filming cheaper, and more flexible to filmmakers working mostly on location. (Kemp,2003:p1)

Perhaps one of the most dominating influences of her experience in documentary film making is her determination to show us the essence of the milieu within which the narrative unfolds. This has become a trademark of her filmmaking. She, for example, vividly captures the specific mood and feeling of a city through sound and image – this is equally true of Kampala in *Mississippi Masala*, Delhi in *Monsoon Wedding* and of Mumbai in *Salaam Bombay!*. She fills the narrative with flashes of city-scapes: cars and bicycles on a busy road, the chaotic swirl of an open-air market, dank and dusty tea shops, towering buildings and garish billboards, a funeral in the slums and so on. Thus we are always conscious of the place in which the film is centered, as if she does not want us to lose sight of the particular city we are dealing with. Through the use of visuals Nair manages to root the audience firmly in the location.

Nair says of herself: "I'm now a person of the world...but I know where I came from". (Orenstein,1992:p60) In relation to other international filmmakers who make nation-specific films out of their hosting countries, Nair is internationally based and has not lived in India for a long time, yet she is known as someone who focuses on making films about India. Her most popular film, *Monsoon Wedding*, specifically brought her very unique style of filmmaking to the world's attention. It also became one of her most commercially successful films. According to Q Magazine it was a "...surprise success which not only stayed in the U.S. top 60 for 30 weeks, but also enjoyed a successful run in the U.K and India." (Roy,2002) For American and European audiences the film produced a rare insight into the modern Indian life,

without the extremely fantastical elements associated with traditional Bollywood film. For Indian audiences on the other hand it still contained enough of the Indian 'masala' film elements to make it a film to be seen. The point is that the film, depicting a modern Hindu family, is upbeat and easy to watch, comic even. However, it is not solely filled with frivolity and magnolias, for Nair manages to combine the inherent lightheartedness of the family affair with a look at more serious subject matter, weaving persuasive scenes about abuse and family loyalties into the overall narrative.

Such films demonstrate that Nair has a decided opinion about the social responsibility of the film maker. This is eloquently displayed in an article she wrote for *Variety*:

In the new "global village" of incessant images, increasingly I see the failure of mass media to impart actual understanding. This overactive pluralism gives one the illusion of knowing a lot about a lot when actually you know a smattering about nothing at all, leaving in its wake an audience so thoroughly bludgeoned by little bits of information that one is left confused and consequently apathetic politically. (Nair,2002:p1)

Nair seems to see no point in making films about issues that are not closely studied and researched, films which leaves the audience member partly ill-informed. Perhaps it is this sense of understanding that she evokes in the viewer that makes her so compelling and ultimately so successful.

As noted earlier in the chapter, there are various documentary style aspects in the two films *Salaam Bombay!* and *Monsoon Wedding*. This extends to the casting of the two films, as they were both locally based. In *Salaam Bombay!* Nair chose to work with street children who were not real actors at all. This results in a raw, uncut, unpolished feel which permeates the film. Nair frequently makes use of close-ups that focus on the undisguised emotions of the children. Specific techniques were employed to capture some of these very natural moments.

Not a single scene in this movie was shot on a set or in a studio, and some of the scenes - including a funeral procession - were shot with hidden cameras, to capture the unrehearsed behavior of the spectators. (Krutika,2007:p668)

These children were able to 'perform' these parts because of the fact that they were quite familiar with most of the emotions. The angst, hunger and anger that the characters were expected to feel and portray was something these children were faced with on a day to day basis.

For *Monsoon Wedding*, Nair ended up using members of her own family for the film, as quite a few of the actors who were cast in the film purportedly did not arrive on set for the start of filming.

Next-door-neighbours were pressed into service as actors (one of them has moved to Bombay and started a new career as an actress). Costumes were provided by Nair and her family. Paintings and other props were borrowed from friends. (Roten,2002:p1)

Through the use of material and props that were already readily available, and not specifically created for the film, *Monsoon Wedding* is therefore almost reminiscent of the some of the Dogme film conventions. The Dogme 95 movement aims to represent reality as closely as possible. The two founders felt that filmmaking was being taken over by special effects, post-production and technology, and therefore vowed that filmmaking would be returned to its purest form. The resemblance of some of the aspects of *Monsoon Wedding* to this vow is especially relevant to the first three points of the Vow of Chastity that can be found on the official Dogme 95 website:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is)
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot).
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place).

4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera).
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.) (Vinterberg and Von Trier,1995:p1)

Nair and Bollywood

For an Indian film audience today, the dominating influence in film is that of Bollywood. Binford makes the following comment about Bollywood film in 1983: 'With an audience averaging twelve million a day, the commercial cinema is generally assumed to be the most influential mass medium in India'. (Binford: 1983:34) Today, in a country that is seen as being one of the fastest growing economies in the world, this figure is grossly out of date, and one can only imagine that with the emergence of the internet and global communities that this figure has vastly increased. In 2005, the industry was already producing between 900 and a 1000 films in year, in comparison to Hollywood's 200 films annually:

The potential for growth is huge even though the Indian industry is already the world's largest producer of films with some 1000 annually, according to a 2005 report by the Confederation of Indian Industry and accounting giant KPMG. (Singh,2006:p1)

Based originally on the musical and dance interpretations of ancient Hindu texts, the films have evolved into dealing with non-secular themes, and even address modern day issues such as inter-caste marriages and abortion. However, internationally these films are mostly known to follow a formulaic pattern which is slightly adapted for variation, whilst maintaining the essence of Bollywood: extravagance and spectacle interwoven with song and dance. Song and dance are however, not the only distinctive characteristic of Bollywood film. Despite the gradual decline of religious content in Bollywood films, the movies produced still adhere strictly to certain belief

systems that stem from the origins of these films. This belief system differs vastly from that portrayed in most Western films. For example, until 1997 and the release of *Jism* no kisses were ever shown on-screen. Because public display of affection is not approved of, sex scenes are almost still unheard of, and in place of that a whole new style of eroticism specific to Bollywood has developed in the form of ‘wet sari’ scenes. These involve scenes where the heroine is dreaming of her true love, and becoming drenched in the rain whilst calling out his name. Instead of then showing or acting out her desire physically, it is hinted at by the sensuality of her body that is accentuated by the wet sari clinging to it.

But lovers are not the only characters that feature prominently in Bollywood films. These films also include a range of other stereotypical Indian characters namely a disapproving mother-in-law, a doting father figure, an evil nobleman and a clowning best friend. Alagh and Malhotra summarise it as follows:

Hindi films have a predominantly formulaic tradition (Lutze). At the centre of the plot is often a love story, wherein lovers overcome great odds to be together. Sometimes the love story ends in tragedy, when the odds are too great to overcome. A variation on the theme shifts the focus from the love story to a ‘revenge’ saga, often based in the struggle of ‘the common man’ wronged by a powerful villain (often represented as a corrupt politician or policeman, underworld don, etc.) who must fight this evil to avenge himself, his family and/or his love, or who justifiably crosses over to the underworld until he sees the light or is killed himself. The uniqueness of the Hindi film is often located in the fact that most Hindi films are musical, a fact sometimes attributed to the linguistic diversity of the country (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy). (Alagh and Malhotra,2004:p19)

Despite the predictable storylines and sometimes frivolous mid-song jump in locations, Bollywood film has resulted in a film culture that influences lives on multiple levels. It influences the way young people dress, re-enforces social values and has even been known to incite riots, as was the case with the filming of Mehta’s *Fire* (1996). Dasgupta quotes Abbas and Sathe:

Although the impact of movies on the Indian populace has not yet been studied systematically, scholars focusing on films as popular culture speculate its influence to be quite strong. Abbas and Sathe write:

In a country where less than five per cent (sic) buy or read newspapers and books, the Hindi film is the only popular form of literature and art for the vast masses of the common people. Their contact with prose is the dialogue that they hear; the only poetry that enriches their lives is the poetry of film lyrics. Hence the importance of the talkie that can educate and inspire the people even when entertaining them (1985:p369)

Dasgupta furthermore writes:

Since Hindi films serve as a cultural link in the lives of immigrants, it is imperative that the messages of these films are closely examined....Thus, along with religious ceremonies, cultural events, language classes, and regular visits to India, Hindi films have become an inadvertent tool of teaching. (Dasgupta,2006:p173;175)

Thus it is clear that not only is Hindi film or Bollywood a dominant form of 'literature' in India, but it also serves as an educational tool which certainly serves to influence lives. This once again serves to emphasize the responsibility of the director to make films that are worthy of being called 'literature'.

The quotes above and on p.26 show that not only is Bollywood worthy of international recognition as a legitimate film industry through number of viewers and films produced annually, but also Bollywood has its own star system, and as previously mentioned its own unique values and history.

The reference to 'Bombay Hollywood' is in many ways a useful term to describe a specific set of industrial practices, a star system, ideas about genre and style and an overall entertainment ethos. (Stafford,2005:p2)

There is an element of optimism in its films that belies the poverty and lack of education that befalls most of India's population. Good often triumphs over evil, the lovers mostly (if not always) end up together, and as an antithesis of Hollywood, chastity is celebrated and protected.

On an international level Bollywood has not only received accolades however. It has endured its share of disparagement, being strongly criticised for being illusionary and propagating false images of India. Films have increasingly been featuring upper caste Hindu's living in expansive mansions, as is the case in *Mohabbatein* (2000) and even the remake of the classic film *Devdas* (2002). This narrow-minded portrayal of Indian families points to the fact that Indian film is becoming increasingly elitist in the kind of characters it portrays, and does not take into account the greater part of its population who are illiterate and poor. Rob Gowland quotes the *Oxford Companion to Film* in a scathing article on Indian cinema, referring to it as follows:

Neither creating a coherent imaginative world of its own nor reflecting the social reality of India, the popular Indian film creates a limbo of song and dance, of sentiment and melodrama, which is comfortably flattering to the wealthy among the audience, seductively escapist for the poor.

(Gowland,2002:p1-2)

If we look at the films of Nair in relation to the above-mentioned statements, we can see that there are distinct differences in her approach to filmmaking. Firstly Nair does not believe, as we see in the quote at the beginning of the chapter, in making films that do not convey meaning and understanding to the audience. Nair states that what makes her passionate about filming is "to communicate with people" (Schwartz,2004). Simply creating a film that is visually striking but empty in terms of content is not Nair's style, and in this instance her films are quite different from that of mainstream Bollywood. Although admittedly she employs principles similar to that of Bollywood in some of her films (Schwartz,2004), she generally shies away from formulaic narrative and what she calls "a kind of high kitsch":

Well, I'm sort of an odd bird, because I don't really belong to the Bollywood system or to the commercial Indian system, and I've always done sort of an

oblique thing from it. But I enjoy a lot and learn a lot from it, besides the themes I mentioned that were common. Emotional intent of a scene is very important in Indian cinema. I wouldn't say Bollywood, because Bollywood sort of implies a kind of high kitsch. I'm talking now much deeper, like the Gurudutts or the old Raj Kapoor and the great commercials from commercial directors, you know? And that kind of emotional intent of every scene – especially when you're doing so many parallel stories at once, and trying to do so many things in every one scene – that learning, or that emotional dagger-in-your-heart kind of thing, is from Indian cinema..." (Schwartz,2004:p6)

Distancing herself even more from the typical Bollywood film, Nair employs spectacle, music and dance in her films specifically to enrich narrative and add meaning, and not simply for mass entertainment and the bonus of selling movie soundtracks - as is often the case with Bollywood films.

The obvious example is *Salaam Bombay!*, one of Nair's first full length feature films, which is almost a direct antithesis of a Bollywood film. As has been pointed out in the Introduction, colour in the film appears muted; in fact the film almost plays out entirely in shades of grey and muddy browns. In the film any references to Bollywood are made in a satirical fashion, or as a point of contrast. The smiling faces of Bollywood stars staring down from billboards seem to mock the pitiful existence of the destitute people below them. Dance and music serves to highlight the difference between the perceived wealth and fame that Bombay supposedly provides to young people. It is in powerful contrast with the squalor, poverty and hunger of reality. The boys on the street manipulate the famous songs of the cinematic screen and sing them to their victims in parody. In addition, there are no magical transportations to foreign locations mid-song. Instead, the only 'transportation' any of the characters experience is either drug or alcohol induced. In fact, most attempts to leave the physical parameters of the city are foiled time and again. The freedom of mind and body that the typical character in a Bollywood film would have is not shared by the characters in this film. Once Krishna is led into the city by the boy who stole his paan masala, there is no way out for him. When he tries to escape with Sweet Sixteen the couple are quickly captured again by the brothel 'bouncers'. Nair shows us how the crowd physically swallows Krishna and Rekha in one of the last scenes in the film.

As they attempt to cling to each other for support, they are almost violently torn apart by the surging crowd. If the same scenario had to play itself out in a typical Bollywood film, Krishna would probably have been celebrated for ridding society of a known criminal and drug dealer, instead of being further isolated and ultimately abandoned.

However, other films make more obvious use of Bollywood references, and certain of her more popular films share certain techniques with the Bollywood style. However, the real difference lies in the *ways* in which Nair's films deal with the truth and the harsh realities of life in India or life as an Indian, which are her themes. It is not that she does not embrace song, dance, spectacle, stereotypical characterizations or situations, but that she consciously *uses* these principles in new and decidedly more truthful ways. Instead of simply portraying an over-protective but well-meaning father figure in a one-dimensional narrative, she makes us think about the reasons why this man has ended up being so afraid of rejection or failure.

In *Monsoon Wedding* for example Nair uses the songs sung by the young bride's female relatives as a wedding tradition as a method of conveying to the audience the despair the young bride is feeling on the eve of her wedding. Instead of singing this song herself against the backdrop of exotic and changing dreamscapes, as would have been the case in a Bollywood film, Nair's song fills the viewer with gentle, melancholic emotions that perfectly captures Aditi's positioning as a girl who is torn between wanting to do the right thing for herself, and doing the right thing in the eyes of her family.

Mississippi Masala and *The Namesake* also share some of the principles of Bollywood film, although in their case it is more to do with thematic content. One issue that Bollywood currently addresses with frequency is that of issues surrounding immigrants or NRI's (Non-resident Indians). Once again, however, there are clear differences in the way these issues are handled in the films. In these two films there is a kind of ideological, nostalgic element that is similar to that of Bollywood. In a traditional Bollywood film the ideal Indian family and culture is celebrated. There is sanctity in the relationships between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters. Blood is always thicker than water and honour and obedience is the accepted way of

life. For example, this is depicted in many dance sequences, celebrating the friendship between two men, or the love of a sister for a brother. In *Devdas* (2002), the young heroine's love is visually depicted by an oil lamp that she keeps burning despite all the years that she is kept away from her lover. A scene featuring the young woman singing to and dancing with the oil lamp is an example of how her longing for her loved one is interpreted. In Nair's films however, longing, be it for a person or a place, is not shown through the action of dance or the words of a song sung by the hero or heroine, but rather through visual hints that portray the emotions of nostalgia for a person, culture or place. In other words, in a typical Bollywood film a longing for a person or a place would be played out through actions, through a kind of dream sequence in which the character is transported to another world, or country that features more entertaining backdrops. In Nair's films the dreams would be portrayed in a much more realistic way, without jumping to locations that have no bearing on the storyline at hand, and would most likely be portrayed as an actual memory, as is the case in *Mississippi Masala*. The nostalgia or longing will show itself as an undercurrent of thought influencing every action and decision a character makes. Jay, for example, will never completely settle in the community of Greenwood, as he still yearns for his life in Uganda. At the same time, he will not form strong bonds with any other male in his life, as it makes him long for his friend and confidante Okelo in Uganda. These ideas are not displayed to the viewer in an obvious way, but are hinted at through, in this case, the inability of Jay to accept his environment, despite everyone else around him attempting to do so in some way.

A few of Nair's other films, however, do have more obvious traces of Bollywood influence. These films include *Kama Sutra* (1996), and some visual aspects of *Vanity Fair*. In these films Nair utilizes the Bollywood conventions for her own more serious purposes. In *Kama Sutra* she employs a Bollywood-style visual opulence in some of the scenes, as well as, according to critics such as Rajesh Gopalan, employing a staid storyline involving a prince, courtesan and princess. His criticism is quite severe, but in some cases quite understandable:

In case anyone should have forgotten just how notoriously racist and idiotic Hollywood's portrayal of the "orient" can be, director Mira Nair has decided to jog our memories with her recently released film, *Kama Sutra*. By filling the

movie end-to-end with sadistic princes, exotic harems, runaway slave-girls, conniving eunuchs and moustachioed guards wielding curved swords and limited vocabularies (yes-saheeb, no-saheeb), Nair has faithfully reproduced many of the most outrageous and absurd stereotypes of Asia that Hollywood has ever invented...

It would be easy to dismiss this phenomenon and this genre altogether as benign stupidity, and indeed, many films like the *Kama Sutra* are so appallingly poor in every respect, that they verge on the comical. But in an age where Hollywood's cultural savagery stalks virtually every corner of the globe, it is disturbing to think that people even in the Middle East or South Asia are often learning of their own cultures and histories through this distorted perspective. One is only reminded of the tragedy of North America's devastated native population, who learn a crude caricature of their own traditions and history through "cowboys-and-injuns" films.

(Gopalan,2005:p1)

If one had to take the criticisms and weigh them against the commercial success and money made by these films, one would be able to say that a certain 'falsity' was indeed noted by the audience. Neither *Kama Sutra* nor *Vanity Fair*, one of Nair's Hollywood based films, managed to create the same kind of stir in filmic circles as did *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala* or *Monsoon Wedding*.

Vanity Fair, although meant to depict an English/British viewpoint this time around, received the same kind of criticism of portraying false images as in *Kama Sutra*. In this film Nair admittedly used Indian elements such as music, Indian dance, costumes, peacocks, tales of elephants and other exotic creatures in India; however, her honesty in interviews about borrowing these elements from Bollywood film was not seen as being the same as delivering a truthful portrayal of the life and times that Thackeray wrote about. Nair specifically changed one scene, in which the protagonist Becky Sharp dances a Bollywood inspired dance for an audience, a scene which specifically resulted in criticism from viewers.

Why was there so much Indian culture in a film set in early 19th Century England? Is it realistic that Reese Witherspoon and a bevy of scantily clad court ladies would perform a Bollywood-style “slave dance” for the King of England? (Cavagna,2004:p1)

Given that the films titles include a dedication to the late Edward Said, of *Orientalism* notoriety, perhaps one ought to be grateful that the film’s Indian sequences don’t show lashed coolies bleeding to produce England’s enormous new wealth: instead, the film’s ‘exotic’ Indian scenes could come right out of tourist brochures and J. Peterman-style safari catalogues, with red, rugged Rajasthani forts under piercing blue skies, dancing peasants, swaying elephants, and dashing men in riding boots. (Foreman,2004:p59)

Although the use of Indian culture and filmic influence in the making of *Vanity Fair* is questionable, it is undeniable that these elements were apparent to and noted by audiences and critics alike. It is therefore clear that Nair is capable of emulating the Bollywood energy even in films that would traditionally not be associated with this kind of film. Whether this is always the right strategy is debatable. What seems to work for Nair is an honest and open approach to filmmaking, especially when it involves real people shown within their own ordinary environments. On the other hand, her attempt to use Indian culture and influences within *Vanity Fair* could have been a deliberate attempt to create an alternative point of view on the classic by Thackeray. And perhaps it does succeed in doing this; however the original intent was not, like Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* remake, or Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), to give an old classic a fresh and modern interpretation. It was never marketed as being a modern interpretation, and was therefore not viewed with the expectation of it being such.

For the perfect example of a film where Nair manages to balance both honesty, truth and yet make overt and conscious use of Bollywood elements, we have to return to *Monsoon Wedding*. As Greer reports:

Nair has said of this film that it freely makes use of Bollywood conventions – large canvases full of interwoven characters, plot structures that move from

one melodramatic crisis to another and an overload of sensuality, visual and auditory. There are even songs recognizable from well-known Bollywood epics. (Greer,2002:p1)

In the first place it is a film about the celebration of life and specifically of Indian culture. It involves all of the characters that would stereotypically be present in a family-based Bollywood film such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) for example the two star-crossed lovers, the proud and happy parents, the dreaded mother-in-law, etc. Notably, *Monsoon Wedding* also features several song and dance sequences (which will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Three) that serve as a visual reminder of Bollywood and its influence.

Though the film emulates many of the more obvious characteristics of a Bollywood movie, it never becomes a culturally exclusive and stylised depiction of India, but actually uses such conventions for its own purposes (as we shall see later). In the event however, *Monsoon Wedding* proved to be particularly appealing to international audiences, many of them unfamiliar with the Bollywood film as genre. This appeal may possibly derive from the novelty value of the Bollywood elements themselves, a point also to make perhaps with the success of films like *Lagaan* (2001). Interestingly enough, this film had already piqued interest from critics a year earlier. Having said this, it must be noted that this obvious Bollywood influence resulted in a fair amount of comment from critics. The film enjoyed great commercial success, but to some, sacrificed some of the reputation of reality and honesty that Nair had built up in her previous films. However, it was not the Bollywood-inspired aspect of song and dance and the kinds of characters that displeased critics, but the sentimentality that the film entertained. Laurier argues the following:

It must be said that *Monsoon Wedding* stacks the deck in such a manner as to distort reality. Are there arranged marriages in which both parties are attractive and intelligent, so that a potentially satisfying relationship develops? No doubt. Are there Indian upper middle class families that treat their “help” with respect and even affection? Probably. Is a more or less seamless coexistence of elements of tradition and modern life possible? Yes, under certain conditions. However, if all the social “exceptions to the rule” in the

film are added up, one confronts a narrative that simply stretches credibility.
(Laurier,2002:p2)

For Laurier the film, by incorporating so many Bollywood film sentiments, loses some of its power and persuasiveness. For critics like Laurier, the intention of film should be much more than simply entertainment. Laurier feels that it's a medium which has the ability to act as a reflection of a certain society, as well as a product of its values and norms, and therefore has a responsibility towards its viewer. *Monsoon Wedding*, for this critic, does not fulfil this responsibility. What Laurier fails to note is the context in which the film was made. After the bombing of the Twin Towers on September the 11th, 2001, the aftermath of this was widely felt. Globally financial markets were affected and the general world view was one of mistrust and pessimism. Fear of another world war outbreak became a reality, which further depressed the global state of mind. Thus the environment in which Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* was made belied the depressed state which the world was experiencing. Its 'small town' focus on family values and general optimism was in stark contrast to the emotions that the rest of the world, specifically America, was feeling. While one understands Laurier's concern that a filmmaker of Nair's calibre borrows so freely from the Bollywood genre, it is also important to realise that there must have been a specific intent behind Nair producing this film at such a time.

