

essay

## Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* and the South Asian Diaspora

By Rebecca Haque

**T**HIS essay is a comprehensive critique of Mira Nair's second film, *Mississippi Masala*. Young, Indian, and avant garde, Nair, in her films, goes beyond restrictive gender issues to grapple with values, traditions, and culture systems of specific communities. In her first film, *Salam Bombay*, she examined the stark reality of the lives of Bombay's street children. In *Mississippi Masala* (1992), she focuses the lens of her camera on the American Deep South in the 1980s. Mississippi has historically been the centre of deep racial animosity between blacks and whites, with its haunting legacy of oppression and segregation concretized in the Ku Klux Klan cross-burning and physical violence directed at negroes. Nair, however, deliberately chooses to deflect attention away from black-white relationships to dwell on the more recent social consequences of the interaction between the fledgling South Asian community and the wider, more permanent, rooted black community that surrounds it.

As the Indian community grows, some degree of interethnic confrontation is inevitable. This confrontation does not only incorporate elements of class and economic power, sadly and inevitably, it also includes the politics of racism. However, the possibility of tolerance and interethnic communication is not ruled out altogether. To a great extent, *Mississippi Masala* represents Nair's analysis and interpretation of the various problems associated with the world-wide phenomenon now known as the South Asian diaspora. She comments on the multiple migration and multicultural experience of communities and individuals living in exile, with the result that her film becomes a trenchant examination of the boundaries defining race and cultural identity. In a recent interview published in the November 1998 issue of the UNESCO *Courier*, Mira Nair explains her method and her medium. She says, "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 do have a private agenda, I suppose, to resist the cultural imperialism of Hollywood by putting people like ourselves on screen. It is an enormous validation to see people on screen who look like us in India... 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."

This is another dimension of my work which I really enjoy — the ability to reach so many people.... What was especially moving about being in Mississippi to shoot my film was that I found black families — with their closeness and church and singing and barbecues — were actually so much like the Indian families that seemed so removed from that community even though they lived just across the highway. The Indian community was doing the same things, believing in similar values to those of the black community. Yet the Indians imagined the blacks to be not quite as human or the same as them.... Indian communities living abroad form their own circle, perhaps to maintain a cer-

tain cultural and sometimes religious purity. In the process, they become more frozen in their 'Indianness' than those living in India. By doing so, they also systematically exclude themselves from integration with the local communities."

In this context, let me briefly quote also from Dharini Rasiah's article entitled "Mississippi Masala and Khush: Redefining Community". Rasiah is a Sri Lankan critic and currently a resident of California. She studies film and video and has focused on women of colour as represented in visual communication. She points out that "Film is a medium that has come to represent the social and political identity of communities and can challenge existing ideologies. Though the film industry has generally been open to the recent influx of minority works, filmmakers are often forced by the pressures of producers and market audiences to create generalisations and perpetuate stereotypes in order to sell their work. *Mississippi Masala*.... is the only film about the South Asian American experience that has reached the mainstream American audience. Though Mira Nair presents some generalisations about South Asians and African Americans, in an effort to unite the communities, she focuses on one particular Indian family with the intention of representing the normally invisible experiences of women and the working class, as well as introducing the South Asian immigrant experience to an American audience."

Set in rural Mississippi, the story of *Mississippi Masala* involves a transplanted Indian family of three forced into exile from Uganda during the period of the Idi Amin regime and now struggling, after years of living in England, to resettle and find economic viability in the United States. The film opens with a kind of prologue: the year is 1972 and the last Indians are leaving Uganda. Idi Amin's brutal expulsion of the Indians is an assertion of black supremacy in the face of years of economic domination of the Africans by the better-educated and wealthy Indian professionals and merchants. A radio announcer proclaims the end of an era in Ugandan history, the beginning of a new chapter in which Africa will belong to Africans, black Africans. The Indians are condemned to impoverished exile because they have failed to integrate with the African community; the irrefutable argument is that they have lived here for decades yet they refuse to marry their daughters to Africans, they refuse to become Africans. The retention of their purity and their cultural isolation is seen as their true crime. In the ultimate analysis, the reason for the expulsion of the Indians is racial hostility and the difference in the colour of the skin of the Indians and the Africans. Born and raised in Uganda, where their forefathers had been brought from India by the British to build the railway, Loha, his wife Kinu and their daughter Mina consider

Africa 'home'. They have deep attachments to the land of their birth. The child Kinu asks Okele, her father's childhood friend and African blood-brother, "Why do we have to go? When are we coming back home? Who will speak Swahili to me?"

