

CRITICAL FILM REVIEW

SARAH MARVI

ASIA 399

The subject of diaspora brings about questions of origins, locations, and identities. Where do people come from? Which directions have they traveled? Where do they belong? The topic also discusses issues surrounding culture, gender politics, belonging, national identity, and subjectivity. These issues are then disseminated through particular narratives in films, literature, and general media. This review will focus on South Asian diaspora films and how they posit concepts of representation and imaginations of a homeland central to their cultural identity through complex and contradictory narratives. I will discuss two films – Mira Nair’s “*Mississippi Masala*” and Damien O’Donnell’s “*East is East*” – and discuss the culture and identity politics covered in both these films.

Mississippi Masala opens in Uganda, where an Indian’s lawyer’s family is forced to leave because of Idi Amin’s policy of not having Asians in Africa. In the opening scene, we see Jay imprisoned because of his hostile comments about Amin’s policies on BBC. He is rescued by his friend Okelo who bribes the police with a considerable amount of money in releasing Jay. The conversation shown between Okelo and Jay by the fire is an important scene that foreshadows Jay’s yearning to return to his place of birth. It also marks the beginning of Jay’s enduring resentment towards Okelo, who states that Africa is not for Jay’s family anymore, and this resentment isn’t resolved until the very end. The family is forced to move because of their skin color and set their roots in Mississippi, United States. The child, Mina, has grown into a young woman with limited memories of Africa. Driving a car one day, she crashes into the van of African-American Demetrius and exchanges addresses. They encounter again later when she is on a date with Harry Patel, a financially successful South Asian-American man, considered a desirable and appealing catch due to his higher status in the community. Mina and Demetrius

become involved in a relationship soon after and are found out by their families. Mina's parents expect her to marry within their extended community of other South Asians and forbid her to see Demetrius. The irony of racism and colorism is evident here since Mina is considered too dark within her community to make a desirable wife. In the black community, she is welcomed with open arms at first, but after the Indians boycott Demetrius's carpet cleaning business, they get angry too, and Demetrius is reprimanded for associating with the foreigners. A further irony is created that Mina's family was expelled from Africa due to their skin color. Yet, that kind of color consciousness is reproduced and practiced by Jay and Kinnu (Mina's parents) against the black community. More interestingly is Jay's fixation and longing for his homeland Uganda and is seen to be obsessively wanting to reclaim his lost property and is seen to be suing the Ugandan government. However, in the end, Jay learns about the death of his dear friend Okelo and decides to return to the United States to Kinnu, thus leading to a concrete conclusion of Jay's nostalgia for his homeland. In this film, Mira Nair brings up various complex topics surrounding interracial relationships, racism, displacement, nostalgia for a home, and identity prevalent in the modern-day.

While *Mississippi Masala* is set in the Deep South in the US, *East is East* is set in the urban streets of Salford, Manchester (UK). The movie is about the Khan family, which consists of George Khan, who originally comes from Pakistan, his British wife Ella, and their seven children. As the movie opens, we see George's son Nazir getting arranged married. However, we see him run out after the bride reveals herself, leaving George humiliated. George is portrayed to be a conservative Muslim man who upholds traditionalist values of his religion and culture. For example, we see the youngest son Sajid getting circumcised after the mosque

Maulvi found out and again leads to an ashamed George. All of his children, except one, have no interest in following their father's conservative footsteps. This is shown from them eating bacon, drinking, and showing disdain for all religious practices. Owning a fish and chips shop, both husband and wife work there, with Ella doing most of the labor around the shop. While George is the dominant one who calls his children "bastards" when they're taking modern liberties and resorts to violence when frustrated, his values are questionable since he married a white British woman, takes advantage of Ella's Britishness, and is shown to have left his first wife from an arranged marriage in Pakistan. In the film's duration, even as George grows more ruthless, the viewers get to understand and sympathize with his frustration and hurt stemming from a fear of losing the traditions he grew up with. It is seen in his effort in making his children act like proper Pakistanis and live to a certain standard he has evaded his entire life. A family in Bradford has two daughters, and George decides to have two of his sons marry them to gain back the respect he lost and have his children be assimilated into the Pakistani community. Ella is put in a difficult situation where she disagrees with her husband's plans and still cannot stand her ground. It all comes to a head at the end when the arranged marriages are broken off due to the children's brazen behavior, and George is once again left ashamed. The ending scene shows him sitting in the shop, resigned, and the children playfully running off in the streets as usual. This film displays many issues surrounding identity, religion, and yearning for a feeling of home – shown mainly through George's character. It is a humorous social commentary of the Muslim South Asian diaspora who left to escape from an oppressive culture and yet struggle to assimilate themselves in the foreign culture fully. The cultural conflict is prevalent in the