I refer to a more extended version of the quote from an article Nair herself writes in September of 2002:

I make images in my work. I don't pen words, especially not words to be delivered from church pulpits. So I experienced great agony writing this essay, particularly since it was also meant for publication, until I began to see it as an opportunity to think aloud with you on what has been possessing my mind of late, in this tumultuous past year since the watershed date of 9/11/01. I have been reflecting on the torrent of ceaseless images flooding our lives: in print media, TV and of course, in our popular cinema, ultimately asking myself the age-old questions Ter Braak raises in his still-radical essay: what is the role of

an artist in any society? What is the place and future of cinema in the world today?

In the new "global village" of incessant images, increasingly I see the failure of mass media to impart actual understanding. This overactive pluralism gives one the illusion of knowing a lot about a lot when actually you know a smattering about nothing at all, leaving in its wake an audience so thoroughly bludgeoned by little bits of information that one is left confused and consequently apathetic politically. Perhaps that is its intention. As was reported in the New York Times, the fact is that while images have become more and more international, people's lives have remained astonishingly parochial. This ironic fact of contemporary life is especially troubling in today's war-mongering times, when so much depends on understanding worlds so different, and consequently totally divided, from one's own. In this post 9/11 world, where the schisms of the world are being cemented into huge walls between one belief and way of life and another, now more than ever we need cinema to reveal our tiny local worlds in all their glorious particularity. In my limited experience, it's when I've made a film that's done full-blown justice to the truths and idiosyncrasies of the specifically local, that it crosses over to become surprisingly universal. Take *Monsoon Wedding*, for instance. (Nair,2002:p1)

After reading this passage, one has a much clearer understanding of why *Monsoon Wedding* specifically was made in such contrast to the rest of Nair's films. It was a reaction against all the doom and gloom and depression that the world was assaulted by, and the film serves to affirm the small pleasures of family and union. Ironically enough, if *Monsoon Wedding* conformed completely to Dogme 95, it would be in direct contrast to traditional Bollywood film, where sound is dubbed post-production and temporal and geographical alienation is almost a pre-requisite. Yet, both Dogme 95 and Bollywood elements are undeniably present in *Monsoon Wedding*. What Nair seems to imply with the use of both of these influences, is that Bollywood and the way it relates to the world has become a kind of reality to many Indians. As mentioned earlier, it has resulted in a revolution of sorts, taking not only India, but also the rest of the world by storm. Bollywood has, as critics like Bagchi

point out, affected discourse regarding feminism and dominant values. (1996)

Tremblay comments that:

Unlike the western films which exhibit a wide variety of genres and themes, this single genre (popular Hindi film) totally dominates the Hindi film industry and has earned the Bombay films the pejorative designation of formula films.

The pervasive influence of films on the formation of social identity can be partially attributed to this homogeneity of genre. Social mores and norms for individual conducts are as much a product of the 'rules of the game' set forth in the films as of the existing societal values. Indicative of the film's popular appeal, the fashion industry thrives on the success of Hindi movies and the popularity of its heroes and heroines. The latest hair-do's and clothing styles reflect those most recently displayed in the films. The tailoring business in North India, and more recently, boutiques in the major metropolitan cities as well, have been little more than keeping up with the demand for film-inspired fashions. The conduct of relationships between the two sexes receives its cues from the films. (Tremblay,1996:p303)

When one thinks about it, this societal response should only be expected if it is what they are confronted with on television and what they listen to on the radio. It almost sounds like a sci-fi film in which subordinates are indoctrinated by popular culture; bombarded with it on billboards, big-screens, voice-overs and the news. Nair is perceptive enough to realise to what an extent Bollywood has permeated everyday Indian life, and she attempts to show this subtly to us in her films. The way that the family in *Monsoon Wedding* sing together at the dinner table at the engagement party is a perfect example. The song they sing is a hit from a Bollywood film, another example of how Bollywood is absorbed by the Indian reality. Even at this very traditional event, where all of the traditional cultural practices are in place, the 'modern' influence of Bollywood is noticeable. It is embedded in their everyday lives, and it is as much a product of Indian culture as it is a reflection. In summary, it is possible to say that Bollywood film has become part of the formation of cultural identity, and has actually started to influence the way Indians perceive their cultural reality.

Other Indian Filmmakers

Bollywood is not the only kind of film made in India, and thus we also need to look at Indian filmmakers who produce films outside of this context. Specifically, there are two Indian filmmakers who have also achieved great success in making Indian cross-over films. The term cross-over implies a movement from a more traditional kind of Indian filmmaking to films that have more of an international appeal, as well as crossing over from more commercial cinema to an art house cinema. Two contemporary directors stand out in this regard, and noticeably, they are both female: Gurinder Chadha and Deepa Mehta. Both, as well as being marginalized as filmmakers by being female, are exceptions in the world of Indian film because they have distanced themselves from films that are in the words of Tremblay “culturally naïve”. (1996:p303)

Mehta’s films, whose subject matter includes sensitive issues such as lesbian relationships and the position of widows in Indian society, have been subjected to violent opposition from the Indian population. The filming of *Water* (2005) had to be suspended due to riots and vandalising of the set, and was eventually completed in another country as the production could not continue in India. Her films, like Nair’s, are primarily about belonging and different formations of identity. This theme is revealed strongly in interviews, much more so than in those with Nair:

“I’ve never felt Canadian. I used to be upset about being called an invisible (sic) minority, that’s what they called coloured people there. I used to come to India and was called an NRI [Non Resident Indian] here. The problem was not about belonging anywhere; it was a dislike for labels...Now I feel very happy being who I am, Deepa Mehta” (Ramchandani). Mehta views herself as a kind of cultural hybrid. Quoting a character from Salman Rushdie’s collection of stories *East, West* who is asked whether he is British or Indian, Mehta says, “I refuse to choose.’ That’s how I feel. I refuse to choose. I spend about half of each year in each country. My daughter is a Canadian. I’m an immigrant here, and I wouldn’t stay exclusively in either place. (Desai,2002:p1)

And furthermore:

India gave me a certain passion to make films," she says. "Canada gave me the freedom to express that passion. I can't help but draw from both. That's the soil that a hybrid comes from. (Gilmore,2002:p1)

Mehta's work therefore definitely comes from a range of personal interactions with different cultures and countries. The above-mentioned quotes also show us how and where her inspiration originates. In relation to Nair, Mehta seems to be much more vocal about her Indian roots and international lifestyle and the resulting identity confusion. On the other hand, both filmmakers do share quite a serious approach to making films about India and its population.

Gurinder Chadha is best known for films like *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) and *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). Although she deals with serious issues surrounding identity, gender expectations and racial divides, Chadha definitely prefers to look at these in a light-hearted manner through the use of comedy. These two films are specifically concerned with diasporic Indians who live in England and other places abroad. Chadha differs from Nair and Mehta in that she was not born in India, nor educated there, and this could be a reason for her more entertaining thematic content. When asked about her film *Bend it Like Beckham* being compared to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), she states:

I wanted to make a film that entertained audiences and also, make them see the world from my point of view and from the point of view of someone who is Indian and English at the same time. (Fischer,2003:p1)

For Chadha it seems more possible to merge the two identities, possibly because she is one generation removed from 'coming from India'. She herself notes this difference stating:

Deepa and Mira went to school in India. They are both Delhi girls. That shows up in interesting ways in their work. On the other hand, I went to

school in Southall. I have been in England all my life. My links with India were through Hindi movies in the local theatres...I have a different relationship with the West. I never see myself as an outsider in the West. (Jha,2004:p1)

This statement is markedly different from that of Mehta, and provides interesting insight into the different attitudes towards their filmmaking. Nevertheless, all three filmmakers are essentially concerned with exploring issues of identity and belonging, be it cultural, religious, national or sexual.

The role of woman in Indian society and the film industry

This brings me to the last ‘context’ I wish to explore as a backdrop against which Nair produces films. Mehta’s quote stating that Canada provided her with the ‘freedom’ to make films is quite revealing. It is not exceptional, nor unusual that both of these directors only found their true voices in the West. This does not mean that they did not have voices or opinions while in India, but simply that the West gave them agency through which to project these. Mehta moved to Canada in order to make films and Nair received a very important part of her adult education in America– these influences provided them with an opportunity to be more vocal about their beliefs, as it would not necessarily have been possible in India.

The fact that Mehta’s films were so violently opposed and created so much furore that they had to be completed elsewhere, give us an indication of how strong the resistance is against traditional values being challenged. These traditional values include the marginalization of women on a social level, which directly affects the career aspirations of any woman in India.

The statistics are sobering, which makes the politics surrounding the social status of women in India much more tangible:

India is one of the few countries where males significantly outnumber females, and this imbalance has increased over time...deaths of young girls in India exceed those of young boys by over 300,000 each year, and every sixth infant

death is specifically due to gender discrimination. Of the 15 million baby girls born in India each year, nearly 25 percent will not live to see their 15th birthday. (Coonrod,1998:p3)

India is a magnificently complex country with 15 national languages, and subtle alliances among politicians and fundamentalists, religion and culture. It has a rich tradition and a colonial past. A country of great sophistication and medieval practices (UNICEF reports that 5,000 Indian brides are still murdered each year because their dowries are considered insufficient), it is a natural home to opposites. (Gilmore,2002:p1)

Thevars (an Indian tribe) prefer sons who can stand up for the family. They consider daughters as a liability on two counts. First, the family honour resides in the proper behavior of women, and men have the responsibility to protect them. Thevar folklore has several ballads that vividly describe and praise the valour of women who commit suicide to save their family honour. Second, it is the responsibility of parents to arrange marriages for their daughters to an upward mobile suitable “boy,” which can prove difficult. Furthermore because of the practice of dowry, marriage has increasingly become more expensive. (Mahalingham,2007:p241)

In nineteenth century British colonial India, officials monitored high-status caste groups for female infanticide and neglect practices. It soon became apparent that the agricultural caste of Jats in the Punjab (both Hindu and Sikh) presented an alarming child sex ratio, in some places showing only 694 girls per 1,000 boys (Malhotra,2002).

Among agricultural castes in north India, land was traditionally given as a major component of dowry for each daughter’s marriage. Hence more daughters meant more dowries, leaving less land for the daughter’s natal family; land was a limited resource and presented an ecological constraint which led families to limit the number of daughters and instead select for sons (Hudson & den Boer, 2004: Mahalingam & Haritatos, 2005, unpublished manuscript). In the state of Punjab, extreme forms of female neglect (e.g., infanticide, neglect, sex-selective abortions) have persisted, such that sex

ratios have remained extremely skewed, recorded at 793 girls per 1,000 boys aged 0–6 in the 2001 Census of India. (Mahalingham and Yim,2006:p717)

Socially writers of literature also became aware of the various injustices against women and commented as follows:

Blessed was the mother of a son. Blessed was the family into which a son was born. He would extend the family line, bring in dowry and good luck and attract the blessings of the Gods. A girl, on the other hand, was greeted with downcast faces. A girl meant nothing but sorrow. One more unproductive mouth to feed and heavy expense for the family – dowry, marriage costs, the endless demands of in-laws who had done her parents a favour by taking her off their hands. Many despondent mothers quickly extinguished the life of the luckless baby, especially if she had arrived at the tail end of a succession of daughters – by smothering her, feeding her the poisonous sap of the calotropis plant or the roots of the valli shrub...If she was allowed to live, the girl was never allowed to forget that through her the family was paying for its sins in past births. (Davidar,2002:p31)

Subjugation of women in India is therefore a reality, and very likely to have influenced the lives and works of its female filmmakers. It is in this context that one must also see much of Nair's work and particularly her interests in the marginalised and the disfranchised. Knowing this gives us insight into how Nair's characters (both female and male) are historically constructed, and may enlighten Western viewers on some of the more obscure motivations on the part of the characters. For example Rekha's inability in *Salaam Bombay!* to appeal to the government to return Manju to her becomes understandable, as we come to realise how powerless she is in the eyes of the law. Ria's hesitance in revealing the truth about her uncle is placed in context – the shame and discontent she would bring to the family would be too much for her to shoulder alone in the film. (*Monsoon Wedding*). Mena in *Mississippi Masala's* family's outrage at her rebellion in dating Demetrius is explained - it is simply not an option for an Indian girl of a class like Mena's to brush off a suitor like Harry Patel.

It is from this background that one of her major themes, identity and belonging, also derives, a point we shall explore further in the next three chapters. But, before we go there, let us briefly consider some of the key characteristics that appear to inform Nair's work in film.

The Voice of Nair

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Nair's training and history cannot be discounted as one of the largest influencing factors on her filmmaking. The various countries she has inhabited have left an indelible mark on her style of filmmaking. Despite having the ability to speak with and to these multiple voices, Nair manages to maintain a clear perspective in her films. She does this by placing intense focus on the individuals themselves in her films, clearly defining the contexts in which they operate. It is as if Nair has a need to describe and visually show us the kind of environment within which the character operates, since it is only then that we can truly understand why a character reacts in a specific way under specific circumstances.

Context is therefore very important to Nair, but arguably content is even more so. Nair manages to use her contexts in conjunction with the physical spaces the narrative plays itself out in to convey specific messages to her audience. In such a way she takes her responsibilities as a filmmaker very seriously. She has managed to use situations like that of Uganda to make the world aware of the atrocities of xenophobia within an African context. She also educates us about the emergence of a modern India by depicting the complexities of arranged marriages in *Monsoon Wedding*.

However, having said that, as a filmmaker this belief that the mass media has a responsibility towards its audience leaves Nair with certain artistic problems, problems which challenge her abilities as film maker and artist and perhaps drive her filmic technique. For my purposes, key questions relate to how she herself is able to ensure that her films 'impart actual understanding' and how she manages to make films about issues of specific importance in India, yet appeal to an international audience. Differently stated: how does she keep the information shared with her audiences basic enough to be understood, yet keep it from becoming oversimplified -

thus preventing the audience from being confronted with and being able to consider the true profundity of the subject matter dealt with?

To me, the answer to this question lies at the core of her nature as a filmic artist - one who uses visual and aural images almost like a painter, to create overarching images of places and a people. She uses film and the filmic 'language' of visual and aural images as the primary medium, in order to present us with a mixture of tragedy, pathos, comedy, intimacy and tantalizing characterizations of places and people. It is this skill that has made her an international filmmaker of some stature. As a testament to her abilities, she has subsequently been the recipient of various awards. '*Salaam Bombay!* won 23 international awards including the Caméra d'Or and the Prix du Public at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival'(Anbarasan and Otchet,1998) *Monsoon Wedding* was voted one of the 10 most popular foreign films of all time (Greer,2002).

The fact that a film that is so specific to a certain culture and deals with the specific customs of said culture as *Monsoon Wedding* is, and is yet able to still be considered one of the 10 most popular foreign films of all time, is testament to Nair's artistry.

Part of this skill lies in her strong sense of place and her ability to articulate that filmically. As previously mentioned, the way in which she depicts the cities within her films (e.g Kampala, Mumbai, Delhi and New York) are *specific* and *familiar* to Nair and she manages to portray the essences of these cities by tapping into her roots as documentary film maker and thus utilising a bold mixture of landmark visuals and sounds, daily events, music and small vignettes, all of which play themselves out on the streets of each of these cities.

For example she uses two very different pieces of music in *Mississippi Masala* to accompany the establishing shots of Kampala and Greenwood – one a curious mixture of African and Indian beats, the second a bluesy song we immediately associate with the South. Then she takes this definition of place even further when she sketches two very different Kampala's: the colonial Kampala and the post-colonial Kampala. She manages to do this through two comparable, but visually diverse scenes. When Jay's family is about to leave Kampala, and find themselves at the airport, there is a very neat, uniformly dressed choir accompanying the exodus of the Indians. These children

are young and impressionable, as we can see from the absented-minded way they are performing this very pointedly patriotic song. They are all conforming to someone else's ideal, as is depicted by the uniforms they are wearing, as well as the uniformity of their singing. In contrast to this Kampala is the one epitomized by the group of dancers in the street that Jay encounters upon his return to the city. These are a group of individuals united by chance through their passion for music and dance. People drum around not because they are forced to, but out of free will, and every performer is also performing their own interpretation of the music and dance, not a prescribed piece, as in the previous case. The costumes they wear are vibrant and colourful and once again individualized. In such a way Nair locates us very specifically in two different versions of the same city.

These are all small details that add up to a larger understanding of the characteristics that make each of these cities unique. However not all audience members will necessarily relate to the cities that she sketches for us so vividly, or even the variety (and often grim topics) in subject matter: anything from street children to immigrants. But similarly to the way in which Nair constructs a recognisable identity for these cities through small details, she also manages to build up the individual and specific *identities* of characters through small details. She utilises everyday situations and everyday people that we encounter daily as the vehicle for the discovery of the intricacies of identity and life in general. This is the other aspect of her films that can be described as having universal appeal. We as viewers do not feel like we are watching a story that is completely unrelated to our own lives, as these characters are shown going through their daily struggles just as we do. Pimmi attempts to keep the peace by soothing her husband with food in *Monsoon Wedding*, Manju in *Salaam Bombay!* complains to her mother that she doesn't have any friends, just like any other child in the world at some point does to their mother. Mena in *Mississippi Masala* is scolded by her mother for wearing the wrong shoes, a scene that becomes comical because it is such a familiar one. Nair's films are not based upon the actions of heroic firemen or crusaders or leaders, but rather attempt to isolate the heroic or challenging in normal lives.

The results of the processes looked at above are films that are layered with meaning and multi-dimensional characterizations, utilising and exploring strong themes that

are greatly concerned with the concept and formation of *identity* and an immense need to *belong*. Indeed, this notion of identity and the concomitant sense of belonging appear to be among the most recognisable and important subjects in her work, contributing largely, I believe, to the general appeal of the films. All human beings, whether young or old, rich or poor, at some stage in their lives, need to make decisions about themselves and their identity, which in turn may also shape who and what they may possibly become, and where they belong. It is these imperatives and the truths underlying them, that Nair seeks to reveal through her various interpretations of individuals, families and communities, and it is this shared search for a sense of identity and belonging that I believe enables the international audience to relate so well to her films.

Above we looked at some general aspects of Nair's work as a filmmaker, notably the influences on her thinking and her technique. It is clear that she has a very distinctive signature in this regard, displaying particular individual qualities of style and technique, and also that she has particular preferences in setting, subject matter and general themes. It is these thematic matters I now want to consider.

So let us now turn to the first of the films to be considered – *Mississippi Masala* and see how this film grapples with notions of identity, and belonging, and specifically the concept of National Identity.

CHAPTER TWO

***Mississippi Masala* and National Identity**

Thus, identity is conceptualized as resulting from cultural possibilities and limitations available to individuals within a given context. For example adolescents around the world may develop a bi-cultural identity with one part of their identity rooted in their local culture while another part stems from their awareness of their relations to the global culture. (Graf, Mullis, Mullis,2008:p57-58)

The notion of *national identity* is often seen as something directly related to the specific space in which the individual finds him or herself physically. As Adeney and Lall: (2005,p260) phrase it

At its most basic, a civic form of national identity is a territorial identity; membership of the civic nation defined by residence within the state borders.

However, it could also be more than this, referring to an imagined or corporal space not directly aligned to geographical or political borders. Thus concepts of identity might relate not only to country of residence or country of birth, but also to associations of race, political views, national laws and borders, or any other kind of grouping or segmentation that occurs on a national level within a country or countries. This definition does mean one might also have to consider so-called “national stereotypes”, associated with the people of nations, nationalities or such groupings (e.g. the belief that all Italians are loud, that Africans are lazy, that the British are uptight or that all Americans are fat and love hamburgers). In such an instance, where one has people aspiring to identify with such national identities, one may refer to it as an example of an *imagined national identity*, as it relies on the generalized assumptions of someone not part of the nation.

For the purposes of this discussion the term does not include *cultural identity*, which is something based on belief systems, conventions and the like (to be discussed in the next chapter), even though the two may be related and be of importance to the same

person. The fact is, a person could be aspiring to a certain national identity even though it is not necessarily aligned to their cultural identity.

The protagonists in *Mississippi Masala* (Jay, Kinnu, Mena and Demetrius), are all in some way trying to redefine themselves from previous identities (for example as *Ugandans* and as *migrants*) in terms of belonging, notably trying to understand what it is they might call 'home' - be it their country of original origin (India), their country of birth (e.g. in Jay's case Uganda, where he believes his national identity is located), or their new country of residence (e.g. the USA and their place among the cultures residing in Greenwood, Mississippi). In the traditional sense of the word, 'home' implies a place of residence, but more than that, a place of belonging, of comfort and of acceptance, a place which can also be an expression of the individuality of the person or persons living there. If one has to look at Greenwood as a home in these terms, it is understandable that Jay and his family struggle to find themselves settling in. Yes, it is a place of residence for Jay's family; however it doesn't evoke a feeling of belonging in them. Acceptance is not always available from their immediate family, as we come to understand by way of the altercation between Mena and her American cousin, and therefore the family cannot feel as if they fit in or belong to this new nation. There are other examples of their exclusion from the community found in later scenes in the film.

The nation as a home:

In the opening scenes of this film, Mena is a young girl living with her parents in Uganda, but when we see her next, she is a mature woman wending her way through a supermarket in Greenwood. Thus Nair makes it clear to us that the family has been living here for a while, as Mena is by now quite grown up. Yet, she also shows that, regardless of the fact that the family has been exiled from Uganda for at least a decade, the family has not yet settled into the community and still holds on to traditional values and conventions, while the world about them struggles to understand. For example, this is subtly suggested when Mena visits the Piggly Wiggly, with her aunt in Indian traditional dress, and the cashier's impulsive outcry of 'Holy Cow!' on seeing the amount of milk that they are buying, is followed by a shot of Mena's lifted eyebrows, indicating her surprise at his response to what she does not

find peculiar from the perspective of her home culture. We are thus shown a lack of racial sensitivity and minimal acceptance of difference in the depicted society. The family might be living in Mississippi, but as far as they are concerned, it is still not their home, not even after more than a decade of living there.