Departure from Uganda is a traumatic and humiliating experience for Loha and his family. The bus ride to Kampala airport is a tense, emotionally wrenching affair, made worse by the unnecessary and callous show of force by two Ugandan policeman — they board the bus, force Kinu to disembark and open her suitcase. Their off-hand search of her personal belongings and their cruel disregard for her things is an instance of physical harassment and psychological torture. Six year old Mina clings to her mother in fear and leaves Africa emotionally scarred.

At this stage in the film, we are abruptly propelled forward eighteen years into the year 1990, with the opening titles and credits and the camera weaving lovingly through the Mississippi countryside and the appropriate blues' music in the background. We are in the Mississippi heartland, and at the centre of our focus is Mina, now twenty-four years old, attractive, independent, articulate, and with a definite mind of her own. The Loha family has certainly come down in the world. Once an affluent lawyer in Uganda, Loha spends all his time in legal correspondence with the new regime in Kampala to try to get his property back. In Mississippi, he is in debt to the Indian community which has provided shelter and means of livelihood to him and his family. His wife runs a liquor store, while he and Mina help manage a motel. Their working-class status is a constant source of shame to Loha, and he is often the object of scorn by some of the wealthy established Indians (one particularly racist Indian ridicules his paradoxical situation, "he was the champion defender of the blacks, but the same blacks kicked him out.") Mina's condition is especially painful to Loha — highly educated and with his entrenched middle-class ethos, he cannot bear to see his vivacious, intelligent daughter spend her days scrubbing grubby toilets. Mina's considered response to her father's concern is, however, matter-of-fact and typically upbeat: "When you win your case and get your money, I'll think about college."

Nair's comment on the human toll of the Ugandan episode does not come to an end with the migration and resettlement of the Loha family in Greenwood, Mississippi. Frequent, intermittent flashbacks reinforce passionate ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' associated with Uganda, as the camera lingers repeatedly on the verdant, rolling hills around Kampala and on the lush, tropical garden and sprawling bungalow of the Loha estate. In his mind, through his imagination, Loha captures the essence of his "Africanness" which in contradiction of his "Indianness" has its origins not in race and the colour of

his skin, but in invaluable, immeasurable bonds of friendship and loyalty to the land of his birth and its people. One special, moving flashback measures the depth of Loha's duality: he sees himself as a child playing in an innocent edenic Africa with the black child Okele — the same Okele who in 1972 risked his life and bribed the Ugandan police to free Loha from jail after he had been incarcerated for giving an anti-African interview to the BBC, the same Okele who pointed out that it was time for the Indians to leave because Africa belonged to "black Africans," the same Okele to whom he had then cried out in a moment of agonized protest, "Why should I go, Okele, this is my home," the same Okele whom Loha can finally neither look straight in the eye nor say goodbye to because he cannot accept condemnation and banishment for being Indian. Okele, a schoolteacher, who loves Mina like his own daughter and urges her not to forget Swahili as he says fond farewell to her at Kampala airport in 1972, is a powerful and potent figure in the film and represents Nair's attempt to categorize Idi Amin's denunciation ("Asians are rich, they are suffocating the economy of Uganda") as a cataclysmic tragedy in the history of that nation. At the conclusion of *Mississippi Masala*, Loha is invited back into Uganda by the new regime to argue his case for repatriation and restitution. Loha finds the Ugandan economy shattered, the social infrastructure tottering on the brink of chaos, and he receives a joyful welcome by the ordinary Ugandan (for example, the taxi driver) who remembered the Asians. Okele is dead, killed long ago in 1972 for being an Indian sympathizer. Knowledge of Okele's death works as a catalyst to cut the emotional umbilical cord between Loha and Africa; he decides to go back to Mississippi and to his family ("Home is where the heart is, and my heart is with you, Kinu"). At the film's symbolic final scene, Loha stops to watch a young, pretty Ugandan girl dancing on the streets and he instinctively takes an infant into his arms. With Okele's ghost looking over his shoulder, so to speak, this is a touching movement towards understanding and forgiveness. The song we finally sing is one of infinite peace, reconciliation, and renewal.