children who hate being associated with 'Pakis' and yet experience the otherness that comes from living in a predominantly white neighborhood and having a white British mother.

One of the common themes in both films is the father figure's longing for a homeland nation-state where they can feel more as part of the community and uphold their traditionalist values. The main difference is that for Jay in *Mississippi Masala*, the diasporic homeland is Uganda and for George in *East is East* it is Pakistan. Moreover, in both films, the yearning is represented through a specific symbol. In Jay's case, the symbol is of the family house in Uganda, which Jay is seen working to recover from the Ugandan government. In George Khan's case, it is the first wife he abandoned Pakistan, which symbolizes the nostalgia that his character goes through. Throughout the film, George is continuously shown giving threats (both scornful and playful ones) to Ella of bringing his first wife to Salford as she would better understand his sentiments. William Safran better explains the kind of fixation on a nation-state in his article, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." He expands on the limited definition of the diasporas by Conner and states that the communities in the diaspora collectively share specific characteristics:

"1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5)

they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (Saffran, 1991, p. 83-84)

Based on this expanded definition, both Jay and George embody these characteristics. Both of them retain their memories of the original homeland and consider it a place, physically and metaphorically, to practice their culture and uphold their sacred beliefs. For George, he desires that his family follow Muslim traditions and culturally conform to Pakistani practices like arranged marriages. George voices his concerns about losing his culture's last connections to the *Maulvi* at the local mosque. He states he should have moved to Bradford, where there is a stronger Pakistani community. However, in marrying Ella and moving to Manchester from Pakistan, it can be said he already abandoned his culture himself and is clinging to the beliefs not out of respect but out of loneliness. This demonstrates one of Saffron's characteristics where George believes he is not accepted in the British society, cannot fully assimilate himself in the foreign culture, and feels estranged. This is evident in the film from his racist neighbor, an admirer of Enoch Powell, supporting anti-immigrant sentiments. As mentioned before, the first wife represents the symbol of George's beliefs, and the mock threats to bring her to Salford drive it home. Bradford further complicates the idea of an ideal homeland described as the 'home away from home'. Bradford has a prominent Pakistani community, and a move there would solidify the cultural conformity that George wants from his family. In *Mississippi Masala*, Jay, and his family are forcibly removed from Uganda, where he grew up, and move westward,

settling in Greenwood. This is different from George in the *East is East* because his move to Britain was a choice and escapism of sorts. According to Saffran's listed characteristics, Jay is stuck in the past and holds on to the memories of living in Uganda. This is shown throughout the film with flashbacks of their previous life in Uganda. Jay is often shown viewing the landscape from his family home's terrace, which represents his sense of loss and internal rumination about Uganda. Jigna Desai, in her book, "Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film," mentions how nostalgia and yearning are depicted by Jay mourning for his physical home but also for the home country. She also states that Jay's obsession with recovering his property and returning to Uganda is contrasted against his wife's Kinnu, who envisions a home that is "deterritorialized" (Desai, 2004, p. 72) and centered around the family itself. Jay, compared to George, has a stronger relationship with his homeland since Jay left his property and his dear friendship with Okelo behind. On the other hand, George has no physical ties left in Pakistan except his first wife, which the narration depicts he abandoned. According to Saffran (1991), even though their sense of longing can be said to be on different levels, they both carry on having affiliation with their respective home countries. The ending of both films can also be contrasted. While Jay reaches a resolution after learning about Okelo's death and forgoes returning to the homeland, George is resigned to the fact that his children's failure to understand his sentiments is a product of his own choices.