With regards to their physical place of residence, the family lives in a motel that belongs to Jay's brother and his son. In this way, not only are they indebted to Jay's brother, but they are also psychologically defined as guests, and therefore transients who are 'visiting', not staying. Nair shows us this transient nature of the motel space through the turnover of the staff employed at the motel, as well as the variety of guests who frequent it. The motel is used by couples who need to meet in secret, and therefore the motel is shown in a somewhat seedy light, as it stoops to renting rooms out by the hour. Even if the motel is used for legitimate reasons, the inhabitants almost become sleazy by association. More than its reputation and negative connotation, the impermanence of their place of residence prohibits Jay's family from investing in Greenwood and its people both literally and figuratively. Lovell Banks expands on this idea:

The identity-bound Indian immigrant community portrayed in the film works, lives, and socializes in small Indian-owned motels. The motel setting is a compelling symbol of otherness; it operates both literally and figuratively as a no man's land...The motel also signifies the family's state of mind. Jay is in suspended animation. He is still a sojourner, a temporary resident. Mina and Kinnu, her mother, however, are permanent immigrants in transition. (Lovell Banks,1998:p28)

The question may now be asked: why does this move affect Jay so much more than it does Mena or Kinnu? Why does he, more than any of the other characters in the film, struggle to adjust to this new national identity of America as a home?

Firstly, Jay's position of power as man, as Indian and provider for his family was initially much stronger in Uganda than it is in Mississippi. Near the end of his stay in Uganda this position did of course weaken and eventually lead to the family's move to America. To Jay this only makes the loss more apparent. In America he does not

feel respected as he is not providing for his family, but is dependent on family to help them survive. He does not have his title as a man of law any longer, which makes him feel even more marginalized. Lastly he is forced to live in an immigrant community where he is seen as an outsider, and he also feels this way, as there is no history connecting him to the place. Kinnu's position does not change as much, as she does not anchor her identity in the nation as Jay does. Instead she finds it in her family and her position within the family. Kinnu only has to re-examine her identity when she realizes she could be losing her daughter. Mena, by contrast is too young to be affected by the relocation to the same extent as her parents. She misses her friend, Okelo, and happier days with her parents, but this manifests itself more in her subconscious than conscious world. Her later rebelliousness is due to the uncertainty the ambiguous positioning of her family in America creates in her. The consequences of the event of relocation have taken longer to appear in her life than in that of her parents.

Nostalgia and nationhood:

The family's attempts to shift from their temporary immigrant identity, to full integration into the target community in the USA is complicated by another key aspect of their lives, namely their nostalgic feelings about their original national identity. Dasgupta talks about this nostalgia in terms of collective symbols and a specific view of the "nation":

When Indian immigrants reached the shores of the U.S., they brought with them their love for the familiar world of Hindi movies. In a new and unfamiliar country, the immigrants sought collective symbols that would represent continuity through their dislocation. Bhattacharjee states, "Central to the creation of immigrant worlds is the idea of the nation – not the nation as a bounded geographical unit but the nation as an ideological force."

(Dasgupta, 1996:p174)

In Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* the collective symbol that Jay's family brings with them to America is not Hindi movies, but rather the collective memory of belonging to Uganda. To Jay's way of thinking, this is the one unifying factor for them as a

family, as well as the aspect that differentiates them from the American Indians with whom they are residing. The most interesting aspect of this is that, unlike the others, Jay's nostalgia is not related to India, which is his *cultural identity*, but to Uganda, the country to where he previously resided, and which he still sees himself being a citizen of. Significantly, therefore, Jay's national identity is strongly linked to Uganda, as it was the place he grew up in, had his own children and made his own life. As he says to Okelo: "I've always been Ugandan first and Indian second!" (Nair, 1992) However, the fact that he is now, in Greenwood, classified as an Indian (with all the stereotyping that entails), clearly causes great confusion for him. The Ugandan national identity that he left behind is what has defined him, and now that it has been taken from him, he is at a complete loss as to what makes him who and what he is. Much of this ambiguity is demonstrated and symbolised in the film through his complex relationship with Okelo, who is really his Ugandan soul brother, a part of himself that he sought to reject yet, paradoxically, regretted leaving behind.

In the process of trying to re-establish or even create a national identity, it is all the more difficult for Jay, as he does not have a flexible understanding of identity and belonging. To him, his identity is shaped by the fact that he was born in Uganda, that his parents worked and lived there, and that his forefathers gave their lives in building a railway to serve Uganda. Jay and his forefathers suffered for the sake of this strange country, and therefore he feels that in a sense they deserved its loyalty in return. His sense of pride, worth and reason for existence is linked to his country. To him, identity is thus very much linked to his Ugandan nationality, and a sense of patriotism and loyalty to it. Without his ties to Uganda, and the reciprocal recognition of these ties, he is lost. As the head of the household he thus expects his wife Kinnu and his daughter Mena to share these feelings, but they clearly do not, each having her own way of dealing with the problems – and this is puzzling to him.

Kinnu's reaction is perhaps more understandable to us as viewers, because as the omnipresent viewer, we get to see first hand what her experience with the soldiers is when they drag her off the bus transporting the family to the airport. When the soldiers spill the contents of Kinnu's suitcase in the mud, her last ties to the country are effectively cut. They laugh at the tinny Indian voice that comes out of the recorder, singing about a love for India. In this moment, we see that Kinnu interprets

this as a symbol of the rejection that the Ugandans have been harbouring all along, but never shown. In her mind, she does not belong to Uganda, and she has never intimately known India, therefore Britain or America is just as good as any other place – and as worthy of her loyalty. Far more important for her are family and cultural identity.

Nair emphasizes this emotional distance from the place and its objects by showing us the relief on Kinnu's face when she gets back on the bus. She immediately reaches out for her family, ignoring the fact that her belongings were damaged. Nair moves the wide shot of the bus and inhabitants to a close-up of the family and their expressions to highlight the intimacy of the moment. Later on in the film, we also see that she keeps a photograph of Okelo and Mena up in her liquor store. Once again, she shows affection and longing for people, not places. To her, family is her sense of home. Significantly, Kinnu is never shown to have any flashbacks or dreams, as is the case with Jay and Mena.

In Mena's case, what Jay does not take into account in his attempts to cope is that young children are generally much more adaptable than adults, not having established firm notions of identity and belonging yet. Quite literally, unlike her parents, Mena does not have a lifetime of memories that she has to discard. This does not mean that the transition for Mena was easy, but her relocation to a different country does not come with as many pre-conceived notions as Jay's does. Therefore her idea of identity is much more fluid and flexible, she can transform as the situation requires. Added to this, Mena's recollections of their time in Uganda are overshadowed by the tension and unease felt in those last days before their evacuation. It is therefore not such an idealistic view of the country. She associated Uganda with the loss of friends, as the prolonged wave to the little boy at her house suggests, as well as a vital part of her father. In none of the flashbacks from these last days does Jay seem happy and carefree, and possibly this is what Mena subconsciously remembers. Mena becomes a type of 'citizen of the world', adapting to whatever space or country she finds herself in.

As suggested in Chapter 1, a key feature of all Nair's films is their sense of the place and her use of landscape as a reflection of the internal "landscape" of the characters.

In *Mississippi Masala* she uses this technique specifically with reference to Jay and his family, linking Jay's memories of home to the landscape of Uganda. In this depiction of the country of Jay's memory, Uganda resembles a kind of Garden of Eden. It is always lush and green, and we never see any signs of the usual African landscape that includes poverty or houses uncomfortably crowded. Noticeable is the fact that he does not reminisce about the faces of loved ones, or the fates of the people who helped him and his family. Instead, his flashbacks show the house they lived in that symbolizes the kind of life he lived there. Even though he leaves this very cherished home in the hands of a servant, we never get to see the face of the servant, as in Jay's memory, this is not what is important. The fact is he had to let go of his home, his house and his belongings.

Nair proceeds to further enhance these images in the mind of the viewer by contrasting the visuals of Mississippi starkly with the memories of Uganda. The sheer size of the family's living quarters is vastly different, as well as the nature of their accommodation. Whereas in Uganda they lived in what looked like a large home overlooking a green valley, in Mississippi the family inhabits small rooms in a motel owned by Jay's family. In Uganda the hills looked soft and rounded, cushioned by green vegetation; in Mississippi the landscape is flat and grey, a world of concrete and asphalt. In Uganda the house belonged to them and was filled with their own belongings, in Greenwood the room they live in belongs to their family and is filled mostly with borrowed furnishings.

Supporting this dispiriting vision of Mississippi is the motel, a symbol of all that is transitory and fly-by-night. This is not a refuge for people who want to get away from the city or a luxury holiday hotel where people go to pamper themselves; it is nothing more than a stop along the way, a resting place on the way to somewhere else. The sign of the motel constantly reminds us of this transient status, as it shows the number of rooms vacant – a building waiting to be filled with people in order to have meaning and purpose. The carpets in the motel are cleaned professionally to erase any signs of permanency of stay. To an extent, Jay feels like his life is passing him by, much like guests pass through a motel. There is also a restlessness that stops Jay from settling down and dealing with his new place of residence. Instead he is caught in between two spaces, the Uganda of his memories and the reality of Mississippi.

Being othered from the inside out:

For Demetrius's family, national identity takes on a different form. Unlike Jay and his family, they have been living in America for generations, although they were also originally immigrants or slaves. Also unlike Jay, they have invested in the Greenwood community, both literally and figuratively. Demetrius's father has worked as a waiter in a local restaurant for years, and Demetrius himself owns a carpet cleaning company that services local motels. Despite this, the family has not been accepted into the community nor does it wholly commit to and accept the community. They live in a more permanent state of marginalization than Jay and Mena. Whereas Jay and his family have a specific nationality to idealize a return to, Demetrius and his family have for so long been displaced that they have no choice but to accept their marginalized position – and this eventually comes to define them. Demetrius and his family thus become resigned to their status as outsiders, whereas Jay, Mena and Kinnu are still battling with it.

The subsequent interaction between the marginalized groups in their different stages of adaptation and varying approaches to dealing with the issue is what Nair attempts to investigate. She sets up the issue quite early in the film, with the scene where Mena crashes into Demetrius who in turn crashes into a white man's truck. The cultural clash/crash is therefore signified, and the recriminations begin. Tension is clearly visible in the aggressive body language of the white man getting out of the truck, and the debate that immediately starts between Demetrius and him. When a black policeman arrives on the scene, the result is a grouping of coloured against white, with Mena and Demetrius reluctantly having to shelve their own irritation with each other in the face of the white man's anger and threats.

The divide between black and white and black and Indian is highlighted elsewhere in the film as well. The white wife of the owner of the restaurant where Demetrius's father works refers to Demetrius as 'the good one', implying that he is one out of the rest of his race that is not. When Mena's cousin Anil's wedding is underway, Nair shows us two white men in conversation, portraying not only a racist attitude, but also ignorance and disregard.

White man no. 1: Send them back to the reservation, that's what I say.

White man no. 2: How many times do I have to tell you, they are not that kind of Indians. (Nair,1992)

But the racial divide does not end with the white community in Greenwood; it is extended to a third party, as Tyrone's comment to Demetrius after the failed tryst with Mena proves:

Tyrone: You want their money you better leave them foreigners alone.
(Nair,1992)

The word 'foreigners' in the quote signals a xenophobic response in the black community, set off by their exposure to the Indian families. There is a display of fear at an immigrant community that seems to align themselves with the white community, more than the black community, who take jobs and money from them and then reluctantly feed it back into the larger community. This scene also indicates that there is a degree of exploitation and manipulation being exercised by both races, and that even though the black community is marginalized by the white community, it does not stop them from marginalizing the Indians in turn.

Lovell Banks also refers to the issue of solidarity and group identity:

Other barriers exist which make racial coalitions between Blacks and Asians problematic. Specifically, the 'group insularity' of both the Asian and Black communities fosters misunderstanding and distrust. Group insularity results from a racial or ethnic group's hostility toward other physically distinct groups, and towards that group's actual and perceived cultural differences.
(Lovell Banks,1998:p10)

Alicia, Demetrius's ex-girlfriend displays a similar kind of behaviour when she tells off Demetrius after his affair becomes public, saying that there 'is no shortage of black women in Greenwood'. By implication she is also saying that she believes people should stick to their own kind.

Lovell Banks offers an interesting perspective on this rather baffling racism amongst the marginalized:

Both the Black and Asian Indian communities shape their external behaviour and modify their culture to appease powerful Whites and gain some measure of equality, whether economic or social. (Lovell Banks, 1998:p31)

If this argument is seen as the base from which these two families and communities operate, one can begin to understand why they are not able to reach some communal ground for mutual understanding. If both communities/races are aspiring to be socially equal to the white community, then one has to be left behind to be subjugated or marginalized. There is something of the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” in this process.

This metaphoric battle is also being fought on another front within the society, namely as the constant battle for power, more specifically financial power. If a community cannot reach equality in social terms, the next best option is to have so much financial power that it supersedes the need for approval from the white community. In *Mississippi Masala*, we are shown how this scenario leads to the downfall of both aspiring communities. Each group attempts to use the other for financial gain; Demetrius promises not to sue Mina’s cousin for injuries sustained, and is thus ensured of a customer base in the Indian motels. When the relationship breaks down because of cultural differences, the financial aspect of the relationship becomes a tool of manipulation. Demetrius, who has grown up in an independent country where focus is very much on the individual and their choices, clashes with Mena’s family who are still very traditional and feel responsible for the sexual reputation of the girls in the family. He sees their relationship as a choice that she is free to make for herself, whereas Mena’s family see it as a move to appropriate what is theirs for himself. In the process Demetrius is not only insulting them by assuming that he can date one of their women, but he is also ruining her reputation as a chaste Indian girl. Demetrius proceeds to threaten Anil and other motel owners with litigation, seeking compensation for the business he has lost. Both communities are once again left

scrambling for power. As one of the Indian women at Mena's cousin's wedding sums up the situation:

Gossiping woman: You can be dark and have money, or you can be fair and have no money, but you can't be dark and have no money and expect to get Harry Patel. (Nair,1992)

In this instance, she is of course referring to Mena's chances of getting Harry Patel, the young man with very rich and upstanding parents as a possible husband. But the comment rings true for the rest of the community as well, if we apply the same formula and substitute Harry Patel with equality and power. It is this premise that ultimately leads to the uproar created by Mena and Demetrius's relationship. Both Demetrius and Mena are dark and have no money, and they have invoked the wrath of the white community by 'not knowing their place', and yet they still expect to lead a normal life. Added to this is the fact that they also have to deal with the disapproval of their own communities. The abovementioned quote also refers to the fact that within the Indian community there are certain values and attributes that weigh more than others. A lighter skin is much more attractive than a dark skin like Mena's, so even within the communities there are levels of social status. In the black community it is not much different, as Demetrius' former girlfriend shows. She herself is much lighter skinned than the rest of her friends, and likes to show off the fact that she has managed to move out of the neighbourhood and have a successful career. When she then returns to her neighbourhood, she belittles Demetrius and instead turns her attentions to her white companion.

Like all of the characters in Nair's film, they have options: they can either end their relationship, appease their families and communities, or they can go in search of a new life for them both elsewhere. Either way, they are forced to sacrifice something: if they stay –their love and their idealism, and if they go – their family and friends.

This perspective is reinforced when we consider the case of Jay and Kinnu. For almost their entire lives, they have been on the outside of whichever community they were living in. In Uganda, they were part of the Indian immigrants, in England they were the Ugandan immigrants, and in America, they ironically enough, end up being

the Indian immigrants again. Whether they are once exiled or thrice exiled from their primary identity/nation makes no difference, it is the fact that they are removed that makes the situation problematic. What Nair is apparently trying to show us is that everyone, in some sense, experiences some kind of estrangement in their lives. For Jay's family it was an unfortunate twist of fate that it happened three times. Nair also does not attempt to give us the solution to dealing with the estrangement, or the answer to belonging. Instead, her films explore the individual choices confronting a range of characters.

So, let us now consider three distinctly different approaches to finding a place of belonging through understanding of and identification with a specific national identity.

Forging a new national identity:

Confronting the past: Jay

For Jay, the betrayal by Uganda and in his mind, his friend Okelo, results in an embittered view on existing systems and laws in Uganda. The years he spent there working and living are completely lost to him the moment he is exiled. Instead of Jay seeing this exile as the machinations of the disturbed and evil individual Idi Amin, who preyed on the insecurities of a nation, Jay chooses to take it as a very personal rejection. Thus the bitterness of being rejected by the country he so gladly dedicated his life to, proceeds to infiltrate every part of his being. It changes the way he looks at the world around him, and his mistrust grows in everything that is not known to him. His ability to adapt to his new environment is impaired and his relationship with his wife and his daughter suffers, as he increasingly turns his frustrations inward. His lives his life in America as if he is sleepwalking, waiting to wake up and find that it was all a bad dream.

Whereas he was a formerly a powerful man, respected and esteemed by his peers, he has become humiliated and downtrodden by the events in his life. For him, the only purpose now is to attempt to receive recompense for all that was lost. What takes Jay a long time to realize is that none of these things can ever be replaced. In essence,

his obsession with receiving compensation for his materialistic assets lost is in actual fact a mask covering his true emotions. It is not his anger at the Ugandan government that is slowly killing him, but his anger and disappointment in himself for abandoning his friend Okelo like he did.

Jay's approach to dealing with his sense of displacement is to refuse to deal with the potentially new national identity he is faced with in the present, and instead to constantly seek to return to the national identity he had and believed in prior to their exile. He is thus not completely passive, for he is still struggling to find meaning, acceptance and belonging, albeit in the past.

Thus, when his only daughter seems to follow in his once idealistic footsteps by attempting to cross the colour barrier, he is determined to put a stop to it. His approach, however, only serves to alienate his daughter even further. Jay has not been a happy man for a long time, and Mena is all too aware of this. Trying to prove to her that 'people stick(ing) to their own kind' is a desired state of being, whilst being so publicly dissatisfied himself, becomes just another way of working through his own issues with identity and belonging. When Jay gives this advice to Mena, he is really trying to convince himself of this fact, for the alternative is that he has made all the wrong decisions in his life up to this point.

Nair creates a specific visual environment in which each of her characters are perceived to function, and in Jay's case, it is almost always in or close to the motel when he is in Mississippi. In fact, we only see him venturing out three times, and all of these are significant occasions. There is thus a kind of insularity to Jay's state of being, as if he does not want to be touched by the outside world again, in fear of being hurt and disappointed. Instead, he chooses to spend his time writing letters to the government of Uganda, or ranting to others about the unfairness of his exile. His isolation makes him blind to the struggle of others around him who are in the same kind of position, including Demetrius and his community.

A core part of Jay's dilemma is the way in which he is haunted by what he sees as his betrayal by his friend, Okelo. When Idi Amin is at the height of his power in Uganda and propagating the removal of all non-black Africans, Jay decides to speak out and is

subsequently arrested. The only person who can help him is his Ugandan friend, Okelo, who wastes no time in freeing him. Afterwards, instead of congratulating him for his bravery and patriotism, Okelo advises him to get out of the country.

Okelo: Africa is for Africans, black Africans. (Nair,1992)

Okelo effectively tells him that he does not belong in the country of his birth any longer and to Jay, this seeming rejection by his closest childhood friend is almost more devastating than being arrested. Eventually, for the safety of his family, Jay concedes and leaves the country along with thousands of other Indians, but refuses to greet Okelo. In Jay's mind Okelo has come to represent exile from Uganda – he is the enemy and Jay refuses to acknowledge him. When Jay arrives in America, instead of recognizing the fact that the Indian and black communities in Greenwood are both marginalised by the majority, Jay starts seeing them as the enemy, as the equivalent of the blacks in Uganda who had exiled him and his family. He therefore projects all of the anger and the confusion resulting from Okelo's 'betrayal' onto the black community of Greenwood.

Even though Jay and Kinnu, as already mentioned, have decided to stay on in Greenwood, the longing to return to Uganda never leaves him, as Nair shows us in a series of flashbacks to their life in Uganda. Since he has severed all ties with his friends in Uganda, memories and letters are all that link him to his country of birth and these become an important aspect of Jay's life. Sadly, the memories are strongly tinged by nostalgia, and do not represent the real life they had led in Uganda. Jay's eventual return to Uganda signifies a need to confront his past, before he can move forward. The emotions that surface as a result of his daughter's choices in life eventually force Jay himself to seek to re-evaluate his views on Uganda and exile. His return visit is thus an attempt to either validate or reject these views, to ascertain whether the exile of his family and others like them really did change the country and result in a new Uganda. Jay once again needs to see a reciprocal change in the country of his birth, in order to feel that the changes he went through in his own life, have meant something. If Uganda really has changed for the better during his time in exile, he will somehow feel that it was worth it, that he played a part in its transformation.

Jay and Kinnu, as already mentioned, decide to stay on in Greenwood. Jay's final visit to Uganda seems to awaken the truth within him. He realizes that the landscape is not nearly idyllic enough to make up for the friends that he has lost. This time, instead of the countryside and the buildings and the streets, it is the people that fascinate him. Ironically perhaps, he moves to something approximating Mina's people-oriented point of view and is literally 'touched' by the people of Uganda, when a little child in a crowd reaches out to pat his face. The answer for Jay is that there is no answer. All that is important is his family, and with a sense of family, there is always a home. And thus he returns to Kinnu in America, having confronted some of his demons in Uganda.