Throughout *Mississippi Masala*, Loha's relationship with Africa has been clear-cut and categorical — Africa is home, and in almost two decades of exile, his roots and his identity are reaffirmed again and again in a constant barrage of letters to Kampala. But what of Kinu and Mina — the women of the South Asian Diaspora? We are told that the Loha family lived for a while in England, but we are not told how long they lived there or where or how. However, from the ambivalent feelings betrayed by both Kinu and Mina, it is safe to assume that residence in England must have played a great part in weaning them away from their African past. Neither has any desire to go back to Uganda, and both have practical, realistic reasons for staying in America —

and loses Mina to his embrace. Nair develops the interracial relationship between Mina and Demetrius amid growing hostilities between the two communities. Both are condemned by their respective communities for not upholding the social and sexual taboos. In a critical scene of confrontation between Demetrius and Loha, Demetrius accuses Loha of racism but the older man begs to be understood — his responsibility as a father demands that he protect Mina from pain and struggle in a world which is not yet ready for interracial relationships. Nair, however, undercuts Loha's argument by making Demetrius a worthy object of Mina's desire and by enveloping their relationship with an aura of optimistic faith. Demetrius has a clearly defined identity: he is a model African-American, a role-model for the other young men in his community, an obliging dutiful son to an aging father who still works hard long hours as a waiter, concerned brother to the wayward Dexter, responsible, upstanding citizen with a growing carpet cleaning business of his own. Demetrius is sure of his place in the world and although aware of the long struggle of his people against racism, he is certain of his own direction. Honest, ambitious and hard-working, vacillation and self-doubt and deceit are not in his vocabulary.

Mina's self-image and her relationship with her culture and her community is more problematic. She is the antithesis to the pure, obedient, submissive virgin heroines of the commercial Hindi cinema who are revered by the South Asian community as symbols and icons of glorified Indian womanhood. In projecting Mina as assertive, at times rebellious, and sexually aware, Nair is truthfully reproducing the conflict between tradition and modernity which has rippled through all Asian communities located in the West and has sometimes ripped generations apart. Nowhere has this conflict been more apparent and more rancorous than in the younger generation's choice of sexual partners. With ties to the rigid traditions of their elders loosening amid the permissive and progressive lifestyle of the mainstream culture, second and third generation Asian-Americans find it easy to cross racial lines and find love wherever Cupid strikes.

In this context, a wedding in the Indian community sets two things in motion early on in the film. One, Mina accidentally meets a young African-American, Demetrius, when she rams her car into his van on the way back from the supermarket where she had been shopping for the marriage feast. Two, the wedding reaffirms the latent racism and bigotry so deeply embedded within the Indian culture: the valorization of light-skinned people and the denigration of dark-skinned ones. Mina's character, with her dark brown skin, presents a challenge to the traditionally prejudiced view of the lighter-skinned woman as the ideal of beauty. Sought and courted by the wealthy, ostentatious Harry Patel for whom she does not care but with whom Kinu would dearly like to see her daughter married, Mina is nevertheless aware of her position as a "darkie" in the eyes of the gossipy Indian women and her negative status as a prospective daughter-in-law in the eyes of Patel's mother. This, however, does not faze Mina a bit: she is self-assured and confident of her sexual power. Advertisement and expression of this sexual power occur when Mina meets Demetrius again at a black nightclub she visits with Harry Patel. Attraction between the Indian woman and the young, athletic, good-looking African-American is immediate and mutual. Patel pales into insignificance in the presence of the more vital male.

At the risk of offending her own community (for example, there is an extended love-scene between Mina and Demetrius), Nair enlarges our awareness of the problems people face in a multicultural society. In *Mississippi Masala* Nair uses the Mina-Demetrius relationship as a tool to expose racial prejudice and intolerance. She focuses on positive human factors to hope for greater communal harmony and unity. Mina and Demetrius do not exactly ride off together into the sunset as in a romantic comedy; they have a hard road ahead of them. But the point is that they are in love, they are happy, and they are united in their aspiration for a successful and rewarding future.