While the first-generation migrants always follow the theme of having a fixed notion of home in South Asian diasporic films, their children are shown to be more fluid with their identity and sense of belongingness. They stand between the boundaries of two cultures and challenge the notion of having one stable identity and the essential binaries that come with it.

In both films, we can see that the children reject the culture that their parents try to enforce on them. For Mina in *Mississippi Masala*, she does not share the same yearning sentiments of her father. She barely has memories of life in Africa except for the occasional mention of Okelo. Jay and Kinu want Mina to marry someone within their community who shares the same values/religion/culture. This disdain for her relationship with Demetrius is a product of anti-Blackness sentiments and the dichotomous notion of “us” versus “them”. Jigna Desai argues that the film forgoes having a specific national identity for Mina and Demetrius and instead celebrates the continuous “shifting and changing homes of incessant (westward) movement in empty land” (Desai, 2004, p. 88). The culture that Mina’s parents want to impose is much less evident as compared to George in *East is East*. Here, the narrative displays that George wants the family to follow Muslim traditions and is not cognizant that he is trying to raise multi-racial children through a monoracial lens. His seven children's cultural disconnect is apparent in scenes where they are seen eating bacon, drinking, running away from the Mosque bus. It is also evident in dialogues that the children view their South Asian culture negatively, for example, Sajid running inside and saying ‘the Pakis are coming’ or when his son cries that he won’t marry a ‘fucking Paki’ or even when Meena despises wearing the saari her aunt sent from Pakistan. Both the films depict the South Asian identities of the children as confusing and unable to refer to “the possibility of culture as open and dynamic” (p. 49). For Mina, the question arises of what constitutes being Indian? She has never been to India, and this inevitable question of ‘where are you from’ arises quite frequently throughout the film. She refers to herself as ‘mixed masala’ because her origins and continuous westward migration from Uganda to Britain to America have left her with multiple experiences of identities. As Jigna

Desai mentions, Mina, born in Uganda of South Asian descent, “prevents any simple constructions of essentialist belonging, thus, problematizing the ethnonational terms of identity” (p. 72). The same kind of cultural identity confusion is replicated in *East is East* in the scene where one of George’s sons states that ‘I am not Pakistani, Dad. I was born here’. The same question arises of what constitutes being a Pakistani or being an Indian? In both films, the children of the first-generation migrants face constant difficulty with aligning themselves along with one kind of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. Mina is considered a ‘foreigner’ by the African community, yet she is too dark-skinned to be regarded as a desirable wife by Harry Patel’s mother. Even when George’s children have acculturated to the British way of living are still considered outsiders by the white community, which is apparent in the neighbor’s racist and anti-immigrant dialogues. One interesting difference between both films is that in *Mississippi Masala*, we see Mina’s parents also producing the ‘Other’ rhetoric and participating in the model minority myth. Demetrius confronts Mina’s father about it in one of the most gripping scenes in the film. In *East is East*, that kind of rhetoric is only left to be produced by the white neighbors in Salford. Diasporic children go through significant reworking in their postcolonial identity construction as they grapple with experiences of racism, cultural confusion, gender stereotypes, and classist notions.

Both films make us consider various issues of the South Asian diaspora. In many ways, both films – *Mississippi Masala* and *East is East* – represent the same themes, including the struggle for individualism, cultural confusion, yearning for a fixed notion of homeland and belongingness. While *East is East* literalizes the interracial and multicultural dilemma in the family, *Mississippi Masala*, also representing interracial relationships, deals with it through the

lens of contradictory racist ideologies. The generational gap between the first-generation migrants and their children has been articulated clearly in the two films and the cultural identity confusion within the second generation as a product of enforced values.

References:

Desai, J. (2004). When Indians play cowboys: Diaspora and postcoloniality in Mira Nair's

Mississippi Masala. *Beyond bollywood: The cultural politics of south Asian diasporic film*. (pp. 67-95). Routledge.

Saffran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A*

Journal of Transnational Studies, 1(1), 83-99. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0004>

O'Donnell, D. (Director). (1999). East is East [Film]. BBC, Assassin Films.

Nair, M. (Director). (1991). Mississippi Masala [Film]. Black River Productions.