Trying to blend in: Demetrius

As descendents of black slaves, Demetrius and his family have been marginalized for so long that they have simply come to accept it. As a younger boy, Demetrius strove to align himself with white dominance that he perceived as being in power by educating himself. When his mother falls ill, he is obliged to take care of his father, and he is forced to quit his studies. Instead of attaining power through knowledge, he now has to develop a different method of likening himself to the community in power. Demetrius then subconsciously tries to align himself and his family with the white community by attempting to prove to them that he is one of the 'good ones'. If he cannot attain equality through knowledge or money, he will attempt to attain it through respectability and trust. The image of respectability emanates from every aspect of Demetrius' being. His clothes are conservative - button down shirts and chinos - very different from the kind of 80's fashion outfit his brother wears. Demetrius's van is painted a calm authoritative green, another way of portraying responsibility and cleanliness. He is the one that picks up his father at the restaurant and takes care of him. He scolds his younger brother for conforming to the stereotype of black youths, sitting on street corners listening to rap music. His friend Tyrone comments:

Tyrone: You're so righteous; you should have been a preacher. (Nair,1992)

As in the case of Jay, who is associated spatially with the motel and visions of Uganda, symbolizing his ambivalent state of identity, Demetrius is also associated with an object that signifies his idea of belonging. In his case it is his van, which not only is the mode of transport for his business and subsequent income, but was also financed by the white owned bank as an investment. To him, this is a form of acknowledgement of his hard work and respectability. Therefore, we never see Demetrius far from his van. It is through the vehicle that he meets Mena, it takes him and Mena on their first date, it is next to the van where they have their first fight, and it is also their means of escape when they leave Greenwood. The van symbolizes affluence, respectability and independence to him, all of the traits that he admires.

Nair extends her exploration of this theme through the introduction of Alicia, his ex-girlfriend. Alicia is noticeably light skinned and has made a successful career for herself in modelling. She, like the white community she comes to symbolize, looks down on Demetrius for being who and what he is. When he meets her in the bar, he tries to impress her with his carpeting business, but this does not mean much to her. In his frustration he uses Mena to try and make Alicia jealous. This initial exploitation of Mena's interest in him becomes symbolic of the relationship between the different communities within Greenwood. Black people use their power over foreigners or Indians to impress or appease the whites, and vice versa.

Demetrius's subsequent attachment to Mena catches him by surprise, and his original reason for going out with her slowly fades away. The relationship that now develops becomes symbolic of what is possible when communities cease to manipulate each other in a play for power. Once an attempt is made to show understanding and respect for another culture or race, the barriers tend to fall away.

The situation between Demetrius and his family is complicated. For Demetrius, this is the second time in his life where something beyond his control has sidetracked him from reaching his goal – first it was to get an education and move up in the community, the second time to have an uncomplicated relationship with someone who happens to not be of the same skin colour as him. The first goal was thwarted when his mother passed away and he had to abandon his studies to take care of his father and younger brother, and the second time when the business he has spent years

building up, is ruined by the clashing communities in Greenwood. The difference is that this time he has a few choices on how to deal with it, which is what Nair focuses on.

In an interaction with his brother after Demetrius and Mena's relationship is revealed, Dexter states that he is in favour of Demetrius leaving Greenwood. Demetrius, of course, snubs him, but the comment plants a seed in Demetrius's brain. When his mother died it was Demetrius's obligation to look after his younger brother, as there was only one breadwinner in the family, but this time around, Dexter himself is grown-up and can therefore look after himself. In a sense, Demetrius's leaving Greenwood allows for Dexter to become a man. With the ever-present protection of an older brother he would never have learnt to stand on his own feet.

Demetrius himself now gets a chance to start over with nothing holding him back. There is no-one who knows his past, and no responsibility to anyone but himself and Mena. For him, thus is the beginning of a journey to find a place of belonging.

The new nationhood: Mena

Mena is not only the youngest, but also the only protagonist in this film who actively pursues an understanding of her national identity. Firstly, she does this by accepting the ideology that her current country of residence stands for, and using this as a base, attempts to find a place for herself within it. She does not close herself off and become isolated like her father, nor does she simply accept the status quo as Demetrius and his family do. Nair portrays her as a young, curious and wilful woman who is interested in interacting with the world around her. Unlike her parents, she is prepared to invest something of herself in the community, and unlike Demetrius, she does not really expect anything in return.

Mena's attempt at resolution for the conflict created by her inter-racial relationship is to abandon Greenwood and attempt a new life elsewhere – a voluntary exile in a sense. The urge to step away from the centre of conflict is a natural one, but in this instance, it is a surprising action for the self-assured Mena to take. Nair has not shown Mena to be easily intimidated at all, as we know from the fights she has had

with her parents. She is also strong enough to pursue Demetrius with determination, finally forcing him to stop by the side of the road and talk to her. Yet the decision to leave Greenwood with Demetrius appears to be made quickly and quite impulsively, and in this case, she does not choose to break the news to her parents in person, but chooses to rather phone them. This action can be interpreted in two ways: either she is scared of facing her parents for fear of guilt making her stay, or she simply sees no purpose in any more conflict. The fact is, nothing can be changed by their not being there, but as is proven by Demetrius and his family's situation, neither does staying in Greenwood and attempting to balance the racial equation.

Thus, although Mena is the driver of the search for a new national identity, it does not necessarily lead her to an actual viable identity. She leaves Greenwood, as her parents had left Uganda and England, still in search of her place within a nation. In truth, Mena and Demetrius travel on to new places where the same old scenario is likely to play itself out again. A searching and curious spirit is therefore not enough to be the agent for change; it is the ability to be honest and true to oneself, as well as the willingness to deal with confrontation that ultimately allows for the change and the creation of new identity.

Nair displays Mena's independent spirit in one of the first scenes where we encounter the grown-up Mena. We are shown a beautiful young woman pushing a shopping trolley in a supermarket. This tells us two things: she is independent, as she is at this point alone, and she is in control, as she is pushing the trolley with intent. The rest of the scene supports this first impression: when her aunt gets distracted by toilet paper on sale, Mena is quick to remind her of the original intent of the shopping expedition. Furthermore, she is portrayed as mobile and confident when she drives her cousin's car. This is in direct contrast to her aunt, who implores her to driver more slowly, and who chooses to sit in the back seat. Even when the accident occurs, Mena does not become hysterical and submissive; instead she handles the situation admirably, remembering to ask for Demetrius's insurance details and remaining calm throughout the altercation. Some part of her must also know what her cousin's reaction is going to be when she gets home with the dented car, but not even this causes her to lose her calm. Mena has thus grown from being a quite sheltered little girl into a street savvy young woman.

Nair shows us that Mena understands her new national identity, and more importantly, her personal identity, by focussing on the various ways in which she interacts with the world around her. When her ancestry is discussed she is informed and open to questions. To Mena, race is an interesting facet of a person's identity, but it is not the defining factor of who he or she is. To enhance this image, Nair does not create a specific association between Mena and any fixed space or object, as is the case with Jay and Mena. Instead, she is shown in a wide array of spaces, including public and personal spaces. Mena is thus defined as something of an explorer; she is drawn like a moth to a flame when Harry Patel takes her out to a nightclub. She quickly joins in on the dance floor and is in no way intimidated by the fact that she only knows two people in the club. When she is alone, she is equally at ease, whether it is in her room or outside by the pool.

As she did in the case of Demetrius, Nair here also uses costume metaphorically to support our reading of Mena's character. Mena is equally comfortable in a sari and a pair of jeans, and her comfortable mix of Indian, African and American styles of clothing is a clear indication of her adaptability and assurance. When she meets up with Demetrius by the seaside on her birthday she is wearing a beautiful mirrored wrap that could easily be African or Indian by design. Later that day she wears what looks like a much more traditional Indian tunic and pants. The next morning when her father and uncle come to meet her in jail she is dressed very much like a rebellious American teenager in a denim jacket and pants, her bag slung over her shoulder.

Another facet of Mena that shows her open-minded approach to national identity becomes apparent as her relationship with Demetrius progresses. By this time we know that Mena is considered very dark-skinned for an Indian girl, which according to the rest of the Indian women in her community is not an enviable attribute at all, yet this does not stop her from enjoying the attentions of Harry Patel and neither does it inhibit her in any other sense. We also know that she isn't very particular in adhering to Indian dress codes (as mentioned above and noticeably displayed before her cousin's wedding) and that she isn't as impressed by Harry Patel as the rest of the Indian community. She definitely does not strictly measure up to the characteristics of a proper young Indian woman.

This idea of Mena as a liberated American girl is reinforced when Nair shows us how comfortable Mena is with her sexuality. This is evident in the scene where she talks to Demetrius on the phone in her room. By positioning her on her bed in a relaxed pose, the sheet covering exposing just enough to hint at her nudity underneath, Nair suggests a modern, liberal attitude clearly at odds with the demure public image the Indian girls are expected to display. Later her rendezvous with Demetrius at a motel by the seaside yet again confirms this. She is not concerned about waking up naked and exposed next to him; instead they share moments of intimacy and comfort.

In Mena's case leaving Greenwood is not a start, nor an ending, but rather a continuation of the process she was already engaged in. Leaving her parents means that she has less pressure to conform to a specific set of rules or expectations, and more space to discover things in her own way. She can, in other words, wear her western shoes with her Indian dress if she wants to, because there is no family or cultural structure to make her feel guilty or who will be ashamed of her when she fails to perform to their expectations.

When Indian immigrants immerse themselves in American society, they do not assimilate completely, but rather modify and renegotiate their roles to fit within the American milieu. They construct their new identity in both the material landscape of immigrant community and in the imaginary landscape of the Indian diaspora. (Jain and Forest,2004:p277)

Since Mena does not have such strong influences deriving from either Uganda (which she left as a child) or India (where she has never actually lived), she is far more able than the others to renegotiate and modify her identity.

Ultimately then, Nair's haunting film does not give us any concrete answers or false assurances that there is a definite way to approach exile and alienation, or the attainment of a national identity even. Instead the film simply acknowledges the existence of the complexities of the human condition, and explores some of the various approaches to self realisation that are available, each with its own unique merits and problems.

CHAPTER THREE

Monsoon Wedding and Cultural Identity:

Indian individualism is softer, relational and familial, less centered on the ego and more concentric around the group obligations. (Sharma,2007:p71)

In the context of India, an understanding of the dynamic relationship among youth, consumption and globalization requires an interrogation of the conditions under which young people engage new spaces of consumption. These conditions are profoundly shaped by colonialist and nationalist categories such as “tradition/modernity” and “public/private” which structure the ways in which young men and women negotiate new consumer identities and spaces. (Lukose,2005:p1)

The week running up to any wedding day can be abnormally stressful, a dramatic period filled with the need to adapt to change and conflict. In addition, weddings are as much a process of letting go as they are a process of accepting and accommodating. Not only are there the concerns of the bride and groom, who are leaving behind their individual lives and embarking on a new life as a couple, but there are also the parental concerns of loss and change. Central to the event are processes of giving and taking, occurring at multiple levels. There is the physical handover of daughter to son-in-law, as well as the emotional parting with childhood to enter adulthood. Then there is the giving of a hand in marriage, just as there is a giving of self and of body. In many respects thus, there is a change in the way in which the individual relates to his or her world, by stepping into the realms of a new world with a life partner – an event as traumatic and exciting for the parents of the bride and groom as for the couple themselves.

The situation dealt with in *Monsoon Wedding* is admittedly not a new one. The subject matter has been covered by a number of well known films, including such popular films as *Father of the Bride* (1950, remade in 1991), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Meet the Fockers* (2004), *Mamma Mia* (2008) and the TV series *The Worst Week of my Life* (2004). What does differentiate this from most other wedding films, however, is its more serious intent (despite the comic overtones) and the fact that it is a film about a Punjabi family in Delhi, India. Whereas films such as *Father*

of the Bride tend to assume a generalized Western perspective on marriage and the traditions, *Monsoon Wedding* is very specifically Punjabi Indian. These characters really are defined and scrutinized as a part of the culture within which they operate.

For example, in both versions of the classic Hollywood film, *Father of the Bride*, with its clear-cut American values, the leading character, George Banks, struggles with his personal ability to let go of his daughter, allowing her to grow up and be her own person. In order to postpone the moment of separation for as long as possible, George attempts every stalling method known to man. He shows reluctance to pay for the wedding, doesn't show approval of the groom and generally makes his wife and daughter's lives miserable in order to give himself time to deal with his incapacity to let go. The leading character in Nair's film, Lalit, on the other hand, does not appear to have as much of a problem with letting go of his daughter as George Banks does. Instead his strongest motivator is that he wants to be a good father and husband and the result is that he struggles with balancing cultural expectations in his role as father, provider, mentor and husband. He tries everything in his power to make things run smoothly and to make a good impression. He too finds the period before the wedding stressful and tumultuous, but the driving forces behind his anxiety are very different from that of George Banks.

It is the dynamic between issues such as letting go and acceptance, self respect and exterior display within the Punjabi context that Nair chooses to focus on in this specific film. She does so in much the same way as *Father of the Bride*, namely by concentrating on the highly fraught and theatrical period running up to the ceremony, and then using the central notion of "marriage" as a metaphor for an exploration of culture and society. So it not only becomes a film about a religious or civil union between individuals, but also concerns the possibilities (and/or impossibilities) of a "marriage" of cultures, of families, of ideas and of minds and spirits. It is important to mention that this includes the marriage of the sometimes-opposing ideas of modernity and traditionalism, as these issues become integral to understanding the way the characters try and assert themselves within their environment.

Whereas *nation* and *nationality* were encompassing terms used in talking about *Mississippi Masala*, even though certain aspects of cultural identity could have been

slotted into it, the key concepts when discussing *Monsoon Wedding* become notions of culture and *society*, and ultimately therefore the nature of *cultural identity* itself.

Cultural Identity

For the purposes of this study, *cultural identity* refers to the identification of oneself with a specific cultural group, which in turn is defined as a group of people bound together by their *belief systems*, i.e. their belief in and use of certain ideals, conventions, social customs, and so on. Religion, sexual orientation, classes, castes or social hierarchy and gender, as well as social values and beliefs may all form part of this belief system. Culture thus becomes a set of rules or guidelines of how to interact within a certain social circle. It is a natural process that occurs so that the specific society or culture can interact with familiar and generalized entities, rather than having to go through the intricate process of getting to know each person individually. It is also a primitive kind of self-protection: in finding others who believe in the same set of ideals and conventions, strength is gained in numbers and power is attained. Cultural identity is one of the hardest identity shaping entities to break free from, as it is mostly held together by broader, encompassing yet often almost invisible belief systems and networks.

Unlike *Mississippi Masala*, which had a multi-cultural base and looked at the interaction *between* different cultures, *Monsoon Wedding* is an exploration of the search for identity as it manifests *within* one specific culture in one specific location: the Indian culture of the Punjabi's in Delhi. Nair uses this focus to investigate all the different aspects of this particular culture, including the difference between male and female roles, as well as caste and/or class differences. The film also addresses emerging global issues such as the difference between resident Indians and non-resident Indians, as well as the influences on expatriates and the issues that arise from this. The friction between modernity and traditionalism plays an important role in the way cultural identity is created. Lastly, the film shows the influence of modern technology such as film and internet on said culture. As Crew says:

It captures the paradoxes and pleasures of contemporary urban Indian society, a combustible marriage of ancient traditions, global consumer culture and high-tech communications. (Crew,2002:p1)

However, Nair contains the scope of the film by limiting it to one family in the Punjabi culture, although the same model could be applied to the broader community, and even to most other modern societies.

From Idealised culture to Real Culture: Using and subverting Bollywood stereotypes

A core element in Nair's approach to her material and depictions of cultural identity is her use of satire and irony, and in this film she sets up a daring metaphor in her utilization and ultimate subversion of the Bollywood ideal – a facet of her film technique which we have already touched on in Chapter 1.

When one compares *Monsoon Wedding* to some of the mainstream Bollywood films with reference to its use of colour, stock characters, music and dance sequences, it is obvious that Nair makes far more than just a passing reference to Bollywood. She herself admitted this when asked about the dancing abilities of some of her actors:

Because the film was really a homemade portrait of Bollywood, I didn't require a big-time Bollywood dancer to do it. The film was about people like us imitating Bollywood style. (Crew,2002:p1)

By her own admission, therefore, the film can and must be viewed in relation to other Bollywood films. This does not mean that *Monsoon Wedding* can be classified as a Bollywood film; it simply means that certain characteristics of Bollywood film within *Monsoon Wedding* are there for very specific artistic reasons, part of her narrative strategy. As Nair specifically states 'the film was about people like us imitating Bollywood style', so the reference is metaphorical, the characters playing out idealized notions of Indianhood, which they derive from Bollywood films. By using Bollywood trademark scenes, like the young cousin dancing in a revealing outfit, she satirises the way in which these characteristics have infiltrated everyday life, and

highlights the ever-increasing extent to which Bollywood has become synonymous with Indian culture.

Nair's technique here is to use certain clearly identifiable Bollywood film conventions in order to introduce stereotypical notions of Indian culture and traditions, and then proceeds to subvert them by honing in on the individual issues and characters. For example, she sets this up by introducing a number of stock Bollywood characters, for example the doting mother, the virginal bride-to-be, the strict but loving father, the palace clown who provides comic relief, etc. These characters are then explored in more detail through the course of the film, and we gradually come to realise that they are much more intricate than they appear, and often even unlike their stock characterizations. This in itself allows Nair to make certain comments on the nature of cultural identity.

Lalit for example, initially presented as the stock Bollywood father, is obviously cast as the patriarch, the responsible head of the family, and takes himself seriously in this role. However, in Nair's film, he is more than this; he is also used metaphorically to represent authentic Indian culture. In fact, he is in some ways one of the most powerful symbols of Punjabi culture and tradition in the film - second only to the wedding ceremony itself. He proudly epitomizes this role in the way he socializes with his family and friends.

However, Nair's film slowly subverts this role, seeming to suggest that it may ultimately be too large and onerous for him. Thus, in the opening scene, Lalit is shown to be strongly territorial, in the way he confidently steps out of his home, and wanders through the garden, to deal with the arrangements, deals with his family and talks to the staff. Two important points are established: that Lalit, as the husband and father, is the head of the house, and two, that the happiness of the family and the success of the wedding depend largely on him. He is also financially responsible for the wedding, and takes this responsibility immensely seriously.

This attitude is clearly in line with Indian cultural tradition:

Expenses of the wedding are borne by the girl's parents, and substantial gifts by way of dowry are given by the parents to the girl to take with her to her new house. They should be enough to provide for her upkeep (or the equivalent of it) for two or three years. By that time, having children will have established her permanently as part of her new household. (Leaf,2008:p1)

However, contrary to the Bollywood “recipe”, the responsibilities mentioned above put the more complex character of Lalit under immense pressure, for besides his symbolic patriarchal role, Lalit also sees himself, at a more humane level, as the peacemaker and ‘keeper’ of the family’s harmony. The entire wedding thus becomes something like an intricate piece of music which he feels he has to orchestrate to perfection. Yet that means that much of his show of control and power will be little more than pretence, for Nair makes it clear from the start that he is finding the wedding and his role in it something of a burden. Having come into the garden to survey the preparations with so much show of authority, he inspects the marigold arch with intense concentration only to find fault with it, and so he proceeds to make a call to P.K. Dubey, the wedding organizer and tent specialist and chew him out. This phone call is both a depiction of the difference in status between Lalit and Dubey, and a show of his desperate attempts at staying on top of things through an almost hysterical display of dominance in the rough manner in which he berates Dubey. This powerful display of his nervousness and insecurity is reinforced by the reactions shown by his wife and the staff, who overhear this conversation and respond in a flurry of activity, organizing tea and food to appease a perpetually irritable Lalit.

It is soon apparent that he not only finds Dubey a nuisance, but that he is actually struggling to find the money required to pay Dubey and the other expenses, and that he fails to understand his wife, his son, and even sometimes his daughters. But to him the important thing is that the family is seen as one cohesive entity; a strong and traditional Indian family with solid values and roots, and therefore he is willing to offer up his own instincts and emotions for the greater good. And it is this struggle that leads to an intense journey of self-discovery and eventual self assertion.

Next to Lalit in all matters of importance stands his wife, Pimmi. From Pimmi’s flustered reaction to Lalit’s anger in the first scene, we can deduce that she is just as

eager as anyone in the family to keep Lalit happy. Later in the film we see her smoking secretly in the bathroom, and then attempting to hide the smell with air-freshener. Although she is cast in a supportive role to the patriarchal figure of Lalit, she is not completely subservient in the traditional sense. In an intimate scene that plays itself out the same night Aditi escapes to meet with Vikram, Pimmi wakes up in the middle of the night and looks at Lalit. Her expression is filled with tenderness as she reaches over and kisses him. His reaction is not reciprocal, but this scene really establishes them as a partnership that has withstood the insecurities and vagaries of many years, as she does not see this as a slight, but rather understands that he is truly exhausted. However, as if to reinforce the idea that there is a male dominance in this culture, Pimmi is particularly attentive to the needs of her youngest son, and much less so to the emotional state of her daughter Aditi, the bride to be. As stereotyped in a Bollywood film, she portrays the role of the doting mother who forgives her son all of his sins, and always acts as the messenger between the strict father and the son. The difference here is that the son is portrayed as slightly more effeminate than the boy would be in a traditional Bollywood film.

Aditi, Lalit's daughter, is portrayed as a classic Indian beauty and is cast in the role of the dutiful and respectable eldest daughter of the family. In the traditional Bollywood sense, she is a symbol of all that is good and traditional within the Indian culture – a beautiful young woman in the prime of her life, about to get married to an upstanding young Indian man. She has all the important visual attributes in her favour: clear light skin, soft silky hair, beautiful blue-green eyes and a voluptuous figure that hints and sensuality and fertility.

This visual portrayal of her as the perfect respectable bride-to-be soon proves to be untrue. From her meeting with Vikram in his dressing room at the studio, we see that she is no demure virgin, for it is clear that this affair has been going on for a while, and that Aditi consents to its continuation. When Vikram tells her to call him, she does not reiterate the fact that she is getting married and that this won't be possible, but instead stays silent, staring after him sadly. It is as if she refuses at this point to take control of her own destiny. Instead she prefers that her parents take control of her life and allows them to arrange for her hand in marriage. Subconsciously, Aditi thus reverts to the stereotype, and starts believing the ideal that is imprinted in every

young Indian girl's mind – that with marriage her needs and desires will be fulfilled completely, and that she will never again want for anything in her life.