## book review

### A Capital to be Shared

*Leading with Knowledge: The Nature of Competition in the 21st Century*  
By Richard C Huseman and Jon P. Goodman  
Publishers: Sage, California  
Price: \$ 27.95.

If you like today's corporate world to Lewis Carroll's realm of the Red Queen, where merely running fast for a long time doesn't get you anywhere, then what is it that companies need to do to keep up with a changing world? They could "run at least twice as fast", as the Red Queen succinctly suggested, which, according to *Leading with Knowledge*, means that they should focus on becoming knowledge organisations'. This, say authors Huseman and Goodman, is not just a buzzword or a fad, but an alternative model to the short-term fixes of corporate restructuring and downsizing (or just plain running, which the Red Queen would have poohed instantly).

The term knowledge organisation has evolved to describe organisations which acknowledge that intellectual capital, especially that of their em-

ployees, gives them a distinct competitive advantage. Huseman and Goodman have conducted a study of more than two hundred of the largest companies in the United States, in which they found that more than three-quarters of the companies surveyed say they are moving towards becoming knowledge organisations.

On the basis of their research, the authors conclude that there is a growing recognition in corporate America of the role that the ability to capture and leverage knowledge will play in today's technology-powered, intensely competitive business environment. They also present a strategic model for conceptualising and leveraging knowledge, which is a synthesis of much of what has been written to date on the subject, current practices in corporate America and their own survey.

Knowledge organisation means different things to different people. In the authors' survey, about half the respondents conceived it as a place where there is continuous learning, improvement and evolution. A quarter saw it, interestingly, as a place where knowledge is shared, while others were of the view

that it is an organisation which has a commitment to training and a learning environment. In their analysis, Huseman and Goodman have narrowed their definition down to an organisation which values and acknowledges knowledge as its primary competitive advantage, encourages continual learning and actively manages its intellectual capital.

At the heart of the model presented in the book is vision, clear vision — which is necessary in order to understand and implement the four stages that follow. Phase I involves the identifying and capturing of knowledge, which includes knowledge mapping or an inventory of the stores of knowledge that exist within the organisation. The second phase is the valuing and prioritising of this knowledge. The authors' survey shows that IC accounting has not as yet caught on in corporate America — only 15 per cent of the companies surveyed had some sort of system to quantify human capital. While IC accounting is still controversial and also that it will take years to perfect such a practice, the process must be initiated, say the authors, at least to encourage managers to "pay attention

to the stores of competency in their organisations that contain value".

Phase III of Huseman and Goodman's model is the sharing and leveraging of knowledge, which takes place in most organisations in an imperfect, informal, over-the-cubicle wall way. Corporations must, according to the model, devise systems for the fast and efficient transfer of knowledge between employees — whether by combination or codifying by means of reports, job descriptions, and so on; internalisation or encouraging individuals to take explicit knowledge provided by the organisation and turn it into personalised, tacit knowledge; or any of several other methods.

The last phase deals with the actual creation of knowledge, which say the authors, is not as simple as filling a room with smart people and then giving them some time to come up with revenue-generating innovations. The model suggests methods by which such knowledge could be generated that is intimately responsive to market realities, closely aligned with the company's strategic direction, and uniquely suited to the competencies of the workforce.

## poem

### Goodbye

by Farzana Islam

I believed we were sincere  
Now I find you bring me tears  
As all on a sudden you said goodbye  
I'm sorry to say you must have lied  
When you said our love was so strong  
Tell me what went wrong  
What made you walk away



It seems it was a game you were thrilled to play  
But there is something you should know  
I have found the way I need to go  
We are living in two distinct worlds now  
Since the day you deserted me  
Did you know what pains you have inflicted in me  
But today I am thinking of a tomorrow  
It took me some time to break off mentally  
As I take the step for a different hope  
The fight is done with my past  
Before I set off to a new morning  
I feel something is left unsaid  
I just want to say you goodbye