Ria is the slightly wayward cousin, daughter of Lalit's late brother. Ria has accepted Lalit is a substitute father figure, and is seen as one of his daughters. Ria, however, is not a traditional Bollywood figure as much as she symbolizes the modern counterpart to Aditi – for she differs from Aditi in a significant way, being as yet unmarried and independent of thought. Ria does not ascribe happiness and fulfillment to marriage only, and to her Aditi's acceptance of an arranged marriage as a solution to her lover Vikram's failure to leave his wife is the coward's way out. She does not hesitate to say as much to Aditi in the taxi on their way home from the studio. However, despite Ria's modern way of thinking, she is still obedient and loyal to family traditions, and her rebellious and outspoken nature is merely a by-product of her education, not a deep conviction necessarily. Nevertheless, she contrasts strongly with the other girls in her family, and this perception is heightened by the natural superstition that surrounds older unmarried girls. Her unmarried state hints at the fact that there must be something wrong with her, or otherwise she would have been married already. The notion that she might have chosen not to get married never occurs to the older generation of her family, and she has to contest this premise numerous times within the film, until her final revelations provide the dramatic turning-point moment of the film.

Dubey, in classic Bollywood filmic tradition, is the comic figure, the "court jester" of the Elizabethan and other dramatic traditions. However, as a character he is shown to be of the lower caste in terms of traditional Indian culture, and is therefore seen as a servant in the eyes of the upper middle class Verma family. However, with her progressive views on social and political matters (see the Introduction), Nair not only uses the character of Dubey for comic relief and commentary, but also to portray the emerging working classes, and the subsequent tension that results within the Indian culture. This clash can be ascribed to the shift in power that is slowly but surely happening.

The upper middle classes can't help but feel threatened and confused by the success of members of a working class that historically was never allowed to work for

themselves. Dubey is a living example of this upward shift in the working classes, and his depiction in the film signals this clearly: he is frequently shown as talking on his cellular phone, he proves to be familiar with e-mail and stock markets, something which Lalit definitely does not have knowledge of. Dubey has in fact managed to build up quite a successful business, as the three men he can afford to employ prove. These three labourers not only display Dubey's power, but are in fact a comic act in themselves, not only supporting and sometimes causing some of the situations in which Dubey he finds himself, but acting as a kind of chorus to his comments and insights.

Nair contrasts the particular kind of working class Dubey signifies with the much more traditional servant's role of Alice. Alice is the maid in service of the Verma family, and is so much a 'part of the furniture' that her presence is barely noticed any longer. She is present at almost all of the most important family events, yet her class and positioning renders her invisible. Nair portrays her as a shy, soft-spoken young girl with a good mixture of common sense and imagination. In a sense, she is the classic servant, loyal and true, without demanding anything reciprocal from her employers. Alice is literally present in all of the most important events in the film – she is there when the groom arrives, and serving food when the engagement party commences. At the end of the film she is even included in the wedding celebrations, despite her lower caste and servant status. Nair spends quite a lot of time focusing on Alice's innocent beauty, portraying her as an almost ethereal creature. When she is featured and focused on, the Bollywood influence appears, but almost in muted tones, as soft music starts to play and the scene starts to almost unfold in slow motion. It is this angel-like nature that draws Dubey's attention initially: she offers him water when no one else seems to care about him. The love story between Alice and Dubey thus becomes another (significant!) inversion of traditional Bollywood storytelling in that the true lovers are not as would be expected portrayed by Aditi and Hemant. Instead the lowly servant girl and the crass events organizer, who shifts from having what nominally appears to be secondary roles, to occupying strong primary roles in the film, represent the lovers.

Secondary characters form other key groups within the film: the soon to be in-laws who arrive from America, Lalit's own extended family who arrive from all corners of

the world, including India and Australia, as well as the absent figure of Lalit's late brother, whose presence is missed by all. These groups all signify important parts of the cultural identity that encompasses Lalit's world. The Rai family is perceived to be an example of the typical non-resident Indian family, full of worldly charms and idiosyncrasies. Therefore Lalit cannot help but feel inferior, even as he struggles to make the wedding as smart as an affair as possible, but at the same time he realizes that through their eyes the whole situation must be very quaint.

Lalit's own brother-in-law is another source of tension for Lalit and of course a core element in the denouement of the film. Tej is portrayed as urbane, wealthy and warm, someone who has in the past been responsible for helping out with financial situations within the family, and at the engagement ceremony he once again steps in with an offer to fund Ria's education in America. Nair emphasizes Lalit's appreciation and deference to Tej through much of the film, despite his pride being under pressure, and it is only at the end of the film that he is able to understand his own subjection to the image of Tej.

Even though many of Nair's characters in this film are purposely and very closely modelled on Bollywood stock characters, it is also clear that in real life these 'stock parts' are actually approximations of specific roles and functions within the Hindu culture, which are what Nair wants us to focus on. She thus uses the Bollywood style, as a kind of shorthand, a characterizing mechanism to allow us to grasp the surface role being played, before she sets about undercutting and dissecting the individual characters and their fears and postures. Thus, on the surface, Lalit's role is to guide and lead, Pimmi's is to support, Aditi's is to represent the new generation of Punjabi's, whilst Dubey and Alice as already stated, are representatives of the emerging working class. But, just as every character symbolizes a specific aspect of either filmic cultural identity or social cultural identity through their stock characteristics, every character is also slowly opened up and revealed to be a complex individual, who has to proceed to find an own kind of belonging within the context of the narrative.

Cultural conformance and identity:

Although the characters in *Monsoon Wedding* have a common goal, namely to establish for themselves a place of comfort within their cultural identity, their varying attempts to reach this point of belonging differ vastly. They are all striving towards conforming to certain cultural expectations, yet they are also individuals with unique personalities trying to adjust to a set of cultural norms. The film is largely about the internal conflict(s) that each of the different characters experience in this process. In the same way that they work on identifying where they fit in their specific cultural context, they also struggle to attain a personal identity, and it is this process of negotiation that Nair wishes to explore.

To illustrate Nair's approach, let us start with Lalit. He is a man in limbo, battling with his exposure to the modern – in part Westernized - world and trying to adjust his ingrained cultural identity to fit the new context. We see this through the emotional turmoil and conflict that he has to negotiate during the course of the film. Derne confirms this tendency in Indian men to internalize the responsibilities for the wellbeing of his family – and specifically his women.

A family's honor is confirmed by a daughter's marriage into a family of the appropriate status. To protect marriage prospects for their daughters, men carefully monitor their unmarried daughters' behavior to limit their interactions with unrelated men. (Derne,1994:p207)

The awakening of modernism in the way women interact with their culture and society places Lalit under a particular kind of strain.

As the father and head of the house, he tries to lead by example thereby making it easier for his family to follow and attain a desirable cultural identity. He clearly believes that conforming to social standards, and adhering to traditional values such as honesty, loyalty, hospitality and respect toward elders, religious laws and traditional cultural practices will make this possible. In practice however, this leads him to contradictory and ambivalent choices. For instance a concern with the right kind of scotch being available for his in-laws in order to show his hospitality (but in Westernized terms), yet at the same time an insistence on the exact execution of traditional ceremonial matters (in Punjabi terms, such as the marigold arch in the

garden, the border design on the driveway and a traditional orange tent instead of the newly fashionable white wedding tents). This desire to want to conform to a rigid set of social norms extends into his relationships with his family, and is tested at various levels.

For example, he has a conventional and thus somewhat chauvinist view of male behaviour, and this impacts on his relationship with his son. Varun is a slightly chubby boy verging on becoming a teenager. In a house filled with women he has grown up slightly effeminate, developing a passion for cooking and dance choreography. To Lalit this is foreign territory. In fact, it is more than that, it goes against what he believes and what his culture advocates. He associates dancing and singing and cooking with women and not with boys. He cannot reconcile himself to the fact that his son wants to perform dances at the wedding, and in his mind the only solution is to send Varun to boarding school. This is shown in Lalit's explosive response to his son in the scene where Varun comes running into the room asking his mother to draw a moustache on his face, for Lalit, repulsed by this, rants and threatens to send the boy off to boarding school. The idea of course is that if they as parents cannot discipline the boy themselves, an institution should be able to do so. Yet both Lalit and Pimmi as parents are responsible for Varun's development and thus being disappointed in the person they helped form and shape, is in a way also a reflection of their own failure. Lalit's late recognition of this fact leads to conflict and tension, since Varun has to deal with the knowledge that his father does not approve of him, or his interests. Consequently he develops his own insecurities around issues of identity.

In contrast to his dealings with his son, Lalit keeps a close watch on his daughters, commenting to Pimmi on how fast things change and to what extent he would go to protect them. However, they are exempted from censorship, as this is the domain of his wife. The exemption of the females from his very strict and forceful behaviour points to the patriarchal society in which he grew up, as the responsibility of carrying on tradition and culture in a visible, actioned way, according to Lalit, rests on the shoulders of the men and not the women. Women, in some sense, can be forgiven for their foolish actions, but by a man or boy it is unforgivable.

But Lalit does not only find this identity crisis troublesome within his family, he sees examples of it everywhere around him and this is what causes his confusion and despair. In a changing society, he is no longer sure of where his traditional cultural beliefs belong.

To a certain degree, Lalit's stringent adherence to traditions also equates to a kind of cultural nostalgia, or an idealized cultural state. The world his children are being raised in will never be the same as the one that he and Pimmi had known when they were growing up. With modernization and technology the Indian culture cannot help but change and adapt, and Lalit struggles to balance the traditional and the modern within his own culture. He seems puzzled at the younger generation in general, and he takes it out on other male members in his family as well. He calls Raoul, the non-resident Indian cousin from Australia, an idiot when he does not manage to locate other family members at the airport. What he does not take into account is that Raoul is not familiar with the physical lay-out of the particular airport, nor does he know what the family members look like. Raoul is constantly berated by his uncle for what is in most part merely a lack of knowledge, rather than disdain for the Punjabi culture. What one comes to realise is that Lalit's anger is not aimed at individuals, but actually at the fact that it is impossible to hold such tight reins on tradition and culture.

Some of this frustration and confusion is demonstrated in his confrontational relationship with the wedding organiser, Dubey, who - as the representative of the working class - appropriately brings an example of the changing world around them to Lalit's attention. Actually almost everything the clumsy yet self-confident Dubey does seems to irritate Lalit, from his cell phone to his fancy clothes and steep prices for waterproof tents, and because Dubey is of a lower class than Lalit, Lalit thoroughly exploits it. An example of his disregard of Dubey's advice is in the scene where Dubey presents Lalit with a choice of wedding tent colours. Dubey is aware that more and more clients prefer white tents as a testimony to westernization and modern lifestyle. This particular design of wedding is called 'The White House', in reference to the home of the American president. To Lalit and the traditionalists he represents, white is the traditional colour of a funeral, death and mourning, and he is appalled at the thought of a white wedding tent. He therefore insists upon the

traditional multi-coloured wedding tent and laughs off Dubey's suggestion. Another example of his refusal to take heed of any of Dubey's advice is shown in the scene where Dubey and his workers are eating at the back of the house whilst the celebrations are carrying on inside. Alice interrupts their meal to tell him that the party-goers need more ice, and Dubey strongly vocalizes his frustration at their inability to have provided for this kind of emergency, despite his insistence.

It is not only Lalit and Dubey who are shown to be struggling with a cultural identity. Though Pimmi on the surface seems to have accepted some of the cultural changes around her and appears to be adapting to them with more ease than Lalit, in order to maintain some level of familial harmony, she seems far more aware of and responsive to the many changes taking place around her. Her instinctive reaction is to try and appease her husband and play the traditional role of the obedient wife. To try and assuage the guilt she feels for Varun's effeminate nature she tries to protect him from his father's discontent. When Lalit lets it be known that the boy will be sent to boarding school, Pimmi immediately tries to assure Varun that it is all still under discussion. Varun however retaliates by yelling at his father and saying that he hates him. The tension in the room is palpable and we see the confusion in Lalit's body language, his shoulders sagging. As a result of this row Pimmi is finally forced to confront her husband on the matter, and so she steps out of her traditional role of wife, turning Lalit's world upside down. The realization that his ever-faithful wife has now reached a point where she cannot condone his actions any longer frightens him.

Aditi struggles with her cultural identity in a different way. As mentioned earlier, her positioning as the traditional Bollywood heroine as well as the obedient daughter is not all that it seems. To her parents she is the beautiful, adoring daughter, a role that she fulfills dutifully and well, but in reality, beyond the borders of the home, she has rebelled against those cultural norms that she is forced to conform to. Her rebelliousness is acted out at work and in her relationship with men. At the start of the film she is shown to be having an illicit affair with a married television presenter, Vikram, which she hides from everyone except her cousin Ria.

Yet, she becomes betrothed to a young Indian man working in Houston, America, and breaks off the physical relationship with Vikram, though not the emotional ties. It

seems that Aditi is constantly seeking approval from men, as if this will somehow validate her. Even when she knows she has acted wrongly, she still needs to confess her sins to her husband-to-be as if only through his hurting can she truly feel guilt. Her need for validation is also evident in the type of man she is at first romantically interested in: strong and domineering, with no regard for a women's feelings. Maybe she feels that if she can capture this 'powerful' man's interest, she must be worth something. But this attraction to men unworthy of her attention is not only about her personal self-esteem. It is also about her self-esteem as a woman within her culture. She has been raised in a household where the father is the head of the house. She therefore has to have his approval in order to feel like she belongs. This seeking of validation from the other men in her life is perhaps therefore understandable.

Having rebelled against the conventional strictures at home through her life at work and her illicit relationship with Vikram, it is as if she is in a sense moving in the opposite way to Lalit – coming back to the traditional fold as it were, perhaps seeking a safe haven. We do not see her actively trying to resolve the internal conflict she is experiencing in her relationships, but instead choosing to ignore the conflict and at least outwardly pretending to conform to the set of cultural norms that her father and mother have set. Instead of questioning why her relationship with Vikram was kept secret and never brought into the open, she decides to step away from the implication of these questions. So she consciously chooses to acquiesce to an arranged relationship, one that is more culturally acceptable, even though in her heart she is still attached to Vikram and knows it. In her case specifically, she is struggling with the pressures traditionalism is exerting on her very modern environment, or vice versa. We also know that even though it is termed modern, it is a strange mixture of modernity and traditionalism, as the scene in the recording studio shows. The female voice-over artist is allowed to work in the entertainment industry without much stigma, yet the specific nature of the voice-over work is called into question when it promotes sexuality in Indian films. Vikram, the symbol of modernism in his Western suit and suave countenance, proves to be very set in his traditional Indian ways. And tellingly so, as he proceeds to ridicule the voice-over artist for her portrayals of amorous scenes. Not only is Aditi herself unsure of her place in between traditionalism and modernism, but she is also attracted to someone who struggles with the same problem. It is interesting then that she settles for someone who has managed

to balance these two extremes in a very logical, simplistic way. Of course it helps that Hemant is physically removed from the direct traditional cultural influence most of the time.

Since she had grown up in Lalit's house as Aditi's sister, it is not surprising that Ria – Aditi's cousin – also longs for some kind of validation, but in her case not from specific men, but from the family as an entity. On the surface she initially appears free and individualistic and somewhat removed from all of this family drama, but Ria has for most of her life carried a dark secret with her, which she keeps hidden in order to protect the harmony within the family. She does this to ensure her place in the family, for her need to belong was so strong that she was prepared to ignore her own pain and suffering, and deny her right to retribution. Thus she, not Aditi, is the true Bollywood heroine:

They (commercial Hindi films) work by depicting, for instance, heroes and especially heroines whose lifestyles are westernized, consumerist and urban but whose hearts, rooted in traditional (read 'Indian') values, push them to sacrifice, for the sake of their families, their individual desires.

(Banaji,2002:p179)

So she completely buries her own need for closure regarding the sexual abuse she suffered as a child, and attempts to live out a fictional cultural identity in public, and doing so without question. Yet the internal trauma she is experiencing surfaces in unexpected moments, revealing another person below. (A particularly revealing moment comes shortly before the denouement in the film, when Ria's eyes immediately film over with tears when confronted with Tej at the wedding celebrations.)

But then, when the sacrifice she has made by not speaking out threatens to destroy her young cousin Aliyah's innocent childhood, she decides to confront the demons of her past – no matter what it might cost her. When she finally breaks the terrible news of Tej's deceit to the family and exploitation of her, she feels as if she is now no longer part of them. Nair shows this by letting us see her leave with a group of friends, and then through a haunting shot of her lying curled up on a mattress on the ground. This

scene is in direct contrast with a previous shot when we saw her as part of the family, sleeping next to her cousin, with doting parents watching over them both.

Ria's struggle for identity is thus closely allied to her positioning within Lalit's immediate family, and to her earlier role as a young woman in opposition to the power of an older, respected man, with the resulting inhibitions that impact on her own sexuality. Once again traditionalism vies with modernism. She – like the rest of the characters – is ultimately battling with traditions and perceptions that are innate to the Punjabi cultural identity. Her choice to break free from it has various repercussions, and her shocking revelations act as a catalyst for all of the characters within the film to re-evaluate their cultural identity – as the viewer realises that though a strongly rooted cultural identity may be a desirable thing for a person to have, when it subjugates free will and morality, it can also become corrosive and ultimately most destructive.

So, given the lighter touch of the film which leads to happy endings for most, it comes about that closure is found in the ending of the film through Ria, as Lalit, finding his own central identity, confronts Tej and embraces and defends her as his daughter.

Lastly, Nair shows us the struggle of the working classes within the Punjabi culture. Although Dubey is Indian and living in Delhi, he is not seen as equal in status to the Vermas. This is ironic, since Dubey is probably better off financially at this point in time than his employer, Lalit. Like Demetrius in *Mississippi Masala*, Dubey attempts to cross this inter-cultural bridge by proving himself equal to the Verma family in the materialistic sense, but being a comic character does not get it right initially. For instance he is shown wearing patterned silk scarves, even in the sweltering heat of the monsoon season. The little scarf peeking out of his pocket is a visual reminder of his cultural aspirations, to be equal to and better than people like the Verma's. Nair also shows Dubey to be particularly adaptable to the situations he is presented with, as if he has no real loyalty to any of the groups whether they are working class or upper middle class. When Lalit turns his back, Dubey and his three co-workers mock him, yet when Lalit is in a bad mood Dubey is quick to point the finger at those very co-workers he had just been joking with. Thus Dubey represents the 'eat or be eaten

world' of the commercial world, hence of the working class Indian. Dubey displays a particularly aggressive approach to trying to establish a new cultural identity for himself, and this is understandable when one looks at where he comes from.

Traditionally the lower caste Punjabi's originated as follows:

Lower castes are described either as original landholders who were defeated and subordinated by later invaders (who became the present landholders), or alternatively as latecomers who were given their present occupation by the landholders in exchange for being allowed to settle. Higher castes are described as successful invaders or as a group given the land of an area by some past ruler for notable services.

In villages, castes commonly fall into higher and lower groups. Traditionally, members of the lower caste would have been considered unclean by the upper, and they might have been denied house sites and access to public wells on the upper-caste side of the village, and they also might have had to use different ritual specialists for marriages and other Lifecycle rituals. Exactly which castes are put in each group varies by area, but the upper castes usually are Brahmins, landowners, and skilled artisans, while the lower groups do work such as handling dead animals and sweeping up offal. (Leaf,2008:p1)

The working class is therefore historically subjugated, but Dubey refuses to buy into the prescribed cultural identity and a subsequent expectation assigned to him by society and sets out to change the status quo. He actively resists the expectations of his society and as the film progresses we begin to sympathize with him and even see his strengths. These are the characteristics in this awkward and garish man that Alice admires and falls in love with.

It is the desire of each of the individuals in *Monsoon Wedding* to ultimately 'fit in' or belong, but it is hard to do this if it means suppressing and hiding parts of one's true self, as most have to do for some reason or other in Nair's comedy. Just as they are working on identifying where they fit in in their specific cultural context, it is a constant act of negotiation between personal identity and desires, and the constraints

and demands of cultural identity. And it is this process of negotiation that Nair explores in her film.

Lest us now turn to some more technical aspects of Nair's exploration.

Signifiers of Cultural Identity:

Music and Dance as cultural signifiers

One of the most obvious ways that Nair represents the Punjabi cultural identity is through her use of music and dance in the film. As stated in the quote at the beginning of the chapter: "The film was about people like us imitating Bollywood style". (Crew,2002) To Nair, and to most Western viewers, Bollywood is associated with melodramatic narratives, opulent sets and costumes, and music and dance. Despite being a Bollywood creation, this emphasis on the musical aspects is also in many ways a reflection of the reality, as Leaf (2008) indicates:

Punjab has generated distinctive forms of virtually all the arts, from dance to architecture, bawdy folk epics to sublime theological poetry. The best-known folk dance is lively and complex *bhangra*, named for *bhang* (marijuana). (Leaf,2008:p1)

What is more important is the way in which Nair uses the different kinds of arts in *Monsoon Wedding*. To start of with, she uses dance and music to demonstrate the different steps in the wedding ceremony. The process starts slowly with only the presence of music at the first occasion. First there is the engagement or 'mangni'. This is described it as follows: "Usually very high profile. This (is) when the boys' side of the family goes to the girls' side with gifts, jewellery, and other goods, to confirm the engagement. Usually even an exchange of rings takes place." (Freedom and Leela,2009:p1)

In Nair's film this occasion is also accompanied by the singing of popular Bollywood-style songs. As time progresses this ceremony is followed by a type of farewell ceremony to the young bride by the rest of the women, where they proceed to paint

her hands with henna. This is called the 'sangeet': "Can be one day or many days, usually high profile in a banquet hall, ladies sing traditional Indian songs, and it is the Indian version of the western Bridal shower. Nowadays people hire DJs and have a dance party followed by dinner and drinks." (Freedom and Leela,2009:p1) In Nair's film this poignant scene shows the women sitting in a circle around Aditi, while an aunt sings a beautiful song that describes the different stages of the bride's life. This entire scene is bright with shades of orange, yellow and red in the costumes of the women. The intensity of this occasion is thus heightened through the use of the bright colours and sad music. Finally the actual wedding ceremony itself takes place, an enormous celebration with food and drink. This is called the 'jaggo': "The jaggo ceremony is where the family dances and sings on the road in front and around the beautifully decorated wedding home. Jaggo is in the last hours of the night." (Freedom and Leela,2009:p1)

Instead of a decorated wedding home Nair uses a multi-coloured wedding tent as the location of this celebration. It reminds us of the colours of the women's costumes at the 'sangeet'. Here dance and music really features as a unifying tool, with all of the family members, guests and even servants partaking in the celebrations. Now the dance and music reaches the height of its intensity with Nair managing to convey this through focusing on the swirling of fabrics and the ecstatic faces of the guests.

The dance and singing is therefore a way for Nair to show how the culture is embodied in their everyday lives. Wedding ceremonies are a specific set of traditions, linked to dance and singing as the signifier. As opposed to Bollywood films where the dancing and singing is mostly an entertaining way to carry the narrative, in Nair's films, the dancing and singing is portrayed in a very real way as part of the everyday lives of the characters.

Nair does not only make use of dance purely for entertainment, she also uses it as a theme throughout the rest of the film to show cultural belonging. Ayesha and her cousin Varun are depicted working hard at choreographing a dance to perform at one of the festivities. Here dance really becomes a cultural signifier. As a type of outsider, Raoul is shown to be completely unfamiliar and uncomfortable with performing this kind of dance as Nair shows us when they are practicing. Ayesha

invites him to join in, and even Varun notices the attention she is giving him, yet Raoul stubbornly refuses to do so. When the night of the performance arrives, Varun, as a result of the fight with his father, refuses to take part in the ceremony. His withdrawal symbolises a rejection of the cultural conformance that is expected of him. If his father cannot accept him for whom and what he is, then he will distance himself from that which his father stands for. The idea of dance signifying a part of this culture is strengthened by the fact that Raoul is subsequently rejected by Ayesha for not wanting to perform with her. When in the end, he ends up dancing with her at the wedding celebration she comments:

Ayesha: We'll make an Indian of you yet. (Nair,2002)

Dance as a metaphor also acts as a unifying factor. Despite the difference in caste, this final celebration of marriage is the only occasion in the film where Dubey and Alice, as servants, are really 'noticed' by the rest of the Verma family as humans. As previously noted, Alice is simply a shadow when on screen with the rest of the family. It is only when she is alone or with Dubey that we see her real personality. In the same way we only see the soft, vulnerable part of Dubey when he is alone or with Alice. The rest of the time he is depicted as a bit of a slimy, street hardened operator, double-crossing and adapting as the situation calls for. In Lalit's dealings with Dubey, we only see exasperation of the kind one has for someone who is not performing up to standard. Lalit has no sympathy or empathy for Dubey, as he truly does not know him on a personal level. When, at the end of the film, Lalit finally notices Dubey and Alice, he invites them to join the celebrations in the wedding tent. All the different classes are shown to be dancing together, and for once, they are all united as one culture.

Costume as a cultural signifier

Nair proceeds to use other visual themes to depict culture, such as through the use of costume. Traditional dress in this film is very much a part of completing an aspect of what is for some a cultural 'performance'. For example Raoul, who is seen as an outsider even though he is Indian, never dresses in traditional Indian clothes. He is mostly shown wearing jeans and T-shirts, the epitome of Western dressing. He is

therefore not 'dressing up' to suit the occasion. When we first meet the adventurous Ayesha, she too is dressed in Western clothing. She seems light-hearted and flirty, an aspect which Raoul immediately seems to respond to. In reality this is not exactly an indication of her cultural beliefs, but rather an expression of her personality. We see her respect and fondness for her culture and all that it stands for depicted when she dresses up in traditional clothes for all of the wedding celebrations. To her way of thinking culture is not only evident in the way you dress, but also in the way you act. Even her very modern tattoo does not change her truly Indian nature. Hemant on the other hand, who has also been extensively exposed to the West, dresses in much more traditional clothes. Even on the day that he and Aditi meet in private to discuss the wedding, he is dressed in an Indian over shirt. He, unlike Mena's cousin in *Mississippi Masala*, is dressed in traditional clothes at his wedding and not the Westernized black suit. Hemant, much like Ayesha, is proud of his heritage and sees dressing the part as honouring his roots, not as a kind of costume or mask with which to 'fake' culture.

An important aspect to note is that traditional dress does not necessarily imply obedience of or adherence to cultural identity. In some cases Nair shows us how it can be used to disguise true intentions, thus showing that cultural identity is not defined through material things, but through actions, implementation and belief. Tej, the uncle accused of sexual abuse, wears traditional dress throughout the film yet does not in truth act as an honourable man. In his case traditional wear is used as a mask or a subterfuge with which he proceeds to betray his family and friends. Finally, after being asked by his brother-in-law to leave the wedding, the first act of acceptance of guilt on Tej's part is to remove his traditional headwear. Through this action he relinquishes the charade and shows his true character.

Conrad also makes note of the ability to use clothes as a cultural tool when he states:

English, Hindi, and some Punjabi mix comfortably in the mouths of these middle-class urbanites as easily as they change clothes; from fashionable Western daytime wear to gorgeous traditional evening costume.

(Geller,2002:p43)

Language as a cultural signifier

This quote brings us to another metaphor for cultural identity, namely language. As is stated by Conrad, Punjabi families use language for a variety of purposes which they do with ease. For Lalit's non-resident family members the English language is a mark of their cosmopolitan nature. To Lalit the fact that they choose to speak English all the time seems to be done on purpose to make him feel inferior. Thus he comments in a half jovial, half serious way:

Lalit: Speak a little English and you become a very cultured family.
(Nair,2002)

Notably he makes this statement in English, to specifically prove a point to the rest of the family seated around the table. This is yet again an attempt to 'level the playing field' of class. He is showing them that he can also speak English and is therefore just as cultured, whilst making fun of their pretentious use of the language at the same time. Some part of him needs to make them feel inferior so that he can feel better about himself and his traditional way of life.

Varun also uses English when he fights with his father and shouts the words "I hate you!" In the same manner, the fact that he says this in English is indicative of his rejection of the dominant cultural identity and all that it stands for. One can argue that Nair does so in order to highlight the key moments in the film for her English-speaking audience, yet there is enough body language and raised voices to make us understand that they are arguing and that Varun is deliberately manipulating the situation through language because he knows much it will hurt his father.

It is therefore understandable that Aditi's lover Vikram, who is the antithesis of the very obedient and traditional Hemant (whom Lalit and Pimmi chose as a husband for her), speaks English. Although his job demands that he be fluent in English, Vikram does not only use this language for professional purposes. Speaking English fluently makes Vikram feel modern and superior. He scathingly says to a woman on his talk-show: You sit there in your hand-loom sari... (Nair: 2002) Through this comment he is telling her, in English, that he has no respect for her traditional ways and that he

sees her viewpoint as being old and staid. Conrad calls him “her (Aditi’s) married, ostentatiously Americanized boss, a television talk-show host so smarmy that not even she can call her behaviour a love affair”. (Conrad,2002) Vikram’s particular kind of English therefore makes him seem almost American. We are reminded of a scene in *Mississippi Masala* where Jay’s brother says to his son that he is becoming just like the Americans – unfeeling and manipulative. This is exactly how Vikram comes across. He proceeds to use language as a weapon of ridicule against others who are not so familiar with it.

Conclusion

In *Monsoon Wedding* Nair clearly starts to blur some of the boundaries between cultural and personal identity. Although there is a lot of emphasis on cultural identity and conformance or rejection thereof, Nair also makes another valuable point through the final decision Lalit takes in regards to the situation between Tej and Ria. In this instance, Lalit makes an individual choice despite the effect it could have on his cultural identity. In fact he is caught in a very problematic situation. On the one hand he has prided himself on living up to the high standards his late brother set in always putting family first. Thus, for the sake of keeping the family intact, Lalit could opt to forgive Tej and make him pay public penance for his actions. On the other hand Ria is like a daughter to him, and if he does decide to let Tej stay within the family circle, this will break a trust resulting in the disintegration of the family. All that he and his belief in his culture stand for will be destroyed, and so he decides to reject Tej’s protestations of innocence. Nair’s lesson seems to be that cultural identity is good and well, but it can never be more important than living up to the beliefs that shapes one’s personal identity. Ultimately, if a cultural identity demands that an individual act in morally reprehensible ways, that identity can and must be rejected. Cultural identity is only positive and good if it is adhered to out of free will. The moment it goes against particular values believed in on a personal level, it becomes a burden, leading to an inauthentic and valueless existence.

It is these personal values and choices that I will attempt to discuss in the next chapter. Here I will look at *Salaam Bombay!* as the focus of a study of Nair’s interpretation of *personal identity*.

CHAPTER FOUR:

***Salaam Bombay!* and personal identity**

The social construction of identity is the first reason why it is dynamic or only relatively stable. Not only do the communities' horizons change over time, but individuals belong to a variety of different communities throughout their life—people move, change occupation, meet new people, acquire new roles; they may become someone's partner, their children's mother and their grandchildren's grandmother. The second reason is that a person's identity is not a monolithic construct but comprises several aspects. These aspects are not separate, but influence one another and thereby lead to changes in one's identity. (Conroy and De Ruyter,2002:p511)

Introduction:

Early in the haunting *Salaam Bombay!* Mira Nair introduces us to the streets of Bombay, superbly employing variations in muted colour, shadow and light to paint a picture of a vast city of infinite contrasts, of good and bad, of light and dark. She shows us the magnificence of a statue of a lion, but she also shows us the child hiding in a doorway, smoking a cigarette. She shows us the glamour of Bollywood movie stars displayed on posters by the side of the road, but she also shows us the crazed old man living beneath those glamorous posters. This metaphor of contrasts is extended to the way her main character, the street child Krishna, whose nature the film explores: he is innocence and hope whereas the other children are world-weary and cynical. These conflicting images thus evoke a sense of bustle, confusion and disorientation in the viewer; a reflection of urban life in an environment such is Bombay.

The life of a street child, as Nair sketches it, is fraught with danger and complications, and governed by an overwhelming need for survival, where every penny is hard earned and stashed away in secret places, food is something to be scrounged for and clothes are a scarce commodity. The children accumulate their wardrobe in an old suitcase, which is communal and available for use to anyone who forms part of their group. This struggle for survival is shown in a variety of scenes in the film, focusing on their desperate hustle for basic necessities. For example, one of Krishna's first

encounters with a street urchin demonstrates this very well. The meeting between Krishna and the first of the street children takes place in a dark alleyway. Krishna is in the process of running away from the senile old man, when he literally stumbles over a young boy sitting on the ground. When the boy steals Krishna's only possessions, his cans of tinned *paan masala*, an altercation ensues, which is temporarily suspended when Chillum arrives with a warning that the police are coming. So Krishna is all but forced to follow in the wake of the two fugitives, in order not to be caught up in the conflict. In one scene, Nair has therefore shown us how the children live on the fringes of society, by depicting them in dark, hidden alleys, how they have to be quick and opportunistic, through the snatching of the *paan masala* by the young boy, and the ever-present danger of the police through the urgency of Chillum's warning.

As the film progresses, these initial perceptions of children living like shadows on the fringes of society are strengthened and expanded upon, and we get to know more about the social system they inhabit. The transitory state in which they are caught is highlighted by Nair's refusal to allow us to identify with the other characters. For instance Saleem and Insect are two other boys, but we never really get to know them, for - as in life - they are easily forgotten and ignored. Thus, because there is strength in numbers, the group of children, of various ages and sizes, operate as a single unit in a specific neighbourhood in Bombay. Most of them do odd jobs to earn money to make a living, whilst others are involved in petty crime and drug dealing. Through their jobs, each of the children interacts with various adult characters on the street, and it is sometimes these relationships that become problematic. Understandably, the group of street children has something of a reputation in the neighbourhood and are seen as not always reliable, tending to be opportunistic and sometimes dishonest. The mere fact that they are children, with no adult supervision, prompts questions about the origins of such behaviour, reminding one in some way of similar issues raised by William Golding's challenging novel *Lord of the Flies* in the 1950s. Nair's film explores some of these motivations. One tends to assume that, among the many possible answers, their youth and their disempowered fringe status must cause the street children to be easily influenced by the promise of money (means of survival) or belonging (identity). Ironically of course, it is precisely these forces that may leave them susceptible to all kinds of abuse and misuse.

It is these issues that Nair explores in this, perhaps still the most devastating and disturbing of her films.

On the notion of personal identity

Because *Salaam Bombay!* is about a group of street children living in the slums of Bombay, one would expect it to be primarily concerned with *social identity*. However, even though Nair obviously shows us glimpses of the lives of all the children in the group, the film is specifically about the life of one child, Krishna, whose life is in many ways a metaphor for the lives of the myriads of similar children that crowd the streets and tenements. On closer inspection, we thus see that Nair's technique is not only to include the other children to broaden the reference of the film's central theme, but also to use them to provide context and insight into the life of Krishna, through our impressions of their relationships with him. It is these relationships that influence Krishna's life and his understanding of himself as a person and it his search for personal identity which ultimately lies at the heart of *Salaam Bombay!*. Thus, my central reading of this film will concentrate on gaining an understanding of the way in which the film explores this search for personal identity, and deriving from this, the way in which personal identity relates to and is enmeshed with a particular social identity in Bombay.

Personal identity is traditionally associated with a sense of what the self is, what makes the self unique and what different parts attribute to make up the self. To some, personal identity is related specifically to memory and the effect a collection of memories has on the establishment of the self, but this argument is more prevalent in philosophical discussions of the term. Northrup defines personal identity as follows:

Identity is defined as an abiding sense of the self and of the relationship of the self to the world. It is a system of beliefs or a way of construing the world that makes life predictable rather than random...Identity, defined in this way, is more than a psychological sense of self. It is extended to encompass a sense of self-in-relation-to-the-world, which may be experienced socially as well as

psychologically. It may include self-definition of individuals or groups at many levels, including interpersonal, community, organizational, cultural, and even international. (Kriesberg, Northrup and Thorson,1989:p55)

In my definition I would also include the fact that personal identity constitutes a place of belonging in which the individual feels that what he or she believes in is an accurate reflection of what he or she feels they are made up of emotionally, physically and historically. Personal identity is therefore directly related to self-esteem, as it is made up of part 'perceived' self and part 'actual' self. As Conroy and De Ruyter point out:

In the formation and composition of what might be termed personal identity a key but often neglected aspect is ideal identity. While comprising aspirations rather than realities, it makes a major contribution to the definition of self-identity. It does this as a result of: (a) clarifying what kind of person the individual wishes to be; and (b) an interrogation of how she sets about achieving her ideal identity, intimating what kind of person she is at a particular moment by virtue of the way in which she strives to achieve her ideal. (Conroy and De Ruyter,2002:p509)

There is thus an understanding and consciousness of self that constitutes a sense of personal identity. And, as Conroy and De Ruyter suggest, there are a range of different elements that constitute a personal identity, including actual or immediate identity, perceived identity (by others) and ideal identity.

Identity and the need to belong

In *Salaam Bombay!* Krishna's external struggle to find a place of belonging socially is clearly secondary to his internal struggle to find peace with himself and his individual identity and involves all these forms of identity. The intensity of what he is feeling emotionally is shown in the way that Krishna sometimes lashes out at those who subjugate him or people he cares for. The conflict and confusion that he is experiencing inside has no release valve, and thus Krishna sometimes does things that

seem radical, violent - even irrational. His rage is like the fire that he uses to destroy things – it consumes him.

When confronted with the implications of his actions, Krishna seems to distance himself from the ‘bad’ that can be associated with them. Nair shows him justifying setting fire to his brother’s bike to Chillum, stating that he was bullied and simply could not take it any longer. He fails to see that his actions require a certain kind of accountability, for there is a large discrepancy between the person he perceives himself to be, and the one others perceive him to be. Nair’s narrative is an attempt to show us all of these aspects of identity through the interactions of Krishna, and how they proceed to form and shape him.

As stated above, Nair shows us how prevalent these states of confusion are. She does this by introducing a number of other characters in the film who are faced with the same dilemma of having to deal with issues concerning their immediate personal identity, before they can accept themselves and finally integrate with society. Stated in simpler terms: only when they can define, and acknowledge who they actually are, will they be able to find those with whom they belong and in a sense develop a real sense of social identity. Each child within the group spends his or her life in a struggle to fit in and belong somewhere, for even though they are young and uneducated and uncared for, and come from widely divergent backgrounds, they all have an instinctive need to belong.

In a telling scene in the cinema, for instance, Nair shows us their fierce response to subjugation. The boys are watching a feel-good Bollywood film and are enthralled by what is on screen. The scene shown is quite risqué and the boys are fully aware of what the lyrics and dance moves are implying. They are singing along when a fellow cinema-goer slaps one of them against the head, telling him to be quiet. The boy’s response is that they paid for their tickets, just like everyone else in the audience, and therefore have a right to enjoy the film, just like everyone else.

Boy: Why are you hollering? We've paid, just like you. We'll do as we please.
(Nair, 1988)

The fellow cinema-goer acquiesces, even though the young boy's retort does not necessarily explain the disturbance they are creating. To this boy, acceptance is clearly reliant on money and the equality it ensures, and as long as he pays his way, he believes that he belongs. This does not apply to going to the cinema, but interacting with the world at large.

Each of them has a different approach to try and attain this sense of belonging. Some choose to develop a certain reputation within the group, and create for themselves a specific character. For example Saleem, who is known for his rude jokes and bullying nature, which protects him from being bullied in turn. Others choose to be defined by the kind of jobs they do, for example drug dealers earn certain reputations by association, which protects them from being preyed on. All of this is done in an effort to establish for themselves a kind of 'name', a social standing and a personal sense of stature.

Many of the young people are confused about themselves and their identity, for example Sweet Sixteen does not know whether she is an exploited child prostitute or a willing lover, Rekha cannot decide if she is a mother or a kept woman, Chillum does not know if he is a drug dealer or drug addict. Baba longs for recognition and acceptance and power, and even though he seems emotionally shut down, he carries an awareness of this discrepancy between what he wants to be and what others believe him to be. After a fight with Rekha he comments:

Baba: Everyone thinks I'm a two-bit pimp. What can I say now? (Nair,1988)

He is clearly aware of just how little control he has over what others think of him (i.e. his public identity) and his consequent acceptance, and even emulation, of this view in his public department (i.e. his immediate identity).

In a very revealing scene where Nair's key character Krishna dictates a letter to his mother, Nair shows us something of the pride these young people develop in these characteristics and associated names. Because he cannot read or write himself, he employs the services of a professional letter writer on the streets of Bombay. In his letter he tells his mother that he is now called 'Chaipau' ("teaboy") instead of

Krishna. To his way of thinking this name gives him a specific purpose and standing within his community as it is linked to his job and gives him purpose. He is not just another street kid who begs and steals, he is actually a teaboy. It is as if he has started a new life, under a new name. In some hidden corner of his mind, however, he does not wish to be forgotten as Krishna. Therefore, if his mother comes looking for him, she will be able to ask for him by both names and so he adds this to his letter. What he does not fully realize the implication of, is that the name 'teaboy', is even more generic than Krishna. In a sense the street children are de-personified by these titles, as the young boy who replaces Chillum shows. When Krishna asks him who he is, he proudly replies 'Chillum', and for the first time, Krishna is faced with how transitory the street children are in this environment. They are easily replaced, a dime a dozen, a commodity just like the tea and drugs that they sell. For Krishna, this realization comes much later in the film, but the letter writer, through his dismissive attitude towards the letter, shows his understanding of the de-personification of these children immediately. He does not even bother to send the letter off, but crumples it up and comments that it is a waste of a stamp.

However, in the beginning of the film, Krishna still finds comfort in this title – 'teaboy'. It provides him with temporary validity to operate within the neighbourhood. Van Blerk, in a study of street children and their behaviour, comments of this need to be validated through a kind of initiation process that each newcomer needs to go through.

This first experience of the city begins the process of developing children's identities on the street. This is not uniform as the groups children join impose upon them particular outward manifestations. Subsequent movements into and out of the street show that this identity is not fixed and changes both temporally and spatially. Through spending time on the street they become drawn into spaces and social interactions that result in an identity commensurate with street life. (Van Blerk,2005:p11)

For Krishna, this is therefore the first step of his initiation as a street child. The process continues as he is introduced to hashish, crime and incarceration, but at this point, in comparison to the other street children, his development of identity is still in

its formative stages. His short life has been filled with constant change and uncertainty, and his perception of who he is and what he stands for has therefore also been a changing concept.

The film thus goes on to explore the attempts of the various characters to ascertain how their ‘immediate’ identity and perceived identity relates to their ‘ideal’ identity. For the purposes of this thesis, I thus want to focus on this relationship of personal identity to the notion of belonging. To do so, I start with Nair’s portrait of Krishna.

The world through the eyes of Krishna

When Krishna lands on the streets of Bombay after being abandoned by the circus, he is confronted with a myriad of influences, moral stances and beliefs. It is in his settling in a specific neighbourhood that he has the opportunity to develop his own set of beliefs and attitudes. Amongst all of these the most important are probably the concepts of good and bad. For the first time, Krishna is not governed or guided by external forces, like his parents or his boss, but is responsible for his own actions and survival. He therefore has choices, although limited ones. He can decide to go along with the initiation process, which will allow him to operate with relative ease in this kind of environment, or he can distance himself from this group and its beliefs, and continue in isolation. Within these parameters also lie a number of other issues, including moral decisions to be made – e.g. whether to strive for his goals by honest and truthful means, or by deceiving and stealing.

As Conroy and De Ruyter point out, issues of morality are shaped by environmental issues and education:

We argue, children cannot avoid ideals—they are presented to them everyday from a wide variety of sources. But these sources or the ideals that they promote are not necessarily good for the child’s well-being or for her fellow citizens. Consequently, teachers as moral agents have an important role in assisting children to acquire ideals that do meet such a criterion of goodness in addition to helping them reflect critically on the range of ideals they may encounter in their communities and society... The social bases of the

development of a child's identity already show the importance of education and the role of parents and teachers. Not only are they significant others who influence a child's perception of herself and thereby influence the relative correctness of a child's self-represented identity, they are also responsible for offering children the horizons with which the child can develop her identity. (Conroy and De Ruyter,2002:p509)

Thrown into a world where he is left to his own devices, Krishna's actual or immediate identity is clearly in conflict with his ideal identity, for his ideal identity is not to belong to the street children, but to be a child within a family and a home. He is, however, presently caught up in an initiation process which seems to offer him the promise of a surrogate "family", but will ultimately only be able to supply him with the identity of a street child. His moral dilemma is thus intense – but does he know this? And more importantly: does he *actually* have a choice? It is the nature of this conflict between the ideal and the actual identities that makes Krishna's story so important to tell and Nair's film so compelling.

The decision to use the child Krishna as the protagonist of her film is therefore quite significant. Nair could have chosen to make the story of Rekha, the prostitute mother, the main focus of the film, and avoided all of these complications, but instead she chooses a child to be the messenger of the ideals she wishes to convey.

In the first place, the fact that Krishna is a child makes him a blank canvas of sorts. The changes that years of street life make to a person's identity is not yet apparent in Krishna. He is not a toddler who has yet to develop conscious decision-making skills, but neither is he a teenager who should at that stage have developed a sense of independence and the beginning of a true understanding of self. In fact, Nair frequently highlights Krishna's small body stature, by contrasting him against large buildings, or shooting from above so that it serves as a constant reminder of how young and inexperienced he is. Thus for Krishna, the perception of identity is much more intuitive at this point, and most of his attempts to fit in or establish identity are done subconsciously (as demonstrated earlier by his erratic outbursts). An example of this is his extreme reaction to Sweet Sixteen's plight: Nair shows Krishna calmly walking into her room, taking her hand and pouring fuel over her bed. He does this

without any planning or sleepless nights trying to think of a solution – instead his actions come across as being completely impulsive and spontaneous. Having no alternative way of expressing himself and his frustration, this is both a release mechanism, but also a call for help. We are reminded of the fact that this exact kind of behaviour is also what got him abandoned by his mother – he set fire to a client of his brother's bike. The erratic nature of these outbursts is therefore symbolic of some internal struggle that is building inside of him, and which overflows in times of extreme stress or unhappiness. He is not at a level of understanding where he uses and manipulates his identity consciously in a play for power. Van Blerk (2005) writes on street children's geography and specifically refers to this kind of identity fluidity and 'cross-over', where it becomes a tool for street children to adapt to their different environments. This is linked to the fact that she believes that the longer a person stays in a certain area; the more likely they are to pick up some of the characteristics of that group. The children get to a point where they are able to switch different identities on and off, as the situation asks for it. For example, they would behave differently, and display different norms in front of their families, if they meet up with them again, than they would when they need to fit into a particularly tough group on the streets.

Krishna therefore does not as yet completely conform to the characteristics of the other street children, yet at the same time, Nair's depiction of Krishna makes us realize how different he is from non-street children. In the scene where the children are working as waiters at a wedding, the non-orphans or upper-class children are shown to be fat and well fed, as well as slightly spoilt as we see from the reaction of the little boy that Saleem is aggressive towards. He immediately runs to his mother who comforts him. The street children are shown hiding food in their clothing at every opportunity, whilst the people at the party do not even look at the food that is being served. In stark contrast the street children are skinny and craving food and fiercely territorial. This kind of set-up on the part of Nair allows for comparison to other kids of his age and thus the abnormality of his situation is highlighted.

So how does Krishna then develop as a person if he has none of the conventional role models in his life? The fact of the matter is, other kids of his age would have been school going, or if not that, been acquiring life skills through mimicking of

parental/guardian actions. In this sense, Krishna is left severely lacking. The important formative influences that would have been attained from observing his parents and growing up with a family, are absent from his life. He has been separated from his mother and brother for a while, and has no other appointed adult looking after him. He is in a sense an orphan who has to learn from his own experience. He does not have the luxury of learning from other people's mistakes; he can only make his own. He is a kind of Pinocchio – who was essentially a pure soul, but had a lot to learn in order to become a 'real' boy. Krishna does not have the luxury of a Guiseppe. He only has prostitutes like Rekha, and drug dealers like Baba and Chillum in his life. The basis for sound decision-making is therefore not present in Krishna's life.

To complicate the matter further, Krishna has a very sensitive nature, as Nair shows us in his first subtle interactions with Sweet Sixteen. Despite her crude rebuff of his offer of tea, he patiently picks up another glass and holds it out to her. It is this patience and hopeful countenance that softens her up and makes her accept the second glass. Krishna feels immense empathy with others, which makes the cruelty of the world he is in so much more confusing to him. The fact that the other children call him 'bumpkin' is therefore a reflection of not only his country origins, but also of his innocence.

We also come to realise quite early in the film that Krishna is very trusting within a dishonest environment. This is just an extension of his innocence. He seems much younger than he is because of the ease with which he trusts people. Nair artistically structures examples of this throughout the film - from the first scene where he gets left behind by the circus up until the moment at the end of the film where he realizes that he is truly alone in the world, with no-one to turn to. Other examples include Krishna allowing Chacha to keep track of what wages he is owed, although this is also due to the fact that he cannot read or write himself. He trusts Chillum to show him a place to hide his money. He trusts Manju to give Sweet Sixteen the cookie he has saved for her. The result for us as viewers is that we can systematically see the breakdown of Krishna's inherent hopefulness. After every instance he is betrayed by one of his 'friends' he slowly starts losing his faith in people around him. Some of the times he does not even realise who the people are that are really betraying him. He thinks that his mother does not care because she never replies to the letter he sent her,

but in actual fact it was the letter-writer who never sent the letter off in the first place. He assumes that it is Saleem or one of the other boys who stole his money, and the realization that it was actually Chillum almost destroys him. For a while we see him mechanically going through the motions of living, as he has no hope of returning home any more. A small ray of light lifts him out of his depression when Manju gives him her share of the wages they got for working at the wedding. In fact it is not the money that gives him hope, but the knowledge that Manju cares enough for him to give up her share.

Thus we see that his issues with trust extend to greater issues, such as the sanctity of a family, the fairness of governmental systems and the loyalty of friends. In the few years he spent with his mother he must surely have gotten used to being included in a family, and having friends. One would assume that abandonment would make him cautious about trusting anyone again. But in fact Krishna does the opposite, which indicates that maybe he thinks that his abandonment was appropriate punishment for what he did to his brother's bike. When he therefore is confronted with other innocent children like him, such as Manju, getting arrested and taken away from their parents, he finally starts to understand how deceptive the world can be. Manju, unlike him, does not deserve to be punished. Rekha does not deserve to have her daughter taken away from her. And so this leads to some fundamental changes in his understanding of himself and his position in the world. It is therefore only closer to the end of the film when we start experiencing a decline in the trust Krishna places in others. It seems that when his trust is broken by isolated occurrences, he is able to process the disappointment and move on. However, when it all appears to happen at one time, his fragile hold on reality and his new identity proves to be too weak to handle the disappointment. Chillum's death, Baba's deceit, his own incarceration, the theft of his savings – all of this contribute to his final demise.

Therefore insofar as 'normal' circumstances of a childhood go, Krishna certainly does not develop his identity through the conventional method. In the end, character formation and identity is not the result or product of the way he is brought up by his parents, or his schooling, or his religion, but by a totality of experiences, starting with his experiences in the city of Bombay.

Mother Bombay

If we therefore look at Bombay as being the place where most of Krishna's development takes place and knowledge is acquired, the image of the city takes on a different meaning. Nair personifies the city as a kind of surrogate mother. Not always a very good one, at that. Bombay is a shelter and refuge in the sense that it provides a physical place to live in, but it does not offer much physical comfort and protection. When there is a semblance of comfort available, it comes at a price - drugs will eventually kill, even though it provides a temporary refuge from reality. Bombay, like a very open-minded parent, provides a large set of opinions and attitudes, and lets everyone make their own choices accordingly. It provides both opportunity and pitfall, as if to test each individual. The mother Bombay also portrays mixed values: it houses both temples and brothels; priests and prostitutes call it home. The one good thing one can therefore say of Bombay as a surrogate mother is that it does not discriminate, but instead allows everyone and everyone into its ample bosom.

Filmically Nair's memorable images of the city and life on the streets, conveys a disturbing impression of the murky chaos that the characters are caught up in. She deliberately shows us both squalor and majesty, the two extremes that the city enfolds. Young children hide in the shadows to smoke whilst and old man runs around half-naked shouting incomprehensible sentences. It seems crazily filled with cars and human beings and life, yet later we are more and more exposed to death that is just as prevalent as life. People are literally shown to be living, eating, sleeping and dying on the street. And, by shooting many scenes from above, Nair reinforces our sense of characters immersed in a dominating context, pawns in the bigger scheme of things.

It is in this context that Nair creates a visual representation of an emotional journey by a young boy. The dynamic relationship between personal identity, its components and its feed-through to social identity is summed up in a unique depiction of life on the streets.

Of course such stories are to be found in any big city across the world, but the particular lack of supporting systems and infrastructure is what makes the story of this city so much more poignant. The Bombay of Krishna's initial understanding, the place where people go to become stars and find fame and fortune, is the opposite to what it becomes in the end: a last stop for those who have no other hopes of finding themselves. As Rao so aptly puts:

Bombay is a city which allows you to withdraw into your own little shell, clawed out of the concrete jungle even as the press of humanity crushes and catches you in its frenetic pace. It is the gateway to India and an escape from its intolerable paradoxes. Bombay is the city of the immigrant, who has left a piece of his heart in some distant corner of India. (2001:p2)

As Nair has said, it truly is a city of strangers. Krishna's desperate words echo eerily in this context:

Krishna: Don't worry, I'll do something. I'll save money. We'll go back to the village. It's lovely there. We'll leave this Bombay, forever. (Nair,1988)

This is the context in which Krishna is placed. How all of these aspects of his background proceed to affect his choices in life, and how Nair proceeds to portray this, is what the balance of this chapter aims to explore.

As briefly touched upon earlier, Krishna's age makes him the perfect protagonist. He has some basic notions of good and bad, of right and wrong that were instilled by his mother, but these are soon in jeopardy as they come to stand against basic survival techniques. In this way, Nair does not need to show us how his sense of right and wrong develops, as by this stage, we have to assume that it is something he is familiar with. His honest attempt at finding a job and earning money proves that this line of thinking is correct. Our own prejudices and assumptions are also called into question as Nair surprises us with Krishna's persistence. We assume that because he now lives on the street he will not want to work, but he is doggedly pursuing his goal.

Role models and support systems

As he does not have parents who care to look after him, the factor that adds to Krishna's crisis in establishing his own place of belonging, is the conflicting relationships of the adults around him. These are the individuals he is supposed to take as role models, people to look up to and learn from, but their actions puzzle and confuse him. Rekha, Manju's mother is both doting and disinterested at times. Her father is only kind or even cordial to her when there is something he can get from it. Chacha uses Krishna to deliver tea for a minimum wage, but fires him at the first sign of trouble. Krishna is therefore only acquainted with disappointment and abandonment when it comes to adults. However, since these are the only adults he is exposed to, this is as far as his knowledge and understanding of adulthood stretches. If we had to look at the kind of identity formation Van Blerk refers to, it would explain why the resultant identity is so different to the norm:

In several cities street identity has been defined in relation to processes of exclusion that suggest street children are outside 'normal' society (Baker, 1998; Beazley, 2002; Young, 2003). The result is children develop identities that are in direct resistance to greater structures operating in their societies. For example, Beazley (2002) discusses how Indonesian street girls adopt a masculine style as part of their identity in opposition to their subordination in male dominated street life.

In many cases this exclusion and marginalisation through living on the streets is because it is viewed as the antithesis to the globalised image of an appropriate childhood where children are located within the realms of the home and family (Ennew,1996). (Van Blerk,2005:p9)

Furthermore, this contrasting depiction of adults and their values explains Krishna's reluctance to appeal for help, or turn to them for advice. The only loyalty and acceptance he experiences from any group is from his fellow street children, and it is therefore this group that he attempts to fit in with and who ultimately have the most direct effect on his developing identity.

Krishna the displaced

Krishna becomes acquainted with a variety of characters some of whom he comes to see as his friends. It is these characters that act as influences on the undulating road of his identity formation and help him to adapt to circumstances

So, at different stages throughout the film Nair shows Krishna as it were trying out different identities for different circumstances in chameleon-like fashion, as demonstrated by his friends and his relationships with them. Firstly he tries out marijuana in an attempt to be more like Chillum. The drug makes him feel strange, Nair shows him tripping over things and being slightly paranoid. He also sees the way the drug affects Chillum and is never shown to be using it again. On another occasion Krishna goes out on a drinking binge with the other street children. Although we don't often see him joining the group in their activities, this celebration is the result of their teamwork earlier that day. Krishna has already committed a crime with them, so he now decides to join them for the occasion. They ride in a cart and are shown to be exhilarated and joyous up to the point when Krishna vomits. The elation they shared moments before rapidly disappears and thus Krishna has his first experience with alcohol and robbery in one day. Krishna also gives in to a moment where he has the chance to feel what it must be like to be Manju. When Rekha calls him in from the rain, dries him off and listens to the radio along with the children, he feels safety and happiness for a short while.

Despite the varying age, sex, background and interests of Krishna's friends in Bombay there is one characteristic that they all share. All of them, in some way, represent an aspect of Krishna's search for identity that he wishes to understand for himself. Sweet Sixteen, like him, is cast out by her parents and left to make her own way in a dangerous world. Sweet Sixteen can literally not understand the language or the conventions of the strange city she finds herself in, and in this way her life is a parallel image for the landscape that Krishna finds himself in and of his own experiences. As much as there is confusion on the part of Sweet Sixteen regarding her circumstances and future, there is uncertainty in regards to Krishna's surroundings and future. They are both equally crippled by a lack of understanding, for they are outsiders. Because of Krishna's sensitivity to other outsiders, he wants to act as a kind of saviour to Sweet Sixteen, so he tries to distract her from her homesickness with tea

and baby chicks. He even tries to help her escape the brothel, even though the two are soon recaptured and punished. Subconsciously he has started to realise that he cannot save himself, that he needs a hero in his life to take him away from this harsh reality. So because he sees in Sweet Sixteen the same vulnerability, he offers to portray this role in Sweet Sixteen's life. In another way, she is the personification of his desire for love. In her he sees all of his own yearnings – she falls for Baba simply because he pretends for a while to care for her.

Initially, Krishna seeks out Chillum, in the hope that their friendship will give him some street credit. As previously mentioned, this is not a conscious decision, but rather a subconscious attraction towards a perceived hub of power. This 'power' that Krishna senses, is in actual fact fear engendered in others, but Krishna only realizes this much later. The people on the street fear Chillum and what he stands for, and thus steer clear of him. But it definitely is this part of Chillum's personality, the cynicism and tough attitude, which draws Krishna to Chillum in the first place. Van Blerk notes that this is a common occurrence amongst street children:

Social relations between street children and others on the street are imbued with notions of power that shapes the creation of particular street identities within specific localities. (Van Blerk,2005:p8)

To Krishna this signifies power, as mentioned, and he wishes to be as tough and wise in order to protect himself. Chillum is the older brother he would have chosen for himself if he had the chance, not his real brother who abused and bullied him. Chillum would have been the kind of brother who would have shown him the world and shared his experiences, rather than bully and batter him. In return for his 'friendship', Chillum finds acceptance and admiration instead of fear, something he has rarely experienced. Nair shows Chillum mostly in isolation, except for those shots in which he is with Krishna. He can often be found sitting at the train station, seemingly waiting for something.

When Krishna therefore gets to know Chillum, he realizes that Chillum cannot be his saviour, defense against the world or his surrogate father and thus their roles are reversed. Krishna now takes care of Chillum, who in turn becomes a kind of ghost of

things to come. Chillum is almost a living representation of the bridge they walk past on the first night Chillum takes Krishna out. He tells Krishna that the bridge is where the souls of Bombay's dead children wander – but Chillum himself is really already dead and wandering. In the end of the film he has already been replaced by another young boy who is called Chillum and deals drugs for Baba. He is representative of the senseless cycle of life and death for the children of Bombay.

Despite the fact that Chillum is much more advanced in his decline than Krishna, there are certain undeniable similarities between the two characters: Chillum was a runaway like Krishna who sought refuge in Bombay, hoping to make money to go home. Chillum admits that he too shared a naïve dream of escaping the streets. To his own detriment, Chillum got caught up in Baba's web of lies and drugs, and the result is the cynical young man Krishna gets to know. This is the young man who, despite his own similar background, mocks the young Krishna by saying:

Chillum: So you think you can go back and breathe sweet village air?
(Nair, 1988)

Krishna becomes similarly caught up in Baba's web of lies, and indirectly with his drugs. As with Chillum, it is as a direct result of all of these interwoven complications relating to Baba that Krishna comes to a fall.

Manju, on the other hand, is almost the female version of Krishna's innocence. She is symbolic of Krishna's need to be a child who has parents who care and love. She, like him, is most happy when sheltered and safe, and carries with her the same kind of naiveté that Krishna has. Their parallel natures are ironically what land them into trouble and into social care. When Krishna loses all of his money to one of Chillum's drug binges, Manju is the one who gives her wages from a wedding gig to Krishna to start saving up again. As payment for this kindness, Krishna cannot leave Manju behind when she stumbles as policeman gives chase. Their innocence is then very abruptly taken from them when the policeman steals their money and puts them in the back of a truck. A man that is already in the truck that transports them to the assorted compounds seems to sense this loss of innocence as he puts a hand on Krishna's head and says:

Old man: It's all going to be all right. One day...in our India, everything will be all right. (Nair,1988)

Towards a sense of self

With that said the parental and peer influences on his identity have been isolated and discussed. What is left to analyze as aspects of his identity are harder to isolate. As has been shown, Krishna has, through his various interactions with adults in his life, come to face certain perceptions about himself. These are not necessarily in line with what he feels he stands for, but nevertheless, through their repetition they become imbedded in his mind. We can call this perception his *sense of self*. This perception of self, as explained at the start of the chapter, is inextricably bound to his development of identity, and thus changes as his identity formation changes.

As Krishna enters Bombay, his self-esteem is extremely low. He has been rejected and abandoned twice, and the fear and uncertainty is artfully captured by Nair in the first scene where we encounter Krishna at the circus. He is instructed by the circus boss to run to the nearest village and purchase 3 tins of paan masala. The camera follows the boy as he runs into the hills on his errand. In the meantime the circus people are packing up, the tent has been pulled down and everything is being readied for their departure. When Krishna returns from his errand, the clearing is deserted. Nair zooms in on the expression on his face as he stands at the edge of the clearing where the circus tent was pitched only hours ago. The internalisation of the abandonment and loss and insecurity is vividly captured in the face of the young boy as he stands on the edge of the clearing where the circus tent stood only hours before. The camera zooms in on the actor, moving closer, as if the camera is the emotion that is finally hitting home. We become aware of Krishna's breathing, which is in contrast with the silence surrounding him. The rustling papers and debris signifies what Krishna is to the circus: disposable garbage, left to be blown about by the wind.

The second time that he is abandoned it is almost worse than the first time. When his mother left him with the circus initially, Krishna truly believed that he would be able to return home if he could get together the money. Now that he has been left behind

again he realises that this dream is more unattainable than ever before. This feeling of being alone and small and insignificant is now firmly embedded.

What makes Krishna special and hence the true protagonist of Nair's film – and the core of her message – is the fact that despite this, he has a streak of hope and optimism and the spark of a strong though unformed self-image embedded in the tiny body.

When he enters Bombay and is introduced to the other inhabitants of the street, he realizes that he is not alone in this underworld of Bombay. There are countless others just like him, and in some ways, worse than him. In a way, this reassures him, and his self-esteem rises slightly. Krishna therefore starts off as a tea boy in an honest attempt to better himself in order to return home. Not only is he working for the 500 rupees he needs to pay off the bike that he set fire to, but he also needs to pay off the guilt he feels for the deed he committed. Bombay becomes, for a time, the means to an end. The euphoric feeling of doing honest work is soon marred by the disdain of his fellow inhabitants. They sense his optimism and hope, and in a twisted kind of jealousy, attempt to pull him down and discourage him. Saleem spitefully steals his tea and drinks it. The boys make fun of his kind gestures towards Sweet Sixteen. Even Chillum taunts him and uses him. His attempts at making an honest living are marred, and so his self-worth falls again. And so the see-saw of self-worth goes up and down for the duration of the film: rising when Sweet Sixteen acknowledges him, falling when Chillum steals his money; rising when Manju gives him her hard-earned money, falling when he is bullied by the stronger and older boys in the Chiller Room.

The importance of this perception of self cannot be underestimated, as it is the constant against which every individual measures him or herself. If Krishna believed that he was as bad as his mother thought him to be, he would have put up no fight, and accepted whatever life had in store for him. As he does not believe in this external perception of who and what he is, he struggles to understand how this has come to pass, and to what extent it is accurate. The conflict between perceived and actual self is therefore the relationship that is being honed and whittled down, so as to merge at some point. The last scene in which Krishna is shown sitting on a low wall, internalizing the trauma of the past few days, is where the actual and perceived self

finally meet, and Nair's lengthy focus on his expression and deflated body language tells us the implication of this 'meeting' with himself for Krishna.

Memory and nostalgia

The last, and possibly most important influencing factor on his sense of personal identity is that of memory, or as previously referred to, nostalgia. Although Krishna must have been old enough to have been able to form and retain accurate memories when he left home, he has nevertheless managed to distort some of these images in his mind in order to suit his perceptions of self. To him, the concept of home has become larger than life, just like Uganda becomes more real to Jay than when he actually lived there. Krishna, in his eternally hopeful state, chooses to forget all of the unpleasant memories linked to home. He chooses to forget about the fact that he was being bullied by his brother, and that his mother chose to discard and abandon him like he was not even human.

'Home' and everything it signifies becomes Krishna's ultimate goal. He even attempts to make others believe in this fantasy in order to make it more tangible to himself. Van Blerk finds that this romanticization is prevalent in communities across the world, giving validity to this statement regarding Krishna's view of home when quoting Beazley:

Although children develop attachments to specific places in Kampala, through belonging to a particular 'depot', home is still romanticised as a positive place providing love and security. In discussing 'home' a dual image sometimes emerged where problems at home resulted in children leaving for the streets contrasted with nostalgic ideas about what it is like at home (Beazley,2000b).
(Van Blerk,2005:p12)

Krishna's nostalgic view of home is therefore another indication that he is in the process of accepting the identity of a street child. His ultimate surrender to this identity comes when he stabs Baba in order to protect Rekha. This action seals in him all of the elements of identity associated with street children, and opposes all of the elements he believed in being his ideal identity. Nair's final shot of Krishna is an

intimate study of the hopelessness and despair that floods him with the realization of what he has done, and also what he has become. Like Rekha, he is now finally a lost soul, at “home” on the streets.

Concluding thoughts

Ultimately, *Salaam Bombay!* provides us with a dark and sombre look at how the identities of street children are affected by the circumstances under which they grow to adulthood. Even the adults have difficulty keeping head above water in this kind of environment, so the chances of the children easily negotiating successful identity formation are minimal. Yet, Rao has indicated, it has also become a landmark film, not only in Nair’s oeuvre, but in the history of serious cinema:

International recognition has however bestowed the final accolade on Mira Nair, who made “Salaam Bombay” a slogan, a catch phrase, and an enduring metaphor not only for the sheer spirit and instinct for survival that animates its street children, but for the city itself. (Rao,2001;p4)

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

I feel very much that cinema is born as a medium to capture exile. The idea of going out of your hotel in Mississippi and looking out of your window and seeing your garden in Kampala. This is something that cinema lends itself to brilliantly, almost as much as literature. (Greer,2002:p1)

I am attracted to ideas that will provoke people and make them look at the world a little differently - stories that come from my part of the world. (Anbarasan, Otchet,1998:p1)

What has become clear from this thematic look at Mira Nair's films is that a primary concern in her work is precisely what is suggested by the first statement above (taken from an interview about *Mississippi Masala*): the films are all, in one way or another, concerned with notions of exile, alienation and the search for identity and a sense of belonging. And the discussions of the films have shown, I hope, that she has been superbly able to exploit all the advantages of her chosen medium to bring her remarkable visual inventiveness and artistry into play in order to communicate this to an international audience and to make them think – an objective .

Let us begin this concluding chapter by briefly looking at some of the more important aspects of this central theme, as identified in our discussions of the films in chapters 2-4.

Concepts of Home

The notion of *home* – as a physical place as well as a mental, metaphoric or imaginary space - is a central concept in much of colonial writing and art. “Home is where the heart is” is not merely a trite saying, it is possibly a real reflection of a state of mind that is in evidence all over the world. World literature is full of examples of this, and the field of diasporic studies today is concerned with issues of alienation and exile – and specifically also in its continuing importance in the post-colonial world, where

movement and displacement have become even more powerful and disruptive in some ways. What is important to note is that in most such discussions the idea does not necessarily refer to a physical structure in a particular place, but in many cases specifically also to the connotations and emotional values attached to the concept.

To illustrate some of the nuances of this as it pertains to Nair's films, consider the following excerpt, taken from an article written about an elderly woman who is reflecting on her and her sister's lives, growing up in India when it was still a colony, and then returning to England for visits and in later years to reside there permanently.

As Josephine reflects, "If my mother didn't live in the house in Brighton, I would have no reason to go to Brighton, because the heart of it all is in that house. It always has been. My grandmother lived there, all my children, if they think of England, they think of that house. It's just a simple, little house, but that was England to them." For five generations since the 1930s, this dwelling has embodied family and country. It sheltered the girls' grandparents for the duration of World War II, becoming for Marjorie a symbol of Britain under siege and her family in peril, particularly after a stray bomb fell less than a block away. The house was also the destination for Josephine, Judy and their father on their first trip ever "Home" to England after the war, and more recently, Marjorie's 470 journal of social history winter 2005 widowed sisters Daphne and then Dorothy came to live there. The home in the heart of southern England provides a particular sense of belonging that unites family and nation. It is the one place, across time, connecting everyone in the family. (Formes,2005:p469)

Clearly there are a variety of influences at play here, the first being that *home* is a space where an individual feels physically safe as well as emotionally at peace, and the second that the word implies something that requires loyalty in return for this sense of belonging - be it a country, a nationality, a culture or a family. It thus contains a history and is not limited to a physical structure of some kind. Lastly, the idea of home is a constant presence in the mind of the individual, even if the physical home not remain in the same physical space.

If a person is not able to find a sense of home or belonging of some kind however, he or she may start experiencing a feeling of alienation, a distance from understanding of the self. In an Internet blog, based on a university exercise she had done on the notion of “home”, N. May describes this sense of alienation experienced when living in a country other than one’s place of birth, and introduces the interesting idea that “othering” and being “othered” as something one might do to oneself.

Living for a year in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, did make me realize, that my taken-for-granted notion of home had other perspectives than home as just being a place to stay and live. The different aspects and notions of home like culture and identity, including the idea of defining oneself in opposition to an “other” which many sociologists and anthropologists has written about, became more clear to me, during the period I was away from my Danish home. (May,2005:p1)

This alienation or “self-othering” haunts all of the characters in Nair’s films. Krishna in *Salaam Bombay!* feels like he is not really part of the group of street children he lives with. From the perspective of the other street children, he is the ‘other’, the country bumpkin, the boy who thinks that he is better than everyone else because he does not steal, but prefers to slave away as a tea-boy. The term is dependent on the viewpoint of the party in power. If Krishna and his fellow street children were seen as a group from the viewpoint of the privileged weddings guests they worked for, they, the street children who had so easily pushed Krishna out, become the ‘other’ in turn.

Because Krishna feels that he cannot share all of their values and experiences, his longing for home becomes stronger and stronger. Nair focuses on the natural instinct of human beings to return to a place of safety and belonging, and in adverse circumstances, this feeling only becomes stronger. It can be equated to the emotions of soldiers at war. Their memories of home become clearer and stronger, the more in danger and further from home they get. They will suddenly long for things they took for granted, like fresh milk or cheese or home-made bread. Loved ones will be missed more acutely, and all past injustices forgotten in the face of death or injury.

This is exactly what happens to Krishna. 'Home' to him, becomes an over-romanticised, more real-than-real concept. And therefore, ultimately, the dream of home is never realised, perhaps because it was never 'home', in the strictest sense of the word, in the first place.

Jay in *Mississippi Masala* shares this ability to enhance the good aspects related to a place, and make them govern his memory of it. What Jay also manages to do on top of this, is to isolate his feelings of pain and rejection from his memories. He, like Krishna, completely compartmentalizes what actually happened to them in that space they refer to as 'home', from what their reasoning is for not being there. And so he finally learns that home is wherever his wife and his family is, and that it has little to do with the country in which they find themselves in or where they came from, though these may have had a part in shaping who he is.

In *Monsoon Wedding* home is the sacred space of trust for which Lalit must fight. He must defy cultural norms in order to do so, but it ultimately proves to be worth the fight.

Nostalgia and identity

Linking to the ideas about exile and alienation outlined above is the impact of feelings of nostalgia. Gopinath describes it in terms of a collection of short stories:

This experience of migration is the grounds upon which the narrative unfolds; the novel is structured in terms of remembrance, with the narrator, Arjie, recalling a "remembered innocence of childhood...now colored in they hues of a twilight sky". Such a phrase, coming early on in the novel, seems to signal that the text can be comfortably contained within a conventional genre of exile literature, one that evokes from the vantage point of exile an idyllic, coherent, pre-exilic past shattered by war and dislocation. (Gopinath,1997:p467)

Nair's films show us how powerfully nostalgia is manifested in many ways within the everyday lives of her characters and - through them - alerts us to the role it may play in our own lives. There are of course different degrees of nostalgia. For example, in

Mississippi Masala Jay's nostalgia is vested in his vivid and idealised remembrances of Uganda and its landscape. For Mena on the other hand nostalgia is not such a deliberate, conscious, everyday focus in her life, for she does not spend her time and energy thinking about Uganda every day, like her father. What she does, however do, is subconsciously emulate some of the good aspects of their life in Uganda. When she and her mother and father drive away from their house in Kampala, Mena says goodbye to a little black boy, who, judging from the passionate and continuous goodbye she cries out, was a very good friend of hers. When she is then grown up and living in Greenwood, she seems to need to duplicate the existence of this boy in her life. Nair shows Mena being almost compulsively attracted to Demetrius from the start. Even though they are involved in a car crash which is not necessarily the best of circumstances, she goes up to greet him when she sees him in a club, although he shows no signs of recognizing her. She is the first person to make a move and call Demetrius, and finally it is also Mena who attempts to reconcile and goes in search of Demetrius. Mena therefore finds a substitute for the little boy that she said goodbye to in Uganda. She finds him in Demetrius, and when her father once again wants them to move away from where they have been living, she finds that this time she cannot leave the little boy behind. Now that the choice is hers, Mena is willing to give up her sense of security in order to maintain a friendship and relationship with Demetrius and the unknown future that he represents. So her whole life (like her father's) is really driven by a sense of longing for a lost past, i.e. nostalgia.

For Lalit in *Monsoon Wedding*, nostalgia is more complex and less easily identified. But it is a powerful presence nevertheless, and ultimately becomes a source of empowerment. He is a man who is deeply rooted in his family relationships, as is shown in the scene where he stands across the bed of his daughters with his wife Pimmi whilst they are sleeping, and passionately states that he would do anything to protect them. His yearning is therefore for a time when these young women were just little girls, and had many years left that they would spend in his house, under his care.

Another facet of this nostalgia is Lalit's yearning for the simplicity of life when he was younger, and possibly to when his eldest brother was still alive to take the lead and guide the family. In fact his enshrined memory of his dead brother is a strong symbol in Nair's film, for the brother's presence is felt and shown throughout the

film. For example Lalit makes mention of him in his speech at the first dinner of the week of wedding celebrations and refers to him every time he talks about Tej, his brother-in-law. Finally, it is in front of his brother's portrait that Lalit is forced to face up to a supremely confident Tej, seemingly unfazed by the previous night's confrontations and accusations, and take a stand. At this stage in the film, we are very familiar with the figurative presence of Lalit's older brother, and in this scene his picture serves as a strong visual reminder of that presence, both to us as viewers and to Lalit – and inspires him to act.

Shifts of power

The foregoing example brings us to another important thematic aspect of Nair's narrative strategies, namely the role power relationships, be they personal, physical or political, can play in character formation and identity. This theme manifests itself in almost all of the relationships Nair explores in her films, though different kinds of power relationships may affect different characters in different ways, and may impact more on some characters than on others. For example, as shown in Chapter 2, in *Mississippi Masala*, the exertion of brutal political power has a much stronger and more immediate effect on Jay than it has on his daughter. In her case, it is the vagaries of *personal power* that play a much more important role in creating who and what she is. In *Salaam Bombay!* Nair takes up a more polemical position and scrutinises the impact of the power roles exerted by adults and socio-political entities on personal identity and the development and growth of a specific child – and on children in general. The film is thus an indictment of the status quo that allows for children to be put into 'homes' that act as holding areas for juvenile 'criminals'. In *Monsoon Wedding* she takes a completely different tack, focusing not on personal or political power, but on cultural and social power, which can blind one man's ability to see the pain his own family is suffering.

Such then are some of the themes of the work. Another aspect that has become clear in this study is that Mira Nair is really a cinematic artist whose unique talent is to use her medium as a tool in her expression of her ideas. In Chapter 1 we discussed much of this (including some more technical aspects) under the section *The Voice of Nair*,

but to conclude this study, let us return to some of the more prominent qualities of Mira Nair's film language.

Characterization and identity formation:

The first point to make is that Mira Nair's films are clearly and unashamedly character driven. It is the power of her characterizations – not only of individuals, but also of groups, of cultures and of cities – all of which contain her “messages” and which she uses to drive her arguments and compel her viewers to take notice.

The main characters in Nair's films share some rather distinctive traits, in most cases an equal measure of vulnerability and perseverance. As much as Jay, Kinnu, Mena and Demetrius are rendered powerless by their nationhood, they all persist in finding a way to deal with their changing understanding of their world. Change and the ability to adapt something they come to know intimately. The same can be said of Lalit, Pimmi, Aditi, Ria and Dubey. They are also seeking an identity that fits and defines them. Each of them approaches it from a different angle, but once again the point is that they are all attempting, indeed daring, to change the status quo.

In this respect Krishna is possibly one of the most poignant characters because of his vulnerability, his youth and the devastating nature of his circumstances, yet he appears in some of the most hopeful and humane scenes in all of Nair's films. For example, despite all of the tragedies that have befallen him, he still has the capacity to be compassionate, as is demonstrated through his sensitive handling of a little baby chicken. He protects and cares for it, before he passes it on as a gift for someone that he really does not know, yet cares for.

Nair's portrayal of these characters is precise and consistent. Once a behavioral pattern has been set, she repeats instances of the pattern throughout the film in question, to reinforce the characterisation and to allow for logical lines of development. For example, Krishna's naïve, trusting nature, is constantly replayed, under varying circumstances in *Salaam Bombay!*, as he keeps being tripped up and disillusioned. This quality is shown to be the one, dangerous yet stabilising constant in a world that is constantly in shadow, shifting and sliding out of reach around the

boy. In *Mississippi Masala* Nair provides Mina with a clear arch of development from the beginning of the film to the end. Her strong central memory of her relationship with the little black boy she has to leave behind in Uganda, is balanced with a corresponding relationship with Demetrius in the present time of the film. Thus, at the end of the film we feel as if she has become whole again, her memories of her Ugandan childhood have become integrated into who she is now, and she and the boy of her memories have been united again, if not in person then at least in remembrance.

The fact that her characterizations are so consistent is one of the reasons that we can understand the motivations and journeys of each of the characters so well. We can understand what is driving them and even the less obvious changes in attitude or beliefs can be spotted this way.

A sense of place

Another way that Nair helps us to understand her themes and the various psychological journeys the characters undertake is through her detailed and almost painterly depictions of the locations and environments they operate in. This point was substantially discussed in Chapter 1, but it bears repeating here. In *Salaam Bombay!* we never get to see Krishna's shelter from the outside, yet the old abandoned go-cart is a signal that we are now in their lair. Even in a city and an environment that is as unpredictable and ever-changing as Bombay, Nair finds a visual element that will root us as viewers. In *Mississippi Masala* she uses music as a very effective tool to enhance our understanding and emotional connection to the city she is portraying. The slightly bluesy tones of Greenwood places us in a kind of auditive limbo, whereas the African beats of Uganda fills us with anticipation and a little bit of fear for the unknown. In Delhi in *Monsoon Wedding* she often shows us flashes of cityscape and people in between scenes, as if to remind us of all of the stories that are playing themselves out all over the city at the same time. She also shows us some of the moods of Delhi through her use of colour. When Aditi, her mother and Ria go shopping for pashmina's and sari's the day is as hot and vibrant as the scarves they are looking at, but when Aditi escapes the house to go and see her lover Vikram the night is ominous in its lack of visibility due to the rain that is pouring down.

A sense of cultural context

The cultural context of each film is as clear to viewers as the physical spaces in which the characters are portrayed. In *Monsoon Wedding* we see the curious juxtapositions of modernism and traditionalism in the cell phones and prayer meetings, the wedding traditions and the brandy that is served at the engagement party. It is apparent in the clothes the characters wear – Ria and Aditi in more traditional clothing than Ayesha in her Western clothes and her tattoo. The mournful chant sung by the women at Aditi's pre-wedding ceremony clashes with the techno beat of the pop song Ayesha performs to. In *Salaam Bombay!* she symbolizes the transient culture of Bombay through the train station. It is the first image Krishna is confronted with when he arrives in Bombay, and it is a scene he frequently re-visits with Chillum. It is here that people come and go, constantly on the move. Nair even gives us hints of a more subtle nature of the guile of Bombay through the misleading images of the Bollywood star performing on the old television in the station. When Krishna buys his ticket to go to Bombay the cashier tells him to come back movie star. In reality when Krishna arrives at the station the only glamour and glitz he sees is on the television screen, high up and unreachable by anyone.

Being of India

Despite the fact that her films play out in various different cities and sub-cultures, they are always somehow rooted in Indian-ness. And this is not a chance occurrence, but a life-view, as illustrated by the following comment she has made:

It is an enormous validation to see people on screen who look like us in India or elsewhere in the South. We must tell our own stories, because nobody else is going to do it for us. I must say I enjoy the responsibility of exploring and portraying these stories through film-making. After all, film, unlike academia, reaches millions. (Anbarasan, Otchet, 1998:p1)

Like many successful writers, it is in fact her regional qualities that open the way for her work to have universal appeal, for what comes into play is a true understanding of

the depth of human emotion and complexity within a known and profoundly understood socio-cultural context.

Monsoon Wedding (and more recently *The Namesake*) may be seen as the most direct and obvious attempts to address this feeling of connectedness to India, but all of the other films are also concerned with identity issues related to India. *Monsoon Wedding* deals with the intricacies of expectations within a culture, and how the characters attempt to find a more comfortable way of living within that culture. It also addresses some of the issues that are brought up in *Mississippi Masala*, namely that of how non-resident Indians (NRI's) attempt to convey and perpetuate their culture within other countries. In a wonderfully humorous scene in *Mississippi Masala*, a large group of Indians are congregated for the celebration of a marriage in Greenwood, Mississippi. Everyone is dressed in traditional clothes, the hall is decorated appropriately with flower garlands and when it is time for speeches the master of ceremonies declares that even though they are thousands of miles away from India, they should sing a song in praise. As Nair lets her camera glide over the faces of the wedding guests, one notices how the older generation sings with gusto, some with their eyes closed. The younger generation is completely at a loss as to what the words to the song are, never mind what it actually means. They have become completely removed from the internalization of the culture, yet they continue to outwardly propagate it through their clothing and conventions.

In *Salaam Bombay!* Nair's gaze is more critical, more focused in a way. She depicts a layered society fraught with trouble. The city of Bombay is presented as a culture-within-a-culture, one that breeds its own set of social problems. The culture is still decidedly Indian, as the films, music, media and setting indicates, but the film's real focus is really another layer within that set of cultural systems. The world of *Salaam Bombay!* is a specific substratum in the city, a sub-culture of poverty and neglect, where the street children suffer under the sway of an disinterested and uncaring government system. Even though these children are amongst those of their own culture, they are still outsiders who are ignored, neglected and abused by those individuals who have more agency and power. They are left to fend and fight their way to survival within the city limits. Nair is commenting on the inability of people within the Indian city to care for and look after each other, even when they are of the

same race and culture. If a city of people can be so indifferent towards those of their own kind, how much more removed would a town like Greenwood be towards immigrants? The degree of severity however, is almost the same. Being rejected by the group you technically belong to sometimes does more damage than being cast out of a group that was never yours to begin with.

The film-maker as thinker and poet

When Nair was interviewed on *Vanity Fair* in The Oakland Tribune in 2004 she made the following statement about Thackeray:

What I loved about Thackeray's point of view was that he observed his own society in a very clear-sighted way and with an acerbic satirical touch.

He was an insider but a total outsider who would expose the sham and the hypocrisy of his own people with great insight. (Stone,2004:p1)

It is clear that Nair admires Thackeray for these characteristics, and not surprisingly echoes some of these sentiments within her own films. She also looks at her own society in a 'clear-sighted' way, and in her case this can be done from both a Western and Eastern perspective, as she has enough 'credentials' to prove herself knowledgeable on both matters. It is in her ability to offer social critique on both sides of the dividing line that the appeal of her films lie. We are never left feeling wanting to know what the story would have been like if seen from the opposite perspective. She gives us equal opportunity to understand both Baba and Krishna's reasons for feeling insecure about themselves. She shows us Demetrius's side of the story through sketching the black American dilemma, and yet does not hesitate to criticize it at the same time. She points out hypocrisies and dualities so that we as viewers can make up our own minds.

This brings me to another point that helps us understand why Nair's films are so successful. She does not convey to the audience member the feeling that she is judging in her portrayals of human beings. We are never forced to take sides as she shows us both the good and bad in her characters. Baba for example has in fact

'saved' Rekha from a life of prostitution on the street, although she still has to work from her apartment. At least she was able to have a child and a better standard of living out of the arrangement. Jay is shown to be a doting father to his daughters but we are not fooled into thinking he is the perfect father, as Nair shows us that he is particularly hard on his son. Yet the outcome is not that we perceive Jay as being a bad person. All that this manages to do is to make us feel more of an affinity with these characters, as they are made to be human, like us. Through showing us both the good and bad sides to each character and then allowing us to make our own conclusions, we grow along with the characters. If looked at it from that point of view, Nair is actually giving her audience members agency to make their own choices. She is daring them to go out and debate the issue and make up their own minds, and that is a particularly refreshing aspect of her films.

Nair admits that this is a particular focus of hers, and one can see the origination of it very early on in her life:

I fell into cinema, and then became possessed by it. I started as an actor, committed to fairly radical experimental theatre, street protest theatre and related things. I was also a good student, and suffered under the illusion I might have become an academic. I received a full scholarship to study at Harvard University when I was eighteen and went to pursue my interest in theatre. But once there, I felt the theatre at the university was too conventional, too staid, compared to what I had done in India. I also grew impatient with the lack of control one has as an actor. Actors are always at the mercy of directors and their vision of the world. I wanted to be the one in control - telling the story, controlling the light, the gesture and the frame. Creative freedom is imperative for me.

Making independent films is an obsessive task - having an idea, writing the script, finding finance, casting, shooting and editing. Then comes the big struggle to make sure the film is distributed throughout the world. All of this could easily take one or two years. In order to live with a project every day for two years I have to be obsessed by it. I can only make films about subjects that get under my skin and make my heart beat faster. I am not in the business of

producing films which offer a pleasant way of filling a Sunday afternoon. That is for others to do, and I don't dismiss it. But I am attracted to ideas that will provoke people and make them look at the world a little differently - stories that come from my part of the world. (Anbarasan, Otchet,1998:p1)

Having said this, Nair is not by any means the only director to ever have these ideals or publicly talk about them, yet she lives them out in her everyday approaches to filmmaking and in the projects she chooses to engage herself. This includes a film school in Uganda and a project to help out the street children in Bombay.

I close with a quotation from Nanda's review of Nair's *India Cabaret*, which sums up the power of Nair's filmmaking:

In *India Cabaret*, Mira Nair uses a culturally specific vehicle - the world of cabaret dancers in Bombay - to raise questions about the social contradictions and the double sexual standard in patriarchal societies, especially those societies in which men's honor depends on women's virtue. The film succeeds on all levels; the cultural specificity of the material adds to the film's interest without ever getting in the way of our understanding the issues being raised or erecting a barrier between the audience and the film's subjects. Nair has obviously achieved a high degree of rapport with all the individuals in the film, both men and women, and has succeeded in getting them to talk with both candor and in-sight. (Nanda,1988:p493)

Nair's films provide a solid balance of entertainment and education, and the process of filmmaking is clearly not only gratifying to her as a person, but serves to enrich and educate her viewers as well.

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